

Speaking to Elected Officials at Public Events

Events like community forums and town hall meetings are a great opportunity for you to not only bring public attention to an issue but also have direct contact with your elected officials. By asking a question that requires a response on the spot, you can sometimes get your policymaker’s position on the record.

Here are tips for effective engagement with elected officials at public events.

Keep tabs on events where your legislators will appear.

Check out their webpage, follow their Facebook or Twitter pages, and sign up for their email newsletter. You can also call their local district office, which can be especially fruitful ahead of congressional recesses (see www.congress.gov for recess dates).

Be clear and prepare. To make a powerful impression, draft a question or comment that hits the “three Cs”: concise, concrete, and compelling. Your goal is not to share a lot of information—it’s about piquing the interest of the legislator or community members to further delve into the issue.

In just a few sentences, do the following:

- Introduce yourself as a constituent and comment on your standing as a scientist or technical expert on the issue
- State why the issue matters and what’s at stake for the local community
- Make a specific “ask”—the action or stance you want the legislator to take

Position yourself as a resource. Introduce yourself to the legislator’s staff as both a constituent and a technical expert, reiterate your request, and offer any support or resources that would help the staff. This is a fantastic opportunity to build personal connections and concisely underscore your standing in your field and the community.

Follow up. Send a thank-you note or call to thank the legislator and their staff for their time. Share relevant information such as fact sheets or summaries of technical reports. Or, if you were unable to ask your question at the meeting, a follow-up call with the legislator’s office gives you another chance to ask it.

Opportunities for further engagement with the legislator include:

- Writing a letter to your local newspaper to focus the community’s attention on the issue and the commitment your legislator made or failed to make
- Inviting colleagues to join you in following up with the legislator and continuing to call for the action you seek
- Making connections with local advocates who attended the event and may be interested in collaborating with you

Questions? If you have any questions as you prepare for a public event, email us at ScienceNetwork@ucsusa.org.



Left: A panel from the California Department of Water Resources listened to public comments and answers questions during a community meeting in 2017; right: A panel of speakers discuss environmental justice at a community forum at Howard University. Sharing your interest and experience on an issue can pique the interest of elected officials and community members to further delve into the issue. Photos: (left) Kelly M. Grow/California Department of Water Resources; (right) Audrey Eyring/UCS