

Northside Power

How To Speak to Your Elected Officials | A Toolkit

Houston City Council

Making Phone Calls to City Council

We don't just show up to City Hall without first communicating with our Council Member and their staff to make sure they know what our concerns are. We want to give them an opportunity to address our concerns, hear us out, and find some solutions before going to City Hall.

It's important to call your City Council office whenever there is a problem that has not been resolved through 311, or if you want to check in on an issue you have reported. If you don't what to do about a problem, call their office and see if they can help. Oftentimes, they can!

You can find the phone number to your City Council Member's office here:

www.houstontx.gov/council/

If you live in District H, your City Council Member is Karla Cisneros. The District H phone number is 832-393-3003.

What to expect:

- When you call your Council Member's office, a staff member will answer the phone. Do not expect the Council Member to answer the phone or be able to come to the phone. Most Council Members have a Director of Constituent Services. This person's entire job is to speak to constituents and track cases.
- If you are reporting an issue, make sure have reported it to 311 already. The staffer will ask you for the SR#. If you aren't sure how to report an issue, the staff member can help you do it or do it for you after you explain the issue.
- When you call, state your name and briefly explain why you are calling.
 - Example: "Hi, my name is Jeff, and I am calling because there is a lot of illegal dumping in my neighborhood."
- Then, the staffer will ask for your address. They do this to see if you are a constituent and what neighborhood you live in.
- The staffer will also ask if you if you have reported this issue to 311.
 - If you answer yes, have that 311 report information ready to provide them. They will look up the report and see what the status is.

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- If you answer no, they will either ask you to report it or ask if you want them to report it for you.
 - Help them complete the report by giving them all the details they request. The more thorough the report, the easier it will be to address.
 - When the report is complete, they will give you a 311 Service Request (SR) number. Keep that information somewhere handy so you can follow up on the progress of the case.
- If this is not an issue that may be solved by 311, or if you need help with something more complicated, the staffer will help you figure it out.
- Be patient with them, as they get hundreds of calls and emails a day. Your call is just as important as the others!
- Often, a staffer will have to elevate your issue along to the appropriate department to get results. Sometimes it can take a few weeks to get a final response.
- If you're waiting on information on a major project or program, follow up once every two weeks to see if there has been any movement.
 - After your initial phone call, that staffer will likely be your main point of contact regarding your issue.
 - They might use email to communicate with you after that phone call, in order to keep a written record with you (which is helpful for you and the staffer).

Emailing instead of calling

You can also email your Council Member's office. However, it is much quicker and efficient to make a phone call. If you email, it will go into the District email, unless you have the direct email of a staff member. Those emails might get lost in the spam folder, and you likely will not get a response as quickly.

- The benefits of calling far outweigh emails:
 - It is more direct
 - You get to talk to someone who will remember you better (because they hear your voice, they learn how to say your name properly).
 - You can have a conversation, which is nicer than just responding to emails
 - You might get asked important questions that can help the staffer assist you more quickly
 - Your phone call can't get lost

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Going to City Council

Why we go to City Council meetings:

- When there is no other recourse for a problem and we've exhausted all other options through the City.
- When we know for sure that the City has jurisdiction over an issue.
- To say thank you for their hard work.
- To share the work we are doing in our community
- To inform
- To make an impact on policies that the City is considering to adopt

- When are City Council Meetings?
 - City Council meetings happen (almost) every week on Tuesdays at 1:30 p.m. and Wednesdays beginning at 9:00 a.m.
 - **Any citizen may speak before City Council on a Tuesday beginning at 2:00 p.m.**
 - The Tuesday session is devoted to public comment.
 - The Wednesday session is for Council to consider actions they need to vote on. Even though that isn't a day for public comment, you may still go in to watch.

- To find out if Council is meeting, check this calendar:
www.houstontx.gov/citysec/calendar.pdf

- You can also view the City Council agenda online:
houston.novusagenda.com/agendapublic/

- How do I sign up to speak?
 - There are 3 ways to sign up:
 - 1. Calling the **City Secretary's office at 832.393.1100**, or
 - 2. Sending an email to citysecretary@houstontx.gov, or
 - 3. Coming by the office on the public level of the City Hall Annex, 900 Bagby, Houston 77002 **by 1:30 p.m. that Tuesday.**

- If a translator is required, please mention this when reserving time to speak.

- Once you have scheduled time to speak, you will be put on the speakers list.
 - All City Council offices receive a list on the Monday before session, so they may see if any of their constituents (like you) are on the list.
 - If they see a constituent listed, a staff member will call to ask if there is anything they can help with. The Council Member won't be the one calling.

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- Sometimes, it is more convenient for all parties if a concern can be resolved or a question answered without you physically going to City Hall.
- If you get a call and the issue is resolved before the Tuesday meeting, it's still a good idea to go speak, because then you can go share *positive* news, by going up and thanking your Council Member and their staff for listening and helping you. *Remember, it's good to share good news too!*

Preparing to Speak

- You will have between 1 and 3 minutes to speak in front of Council. Keep your comments short and to the point.
- Determine what you want to say
 - Are you sharing a concern? Are you speaking in opposition to something the City is proposing or is doing? Are you thanking them for a job well done? Are you making a specific request? If you answered yes to all of them, consider narrowing it down.
- If you're making a complaint, try to provide evidence of a documented problem such as:
 - Pictures
 - Dates you called 311
 - Report numbers, or anything else you think will be helpful for Council Members to understand your problem.
 - Example: there is a major flooding problem in your neighborhood. You have reported this issue to 311, so you bring the 311 reports and date reported. Maybe you also provide pictures. This will help them follow up on your case!
- If you provide any materials to supplement your public comment, you must bring at least 17 copies so each Council Member and the Mayor has a copy to look at.
 - When you step up to the podium, you can mention you have documents to pass out, and someone will distribute them for you.
- Most importantly, write down what you want to say! It's much easier if you have notes to reference or piece of paper to read off of so you don't want to forget what your main points are while you are at the podium.

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When You Speak

- Get there on time, at 2:30 pm. You will need to park, go through security, and then get into the City Council Chamber on the 2nd floor. It's ok to walk in and out of the chamber during session, but it's better to already be sitting there and ready to go in case you're called up first.
- There may be a few people before you, so wait in one of the benches in the chamber. The City Secretary, Anna Russell, will call out two names at a time, so you can prepare yourself while the other person is speak.
 - She will say something like: "Next is Jane Smith, to be followed by Susy Thomas."
 - If you are Susy Thomas, you will walk up to the podium right after Jane Smith has finished.
- When you walk up, introduce yourself with confidence!
 - "Hello, my name is ____, and I am a constituent of District _____. Thank you for taking the time to listen to me today....."
 - If you are there to represent an organization, you may mention this at the beginning.
- Explain why you are there.
 - Share your prepared comments.
 - Stay on topic.
- End with an ask. (And a thank you!)
 - Oftentimes, people will speak at council but they don't provide a clear question that needs to be answered.
 - When you end with an ask, you make it difficult for anyone to ignore you.
 - Example: "I'm requesting that the City look into a drainage study to be done in my neighborhood to determine why it's flooding so much."
 - Regardless of whether you are going to address an issue or give praise, always finish by saying, "Thank you for your time and attention."
- If you happen to go over on your time, you will hear a little "Ding!" and the Secretary will interrupt you and say, "I'm sorry, your time has expired."
 - If this happens, say, "Thank you" and stop talking. Sometimes, a Council Member will offer you extra time to finish your comments. If they don't they will say "Thank you" and that will be your cue to leave the podium.

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After You've Spoken

A Council Member may want to ask you questions after you speak.

If you are asked a question but don't know the answer, it's ok to say, "I don't know the answer to that." In fact, it gives you the chance to contact them again about the issue if and when you do have an answer. Never make up an answer to a question -- giving wrong or inaccurate information can damage your credibility. We want to build trust with our elected officials.

Something else that may happen is that they will direct you to speak with someone from another City Department, like Public Works or the Department of Neighborhoods. They will say something like, "Gary Norman from Public Works is here, and he can further address your concerns. He is sitting over there."

But they may not respond at all. If no one has any questions or comments from you, don't take it personally. They may want to follow up with you one-on-one, or there may just be too many people on the speakers list to individually address everyone without going over.

Regardless, it's good to follow up! The next day, while you're still fresh on their minds, make a phone call to your council member's office and speak with their staff. Ask them for a timeline on the issue you spoke about, or more information about the issue you're concerned about and what you can do to help.

Each Council office receives hundreds of calls and emails a week. They work hard to keep track of all the issues each constituent brings to them. Following up with them helps them stay on top of your issue and get it resolved it faster. It also prevents you from feeling like you're in the dark!

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Best Practices:

Stay positive

If you're nervous, bring someone to City Council with you for moral support

Talk in the public interest

View this as a learning process

Be respectful while other people are speaking

If you don't know the answer to a question, it's ok to say "I don't know!"

Say Thank You!

Don'ts:

Yell

Place blame

Threaten

Speak for anyone else without permission

Misrepresent the facts

Burn Bridges

Storm away