

How to Testify Before the Taxation Committee

Kerry Leichtman, CMA

The Legislature's committees are populated, for the most part, by ordinary people who were elected to serve in the House of Representatives and Senate. They are people from various backgrounds and experiences. It's probably safe to say, most are sincerely trying to do right by the constituents who voted them in and for the state at large.

Legislative committee hearings are educational opportunities for the Legislators. Using the Taxation Committee as an example, bills are assigned to them by the leaders of the House and Senate. Their mission is to consider proposed legislation and decide whether or not to send them to the full body for consideration. If a bill is voted in the affirmative by both houses, and then makes it through the appropriations process if there is an associated financial cost, the bill becomes law. I've simplified this description of the process because all of the permutations of how a bill becomes law is not the main point here.

So how do you contribute? First, subscribe to MMA's *Legislative Bulletin*. Published every Friday afternoon when the Legislature is in session, its articles do an excellent job explaining bills of interest to municipalities. There are two departments in its back pages: Legislative Hearings and In the Hopper. Legislative Hearings is a listing of the where and when of the following week's hearings, divided by committee (i.e. Taxation, Judiciary, State & Local Government, etc.). In the Hopper lists bills whose hearings are not yet scheduled but are making their way through the process. It's sort of like a heads up that hearings for these bills are imminent.

To offer input you can attend the hearings or send in your testimony. If you plan on sending in your testimony try to get it in 48 hours in advance of the hearing so that the committee members will have a chance to review it prior to the hearing date. The Legislature no longer accepts testimony through e-mail. Instead, a submission form is available through the Legislature's website: <https://www.mainelegislature.org/testimony/> This system will distribute your testimony to the committee members.

Testimony submitted online the day of the public hearing will be posted to the internet. Don't include personal information that you do not want made public.

Materials subject to copyright protections will be removed before posting to the website, but they will be included in the record and the email forwarded to committee members.

If you plan on attending the hearing, you will have the most impact by putting your thoughts on paper. Bring 14 copies so that all of the committee members and recording secretary will have a good record of your comments. This is not a requirement but a strong recommendation. Be sure to put your name, occupation and contact information on it.

I have attended hearings where I heard someone say something that I wanted to refute or offer agreement on. That's okay too, and obviously in that instance I had nothing to distribute. Other times, I didn't have time to write a well thought out argument and spoke off bullet points. I made copies of those bullet points for the committee.

Keep in mind that as an assessor you have a unique vantage point on property tax issues and the likely consequences of those bills under consideration. Most of the people on the committee will be very interested in the perspective you bring.

A respectful tone of cordial civility is the norm. Beginning and ending your remarks by thanking the two chairman or chairpersons, if you prefer, and the committee members for the opportunity to speak sets a good tone. Don't worry about appearing nervous. They are probably used to it and will appreciate the effort you are making.

Most of the legislation you'll want to speak about will be heard at the Taxation Committee. They meet in the same room each time (Room 127), so once you've found your way to it the first time, you're all set for future visits.

The committee members sit around a horseshoe-shaped table. There are three rows of visitors' seats facing them. You'll give your testimony seated at a desk facing the committee with your back to the gallery seats. One of the two chairpersons (one from the House and one from the Senate) will ask if anyone would like to comment. There's no set order, no numbers handed out, you just make your way to the desk, handing your copies to the clerk, and go for it.

The State House, of course, has security. You'll empty your pockets, take off your belt (but not your shoes, thankfully), put whatever you're carrying on a conveyor belt scanner, and walk through a metal detector. Try to remember to leave your pocket knife at home or in your car. If you don't they'll hold it for you, but it's on you to remember to ask for it on your way out.

There's limited parking in the State House lots, most of the spaces are reserved for Legislators, but there is a free parking garage just a block away on Capitol Street. Go a little early the first time to find your way around. If you're hungry or thirsty there's a cafeteria downstairs in State House.