

TOWN OF WESTPORT

Town Board

John A Van Dinter, Chair
Terry Enge
Kenneth R. Sipsma
Brad G. Robinson
William B. von Rutenberg

Kennedy Administration Building

5387 Mary Lake Road
Waunakee, WI 53597
Office 608-849-4372
Fax 608-849-9657

Thomas G. Wilson
Attorney/Administrator/Clerk-Treasurer

Robert C. Anderson
Utility, Finance & IS Manager

Debra J. Flynn
Administrative Assistant

Working with Westport Government “Do’s and Don’t’s for Meetings”

Thomas W. Harnisch, the lobbyist and legal advisor to the Wisconsin Towns Association, was asked to provide to a group of concerned taxpayers a list of do’s and don’ts regarding how to successfully approach the Town Board and its members at a public meeting. He provided such a list in the article *From the Statehouse to the Town Hall*, WTA Report, September 2002. We have taken that article and refined it below to generally assist citizens and petitioners when dealing with a matter before a Westport Town Board, Commission, or Committee. Please review this list of suggestions prior to attending a meeting for helpful hints in your particular matter. Keep in mind that these are only generalities, and there may be specific required procedures and decorum to follow, depending on the body you are dealing with. Please do not hesitate to ask Town Staff for assistance with specifics.

DO’S

1. Do request, *not demand*, in writing, to be placed on the Town Board, Committee, or Commission meeting agenda in a timely fashion with your concerns or questions specifically provided to the Town Clerk or to another person who establishes the meeting agenda.
2. Do prepare for the public meeting, including developing for dissemination a written meeting handout, which should contain relevant written articles and exhibits. Normally, no more than three (3) or four (4) major legal or political concerns can be successfully addressed by any speaker under reasonable time limitations. (i.e., five (5) minutes).
3. Do only where lawful and advisable by law, contact the individual members of the body prior to any “legislative” Town public meeting to “lobby” the individual members regarding your concerns. Do not become upset if the members do not wish to discuss the matter individually because it is most often advisable for the members to discuss matters before them only in public meetings of their body. Members who serve on quasi-judicial “bodies,” like the Board of Review, should not be “lobbied” by the parties in interest.
4. Do remember that “legislative” public meetings are legally different from “quasi-judicial” meetings of a Town body. The legal standards and actions that ethically can be taken by participants are quite different at these two (2) types of meetings. Know the difference.
5. Do prepare to speak to the Town body under the “rules” of that Town body, including time limitations. Often, public discussion at a public meeting will be limited to a few minutes per person. Attempt to determine what these time limitations will be prior to the meeting.

“Do’s and Don’t’s for Meetings”

6. Do prepare your speech with time reserved, where advisable, to answer questions from members of the Town body.
7. Do consider arranging to have specific supporters in attendance at the meeting, where advisable. These supporters may or may not speak, where again advisable.
8. Do address the Town body with respect for the officers and members even if you do not respect an individual member or officer.
9. Do speak at a proper voice level and with proper enunciation and clarity so that the members will understand you. “Speak up,” but don’t shout.
10. Do repeat any questions asked of you by the members to insure that you understood and heard the question, and so that the other members and the public understand the question.
11. Do avoid politically partisan, religious, racial, ethnic, sexist, agist, and disabled comments or jokes with these members at their meetings. Be “politically correct” at these public meetings, even if it causes you great discomfort in your speaking style.
12. Do prepare for the meeting by knowing the facts and politics that are relevant to the meeting agenda item.
13. Do inform the Town Clerk in advance if you have any physical or legal disability which would limit your participation at a meeting. A legal disability may require assistance, or even a Closed Session.
14. Do address your comments, questions, and responses to the Chair of the meeting.
15. Do make your public or private concerns at the meeting very clear and distinct, and offer your possible solutions and answers that are clear and distinct. If you do not know an answer to a question, say “I do not know the answer.” Remember, Town officials are sometimes elected persons, often with limited background expertise and understanding of specific public or private concerns. They may need your help to make these concerns real and clear to them.

DON'TS

1. Do not confuse Town Board meetings with the Annual or Special Town meetings. These are quite different public meetings with quite different legal and political functions.
2. Do not threaten, insult, attack or name call Town officials or others at public meetings, or put down any person. The political and legal ramifications are generally not positive for the threatening or insulting party. Remember to respect the officials and the opinions of others.
3. Do not contact Town officials prior to any individual legal action related to a quasi-judicial meeting or hearing of a Town body for which you have a substantive interest. This may be

deemed “ex parte” conversation, and may cause negative legal ramifications.

Page 3

“Do’s and Don’t’s for Meetings”

4. Do not offer Town officials anything of value related to any upcoming Town body meeting actions. This may be considered misconduct in office for the Town official, and may be considered bribery by the offering person.
5. Do not attempt to participate or speak at a meeting where the Chair of the meeting has not recognized the speaker. The State Open Meetings law limits when the public may participate based on the agenda of the public meeting.
6. Do not disturb meetings with the use of video or tape machines. These machines are allowed at Open public meetings, without permission, but must be carefully installed and used to limit disturbance.
7. Do not argue or debate with the Town officials at a meeting. These meetings, both legislative or quasi-judicial, are fact finding and record creating meetings, not debate forums.
8. Do not encourage or cause any noise disturbance at Town public meetings. Clapping, hissing, or booing are not proper legal or political actions, and possibly subject the disturbing person to disorderly conduct charges.
9. Do not harass or alienate Town officials by constant public participation at meetings, and by lengthy public speeches at these meetings.
10. Do not make or encourage false or misleading statements at meetings, and do not publish at these meetings false or misleading articles or publications. The political ends do not justify the means of false statements.
11. Do not discuss or attempt to discuss items not on the public agenda for the meeting. The State Open Meetings law limits the scope of public discussion to agenda items.
12. Do not expect or demand at meetings that the Town body immediately take action on specific public or private concerns. Town officials are mostly part-time public officials whose time commitments may not allow for immediate action, even if they desire to take timely good faith action on these public or private concerns.
13. Do not “bad mouth” your opposition or people who oppose your concerns at the meeting. In local government and politics, you should never “burn your bridges.”
14. Do not underestimate certain Town official’s responses at various Town meetings. Certain Town officials are quite capable and skilled politicians who clearly understand the political and legal ramifications of suggested public political or legal concerns and actions.

15. Do not forget to publicly thank Town officials at these public meetings and to praise (where advisable) them for their past public actions.