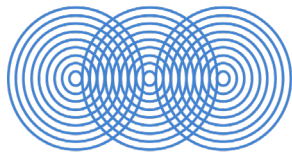


INFLUENCING POLICY AND PLANNING:

A Civic Engagement Toolkit



**Puyallup Watershed
Initiative**

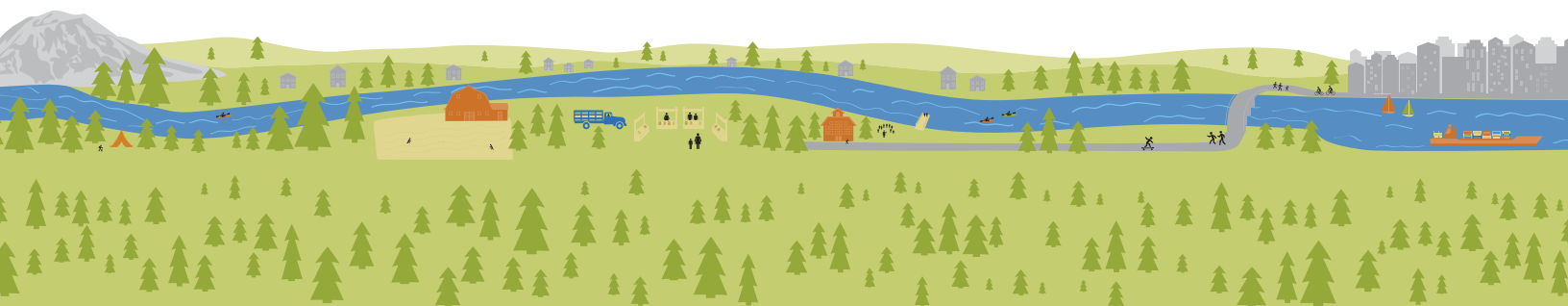


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About this Publication

This publication was produced by Forterra for the Puyallup Watershed Initiative. At the time of its drafting and publication, COVID-19 was an ongoing public health emergency that had dramatic effects on civic engagement. It increased opportunities for virtual participation while also limiting in-person activities. It is our hope that more inclusive practices, such as virtual public meetings and hybrid models of virtual and in-person participation in the civic process, remain in the post-pandemic world.

In June of 2022, two community forums were hosted to present the toolkit to community members and agency partners and to solicit their feedback. Participants provided specific and broad feedback about ways the toolkit could be improved and the current strengths within the toolkit. Using this feedback, staff updated the toolkit to create this current draft of the toolkit.

Pierce Conservation District's mission is to equitably support community-driven solutions to the most pressing local environmental challenges. Learn more at: <https://pierced.org/>

Puyallup Watershed Initiative's mission is to improve social and environmental conditions throughout the region, which comprises more than 1,000 square miles from Mt. Rainier to Commencement Bay. Learn more at: <https://www.pwi.org/>

Puyallup River Watershed Council's mission is to restore, protect and enhance the environmental, economic and cultural health of our watershed, from Mount Rainier to Commencement Bay. It is through the Puyallup-White River Local Integrating Organization that funding was available to support this toolkit. <http://www.piercecountywa.gov/prwc>

Forterra drives land-based solutions in Washington to support a healthy environment and resilient communities for all. Learn more at www.forterra.org.

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- Pierce Conservation District staff, especially Melissa Buckingham
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- Seaport Alliance staff
- Port of Tacoma staff

Land Acknowledgment

Pierce County includes 1,806 square miles of ceded lands of four Federally recognized Tribes: the Puyallup Tribe, the Nisqually Tribe, the Muckleshoot Tribe, and the Squaxin Island Tribe. These Tribes are sovereign governments that predate the founding of the United States, and their sovereignty is an inherent right that has existed since time immemorial, recognized with a government-to-government relationship by the United States.

We recognize that the traditional and current homelands of these Tribes and their territorial lands, waters, and air are contiguous and transcend U.S. government-established boundaries. This means the quality and abundance of the County's natural resources directly affects the quality and abundance of natural resources of Tribal Nations.



INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this publication is to help community members, organizations, and other stakeholders to more effectively engage in discussions around land use planning and natural resource management decisions. Representative democracies like ours work best when a well-informed, well-organized, and well-prepared community participates in policy and planning processes that affect their neighborhoods and people. Community members who are knowledgeable about these processes and proactively engage in the civic process can have a powerful influence on local land use decisions that shape the future of their communities. Similarly, more open and responsive governments better serve and meet the needs of their constituents. By engaging in civic processes, community members, government staff, and elected officials can better understand the various challenges and opportunities associated with policy and planning decisions.

This publication is for practitioners, community members, and other stakeholders in policy and planning decision-making that impact the watershed. The material included in this toolkit is a synthesis of information drawn from interviews with current and former elected officials, community members, and staff members of organizations that have worked on engagement efforts; research into best practices and available tools included in other toolkits; and feedback from community members and practitioners.

Another important distinction to keep in mind is between civic engagement and political advocacy. This toolkit's focus is on the former and for these purposes is defined as community and public involvement during policy and planning decision making processes. Advocacy is defined as specific support for a policy or candidate, which is beyond the scope of this toolkit. There are many organizations that work in the advocacy space and the appendix includes a short list of them for reference.

We also acknowledge that the current system of policy and planning places the burden of providing feedback on the community and not decisionmakers. This is an example of institutional oppression and exclusion that makes it more difficult and time consuming for people with the least amount of power (who are often low-income, people of color, and/or immigrants) to engage in public decision-making processes. For elected officials and government staff, it is essential to recognize how historical inequities, power, and privilege influence planning and policy decisions and who can more easily participate in them (typically wealthier and white communities).

Civic engagement is a two-way street between the public and government representatives, and it is incumbent on elected officials and staff to proactively reach out to and engage people and communities who have been frequently excluded or negatively impacted by planning and policy decisions. Recognizing these historical inequities, this toolkit does not attempt to address systemic inequalities in our current civic engagement processes for planning and policy decisions. Instead, it describes current processes and provides suggestions for making more impactful contributions to shape land use outcomes. We encourage the public and governments to continuously work towards improving these existing systems so they are more transparent, responsive to community needs, and inclusive of the many diverse communities who live in Pierce County.



THE PLANNING PROCESS

Key Players and Their Roles

The roles and responsibilities of various decision-making bodies vary across the Puyallup Watershed. Some decisions are made at a very local level; other decisions are made at state and federal levels. Regardless, decisions are always made by people, and there are typically opportunities for the public to provide input and comments. It's important to know who various players are, how they interact with each other, and what they can (and can't) make decisions about. Here are some:

1. **Who:** Community members

What they do: Community members are stakeholders and key players in land use planning. They are your neighbors, workers and owners of local businesses, visitors to neighborhood parks and open spaces, and members of community groups and organizations. Community members can raise questions and concerns about the potential impacts of a proposed project. They also share first-hand knowledge about conditions in the area that should be considered during project review. They can testify at a public hearing, submit a letter to endorse or oppose a proposal, meet with staff and elected officials, attend a public workshop to guide long-term plans, participate on an advisory committee, engage others on local issues, and find other opportunities to influence the policies and plans that will impact the community.

2. **Who:** Applicant

What they do: An applicant is the person who submits an application for a development project, variance, zoning change, code amendment, or other land use approval. Applicants can include developers, consultants, landowners, attorneys, or members of the community. They are required to comply with federal, state, and local development codes, however, in instances where they believe they cannot comply with these requirements, they will often apply for variances from the codes to become exempted from requirements. It is important to note that these variances do not, in most instances, have a public process for appeal.



3. **Who:** Planning Staff

What they do: Planning staff are local government employees: nonpartisan career civil servants who receive and review planning applications, enforce zoning codes, provide background information and recommendations on land use applications to appointed and elected officials, conduct pre-application meetings with developers, and serve as a resource for the public on land use planning activities. They also work with the community to develop a long-term vision for the future. Many counties and cities refer to these long-range plans as Comprehensive Plans. Depending on the issue, other local government employees and department may be involved.

4. **Who:** Planning Commission

What they do: The Planning Commission is an advisory board made up of volunteer community members appointed by elected officials. There are Planning Commissions at the county and city level. They assist the City and County Councils in making decisions by discussing new ideas, holding public hearings, and providing recommendations to elected officials. This can include changes to Comprehensive Plans, zoning codes, land use regulations, and other planning related proposals. Planning Commissions do not have decision-making authority and can only make suggestions to elected officials. Some cities have other volunteer commissions who provide recommendations to city or county councils on land use and planning decisions, depending on the issue.

5. **Who:** City Council

What they do: City Councilmembers are representatives elected by the public. Their responsibilities include creating policy, changing zoning, approving plans, hearing certain appeals, appointing members of the Planning Commission, and conducting public hearings.

6. **Who:** County Council

What they do: Similar to the City Council, County Councilmembers are elected by the public and serve the same functions as listed above throughout the entire county, primarily in unincorporated parts of the county (e.g. places in Pierce County outside of city limits).

7. **Who:** Local government

What they do: This includes city and county staff that are responsible for a range of integral services including schools, housing, planning, waste collection and more. For this toolkit, the focus of their role is on the administrative side of comprehensive plan updates, development regulation amendments, and support for elected and appointed officials.

8. **Who:** Hearing Examiner

What they do: The Hearing Examiner is appointed by the County Council and is responsible for conducting public hearings, preparing official records for those hearings, compiling legal and factual findings, and issuing final decisions for land use cases. The county and city governments will use the Hearing Examiner's recommendations and decisions for land use permits, site plans, variances, and subdivisions.

9. **Who:** Land Use Advisory Commission

What they do: Not all counties have these commissions, but Pierce County has several Land Use Advisory Commissions. These can be comprised of a mix of elected officials, staff, and/or members of the public. Their role is to serve in an advisory capacity on issues related to land use, providing recommendations to the Executive, the County Council, the Hearing Examiner, the Planning Commission, and/or Planning Staff. They hold meetings to facilitate communication between community members, property owners, business owners, and the County on significant land use issues. They review applications for proposed developments which require a public hearing and make recommendations for updates to their community plan.

10. **Who:** Other Boards, Committees, and Decisionmaking Bodies

What they do: The above list is not exhaustive of the bigger picture of public agencies, their elected representatives, and staff beyond the city and council levels. Other significant bodies include public utilities, libraries, schools, parks districts, conservation districts, and more. Ultimately, these bodies adopt budgets where values are translated into investments and services.

11. **Who:** State and Federal Agencies

What they do: Some decisions are made at the state or federal level and regulations coming out of these agencies also come with different civic engagement processes than decisionmaking at the city or county level. Some significant policies that are governed by the state or federal government are outlined below.

12. **Who:** Tribal Governments

What they do: Federally recognized Tribal Governments are sovereign nations and co-managers of land and resources. There are treaties between several Tribal Governments and the United States Government that establish formal agreements about how land and resources will be administered and allocated. There is a long and problematic history of the U.S. Government violating and ignoring the promises made in these agreements, particularly as it relates to land ownership and natural resource management. Tribal governments may enter into formal consultation agreements on land use decisions with state, county, and city governments, although the Tribal Government should be seen as co-equal to the Federal Government. It is important that stakeholders (such as community members, applicants, and others) never speak on behalf of a Tribal Government or assume to know their position on certain issues. Instead, stakeholders should request that city, county, and other elected officials consult with appropriate Tribal governments about land use decisions. In many cases, this consultation is required by state and/or federal law.



Important Laws and What They Do

There are many laws – federal, state, and local – that govern land use planning and decision making. The following is a summary of some of the most referenced laws that stakeholders should be familiar with. Due to their complexity and the overlaps with more specific local regulations, federal laws such as those governing endangered species, wetlands, and stormwater discharge are not discussed in this publication.

Growth Management Act

The Growth Management Act (GMA) is a Washington State law that was passed in 1990 in response to the threat that unplanned growth and development poses to the environment, sustainable economic development, and quality of life. The GMA establishes goals to:

- discourage sprawling development and instead encourage development in urban areas,
- encourage economic development throughout the state,
- encourage efficient alternative forms of transportation (bikes, buses, trains, etc.),
- protect shorelines,
- respect property rights, and
- allow for early and continuous public participation in the planning process.

The GMA creates a framework where local governments are responsible for meeting certain goals in their comprehensive plans and effectively implementing development regulations. One intent of the GMA is to give local governments the flexibility to create plans that meet these goals while also meeting the needs of the local community.

One significant requirement of the GMA are protections for “critical areas,” which are often referred to as a Critical Areas Ordinance. This requirement is to protect the natural environment, sensitive habitats, and drinking water by limiting development. Tree regulations (which include rules for pruning, removal, planting, and more) are a type of Critical Area Ordinance, intended to protect urban tree canopies and forested areas. Tree regulations differ widely across different cities and counties.

State Environmental Policy Act

The State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) was passed in 1971 and created the framework for Counties and Cities to use when determining the environmental consequences of a proposal. It also allows local governments to modify or deny a proposal because of the anticipated environmental impacts. The SEPA process looks at impacts on both the natural environment (earth, air, water, plants and animals, energy, natural resources) and the built environment (environmental health, land and shoreline use, transportation, public services and utilities). SEPA review is required for development projects of a certain size and for official actions such as the adoption of a comprehensive plan or development regulation.

Shoreline Management Act

The Shoreline Management Act (SMA) was passed by the Washington State legislature in 1971 to manage and protect shorelines by regulating development in the shoreline area. The goal of the Act is “to prevent the inherent harm in an uncoordinated and piecemeal development of the state’s shorelines.” The Act establishes a broad policy giving preference to uses that protect the quality of water and the natural environment, depend on proximity to the shoreline, and preserve and enhance public access or increase recreational opportunities for the public along shorelines.





Comprehensive Plan

A comprehensive plan is a legally adopted document that reflects the community's vision, long-term goals, and objectives. Comprehensive plans must contain certain elements addressing land use, housing, capital facilities (infrastructure), utilities, transportation, economic development, growth targets, and more. Comprehensive plans are implemented using zoning codes, development regulations, and other tools and ordinances. Local governments may amend their comprehensive plans no more than once per year and must undertake thorough reviews of them every eight years. These major updates represent a valuable engagement opportunity.

Development Regulations and Zoning

Development regulations are the rules that implement land use policies of the comprehensive plan. These regulations establish what kinds of construction and uses are allowed where, along with rules for building heights, densities, permitting, and physical characteristics of new construction (often referred to as zoning). These may include anything from parking, landscaping, tree retention, setbacks, or design. Local governments are required by law to review development regulations annually. Councils update development regulations through an amendment process. The city of Tacoma offers the Puyallup Tribe the first right of refusal for all lands that are surplus.

Transportation Plans

Transportation plans are created by transportation agencies, like Pierce Transit, Sound Transit, and the Washington State Department of Transportation. These plans solicit public input to guide investments in public transit and other transportation projects. Timing of transportation plan updates vary widely.

Budgets

Every government develops a budget, typically on a biannual basis (once every 2 years) to fund agencies and projects. Budgets are often a reflection of values and priorities. When local and state budgets are updated, community members have the opportunity to meet with their elected officials to request dedicated funding for specific projects, studies, or agencies. Budget cycles vary by municipality.

DEVELOPMENT PROCESS BASICS

Planning Process for Development Projects

(The basics explained here apply to proposed developments that require a permit. Some do not meet the threshold requiring publication. Check your jurisdiction's regulations to understand when a permit is required so you can follow land use proposals that may or not need a permit.)

PHASE	WHAT THE APPLICANT AND CITY ARE DOING	OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMMUNITY ACTION	DECISION MAKING BODY
Concept and Feasibility Review	<p>Applicant evaluates project ideas.</p> <p>City and applicant discuss project and required government approvals.</p> <p>Applicant submits application for project.</p>	<p>Generally, stakeholders are not involved in this phase of the development process.</p> <p>Reviewing application materials as available (ie Planning Commission meeting notes); compiling available relevant data related to the project.</p>	<p>At this point the applicant decides whether or not to proceed with project.</p>
Application Submittal/ Review	<p>City publishes notification.</p> <p>City staff begin application review.</p> <p>Conducting public hearing on project.</p>	<p>Submitting written comments on project to planning staff.</p>	<p>City reviews application for compliance with applicable statutes.</p> <p>Planning staff prepares recommendation for review authority.</p>
Hearing/Decision	<p>Publishing decision.</p>	<p>Attending public hearing. Giving verbal testimony and submitting written testimony and supporting documentation into the record.</p>	<p>Depending on the governing body, process can be over if decision is agreeable to all. However, some bodies may have appeals process, which can be prompted by applicants or community members.</p>

Planning Process for Comprehensive Plan or Development Regulation Amendments

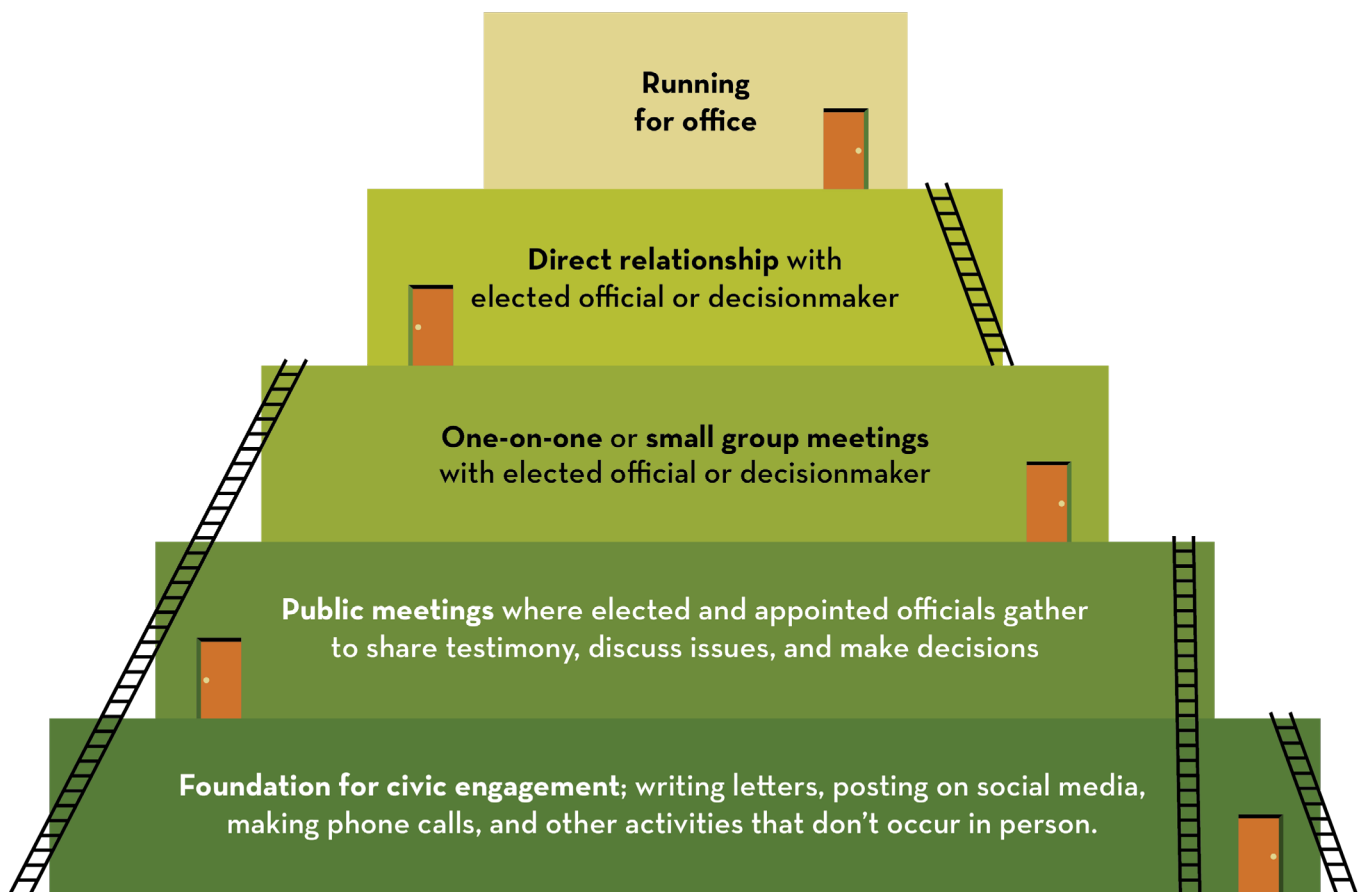
There are two kinds of comprehensive plan updates: annual updates (usually minor changes, site specific rezones, technical amendments) and major 8 year cycle updates. The table below offers a general description of the planning process for annual updates to the comprehensive plan or development regulation amendments. It is important to check your local government's website to help you determine the right people and agencies to contact.

PHASE	WHAT THE APPLICANT AND CITY ARE DOING	WHAT INVOLVED STAKEHOLDERS ARE DOING	DECISION OR ACTION TO BE TAKEN
<p>Amendments Proposed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comprehensive Plan amendments allowed once a year and are announced on a city's planning web page. Development Regulation amendments must be considered at least annually 	<p>An amendment is proposed by either a community member or by the City.</p> <p>A list of requested amendments is presented to City Council to decide which amendments to evaluate further.</p>	<p>Proposing changes during the update process to help shape the plan and regulations.</p> <p>Reviewing other amendment requests and submitting written comments on those requests to planning staff and decision makers.</p>	<p>Local government prepares draft amendments based on community and city recommendations for City Council.</p> <p>Council decides which amendments to focus on and evaluate further.</p>
Public Participation Process	<p>An amendment is proposed by either a community member or by the City.</p> <p>A list of requested amendments is presented to City Council to decide which amendments to evaluate further.</p>	<p>Proposing changes during the update process to help shape the plan and regulations.</p> <p>Reviewing other amendment requests and submitting written comments on those requests to planning staff and decision makers.</p>	<p>City staff prepares draft amendments based on community and city recommendations for City Council.</p> <p>Council decides which amendments to focus on and evaluate further.</p>
Public Hearings/Decision	<p>Cities publish engagement plans, convene workshops, and share surveys.</p>	<p>Attending public meetings and hearings where proposed amendments are discussed.</p> <p>Submitting comments to support preferred alternatives and amendments.</p>	<p>Vote ends process. If there are technical or legal challenges, opponents may appeal to the Growth Management Hearings Board.</p>

INFLUENCING DECISIONS

This section describes how and when to engage with your community and your decisionmakers. When you participate, how you do it, and the most effective method for a given situation can be organized into a pyramid of impact. At the top of this pyramid is a direct relationship with elected officials or decisionmakers. Actions at the top of the pyramid typically require the largest time-commitment, but they are also more impactful than actions further down. Activities like one-on-one and small group meetings with elected officials and staff are at the top of the pyramid. These meetings provide valuable space for discussing an issue in depth with opportunities to ask questions, clarify concerns, and build relationships with elected officials. The next level in the pyramid is public meetings, where community members and public officials gather to share testimony, discuss issues, and make decisions. At the base of the pyramid is the foundation for civic engagement: writing letters, posting on social media, making phone calls, and other activities that don't occur in person. These activities typically require less of a time commitment, making them easier for more people to do.

Getting involved at the base of the pyramid supports and leads to actions further up and sparks interpersonal and working relationships between community members, staff, and decisionmakers. The top of the pyramid represents more direct and personal engagement with fewer opportunities to make contact, while the bottom of the pyramid offers easy and multiple ways to engage, albeit in a less personal way. There are meaningful ways to engage at all levels of the pyramid and an effective civic engagement strategy will include each.



START WHEREVER—CLIMB AS HIGH AS YOU LIKE

Participate early. Participate often.

It is important to keep an eye out for proposed changes in your neighborhood coming from the city, county, or other government entity. This kind of information can be found by tuning into or attending public meetings, looking at proposed land use signs in your neighborhood, following local news, word-of-mouth, and other means. Government decisions have varied timelines based on which government entity is setting the policy and what step they are on in the process. Some policies can be enacted within a few days while most take weeks and months with multiple opportunities for public influence and comment. The earlier you get involved, the more opportunities you will have to learn and provide input. Here's what you can do once you know changes are under consideration:

Timelines vary by jurisdiction and proposed changes.

Government decisions have varied timelines based on which government entity is setting the policy and what step they are on in the process. Some policies can be enacted within a few days while most take weeks and months with multiple opportunities for public influence and comment.

Know your district.

No matter where you live in Pierce County, you are represented by an elected official at the federal, state, and local (county and city) levels of government. Often the first step of public engagement is to reach out to the people who represent you and your community. To find your district, go to your city's, county's, or state's website and search for a district map. Many governments have systems that allow you to type in your address to find the district that you live in and who represents you.

Get to know your decision makers.

Government staff are generally seen by elected officials as trusted, nonpartisan experts and civil servants. They play a key role in drafting policy proposals, engaging community members, and supporting commissioners and councils. Planning commissions and local councils play key roles in planning decisions, and their meetings are held regularly and are often open to the public, and many now have virtual viewing options and are recorded so you can watch them in the background or when you have the time. Attend a few public meetings to get a feel for how they work and know who the agency staff are involved with various proposals. Also meeting with commissioners and council members personally will allow you to better understand what their priorities are and what groups, communities, or individuals most influence them. Another opportunity to get to know your decisionmakers is during study sessions when Council members can be seen in a more informal setting learning about issues that will come up in future council meetings. Hearing their questions to staff gives one an understanding of their concerns and issues

Organize your community.

Get to know your neighbors and like-minded individuals and consider forming a neighborhood or issue-based association to discuss issues that may impact you. Research existing groups with the same or similar interests that you can join. It is more effective to advocate for change with other people than as an individual. Neighborhood councils are also a great avenue for people to connect with neighbors on a local level and bring up issues and concerns.

Track public notices.

Public notice of proposed land use actions and planning processes can come in many forms. Sometimes, you will actually be mailed written notice of a proposed action near your property. Notices are also published in the public notice section of local newspapers' classifieds. You may also see a large board with "Notice of Land Use Action" or similar wording placed at a proposed development site. Be aware of vacant land in your community; these are the locations where developments are most likely. Local governments also use email lists and their websites to notify the public about projects and land use changes early in the process.

Example Scenario

A group of community members is concerned about a potential development that will impact the watershed. They want to get the issue in front of their decision makers and for them to review the environmental impact based on the project idea that has been shared. There is nuance across jurisdictions within the Puyallup Watershed, so the group divides responsibilities. Someone checks their city's website to find out who their councilmember is, the contact information for that elected official's office, and reaches out to set up a meeting. Then, get familiar with the councilmember's voting history, especially on issues similar to the one you wish to discuss. One community member finds and reviews the current policy on environmental impacts from a development project similar to the one proposed and outlines what they think should be changed to address the group's concerns. Another community member shares this information with the group and coordinates efforts making use of a range of activities including phone calls, writing letters, posting and tagging on social media, and 1:1 meetings with elected officials to get this project on the docket for a formal review. Get familiar with other councilmembers and reach out following the above steps to those that have a voting history or platform that closely aligns with your cause.



Tips for Public Participation

The following table is by no means comprehensive but is intended to provide helpful tips on conveying your opinions and concerns to decisionmakers in a clear, concise, and effective manner. There are times when one tactic will work better than another, so consider the table below as broad strokes

More Effective	Less Effective
Build a direct relationship with your elected officials to better understand their priorities and the individuals/entities that influence them the most	Make personal attacks on decisionmakers for undesirable outcomes instead of holding them accountable for the decisions.
Tell your story and show how changes will affect you personally. Bring your passion with you!	Make jokes, tell inappropriate stories, speak in hyperbole, ask multiple rhetorical questions, or speak on behalf of others.
Participate as early as you can.	Wait until after most decisions on a project have been made to raise concerns or objections.
Come to public meetings prepared with thoughtful and persuasive arguments in favor of your position. Support your arguments with facts.	Wing it (i.e. showing up to give public testimony without preparation).
Coordinate with others who share similar objectives	Speak for your self-interest over the needs of your allies.
Suggest solutions and alternatives.	Outline the problems, focus only on negatives.
Create a record for yourself to help you remember what happened during public meetings, meetings with elected officials, and community meetings.	Make statements and claims about an issue or process without first understanding the actions and decisions that have already been made relating to an issue.
Submit your comments, testimony, letters, etc. to the official record to ensure community input is documented.	Provide your opinion and feedback outside of formal channels, resulting in your opinions not being captured in the formal record
Provide decisionmakers with information about the type of land use you want to see in your community.	Make unreasonable requests and ignore the needs or rights of those you disagree with.
Continuously participate in the process using multiple tactics to engage your community, staff, and decisionmakers.	Assume one call, comment letter or email are enough, especially for multiphase projects.



Engagement methods

There are several things to keep in mind no matter how you choose to engage. Consider these principles to be the foundation of communication: rely on facts, ask a lot of questions, and thoughtfully share your personal experiences.

Generally, when contacting an elected official or decisionmaker directly, it's best to start with those who directly represent you through a district model and work out to at-large members. Save representatives with influence over the decision you are hoping to influence that do not represent you or the project area for last.

Remember, sometimes shorter can be better and emphasis on your connection to the place or issue in question can tell a compelling story. The following methods are listed in order of assumed impact (most impactful to least) with a brief description of what it is and what it involves so you can determine which suits you best. Worksheets to help guide you through these various methods are in the appendix.

Meetings

Individual meetings

One of the most effective methods of civic engagement is to meet face to face with an elected official or decisionmaker. Many elected officials meet with constituents, but many of them have limited time because they serve the public in addition to holding regular jobs and having personal obligations. Therefore it is essential to make the most of an opportunity to meet with an official. Community members can schedule individual meetings in several different ways; it's easiest to get time based on an existing relationship, if you happen to have one. In lieu of leveraging an existing relationship, contact information for the elected official and their staff is typically readily accessible on the city's web site to schedule a meeting. Elected officials know they cannot do their job well without input from community so they truly value hearing from the public and your request is likely to be prioritized regardless of any prior relationship.

Public meetings

Public meetings in this context refer to workshops, open houses, information sessions, or other events where a local government invites community input or shares news about a topic. These are different from commission or council meetings, at which members of the public are also welcome. Public meetings are an opportunity to give opinions, ask clarifying questions, and share how they will be impacted by a project or plan, such as a rezone, comprehensive plan update, or code amendment.

Public hearings

Giving effective public testimony at public hearings provides an important venue for public participation. Most public testimony is limited to two or three minutes, and in that time making a connection with your decisionmakers by sharing an anecdote that gets to the heart of the issue rather than sharing only data points will be the most impactful. By coordinating with others, you can spread out the various points you want to make. If someone has already raised an issue or point you planned to make, state that you agree with the earlier comment rather than reiterating what was already said.

Writing

Writing an effective comment letter, postcard, or email

Although the quantity of letters a commission or council receives may indicate the extent of neighborhood or agency interest, it is the relevance of the comments that will most affect a project's outcome. For example, if members of an interest group send hundreds of identical form letters to public officials it might make less of an impact compared to a brief and poignant letter sent before a big decision will be made. Whether you send a form letter or not, the most important consideration is if this method of engaging matches your goal. Keep in mind that elected officials are not required to read every letter they receive.

Getting Into News Outlets

Often times, when large development projects are proposed or controversial land use decisions are being discussed, they receive coverage in local papers, newscasts, blogs, or local podcasts. Participating in how a project or decision is covered in the media is another way to help influence the planning process. For local papers, op-eds are an effective way to enhance and inform the community dialogue on a particular issue; a letter to the editor is an effective tool when an issue is already being discussed in the newspaper but you find the coverage to be biased, inaccurate, or incomplete. For local TV/radio, blogs or podcasts, reach out to reporters and/or hosts directly about the issue and see if they will feature you and/or your community and cover your perspective.

Other Communications

Social Media

The use of Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Next Door, and other social media platforms can be an effective means of gathering support, increasing the level of awareness on a particular issue, building relationships amongst supporters, and contributing to collaboration. It can also be overtaken by bad actors and misused for other purposes. For that reason, it should be used strategically and with opportunities for holding a dialogue between group leaders and supporters, and between community members and elected officials. You can use hashtags to increase visibility and tag other people and organizations to broaden your reach. Where elected officials participate in dialogue on social media this can be an effective, direct line of communication.

Phone Calls

Calling your councilmember about a policy or land use issue with a personal touch can make an impact if done well. Going in with a script or some prepared notes will help you make all the points you want to whether you reach someone or have to leave a voicemail. Make sure to mention who you are, where you live or are located, how it relates to the elected official (if it isn't within their district they will be less likely to respond or get back to you since they aren't relying on your vote), share your story about why the issue at hand is meaningful to you, and the action you want the official to take.

BEYOND TAKING ACTION

Taking Public Office or Serving on a Board or Commission

Through civic engagement and advocacy on policies or projects of great importance to you and your community, you may catch the civil service bug. Consider running for office or seeking an appointment to a public board or commission with jurisdiction over policies that matter to you or are in your area of expertise. For example, if you are a planner by trade or urban growth management enthusiast, consider applying to join your city or county's planning or sustainability commission. If you are energized by renewable energy policies, look into qualifications needed to join a public utility board. There are other City boards, such as Parks, and if you are a businessperson, you might be interested in participating on the economic Development Commission. Some positions are appointed by elected officials and others are elected by the public.

Applicants for a board or commission should attend meetings and meet with current or prior members to learn about the priorities of the group and how it works. Consider also meeting with elected officials who appoint members prior to applying to find out what they are looking for in candidates. Pierce

County commissions are listed [here](#) and available vacancies as well as required qualifications are listed [here](#). [Washington State](#) and major cities like [Tacoma](#) and [Puyallup](#) also have various boards and commissions available and in need of volunteer applicants.

If running for public elected office sounds more appealing, check out the annually updated list of offices up for election and other information provided by the Pierce County Auditor [here](#). Groups of all types, both national and local, such as advocacy organizations and industry organizations like Chambers of Commerce hold candidate trainings and you should sign up for as many as possible to get a feel for the best strategies to running and winning.

Getting Involved with Your Conservation District

The Pierce Conservation District has a wide-reaching [calendar of events and volunteer opportunities](#) you can partake in to give back and make a difference. You can even become a member and register to vote in conservation district elections, which are distinct from general voter registration in Washington State. You can also run to be a member of our Board or Associate Board.



Public Interest Groups and Advocacy Organizations

If you find yourself a bit lonely in your civic engagement efforts, you should consider joining a group or organization that advocates for issues you are passionate about. Many are non-profits with varying tax statuses dependent on the type of advocacy they perform. Examples include the [League of Women Voters](#), [WashPIRG](#), the [Sierra Club](#), [Tacoma Tree Foundation](#), [Washington Conservation Voters](#), [350 Tacoma](#), [Sunrise Tacoma](#), [Tacoma Urban League](#), [Centro Latino](#), [Asia Pacific Cultural Center](#), [Rainbow Center](#), [Friends of Pierce County](#), [Tahoma Audubon](#), [Conservation NW](#), [Environment Washington](#), [Communities for a Healthy Bay](#), or [Futurewise](#). Most of these organizations have local Pierce County or Tacoma chapters with members who share your passion for conservation and may make great allies in planning future civic engagement campaigns you lead. They can also help keep you apprised of issues they are tracking that impact your neighborhood. Consider reaching out to them directly to learn more about their priorities and how you can get involved or sign up for their email lists to get updates.

Political Campaign Engagement

Elected officials run for office to make laws and decisions that reflect their personal values and those of their communities. Campaigns for public office cost money. Making contributions to political campaigns can be a way to connect with an elected official before issues reach them in office, particularly when they share your values. This guide is not suggesting that contributions buy political influence, but rather that the decision to support a campaign sends a message about who is putting their time or money behind candidates based on their positions. While not everyone can or will want to support political campaigns, two main ways for those interested to get involved are:

- Volunteering – offering your time to make calls or speak to people in your community on behalf of a candidate, helping to run campaign events, or filling other clerical or office needs.
- Donating money – this is best done at a campaign event where you can meet the candidate and connect on a personal level. A conversation at a campaign event can lead to the cultivation of a working relationship or less introductory meetings later– the top of the engagement pyramid. The amount of a donation is less important than the show of support.

Supporting a campaign, either by volunteering or donating, can help you build relationships and demonstrates that you can mobilize a wider network of support if you bring others along. Elected officials aim to be in contact with communities when running for office and once in office. Getting to know them before you need something helps build trust and common understanding.

APPENDIX

Tips and Worksheets to Guide Effective Civil Engagement

Individual or 1-on-1 meetings.

Tips to maximize the value of an individual meeting:

- Find out how elected officials schedule their meetings. A city or county will usually have staff, such as a legislative aide, who can explain the scheduling process and help set up an appointment.
- When scheduling, know what topic you want to cover and how you relate to the official. Be specific – for example, you want to discuss flooding risks in your neighborhood. Do you live or work in their district? Do you represent an interest group or group of concerned community members? Are you their neighbor or prior campaign supporter?
- Make an effort to meet at a time and place of the official's choosing, to the extent that you can be flexible.
- Be prepared to discuss your topic: what is the issue, how does it affect you, what do you propose as a solution? Anticipate what questions they might ask. Do research to get a sense of their past decisions and statements on similar topics.
- If you are meeting in a small group, divvy up talking points among the group so everyone speaks to something. Try to keep group size to no more than 4 – too many people in a group can reduce the effectiveness of a meeting.
- Get straight to the point and try to determine whether they will support your requests and what level of priority your project is to them and their agenda. This information will be helpful in strategizing next steps and further community involvement.
 - If they are supporters, find out what they need from you and community to be successful advocates.
 - If they are unsure, find out what information they would like to further inform their opinion.
 - If they are opposed, try to ascertain if they will be actively or passively working against your activism or cause.
- Listening is just as important as speaking. The most effective 1-on-1 meetings with elected officials are conversations. Resist the urge to just convey a lot of information to the elected official. Instead, ask questions and try to learn more about what the elected official thinks, what their concerns and priorities are, and what other people or organizations are important to them. This will all help you build a relationship with your elected officials.
- Be respectful of their time and finish the meeting promptly. Thank them for the opportunity to connect and follow up with any supplemental information offered or requested by them.

Create Your 1-on-1 Meeting Agenda. Fill out this table to create an agenda for your 1-on-1 meeting:

Agenda Item	Tips	My Agenda (Create your agenda here)
Introductions	Introduce yourself and others in your group. Let the elected official know if you are a constituent, who your group represents, and any other information to let the elected official know who you are and why you're meeting with them.	
Thanks	Always thank elected officials for meeting with you. If they have voted to support issues that are important to you or related to the meeting, thank them for their past support. You can also congratulate them on any recent victories. This starts the conversation on a positive note and shows that you've done your homework to know who they are.	
Introduce topic	Provide a high-level overview of what you'll be discussing and state your position. For example: We're here to discuss climate change. Our group is very concerned about the impacts it will have on our community, and we oppose climate change.	
Ask questions	Before diving into details, ask if the elected official has heard about the topic and what they think of it. Asking questions is a great opportunity to get the elected official talking. This is a great chance for you to learn more about the elected official.	
Discuss topic	Pick 2 or 3 points that you want to share with the elected official. Remember that your time is limited and elected officials are not subject-matter experts, so it's best to keep it simple. Telling stories about how the topic impacts you or your community makes the issues more personable and relatable. Remember to pause and allow for the elected official to engage in a discussion with you.	
Direct ask	Elected officials will want to know what you want them to do. You can ask them to vote a certain way, provide funding for a project, etc. Whatever the ask, it should be specific and direct.	
Follow-up questions	Elected officials rarely will commit to anything on the spot. If you don't get a firm yes or no, ask what additional information they need to make a decision. Ask if there are any other stakeholders they'd like to hear from.	
Thanks and follow-up plan	Thank them again for taking the time to meet with you and offer to follow up with them or their staff with additional information about the issue. If there is an upcoming event you'd like them to attend, you can also flag the invitation. Then make sure you follow-up via email within a week of the meeting.	

Public meetings

Tips on making the most of public meetings:

- Review the description of the meeting and any shared information in advance. This might include a draft proposal, maps, scenarios, or design images.
- Ask for accommodations and share accessibility needs. Language interpretation, wheelchair and walker access, and other accessibility needs can be met with advance notice to city or county staff. Support your community members by proactively asking for accommodations.
- Invite neighbors or other members of your community to attend.
- Help others overcome barriers to participation, such as figuring out internet connectivity needs, transportation, or childcare.
- Come prepared to share feedback. It's okay to oppose an idea, even better to offer alternatives.
- Balance listening and speaking, treat your fellow participants with respect and courtesy even when you are on opposing sides of an issue.
- Speak for yourself and share personal experiences – how has (or how will) an issue affected you?
- Use the opportunity to meet other people who share your interests.
- Take copies of printed material with you to share with others or share broadcast or meeting links with interested parties
- Sign up for notifications so you can get advance notice of additional opportunities to give input.

Public Testimony

Tips for effective public testimony:

- Be prepared. Most testimony is only for two or three minutes, and the time goes quickly. Making a brief outline and practicing your testimony beforehand can help you better convey your message in the allotted time. Keeping your remarks brief and focused will allow you to deliver your message with minimal assistance from notes. Looking your audience in the eye will make your comments more memorable and increase the likelihood that the audience is engaged and focused on your message.
- Be strategic about when you sign up to speak. Most public hearings have a sign-up sheet for people who wish to speak. Public officials, like all of us, become weary after hours of public testimony, so it is advantageous to speak early when your audience is likely to be the most attentive. However, if you are part of a group of people all planning to testify with a similar message, it may be to the group's advantage to spread presenters out so that your audience hears your position repeatedly throughout the hearing and so that later presenters can address weaknesses or inaccuracies in other testimony.
- Include the basics in your testimony. Start your testimony by introducing yourself and the name of any organization you may represent. Many jurisdictions will require you to give your mailing address. Even if not required, it is helpful for providing context for your comments. If at a council meeting, you may even say which district you live in (if applicable).
- Be brief but thorough and genuine. It is important to keep your remarks focused and succinct, but you want to make sure you are sharing your story or establishing a solid record of facts to support the decision you want made. It is often not possible to reference all the relevant research and data to support your position during your allotted speaking time. Instead, simply reference the existence of such data, and submit a written copy of the data into the record to supplement your testimony. Written data should be presented to the clerk before the public hearing, if possible. Ideally, it is helpful to provide enough copies for all of the decisionmakers at the hearing.
- It is important to remain professional and courteous when giving public testimony. Take care not to overstate your case and risk undermining your position. Stay focused on the merits of your argument; it does not advance your cause to bring up past decisions you didn't like or to insult decisionmakers or planning staff. Stay focused on the issue you are there to discuss and do so in a way that is positive and professional.
- Say thank you. It is always helpful to thank your audience for their consideration of your comments and suggestions and to express your gratitude for being able to participate in the public process. Most often, decisionmakers at public hearings are volunteering their time and it helps to let them know that their efforts are appreciated. This also helps to keep a positive and professional tone to your testimony, even when you may be disagreeing with a particular action taken by a jurisdiction.

Create Your Public Testimony. Fill out this table to create your public testimony:

Speech Outline	Tips	My Testimony (Create your testimony here)
Introduce Yourself	Name any group or organization you represent. Mention where you live.	
State your position	Start your testimony noting if you support or oppose the issue being discussed (or note that you have comments for consideration or concerns you'd like addressed).	
Describe your position	Briefly share a few specific points. These can be specific issues with the project, concerns to be addressed, potential solutions, benefits of projects, and (most importantly) why they matter to you/the community.	
	If applicable, reference written materials you are submitting into the record that support your testimony.	
Direct ask	Restate/summarize the issues you have identified and the action that you wish to see the decisionmakers take. Remember to be specific with your ask.	
Thanks	Thank the audience for the chance to testify and participate in the public process.	

Writing an effective comment letter

Tips for an effective comment letter:

- Introduce yourself and why you are interested in the project.
- Get to the point up front. What is the decision you support? What outcome do you desire?
- State your concerns clearly and succinctly. Frame comments in the context of impacts on you, your community, and the land involved.
- Stay focused on your objective. Comment only on issues relevant to the decision being made.
- State opinions and preferences, ask questions, and propose alternative solutions to particular issues. Where possible, include data to support your opinions.
- Ask for studies that you think are important but have not been provided.
- If the proposed project is subject to the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) and you think it will have significant environmental impact, specifically identify the areas of the environment you are concerned about and request that an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) be prepared.
- Identify project features that you like and think should not be changed.
- Ask to be added to the project mailing list and request a copy of the decision.
- Keep the length to two pages or less.

Create Your Written Comment Letter. Fill out this table to create your comment letter:

Letter Outline	Tips	My Comment Letter (Create your letter here)
Introduce Yourself	Name any group or organization you represent. Mention where you live.	
Explain why you're writing	Start your letter flagging the specific issue you're writing about and note your support or opposition, concerns you have, etc.	
Describe concerns	Let the elected official know the problem that needs to be resolved or the issues currently going unaddressed. Explain why this matters to you and your community.	
Describe solutions	If you support a proposal, describe how it addresses your concerns. If you oppose a proposal, describe what you would rather see.	
	If applicable, reference written materials you are submitting into the record that support your testimony.	
Direct ask	Restate/summarize the issues you have identified and the action that you wish to see the decisionmakers take. Remember to be specific with your ask.	
Thanks	Thank the decisionmaker for the chance to provide written comments and ask to be updated on future opportunities to provide comments and participate in future events or meetings.	

Writing Effective Newspaper Submittals

Tips for writing and submitting an Op-Ed:

- Write about a current issue that is engaging and relevant. Op-Eds are used to advance new ideas on how to solve problems, highlight issues that are going under-covered, or to persuade readers to support your position on a controversial topic. State the issues clearly, avoiding excessive rhetoric, and cite your sources for any facts or statements you make.
- If you have a professional title that suggests authority, use it. If you are part of an organization, seek permission to sign the op-ed on behalf of that organization.
- Follow the local paper's length requirements. Most papers want Op-Eds that are between 600 and 800 words. Some are more lenient; some more restrictive. Tailor your submittal appropriately.
- Most newspapers also have guidelines for how to submit an op-ed. Typically, they ask you to email their editorial team. Sometimes there is an online form. Regardless, when you're ready to submit, include a brief cover letter to the editor, explaining who you are and asking for them to consider running the editorial. Mention why you feel the topic is important and assure them that you have not sent it to any other papers. Keep this cover letter to less than a paragraph.
- Relate to your audience. Think about ways that the issue you're writing about impacts the lives of your community, local businesses, and your city. Drawing a direct line between your issue and the lives of the people reading your Op-Ed, the more it will resonate with them. Facts and numbers are important, but overly relying on them will make your Op-Ed less interesting to read and less likely to be published.
- Try to think of a catchy title. If you don't, the paper will choose one for you, which may not emphasize your central message. Picking your own title doesn't guarantee that is the title your Op-Ed will be published with, but a catchy title has a better chance of sticking.
- If your first-choice paper doesn't run your Op-Ed, try sending it to another paper, or even a third one. You can also post Op-Ed's as a blog post if your organization has one. Or, you can shorten and re-submit your article as a Letter to the Editor.
- Share your Op-Ed! The point of an Op-Ed is to continue the discussion. If your Op-Ed is published, share it on social media, email it to relevant decisionmakers and groups, and print off copies to pass out at events or meetings. Once it's published, make sure people read it

Tips for writing and submitting a Letter to the Editor (LTE):

- Strike while the iron is hot. If you see an issue that you care about covered in the local paper and you want to respond to the coverage, respond right away. Ideally, you want your response received the very next day. If you delay, you reduce your chances of being published.
- Make it a group affair. If more than one person sends in an LTE about an article, it lets the paper know that this is a topic that their readers care about and will respond to. Try getting your family members and friends to send in their own LTEs. You can host a letter writing party and talk about the various points that each person could make in their letters. While it's unlikely every one of your letters will get published, it's more likely that at least one will make it in the paper with more people submitting their letters.

- Explain who you are. Relating your particular experience or background to the issue helps to explain why you are qualified to comment
- Make your point. Each newspaper has its own length requirements for LTEs, and they are generally long enough for you to make one main point. Instead of diving into details or listing out a bunch of facts, focus on the one main point you want to convey to people and stick with that.
- Make it memorable. People are more likely to remember and relate to personal stories and anecdotes than a list of facts and figures. Nit-picky letters full of complaints aren't fun to read. Punchy letters that are short and snappy are more likely to be published.
- Submit your letter. Like with Op-Eds, most newspapers have guidelines for how to submit an LTE. Again, this is typically either via email to their editorial team or an online form. Unlike an Op-Ed, there's no need for a cover letter with an LTE. If you don't get published in your first paper, try again with a backup paper.
- Share the LTE! If you get the LTE published, share it far and wide to further the conversation

Definitions

Incorporated area: an incorporated area is one that is part of a town or city, with a charter and its own municipality, and elected officials

Unincorporated area: an unincorporated area is one that is not part of a town or city, and is often part of a larger municipality such as the county, and does not have its own elected officials

Variance: a variance is kind of like a waiver for zoning regulations. Property owners, or applicants, can request a variance to deviate from current zoning requirements.

District model: there are several forms of representation in existence. Some government bodies are made up of all at large members while others have all district representatives, and many have a hybrid of both at large and district representatives.

At-large members: At-large is a description for elected or appointed members of a governing body for a whole population. This is common at a city, county, and state level.

District members: A district member is an individual that represents an entire district

Create Your Op-Ed or LTE. Fill out this table to create your newspaper submission:

Letter Outline	Tips	My Op-Ed/LTE (Create your newspaper submission here)
Introduce the topic	If you can connect the topic to current events or a recent story published in the newspaper, it can help get your Op-Ed or LTE published.	
Describe how it relates	Mention how the issue relates to you and your community. Use a mix of facts and personal anecdotes.	
Describe solutions	Be explicit about the actions that you want to see to address your concerns or current issues. Try to paint a picture of what the future could look like if action does or does not happen.	
Closing	Readers to get all the way through your LTE or Op-Ed will want to be left with a call-to-action. Reiterate your position and what you want others to do when closing your submission.	