

# Guide to Making Public Comments: WHO, WHEN & HOW?

## Who Do You Want To Speak To And At Which Level Of Government?

Who has the authority to create change/impact the item you care about? Now you can determine if you want to reach your local, county, state or federal elected officials, or the general public through newspapers, social media or other forums.

- Know your audience and understand their point of view on your issue. For example:
  - Who is their primary constituency ? How do they measure success? Your audience may or may not be satisfying the electorate overall; but instead be focused only on delivering an outcome to their base and re-election needs. How long they have been in office, know their voting record if possible and committee assignments for this term, if applicable. This information is typically on the website.
  - What is the political make-up of the elected body? Are they all from one party or is it a mix? Is it particularly partisan? How much do they reflect a variety of demographics, constituents and viewpoints?
  - You can read up on their backgrounds, viewpoints and voting records on the respective government websites and/or their personal campaign pages.
  
- Develop persuasive arguments that will appeal to your audience's definition of success. For example: support business growth, create tax revenue or future economic development.
  - One example regarding the issue of creating more affordable housing is to focus on housing for workers who are the backbone of the County's economic growth and that homelessness keeps businesses from investing in the region. There may be compelling arguments that align with an elected official's values/beliefs/platform other than a 'moral imperative' or a 'right' to housing.

# Guide to Making Public Comments: WHO, WHEN & HOW?

- An environmental message about the importance of clean water can be framed as being detrimental to tourism and recreational boaters and having a negative impact on tourism revenue.

## When and How to advocate?

There are a variety of ways to advocate. You may choose one, or decide to use several ways to reach your elected representative. It will also depend on your audience. The website links provided in this Guide provide you with the necessary contact information and instructions.

- *Directly to an elected official:*
  - *Email* to the one elected representative(s) representing your local county or state/federal) district or School Board etc. (this will be based on your primary residential address).
  - *Email* to all the elected representatives on a Board, or legislative body, or serving on a specific committee pertinent to your topic.
- *Written* on the record public comment through a government website: You may fill out the [public comment form on the bottom half of this webpage](#) in advance of the meeting. Be sure to include your name and submit your remarks by the meeting deadline. County Commissioners may not receive your comments before the meeting if the form is submitted after the deadline
- *In person* public comment at a meeting (you must sign up in advance). You can request to speak 24 hours before the meeting date (9:00 a.m. the day before). To sign in to speak prior to the meeting go to [Public Speaker Sign-Up Form](#).
- *In person meeting* with a legislator. Know who you want to meet with and the topic to be discussed. Then, for example, to set up a BoCC meeting, call 941-745-3700 and you will be directed to the appropriate assistant. More information is available at [mymanatee.gov](http://mymanatee.gov) on the Commissioner homepage.
- *Phone call/voicemail* to a legislator's office (Here's a video featuring Katie Couric on how to make a call to a legislator:  
<https://www.instagram.com/reel/CqX8tqIrqaQ/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>)

# Guide to Making Public Comments: WHO, WHEN & HOW?

## To speak in person at a Board of Manatee County Commissioners Meeting:

- You have **3 minutes** and they are very strict. It is recommended that you practice reading your presentation aloud several times to ensure it does not go over 3 minutes.
- Before you start speaking, which starts the 3 minute timer, make sure the microphone is adjusted so that you are speaking directly into it so you will be well heard in a clear and confident voice (say testing, testing). It is possible that it is not adjusted properly when you get to the podium, and you may need to adjust it.
- **Structure your speech** like so:
  - State your name and county of residence
  - Discuss the issue - State your position and what the impact is
  - Clearly define the action requested
- **Be respectful** and prepare specific talking points to effectively convey your passion for the issue.
- **Make eye contact** with each Commissioner, even if they don't look back at you.
- **Use printed pictures** where possible. Next to the podium is a table with an overhead projector. When you stand up, please tell the Board you have pictures to present.
  - DO NOT use your phone; print out any images you would like to present.

## Example of Effective Speaking Comment to BoCC

*Commissioners, my name is [NAME] and reside in Manatee County. My topic is transparency and governance. Please allow citizens to resume participation in BoCC meetings by calling-in their comments. Although this option was originally added in response to the pandemic, it is a valuable way to allow more residents to engage with their government, particularly those without transportation or who have abilities issues. Existing BoCC rules regarding public comment effectively allow calling-in comments as well as in-person comments. Please re-authorize call-in commenting for your meetings. Thank you.*

# Guide to Making Public Comments: WHO, WHEN & HOW?

## To contact your Local Manatee Board of Commissioners ([mymanatee.org](http://mymanatee.org)) via email, phone or in person meeting:

- Go to the Manatee County website [mymanatee.org](http://mymanatee.org) and click on the tab labeled [Government](#). In the government dropdown tab you will be given options to choose from.
- Choose and click on '[Board of County Commissioners](#)'. This will take you to the Board of Commission Home Page that provides general and detailed information about the Commission and each individual County Commissioner.
- Click on the name of a Commissioner, and you will find detailed information which includes their District, a map of the district they represent, personal bio, and contact information.
- If you do not know what district you live in, there is a link to a [Resident Information Tool](#) which will tell you your district.
- On the left side of the Commissioner home page, there is a link to "[Contact your County Commissioners](#)". When you click on this link, it takes you to detailed information on how to contact the Commissioners.

## When should I advocate?

### Deadlines & Word counts for submission

- *Online public comments* for Regular BOCC meetings are typically due no later than 2pm the Friday prior to the Tuesday meeting. There is a 3,000 character (**not words**) count limit. Go to [mymanatee.gov](http://mymanatee.gov), click on the Government Drop Down Tab; click on Board of Commissioners and click on the Contact your Commissioner to get to their Home Page.
- *Emails to Commissioners* do not have a time constraint or word count. Write your letter a few days before any relevant meeting so they have time to read your comments.

## What are the types of agenda items and how do I know which one to make my comment?

- At the BoCC, citizens can comment at various times:
  - Future Agenda Items - citizens can comment on anything they'd like, as long as it is not on the agenda for that meeting
  - Consent Agenda - typically routine items that don't require individual discussion and are voted on as a group. A citizen may comment on a particular item/items listed in the Consent Agenda. The Chair will call for comments on the Consent Agenda early in the meeting.

# Guide to Making Public Comments: WHO, WHEN & HOW?

- Regular Agenda - after commissioners discuss an item listed on the regular agenda and are taking a vote on it, the Chair will call for citizen comments. Citizens may comment at that time on that item only.

## When is it important to speak in-person on an agenda item vs. future agenda item?

- You should speak on a particular agenda item when you have a strong opinion about it and want to share that with the Commission.
- When an agenda item is listed for a specific meeting date, you should speak on the topic when it is on the agenda
- “Future” agenda items are anything at all you want the commissioners to know about, whether or not it is already scheduled for future discussion or not. It is a topic not specifically on the agenda.

## What do you need to know about attending and presenting at a regular meeting of the Manatee County Board of Commissioners?

- Where/what time do the meetings take place?
  - 8:30 - 5:00\* every other Tuesday ( \* sometimes shorter or longer)
  - Manatee County Administration Building 1st Floor
  - 1112 Manatee Avenue W Bradenton 941-748-4501.
  - There is a parking building next door, and free parking around the corner on 10th Street W.
  - You will need time to park and go through security. It is not necessary to arrive by 9. Based on when your item is on the agenda, it's best to arrive by 9:30am and be prepared to stay as agenda items are often shifted with no notice.
- What is the attire?
  - Business casual
- What do experienced public commenters or previous Commissioners recommend / tips?
  - Sit near the front and make eye contact with the BoCCs.
  - Stay engaged and listen closely to their discussion and comments.
  - Do not whisper or make any negative reactions to BoCC comments. Stay neutral during all the business matters.
  - Do not approach the BoCC dias until your name is called.
  - You will need to introduce yourself once you are at the podium. Keep it short as they will start the 3-minute timer. Quickly state your name and

# Guide to Making Public Comments: WHO, WHEN & HOW?

that you are a registered voter in Manatee County. If you've been here awhile, tell them how many years.

- Try to keep as much eye contact as possible while reading your remarks.
- What should I expect?
  - **A very strict 3 minute time limit.** While the Commissioners have unlimited time to discuss issues and digress, the public is held to very strict limits on speaking time.
  - A formal and slightly intimidating environment where the Commissioners are on a high dias, and the speaker has to look up to them from a lower level across rows of audience members and tech support staff. Feel free to watch previous meetings at [mymanatee.gov](http://mymanatee.gov)
  - A very high-tech auditorium room with TV screens, computer equipment for a high tech operation, armed security and a metal detection system .
  - You will be videotaped and recorded
  - The BoCC is tolerant of citizen input and comments. They may engage with the speaker, but that will take up your 3 minute time so it's suggested you stick with reading your public comment and avoid being interrupted. They may comment when you are done, but because your time is up, you are not really able to have a back and forth. They may also quickly move on to the next commenter or agenda item.
- Will the commissioners engage with me during/after my comment?
  - They might. Typically they do not interrupt you while you are making your public comment.
  - You want to stay focused on delivering your remarks in the 3 minutes allocated to you. They may ask a question afterwards, or discuss among themselves. Finish your remarks before engaging.
- What happens if the meeting runs overtime and I am unable to deliver my remarks in person during the meeting?
  - In this case, send an email to the commissioners with your intended comments.

**Where can I watch or listen to government meetings?** Click on the link for [Live Stream](#), or watch via the Manatee Government Access (MGA) on Spectrum channel 644, Verizon channel 30 and Comcast channel 20., or watch previous meetings on the [YouTube channel](#). Find a specific meeting's video from [list of Meetings & Agendas](#).