

ASKING GOVERNMENT:

Ten Tips for Making Effective Requests

- 1) Go to the right place. If your issue clearly is the responsibility of some executive department (i.e., any department except Legislative, Municipal Court, and Law), go there first. If that fails, go to the Mayor's office (684-4000) or to the Citizens Service Bureau (684-8811). If your issue is a matter of policy, go to the City Councilmembers (chair, vice-chair and member), who are on the committee that considers issues like yours. In the spring, budget matters should go to the Mayor's Office and to the Council. In the fall, budget matters should go to the City Council.
- 2) Be sure in your first paragraph to ask for what you want in precise, unequivocal, uncluttered language. This is true for in person meetings, too. Assume that if you do not ask for a response to your request, you will not get one.
- 3) Keep communications very brief. Any request should be presented in less than one page. Attachments are fine, but the one page request should clearly describe your issue and what you want. This rule is similar for meetings with officials. Practice presenting your issue in the clearest, most concise way possible, with only the most relevant facts presented. Leave time for the official to ask questions, and be willing to help go find more information if the official asks for it.
- 4) Offer information and ideas. If you know something about a situation that does not appear to be understood or taken into account by officials, by all means offer it. If you have a fresh idea, and you have made a good effort to research its viability, do present it. But keep it brief and remember that if you want a response, even this is a request: "I would like you to include the following idea/information in your thinking about this issue, and I request that you let me know that you received the idea/information."
- 5) Do not make more than one request in one communication. One letter, one request. One meeting with an official, one request. One e-mail, one request. Resist the urge to pile on issues just because you have someone's attention. If you present a menu of problems, at best you are much harder to help. At worst you risk losing that attention altogether.
- 6) If you are making an argument in a situation where there are competing interests (e.g., a new development, a struggle over budget dollars, proposed uses of available public land), it is a good idea to show that you understand that there is a competing view, and to acknowledge that officials are in a position of having to balance competing interests. It is difficult to gain respect when you disrespect the interests of others, and fail to appreciate the bind that your public officials often find themselves in.

- 7) Be polite. Even if you are angry about some decision, it is never a good idea to use insults or resort to name-calling. In the case of elected officials, they will never even see the communication if you do this, and in the case of other officials, you may burn a bridge you will need in the future. Part of being polite, of course, is thanking people when they do help you. It certainly can't hurt and it probably helps all your fellow citizens.
- 8) Keep a sense of proportion. Potholes do not equal new bridges. Disputes between neighbors do not equal disputes between neighborhoods. It is good to approach decision makers with an appropriate degree of urgency and importance. If you make a mountain out of a molehill, it is much harder to take the request seriously. Be clear that the issue matters very much to you, and make your request, just show that you realize it is not the end of the world.
- 9) If you have taken steps to resolve your concerns, say so. Those who have done everything they can think of to do before coming to government are more likely to get prompt help. If you tried to talk to the irritating neighbor first, or already trimmed all the overhanging trees you could reach, or tried discussing your issue with a City worker but couldn't get resolution, let officials know that.
- 10) Research a situation before you make assertions about it that may prove to be incorrect. Each of us has only so much political capital. Don't spend yours on something that is not really the problem you think it is. Use the City's public information officers for help. Use the web. Use your Neighborhood Service Center coordinators. Use the Library. But don't use unsubstantiated gossip without identifying it as such, or even your own observations, unless you are certain they are comprehensive.