

# EXAMPLE ANNOTATED MEETING AGENDA

Thank you for meeting with us, Councilmember Gomez. My name is **Claudia Freeman**, and **I live in your district**. I'm joined today by my neighbor, Jim Brown, and Aisha Lark, a representative from a local nonprofit, Trees Are Great. We wanted to meet with you to share our concerns about the lack of trees in our neighborhood.

**Before you start the meeting, discuss what each person will cover. This can be specific topics or sections of the agenda.**

First, I want to thank you for **your leadership last year** to get more funding in the budget for wildfire prevention and education. With this funding, we can reduce the severity of wildfires, which protects forests and people. **Thank you for leading this effort.**

**Let them know that you aren't just a concerned citizen, but you're also one of their voters. Most elected officials try to balance the many needs and opinions of their constituents as they decide how to vote.**

As you know, it's important for our community to have healthy forests, including a healthy urban forest. Unfortunately, our neighborhood has one of the lowest tree canopy coverages in the entire city/county, which has big public health impacts. Areas with fewer trees tend to be hotter and have more air and water pollution than areas with more trees. As we experience more heat waves in the region, living in a neighborhood without trees can be deadly.

**Thank them for something that was a priority/focus for this office. Don't thank them just for a "good vote." Ideally, you'd find a topic that is closely related to what you're there to speak about, but that isn't always possible.**

**Have you noticed how few trees we have in our neighborhood? Have you heard about how trees can help reduce heat and pollution? Have you heard concerns about trees/lack of trees from other people?**

**Pause for a moment after the thanks to give room for the elected official to talk about that issue. Listening is just as important as speaking during these meetings. It gives you a chance to better understand the elected official's priorities and who/what most influences their decisions. The best meetings with elected officials are half listening and half speaking.**

**We understand the concerns with trees around sidewalks.** A lot of those conflicts were caused because the wrong tree was planted in the wrong place. City forestry departments have come a long way and now have great guidance for the right trees to put in the right place. Through careful planning, those sorts of conflicts can be avoided, which is a good thing because we need a healthy urban forest in our neighborhood.

**Resist the temptation to start giving out numbers. Some elected officials will want specifics, others will glaze over when you bring up numbers. Providing a short overview also previews several topics to explore more (remember, you want the elected official speaking half of the time).**

**Come into the meeting prepared to address concerns. You may know some of the things that they are already concerned about, but if you don't, have a few quick responses ready to go.**

**If a concern comes up that you don't have an immediate answer to, it's ok for you to say that you hadn't heard that concern before and that you'd look into it more to see if there are ways to address it.**

During the summer, the daytime temperatures in our neighborhood are over 90 degrees, and no one on our block has air conditioning. The only place people can go to cool off is under the big shade trees at the local park. Many seniors in our neighborhood can't get there, and several experienced heat stroke last summer because of the high temperatures. Other neighborhoods in the city don't have this experience because they have more trees that can keep their homes and community cooler.

We think that having more trees in our neighborhood is really important, which is why we would like you to support funding for trees to be planted along the city's streets, prioritizing areas that have the lowest tree canopy coverage first. Is that something that you'd be able to support?

Thank you for considering our request, Councilmember Gomez. I believe budget requests from council are due in a month. Is there any additional information we can provide you with in the meantime as you consider our request? Are there other organizations or individuals you'd like to hear from about this issue? I will follow up with you/your assistant in a week with that information.

Before we go, we also wanted to invite you to an upcoming event that Trees Are Great is hosting in our neighborhood. Next weekend, they will be hosting a tree-walk through our local park, talking to people about the history of the park and the trees there. If you're free, we would love to have you there.

Thank you again for your time and for listening to us today. We'll be in touch soon and look forward to working with you further on this issue.

It's important to tell your personal stories and experiences. Let the elected official know how this issue directly relates to you and your community. Personal stories stick with people better than facts and numbers.

Direct asks can feel uncomfortable, but they are essential. Make this ask even if the elected official tells you early on that they support you and your issue. This also lets the elected official know what they should do to help and show their support.

You can come with a secondary or tertiary ask. "If you can't support X, would you be willing to support Y or Z?" Getting a commitment from the elected official on one of these lower priority asks allows you to continue working with the elected official, which may get them to supporting your ultimate ask.

Elected officials work well with deadlines. Letting them know when various actions need to happen is important. You also want to ensure that there's plenty of time for the elected official to think about and respond to your request before the deadline. Meeting with an elected official for the first time the day before a deadline is unlikely to be successful.

Many elected officials have a staff member who helps with scheduling meetings and responding to constituents. Building relationships with these staff can also be a valuable when building a relationship with the elected official.

Inviting elected officials to your event can help build a deeper relationship with them and increase opportunities for you and your community to communicate your needs and ideas to them.

This question also helps you better understand which groups or individuals the elected official already trusts and values. Former partnerships with these groups can help build a closer relationship with the elected official (you become a friend-of-a-friend).

Follow-up is very important! This allows you to continue the conversation and keep building the relationship with the elected official. You can also request another meeting with the elected official after you send them the follow-up information.

## EXAMPLE PUBLIC TESTIMONY

Hello, my name is Jim Brown, I live on South D Street, and I'm a volunteer with Trees Are Great.

Some city or county councils will ask for your address, but usually you can just give your general neighborhood or street that you live in.

Tonight, I'd like to ask the city/county council to support funding for trees to be planted along the city's streets, prioritizing areas that have the lowest tree canopy coverage first.

Because you will usually have 2 or 3 minutes for public testimony, it's important to state your position/request up front in a succinct way.

My neighborhood has the lowest tree canopy in the entire city, which means that in the summer, our neighborhood is 5 degrees hotter than neighborhoods with more trees. This is a public health risk. I live with my elderly parents, and my father suffered heat stroke this summer because it got so hot and we don't have air conditioning. We also don't have any trees along our street. Instead, the road and pavement absorb all that heat and puts my community at risk.

Bring your personal story into your public testimony. People and elected officials will remember stories and experiences more than stats and numbers.

Trees are a simple solution that helps keep neighborhoods cooler while providing many other benefits. In a letter sent to you by Trees Are Great, there's more information about a local research project showing just how much cooler neighborhoods are when there are trees planted along the street.

Don't feel like you need to recite all of the facts and figures in your public testimony. Instead, use written comments for these details and reference them in your oral testimony.

My father wasn't the only person in our neighborhood to suffer from heat stroke last summer, and I'm concerned that this summer could be more dangerous for my parents and our neighbors. Please support funding for street trees, prioritizing low-canopy areas of the city like my neighborhood.

Ideally, you'll have time to restate your request or position at the end of your testimony.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide public comments.

## EXAMPLE WRITTEN TESTIMONY

Dear Mayor Nguyen and City Councilmembers,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide public comment on the city's upcoming budget. As the city develops its budget, we request that you budget \$50,000 for efforts to plant street trees, prioritizing areas of the city with lower tree canopy coverage.

Put your main ask up front so it's quick and easy for elected officials to see what you want. Remember that elected officials get a lot of letters and comments, so the easier you make it for them to find your "ask" the better.

Trees Are Great is a local nonprofit that educates the public and policy makers about the importance of trees. For the last ten years, we have engaged community members to plant over 5,000 trees throughout the region. We have also advocated for stronger policies at the state and local levels to ensure strong policies that protect and expand urban forests.

Give a short overview of your group (if you're part of one) and/or your community. This provides some context about where you're coming from and what is important to you and your group/community.

Trees provide a host of benefits ranging from pollution reduction, habitat creation, and climate adaptation. As summer heat waves become more extreme, trees are an important tool for cities to keep communities cooler and to protect public health. Cities and neighborhoods without trees and green spaces are much hotter than areas with mature urban tree canopies. This phenomenon is known as the Urban Heat Island Effect and occurs because buildings and pavement absorb heat and radiate it out.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, local research has shown that the Urban Heat Island Effect can be mitigated by planting trees along streets and roads.<sup>3</sup>

In your written comments, include citations with links to news paper or journal articles that back up your arguments. This shows elected officials that your comments are grounded in research and facts (not just anecdotes and gut feelings).

Keeping neighborhoods cooler during hot summer days is an increasingly urgent public health need given that heat waves are occurring sooner, lasting longer, getting hotter. Last year, a dozen people living in the city experienced heat stroke during July's heat wave. All instances were in the South D Street neighborhood, which has the fewest trees in the entire city, and the majority of these people are either elderly or have existing health problems that make it difficult for them to access public cooling centers.<sup>4</sup> Given that most residents in this neighborhood don't have air conditioning, excessive heat seriously threatens the health of the community.

By budgeting \$50,000 to plant street trees, we estimate that the city can plant 6,000 - 10,000 trees annually. With this investment, the city would likely reach its goal of 30% canopy coverage, city-wide, within 5 years. While Trees Are Great supports tree plantings along all city streets, we recognize that some communities and neighborhoods have fewer trees than others and are experiencing the impacts of Urban Heat Island Effect more. The lack of trees in low-income and racially diverse neighborhoods is a product of historical discrimination and policies that denied services and resources to these communities. Because of this, Trees Are Great supports efforts to prioritize street trees in low-canopy neighborhoods first with the intention of making the city's tree canopy coverage more equitable.

**It's important to always think about equity and justice when it comes to planning decisions and policies. Consider how past decisions may have create inequities and how new policies or tools can be used to address those inequities. Remember that no single solution will undo generations of discrimination, but there are ample opportunities to counteract some of these past harms and move us in a better direction.**

With increasingly intense heat waves impacting our region, it is essential that local governments and communities invest in solutions today. One of the best tools we have to keep neighborhoods cool and protect our public health is trees, and as a Chinese proverb says, "The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second-best time is now." Please support allocating \$50,000 in the city's budget to plant more street trees, particularly in low-canopy neighborhoods.

**Always close your written comments by reiterating your ask.**

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide comments on the city's budget. We look forward to working with you further to grow and protect our shared urban forest.

Sincerely,

Aisha Lark

Civic Engagement Coordinator

Trees Are Great

## EXAMPLE LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

In last week's story, *Residents brace for early heat wave*, the Local Newspaper wrote about how many people in our area are preparing for temperatures over 90 degrees. Last year, heatwaves like this caused some people to suffer heat strokes, and keeping cool when you don't have AC is hard to do!

One thing that the article didn't discuss is what the city/county can do to help keep our neighborhoods cooler: plant trees! Local research has shown that shade trees planted along streets can reduce neighborhood temperatures by 5 to 10 degrees. As heatwaves show up earlier and last longer, it's important that street trees are one of the tools we use to keep our communities cool and healthy.

Neighbors in our community and Trees Are Great have asked the city to support funding for more street trees in the upcoming budget. Investing in trees is a low-cost and effective way to not only cool our neighborhoods, but they can also reduce air and water pollution.

Contact your city councilmember and tell them to invest in street trees so we can stay cool in the summer.

Sincerely,

Casey Lee

Letters to the Editor that respond to published stories tend to have a higher chance of getting published. Local papers view this as a continuation of the conversation they started with the story.

If there isn't a relevant story you can respond to, try to connect your letter to something happening in your community. Papers don't like publishing letters that seem like they are just one person's soap box. They want letters that will resonate with multiple people and that are about timely issues.

LTE's are short, so pick one or two points to make. If you start making a laundry list of facts and points, your argument will get muddled down and not resonate with people as much.

Try ending your LTE with a call to action. This encourages readers to get involved and lets them know who to contact and what to tell them.

# EXAMPLES OF LESS EFFECTIVE TESTIMONY & COMMUNICATION

*NOTE: A lot of effective Civic Engagement is about effective communication. Whether you're writing a letter to the editor or preparing testimony for city council, these are some examples of less effective forms of communication:*

I'm here tonight to say how outraged I am at the idiotic decisions you've made.

You apparently don't care at all about the environment or people. We don't have nearly enough trees in our community. Over the last year, the city cut down hundreds of trees, which would have sequestered thousands of pounds of CO<sub>2</sub>, which we have to do to meet the goals of the Paris Climate Accord, and according to scientists, we have to prevent a rise in 2 degrees global Celsius, which we are on track to pass given the melting of the permafrost and fossil fuel projects being approved across the country. An oil pipeline in Kansas is being built right now and would be a climate bomb. And this just fuels more extreme weather, threatens our agriculture system (which is run by mega-corporations that also kill the planet) and will further fuel immigration across the globe.

This also doesn't take into account the role trees play in filtering our water. Our region receives roughly 40 inches of rainfall a year, and in forested ecosystems, less than 1% of that rainfall is surface water runoff. The rest of the water is intercepted through the various levels of the forest canopy: upper canopy, mid-canopy, lower canopy, groundcover, and finally the organic layer. Plants slow the descent of rainwater, which reduces the erosive impact of each rain drop. Trees and other plants also absorb rain water and infiltrate it into the groundwater. As the water moves through the soil, it is cleaned and returned to streams, rivers, and lakes through the forests' hydrologic cycle. With development, surface water runoff increases 20 - 50%, which most cities direct into gutters and systems that move it directly into streams, not into the groundwater.

Remember to start with your name, affiliation, and where you live.

There's not a clear ask or position up front: just a lot of anger, which can turn off people from your argument.

This presupposes the values or motives guiding decisionmakers. This can make decision makers defensive, especially if they view themselves as doing good work for people or the environment.

Try connecting to more local issues that people in your community experience. Focusing on these issues can connect with people better than highlighting global challenges like climate change. You also want your solution (more trees in your city) to address the problem you have. No city can plant enough trees to completely solve global climate change, but it can plant enough trees to advance climate adaptation and mitigation locally.

This is another tangential comment about issues that local decisionmakers don't have any control over.

This is way too much information for public testimony and other types of civic engagement. Try to simplify complex systems so that you can more quickly and easily communicate concepts to people who don't have a science background or much time.

This excess runoff picks up pollution on roads, lawns, and building, creating a complex, toxic mix of chemicals known as polluted stormwater runoff. Urban trees help to reduce the amount of polluted stormwater flowing into gutters and impacting our local environment.

All of the people of color in my neighborhood want trees and support more funding for trees. We also must remember that trees are sacred to Native Americans. They know how to live with their Mother Earth, which includes protecting forests.

You are part of causing this crisis by cutting down all of our trees and paving everything in the city. How dare you! I look forward to voting you clowns out.

Hyperbolic language like this isn't effective at engaging or convincing people to your view point. It can make you seem less credible.

Name calling is never appropriate. Avoid making personal attacks. We can always disagree over ideas and proposals, but the key to effective civic engagement is having civil discourse.

Make sure that you aren't speaking on behalf of entire communities if you don't represent them or are a part of them. Many people want to be allies for marginalized communities, which is great to do! The better way to support them, though, is to encourage planning and local government staff to consult with members of these communities, include them in the decision making process, and respond to the needs that they raise.

This sort of statement often comes from non-Tribal people trying to be allies of Native people. Unfortunately, this makes several big mistakes. First, this statement paints all Native Americans as a single monolith when really, the tribes that have lived on this continent since Time Immemorial are diverse in their traditions, cultures, and values. This author also assumes that they can convey spiritual values on behalf of Native people, which is not appropriate.

The best course of action is always to let Tribal Governments and Native people speak on their own behalf. Non-tribal people can also encourage their elected officials to fully consult with Tribal Governments and engage Native people more.