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## **CITIZEN'S GUIDE**

**to participation  
in municipal  
decision-  
making**

**PUBLIC INPUT TOOLKIT for Municipalities**



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The Citizen's Guide to Participation in Municipal Decision-Making  
is available online at  
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September 2005  
ISBN #0-7785-4225-4

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## Contents

1. The value of participation .....	1
2. How to succeed at public input.....	1
3. Learn what is going on .....	2
Find out about your municipality.....	2
Work together.....	3
4. Provide input to municipal decisions.....	4
Does Council or administration make the decision? .....	4
When will a municipality inform citizens about a decision or request public input? .....	4
Council decisions.....	5
Administrative decisions, with right of appeal .....	7
Administrative decisions, without right of appeal .....	7
Advisory boards .....	8
5. Tips on making meeting presentations .....	9

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# CITIZEN'S GUIDE

## to participation in municipal decision-making

This guide will help you become an active citizen in your municipality. It will provide the essential information you need to be part of the municipal decision process.

### 1. The value of participation

Municipalities are established to serve people. They become better (and happier) places when people get involved in decisions. Decisions made by your local (municipal) government affect your day-to-day life and deserve your attention. You may be affected by decisions about annual budgets, public transportation, garbage pickup, new building developments or whether the house next door to yours can be enlarged. As a citizen and taxpayer, you have a stake in the outcome of municipal decisions.

There are many opportunities for the public to become involved and take part in decision-making. Municipal officials welcome input from the public; in some cases, they are required by law to seek it. However, the final decision rests with Council.

In some situations, the public will be directly notified and asked to respond (e.g. by completing a survey or attending a meeting). However, in many situations, you must make an effort to become informed and involved. Often, the municipality is not obligated to notify the public personally about an issue or decision process taking place.

Become more proactive in the decisions affecting your municipality. You have the opportunity to help your municipal Council make better decisions and to improve the quality of life in your community.



**Tip:** There are usually community groups or associations that can help you become familiar with municipal issues and processes. Working together helps to ensure success.

### 2. How to succeed at public input

If you want to get the best results in return for your effort to participate in municipal decisions, consider the following:

**Learn what is going on.** Sometimes a little detective work is needed to find out what changes are being considered. Be aware of what is going on around you so you know when public input is being requested or when you can request to give public input. Early enquiries are always a good idea.

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**Learn about the Decision.** Learn what decisions have already been made, and what decisions or parts of decisions remain to be made and will be affected by public input, and what the public input is intended to achieve. Sometimes your input addresses only a part of a decision, and other (and possibly larger) parts may already have been decided and are no longer open for public discussion.

**Work with others.** There is more power in a group approach. When citizens work together, they are more likely to influence municipal decisions. However, this means you must achieve consensus with others and any differences should be discussed within the group, not with others.

**Respect the processes established by municipalities** and recognize that staff and councillors may have real practical and legal constraints on what they can do. Municipalities must consider what is good for all.

**Be realistic about your goals.** Municipal Council must make decisions that consider the needs of all parties concerned, within the zoning established in the municipal development plan. Study the situation and consider your requests carefully. If a developer is acting within the requirements, you may want to discuss possible modifications that would reduce the impact on neighbours (e.g. entry area, parking).

**Never underestimate your power as a citizen** and member of community organizations to effect change in a positive and calm way.

**Other levels of government may sometimes need to be involved** in what appears to be a simple municipal matter. You can take the initiative to involve other government officials or take your input to forums set up under provincial or federal legislation.

### 3. Learn what is going on

#### ***Find out about your municipality***

Familiarize yourself with the particular ways that your municipality operates. The Government of Alberta's website ([www.municipalaffairs.gov.ab.ca](http://www.municipalaffairs.gov.ab.ca)) includes useful information about how municipalities operate.

Your municipality may have a website. If not, look at websites for other municipalities to find out general information that might also apply where you live. For example, the process of development applications is largely set out in the *Municipal Government Act* and applies to all municipalities regardless of size. Larger municipalities such as Edmonton and Calgary have information in printed form



**Tip:** Be open to compromise. Remember, there are often several perspectives to an issue.

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and on their websites which explains the process. The local county or municipal district website may offer information valuable to a summer village resident.

Go to your municipal office or local library and look for brochures about anything connected with the municipality, including procedures, bylaws and dates and times of Council and committee meetings. If you need clarification on a particular aspect, make an appointment to talk with an administrator or call and ask your questions.



### **Work together**

If you want to get better information about the municipal decisions that may affect your neighbourhood, become part of the “network” of people who are likely to know. These people include:

- Your elected municipal councillor
- The municipal administrator or planner who deals with zoning and planning
- A local community association or non-government organization

It is recommended you attend a Council meeting and see how decisions about zoning, development or services are handled. Introduce yourself to some of the interested citizens, if you do not know them already.

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## 4. Provide input to municipal decisions

### ***Does Council or administration make the decision?***

*The Municipal Government Act* provides guidance about who has the power and responsibility to make various decisions. Only Council can decide to rezone a piece of land, but administrative staff can determine whether or not to issue a development permit. Council makes policy decisions about such things as budget, budget allocation, bylaws, or land use.

There is an exception. Council may have established an area as a “direct control district.” These districts have specific requirements that must be met by all proposals (e.g. preservation of historic buildings). In these cases, Council approval is required.

The following table describes three types of municipal decisions, noting where formal public notification is required, and whether formal public input is normally suggested.

Type of Decision	Description and Notification
Council, e.g. bylaw change	A bylaw that must be advertised.
Administrative with a right of appeal, e.g. a development permit that generally conforms to the zoning	Decision made by an administrator or administrative committee. Those affected are notified. Those citizens may appeal to a civic board within an established timeframe.
Administrative without right of appeal, e.g. installation of a new sewer line	Administration has the power to make many decisions about municipal services, signs, construction, etc. These decisions <u>may</u> be advertised if they affect the community (notification is not legally required). Public input may or may not be requested.

### ***When will a municipality inform citizens about a decision or request public input?***

Public input is required before a municipality can change certain bylaws, for example, when a road is closed. In this case, the municipality is required by law to formally notify you (the citizen) by advertising or mailing a notice, and to seek public input before a decision is made.

In many other situations, the municipality (usually Council) will decide it needs to gather public input before it makes a decision.



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If public input is required by Council, the administration may do one or all of the following:

1. notify citizens (mail, direct contact, media),
2. hold public meetings,
3. request input through a survey.

The earlier you can become involved, the better—especially if municipal staff are not yet able to make plans public. For example, if property is being developed in your area, the plans may be fairly well advanced before there is any legal obligation for the developer or municipality to notify the community or neighbours. If you notice surveyors on a property or roadway that may concern you, call your municipality and ask questions. Sometimes administrative staff may not be able to divulge confidential information (perhaps the developer has not yet made a formal application), but they may then recommend to the developer that some discussion takes place with the community. Also, if you know who is potentially developing a property, you may contact them directly and ask for a meeting to which municipal staff could then be invited.



### **Council decisions**

Decisions by your elected Council can only be made by passing a bylaw or resolution. Once a decision is made in this way, it is very difficult to have it reviewed or changed. You could only do so by persuading councillors to reopen the decision or by challenging the decision in court. It is much better to try to

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influence Council's decision by providing input before the bylaw or resolution is passed.

There are different ways to provide input to high level decisions under consideration by a Council:

**Examples of high level municipal decisions:**

- Rezoning land
- Adopting an area structure plan
- Adopting an annual budget
- Closing a public roadway
- Privatizing a municipal service

- In some situations the law requires a municipality to hold a **public hearing** before it makes a decision on a particular issue (e.g., a road closure or land use rezoning bylaw). This would be a **statutory public hearing**. In other situations, a municipality may decide to hold a public hearing because of the nature of the issue. This would be a **non-statutory public hearing**. Public hearings are advertised in the press and may also be noted on a municipal website or by notice in public buildings. If you have a specific interest in the issue, you may receive a mailed notice about the hearing. Some tips about presenting at meetings are provided under item 5, page 9 of this guide.
- In larger municipalities, decisions made by Council are often based on information from **committees** of councillors. The committee will review an issue and report to Council with recommendations, so it's best to try to influence those recommendations. Municipalities will each have their own policies as to when members of the public may make presentations (either to Council or to a committee). Find out what these policies are in your area so you do not miss the opportunity to give input to the decision process at the appropriate time. In some municipalities, citizens may make presentations to committees (e.g., transportation committee) but not to Council when it is making the decision.
- Some Council decisions are prompted by a municipal **department** that may have been looking at an issue for many reasons. For example, the department may be responding to an enquiry from a Councillor (often initially from a citizen), a department may of its own volition be seeking to take an action for which it needs Council approval, or the department is responding to an issue raised with them directly by a member of the public. It is always possible for you to contact administrative staff to ask for a meeting on a particular issue, or to request that a public meeting be held in the community.

As a result of its deliberations in any of these situations, the department will ultimately be sending a report to Council with recommendations.

- Lobby, write and talk to your councillors. Remember to talk to all councillors, not just the ones that represent your area, because they all have a vote. Group action is often more effective than individual action, so if appropriate, try to involve other groups who may also be affected by the decision.

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## ***Administrative decisions, with right of appeal***

Some decisions that might affect you as a community member are made by administrative staff. In situations where these decisions have a significant impact on the lives of particular citizens, the law provides for a system of appeal to a board made up of citizen volunteers, councillors or a combination of the two. For example, a Council can establish an Assessment Review Board which deals with complaints about taxes and tax assessments.

If you have an interest defined by the law, you will be notified of appeals before such boards. For example, if a development permit is granted which requires variances from the established requirements, nearby neighbours may be notified and given an opportunity to appeal to a Subdivision and Development Appeal Board.

There are also situations where a matter does not go before a municipal appeal board, but where the law allows a citizen to appeal a decision of Council to the Courts or to a provincial appeal board. For example, if an administrative decision is given to a community member to remedy unsightly property, there is a right to request Council to review the decision or, in limited circumstances, to challenge Council's decision in the Courts. Some decisions concerning municipal utilities can be appealed to the provincial Public Utilities Board.

As a community member affected by a decision made by the administration, you can always contact your municipality to discuss a situation before a decision is made. Once a decision is made, you are bound by the strict procedures of appeal which you should be careful to follow. With regard to making appearances before appeal boards, see the tips under item 5, page 9 of this guide.



**Tip:** Every municipality has to establish (or share with another municipality) a Subdivision and Development Appeal Board for the appeal of subdivision issues and development permits.

## ***Administrative decisions, without right of appeal***

Other decisions made by administrative staff do not have to be reviewed or passed by Council and are not subject to formal avenues of appeal. Such decisions might include whether a recreation program will continue or not, when street cleaning will take place in a particular area, or what traffic measures might be appropriate or not in a certain area. Following are some suggestions on how you can provide input to these decisions:

- Generally, the earlier you are involved in a decision process, the better chance you will have to influence the outcome. Don't expect to be formally notified.
- It is always possible to contact administrators (by e-mail, phone or in person) to discuss the decisions they are making. Even if a decision has

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been made, it might still be important to talk about the effects of the decision and request a review.

- If you think the decision affects a number of people, think about organizing a public meeting and asking civic staff to attend.
- If you are part of a community group or association, maintain ongoing links and good relations with municipal administrators. This can be time-consuming and is not easy for volunteer groups, but can pay dividends in the long run.
- Be aware of notices either in the press or mailed to your home which might be asking for input on a decision. Generally, municipalities want to make decisions that are good for most people and therefore public meetings will often be held to canvass certain issues.



### **Advisory boards**

Sometimes municipalities will set up advisory boards relevant to particular areas or issues. The boards serve to advise Council and the administration, when requested, on matters such as heritage and historical issues, recreation issues or public services such as fire protection. Citizens are generally invited to apply to sit on the boards and it is always possible for members of the public to make representations to an advisory board in regard to any particular issue either in writing or in person.

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## 5. Tips on making meeting presentations

The following tips will help you to prepare:

**Learn the date and time for the meeting.** Contact the municipal office or visit the municipal website.

**Learn clearly the issue at hand** and understand the particular decision being made by the municipality or Council. If you are "on topic" and clearly address the issue at hand, your input will be much more valuable to those making the decision.

**Register in advance to speak.** Some municipalities have registration forms online, or you may contact the municipality by telephone. If you need presentation equipment (e.g., a computer, projector, etc.) request it at that time.

**Find out what the meeting process will be.** Your municipality may have policies about how meetings are organized (e.g. presentations by the public may be limited to five minutes). Also, try to observe a meeting before you attend your own to see how the forum works. Many board/committee/Council meetings are open to the public, as are public meetings and hearings.

**If providing any supporting materials, make sure you have enough copies for each board/committee/Council member.** Call in advance to find out how many copies are needed. Note: Providing a summary of your speaking notes allows the listener to focus on you rather than taking notes.

**Be prepared to make your point succinctly.** You will be better received if you are ready and prepared. If you only have five minutes to speak, the time can go very quickly.

**If presenting as part of a group, use your time wisely.** Each group member should plan to present different points. Repetition of the same point(s) can irritate those hearing the issue.

**Remain civil,** no matter how deeply or passionately you feel about an issue. Members of the public can be asked to leave meetings if their conduct is improper.

**If you cannot attend a meeting in person,** you may write to the Council or committee members in advance of the meeting.