



Planning Department CLIENT ASSISTANCE MEMO

How to Comment

When can I make Public Comments?

There are many times when a public or private project or City policy might affect you or your property. In those instances, the City wants to hear from the public so that we make sure our policies reflect the goals of our residents and businesses. We also want to ensure that the public has an opportunity to comment on land use actions and environmental review. Your comments are valuable and important to us.

Comprehensive Plans, Parks Plans, Zoning Code Amendments, and Rezones. The City's Comprehensive Plan describes the overall land use policies for the City for many years. This is also true of the zoning code. Parks plans, district rezones, neighborhood plans and site plans for public properties each have specific impacts and benefits in smaller areas. In each of these instances, the City wants to hear from its residents and businesses so that we can create plans that benefit the most people over the long term and reflect the unique character of Gig Harbor. Generally, you may provide comment at a variety of levels (to Staff, to the Planning Commission or Parks Commissions, or directly to the City Council). In these cases, there are usually multiple opportunities to provide comment during public meetings or open comment periods.

Land Use Permits and Environmental Review. Land Use and development projects may have impacts at the level of just the property itself, or at the neighborhood level and beyond. Impacts could be additional traffic, environmental or shoreline impacts, impacts to schools, utilities, noise or other areas. These issues and more are considered by the City during project review. They are also considered specifically as part of the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) review. Most significant projects will have some sort of public comment period. This includes most non-residential or multi-family development projects and larger subdivisions. We seek comments from the public when a new project comes in, when a SEPA environmental determination is made and at the time of public hearings. We also seek comments from tribes and other agencies such as the Department of Ecology, the County and utility providers. We want to hear from anyone who might be affected by a project. The earlier you comment, the better.

Why Should I Comment?

Though the City's application forms and review process provide us with a great deal of information, we don't always know how a project might affect you personally. And, though we inspect sites, we don't always see every issue at the site, such as wildlife habitat or sight distance along roads. The people who live there know the issues and can help us see what we need to protect, fix, or mitigate.

In Washington, we are allowed only one open public hearing on most project specific approvals. That means if you miss the chance to comment, we normally are not allowed to go back and revisit the issue at a later time. This is especially true for SEPA issues. Once the determination is made, the only way to address new issues is to appeal the determination. If no one appeals a determination, it and all of its mitigation measures are fixed. You can help us lessen project impacts and improve the overall design of projects, but you have to do it during the comment period.

What is the best type of comment?

The City accepts both written and verbal comments. You may comment on a proposal or plan during a public meeting or hearing. These comments will be considered during project review and approval or in the development of plans. If you choose to speak at a public hearing for a land use approval, such as at a hearing before the City's hearing examiner, your comments will be recorded and become part of the public record.

The most effective form of commenting is submitting your comments in writing. When you do that, you can be assured that all of your issues become part of the record and will be considered by the decision maker. If you provide a written copy of your comments, you can enter that into the record at a hearing and then provide a verbal summary to the hearing examiner or Council.

What comments are helpful?

Comments in the following areas are particularly valuable:

- Any inaccuracies in the application materials, environmental checklist, EIS, or other documentation such as property specifics the reviewer might have missed;
- Areas of potential impact that have not been identified;
- Adverse impacts that have not been adequately addressed;
- Possible mitigation measures that could or should be added to the proposal;
- Reasonable alternatives to the proposal;
- The need for additional or improved studies; and
- The merits of the alternatives and mitigation measures proposed.

Be clear, concise, and organized. Decide what you need to say before you begin. Create an outline by subject matter and speak to those highlighted topics. Submit the bulk of your comments and argument in writing. State only facts rather than gossip or opinions and remember this isn't about personalities but instead is about creating projects that are good for the community.

Be specific. If you are for or against something, say why. It is always a good idea to give as much support as possible to your comments. Include as much factual information as possible. For example, describe the current traffic issue and how the new project might affect it. Another example might be to show pictures of the current view that might be blocked or an existing storm drainage issue. If you can, refer to documents – the City's plans and codes and the project application.

Identify possible solutions. If you have ideas for how a project design might be altered to fix or address a specific issue, mention that. One example might be landscape screening or placement of signs. If you know of something the reviewer's missed, bring it up and tell us how you think it could be fixed. The City will consider your concerns and suggestions.

Pick a Spokesperson. The hearing examiner or other decisionmaker wants to hear about each new issue or mitigation measure. Once is enough to get that issue considered as part of the decision. If multiple people feel strongly about the same issue, have your spokesperson say so and have those voices counted without the need to have everyone repeat themselves at the hearing.

Client Assistance Memos are not intended to replace the Gig Harbor Municipal Code. Should you have any questions regarding this information please call the Planner of the Day at (253) 851-6170.