



City of Woonsocket, RI

Planning Board

What is a Public Hearing?

The Planning Board is required by State law to hold Public Hearings on major subdivisions, minor subdivisions where new or altered roads are proposed, and amendments to regulations or the Comprehensive Community Plan. Hearings may be held on other types of development applications. A hearing may be part of a regularly scheduled board meeting or held at a standalone meeting and may require more than one meeting to complete. Hearings give developers the opportunity to explain their projects and give members of the public the opportunity to ask questions, express their views, and provide supporting evidence.

State law requires decisions made as a result of Public Hearings to be based on and supported by “the record” developed at the hearing. The record includes testimony and comments presented at the hearing and documents and exhibits submitted in connection with the matter. Hearing minutes and documents and exhibits related to the matter are available at the Planning Department in City Hall.

The issues addressed at Public Hearings can be complex, involve property rights, and are subject to appeal. The following hearing procedures help ensure hearings are conducted fairly and according to State law.

How is a Public Hearing Conducted?

An agenda is established and posted before each Planning Board meeting. The agenda sets the Order of Business to be followed by the board. The meeting agenda may include several items of business, including any advertised Public Hearings. The Chairperson of the board runs the meeting. Among other responsibilities, the Chair calls the meeting to order, introduces agenda items, and has the authority to change the order of agenda items, and to take necessary measures to control the hearing.

When the board reaches the agenda item related to the Public Hearing, the following procedure is generally followed:

1. The Chairperson explains the purpose of the hearing, announces the ground rules, and then calls for a motion to open the hearing by vote of the board.
2. The Chair asks City staff if they wish to clarify any items. For example, the City Planner and/or Solicitor (lawyer) may discuss any procedural issues, technical studies, or recommendations issued by City staff, the Technical Review Committee, or a consulting engineer.

3. The Chair asks the applicant to present their application. The applicant, who has the burden of proof to show compliance with City laws, presents testimony and evidence to support the application. The applicant may have expert witnesses speak at this point.
4. The board may ask the applicant for clarification on unclear items. The applicant or their expert witnesses answer the questions.
5. The Chair opens the hearing to the public for comment (Note: Unless an agenda item is posted as a *Public Hearing*, public comment on the item is allowed only at the discretion of the Chair):
 - i. People who wish to speak raise their hand and are recognized by the Chair one at a time.
 - ii. All persons must approach the podium and state their name and address for the record.
 - iii. Comments should not be repetitious or irrelevant. It is acceptable to state, “I agree with Ms. Smith,” rather than repeating her comment.
 - iv. Exhibits, such as photographs, maps, videos, drawings, or charts, presented to the board will be included in the record.
 - v. The time limit for public comments is generally 3-5 minutes per person. The Chair determines the time limit based on meeting attendance.
 - vi. People who have not spoken are recognized before those who wish to speak a second time.
 - vii. If more people wish to comment than can be accommodated in one evening, the hearing is “continued” to another date set by a vote of the board. The board will ensure there is an opportunity for all people to speak.
6. The applicant responds to public comments after everyone from the public has spoken. At the discretion of the Chair, the applicant may be allowed to respond to public comment at any point during the hearing.
7. Once public comment has concluded and all questions from board members have been addressed by the applicant, the Chair calls for the close of the hearing by vote of the board. If there are outstanding issues the applicant must address, then the hearing remains open and is continued to another date set by a vote of the board. A new agenda will be established and posted before the next hearing date, however no additional direct notice to abutters is provided.
8. Once the hearing is closed, the board discusses the issue and may question the City Planner, Solicitor and/or applicant. The board usually discusses whether the application meets required findings, conditions of approval, and a draft decision regarding the issue. The Chair then calls for a motion on the item, which, if seconded, is discussed and then voted upon.

What Behavior is Expected at a Public Hearing?

Public Hearings work best when everyone behaves respectfully, exercises patience, and follows the rules set forth by the Planning Board Chair. Spontaneous comments from the floor, personal attacks, and unruly behavior (e.g. booing or cheering) are not permitted. The Chair may take necessary measures to control the hearing, including closing the meeting without taking further public comment, calling for the removal of disruptive persons, and clearing the hearing room.

This guide is designed to aid in the public’s understanding of the City’s planning process and to promote public participation in the land use decision making process. It is not part of the City’s regulations and is not legal advice.