

## Customer Information Bulletin

# COMMENTING ON PROPOSED DEVELOPMENTS

### Planning Division

1055 South Grady Way – Renton, WA 98057  
Phone: 425-430-7200 | [www.rentonwa.gov](http://www.rentonwa.gov)

Concerned citizens can review the following list of land use issues when commenting on a proposal that may impact their neighborhood. This list should not be considered to be all-inclusive, but provides guidance regarding issues to consider when commenting on development proposals.

- **Zoning:** uses allowed, are there any restrictions;
- **Development Regulations:** maximum building height, structure setbacks, lot coverage, minimum and maximum number of units, lot size, landscaping requirements;
- **Critical Areas:** shoreline, geological hazards, wetlands, aquifer protection areas;
- **Parking:** minimum and maximum number of required parking stalls;
- **Utilities:** sanitary sewer, storm drainage, water;
- **Environmental Impacts:**
  - ◆ **Earth:** grading/filling, slopes, soil types;
  - ◆ **Air:** emissions to the air;
  - ◆ **Water:** surface runoff, withdrawals of surface or ground water;
  - ◆ **Vegetation:** plant removal or alterations;
  - ◆ **Animal Habitat:** threatened or endangered species;
  - ◆ **Energy and Natural Resources:** potential solar impacts;
  - ◆ **Environmental Health:** special emergency services, hazardous waste;
  - ◆ **Noise:** short-term and long-term noise impacts, measures to reduce or control noise impacts;
  - ◆ **Housing:** dwelling units provided or units lost, compatibility with existing housing;
  - ◆ **Aesthetics:** bulk, mass, height, blockage of public views;
  - ◆ **Transportation:** impacts on existing streets, public transit, new streets, and new trips per day.

If you believe any of the above-mentioned issues have not been adequately addressed, or there is insufficient information provided, please take a moment to comment on the project as described on the backside of this informational handout.

Or, if you have some general questions about a project proposal or just want to speak to someone about potential development, please feel free to contact the City of Renton Planning Division at (425) 430-7200 and ask for the project planner.

# What Concerned Neighbors Should Know about the Land Use Process

The City of Renton encourages all citizens to get involved in the land use process. This handout provides a brief overview of the process. It also highlights key elements that concerned neighbors should consider when commenting on development proposals.

State and local laws require certain land use projects to undergo a notification/comment/appeal process as part of the application process. For example, a new shopping center would be required to obtain site plan and environmental review approval, which triggers a public notice, comment and appeal period. However, once the site is developed, if a tenant wants an electrical permit for a new electrical outlet a public notice and comment period is not required.

Some of the land use permits that require notice/comment/appeal periods are: site plan review; environmental review (SEPA); variances; conditional use permits; short plats; preliminary plats; temporary use permits; rezones; and comprehensive plan amendments.

In contrast, many other land use and building related permits do not require public notice/comment/appeal periods such as: building permits for single family (new homes); minor commercial tenant improvement permits; electrical and mechanical permits; signs; business licenses; lot line adjustments; right-of-way use permits; and construction and utility permits.

**The Notification and Comment Period Process:** Once the City accepts a complete land use application the “Comment Period” begins. The comment period is the time when concerned citizens can get involved in land use projects. The following list of steps outlines the notification and comment period process:

1. The **Notice of Application** is issued when a project application is accepted by the City as complete. This notice provides a brief overview of the project, its location, and a City contact number and address if a neighbor chooses to comment on a project. More specific details of the project can be obtained by visiting the City’s Planning Division (6<sup>th</sup> Floor of the Renton City Hall, Monday through Friday 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.).
2. **The Comment Period** begins when the City of Renton Planning Division mails a “Notice of Application” to property owners within 300 feet of the proposed project boundaries. In addition, the City posts the subject site with a bright colored project poster. This poster provides the same project and contact information as the “Notice of Application”.
3. To comment on a project, send comments in writing to the Planning Division, and please include your name and mailing address. The comment period last for two weeks and the City will **not** make any decision or recommendation on the project until the comment period expires.
4. Concerned neighbors may contact City staff and ask to be made a **Party of Record**. Becoming a party of record assures concerned citizens that they will be notified of any

opportunity to attend a public hearing and, that they will receive a copy of the land use decision. Anyone submitting written comments is automatically made a party of record.

5. Once a project **recommendation** or **decision** has been issued, a 14-day appeal period begins. Any concerned party can **appeal** a project during the 14-day appeal period. An appeal of a decision or recommendation must be received by the City Clerk's Office by 5:00 p.m. on the appeal deadline date. An appeal must be requested in writing accompanied with the required appeal fee listed on the City of Renton Fee Brochure. All appeals are filed with the City of Renton City Clerk's Office on the 7<sup>th</sup> Floor of the Renton City Hall.

**How to Reach Us:**

The City of Renton Planning Division is located on the 6<sup>th</sup> Floor of the Renton City Hall building.

Renton City Hall  
1055 South Grady Way  
Renton, WA 98057  
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# Letters to a Public Hearing Body

Letters are very important to City Council, Planning Commission and Hearing Examiner as they make decisions. A well-written letter can be as influential as the Staff Report.

## Preparation

1. Read the staff report and other background materials.
2. Confer with your neighbors.
3. Know the decision-making criteria.
4. Brainstorm a list of the points you wish to make. If you represent a group, ask other people for ideas and add their input to the list.

## Writing Your Letter Part I

### State the Facts

1. Include your name, address and phone number and/or email.
2. State your interest in the case and whom you represent (if you are speaking for yourself, say that).
3. What you want/don't want the hearing body to do (one or two sentences if you can, early in the letter).
4. Cite specific, measurable impacts.
5. Try to avoid hearsay or prophetic ("chicken little") statements. Use facts.
6. Provide information, if you can, that reveals gaps or errors in the application material or the analysis, or introduce new information.
7. Offer solutions if you can.
8. Specifically request follow up if you expect it.

## Writing Your Letter Part II

### Organization

1. In the heading, identify the subject and state if you are in favor or opposed.
2. Organize your letter similarly to the Staff Report.
3. Provide evidence for why the hearing body should make a particular decision.
4. Relate evidence directly to the decision-making criteria from the Staff Report.
5. Provide reference to page numbers in the Staff Report.
6. Use bullet points or numbered lists to outline your points.
7. Keep it short (one or two pages).

## Writing Your Letter Part III

### Common Mistakes

1. Forgetting to put your name on the letter.
2. Straying from the facts in the case.
3. Addressing issues that are not related to the decision at hand.
4. Addressing issues that are outside the influence/responsibility of the hearing body.
5. Stating inaccurate facts.

6. Making assumptions.
7. Illegible handwriting.
8. Spelling errors.
9. Disorganized.
10. Too much emotional language (be personal without letting your emotions drive the letter).
11. Forgetting to include your address or phone number.
12. Not acknowledging whom you represent.
13. Writing too much.
14. Relying on rumors.
15. Making threats.
16. Name-calling.
17. Lack of facts – only hearsay and assumptions.

## **Advice from Those Who Have Written Before:**

### **From citizens:**

“Write the letter and put it away for a few days. Reread it, and if you still feel the same way, send it.”

“Don’t save the letter writing only for objections. Praise helps city staff know what they are doing right as well.”

### **From a City Councilperson:**

“It is especially helpful if the writer has information that is unique or has a point that is unlikely to be covered by others.”

## **Decision-Making Criteria:**

These are the applicable standards and criteria that the hearing body must use when they make a decision. The decision-making or applicable criteria are outlined in the Staff Report. If you can’t find the criteria or have questions, call the staff person who wrote the report or the Planning Division at 425-430-7200.

## **Where to Find the Staff Report:**

You can also request a Staff Report by calling the Planning Division at 425-430-7200.

## **Writing Alone or Writing For a Group:**

The first question you might want to ask yourself is, am I speaking just for myself or for others as well?

### **Advantages/Disadvantages**

#### **As a group:**

- Different perspectives in addition to your own.
- Power in numbers.

- Requires coordination to rally support.

**As an individual:**

- One person's opinion might be biased in some way.
- You may have an important perspective.
- Less coordination required.

**Suggestions for Writing as a Group**

- Cite the broadest base of support you have for your position such as a petition or letter signed by neighbors, an approved neighborhood plan, or an annual neighborhood opinion survey.
- If you have approval (as defined by your Association's by-laws) to represent your Neighborhood Association, use Neighborhood Association letterhead.

**Suggestions for Writing as an Individual**

- Remain objective and avoid emotional language.

**Making Your Case in One Sentence:**

Your case will be conveyed most powerfully if you can make it in one short and succinct statement. Most of us can't write a great statement like this the first time. Try this technique for developing one:

1. Write down everything in your head. Focus on "what" you want the hearing body to understand (you will address the "why" later).
2. Set that aside.
3. With a new sheet of paper, write down your main point again.
4. Examine what you have written and identify the most important point. Eliminate repetition.
5. Repeat until you have reduced your statement to one or two sentences.

# Testifying at a Public Hearing

Your presence at a public hearing can be a powerful statement. Use the following techniques to organize your thoughts so that your words will make a powerful statement too.

## Preparing for Your Testimony:

1. Make sure you understand the issue that is before the hearing body (is it an actual development proposal or an annexation, or a rezoning?).
2. Bring in a written statement of your comments to organize your thoughts (see the “Letters to a Public Hearing Body” handout).
  - a. Review the Staff Report
  - b. Understand the decision-making criteria.
  - c. Create a short (one or two sentence) statement that summarized what you are asking the hearing body to do.
3. Use facts and make sure your facts are right. Avoid assumptions.
4. Make a bulleted list of your main points. It will be easier to read.
5. Practice your testimony before you arrive.
6. Time yourself. You’ll only have a few minutes to make your point.
7. If attending with others, limit repetitive testimony by assigning different topics to each like-minded individual planning to testify.

## When You Arrive at a Hearing:

You will usually find testimony cards or sign-up sheet at the front table near the agendas or by the entrance. If it’s a card, fill it out and hand it to the clerk or staff person. Don’t forget to include your address. Wait to be called.

## At the Microphone

The purpose of your testimony is to focus the hearing body’s attention on the connection between your testimony and their decision-making criteria.

1. State your name and where you live first, followed by your position (for or against) and whom you represent (yourself or a group).
2. Address the issue that is before the hearing body, such as a proposed ordinance. Refer to it by name and identifying number.
3. Keep it short and to the point. Observe time limits.
4. Provide examples if you can of the points you make.
5. Provide information or new material of which the hearing body might not be aware.
6. Provide realistic alternatives for the hearing body to consider.
7. Be aware of what your body language is saying.

## Other Advice

1. Avoid threatening language, no matter how emotionally charged the topic.
2. Be respectful and professional. Don’t get personal or overly emotional.

3. Stick to the topic and try not to ramble. Be respectful of the length of the meeting and all the other people who may wish to speak.
4. Use facts; not rumors, fears or speculation.
5. Avoid repetition. There is nothing wrong with simply saying “I agree with the testimony of Mrs...”
6. As a member of the audience, do not clap or shout out from the room. This takes from other people’s time and is disrespectful.

## **Specific Advice From Those Who Have Spoken Before**

### **From citizens:**

“Be prepared with paper and pencil to inject new thoughts into your speech based on what you may have heard from the opposition.”

“Have your thoughts written down. Simply read your written testimony if necessary. Many times this is much more effective. You don’t lose your train of thought or forget important details.”

“Body language is important. When you are called to testify, hand the clerk a copy of your written testimony. Bring your testimony in a manila folder. Once you are comfortably seated or at the podium, open it slowly. When you are finished, place your testimony back into the folder to make it clear that you have finished.”

“Avoid bringing up background or peripheral matters. If the Council wants more detail, they will ask questions before you turn to leave.”

“End your testimony by saying, *“We urge Council to support (or reject) this measure.”* Say *“Thank you for this opportunity to speak”* before you stand up or turn to leave.”

“Do your homework! What codes are in place that supports your position?”

“Don’t be afraid or intimidated. Many of our appointed and elected officials are volunteers who want to hear what you have to say. If you are upset about the issue, it is alright to convey that, but without personal attacks and accusatory language. Remember that the people you are addressing are your neighbors, and they may already be on your side.”

### **From Planning Commission:**

“Stop and take a deep breath. Then begin your testimony.”

Q: What are you looking for as you take testimony from the public?

A: What’s this person’s interest in the issue and why? What’s the source of their information? Is it accurate? Is their concern something that’s unique to them, or is it something that would be of concern to many?