**Become a More Effective Advocate on Local Issues**

I often hear from residents who are active in the community, involved in various initiatives, and frustrated about how to effectively advocate for or against legislation. As a Council member now, but someone who worked for many years with my neighborhood and various non-profits in an advocacy role before the Council, I realize the past mistakes and missed opportunities that were the result of not really understanding the City Council process and when and how to be effective. This primer is for the novice. Obviously, my limited time on the Council does not make me an expert. However, I can tell you how I get my information on legislation. I have already received so many emails and heard so many public comments that have less impact than they might otherwise have had if the advocate had a little more information about the process. Maybe I can shed a little light on the process. If your issue requires new legislation, or you oppose legislation that has been proposed, the following suggestions may be helpful, assuming you don’t plan to hire a professional lobbyist.

1. **Build Relationships.**

* Either individually, or as an organization, make the effort to get to know your District Council representative and other council members who may have an interest in your area of concern. For me personally, numerous individuals, who may identify themselves as members of a group, are more effective than communication from an entity purporting to represent its numerous members.
* Develop relationships with those who work for the various City Departments responsible for the services or facilities of interest to you.
* Be reasonable in your expectations, both as to the time someone can devote to your specific concern, and as to the amount of influence one person can have.
* Don’t expect that Council members are aware of any ongoing or prior discussions you may have had with staff or commissions.
* Keep your communication civil and become a trustworthy resource for information. Try to get all the facts and be accurate in your representations. This is a tall order, but you will earn the respect and appreciation of those whose help you are seeking.

1. **Understand the roles of the Administration and the City Council**.

The City Council reviews and adopts the budget, but the administration presents a budget to the Council. In preparing the budget, the administration has already set priorities and allocated expenditures among functions and services. While the Council may scrutinize expenditures and cut items in disagreement with the administration, it is unlikely that any department would come before the Council asking for increased funding and higher priority than assigned in the Mayor’s budget- they work for the administration, after all. So for example, if you are concerned about funding for code enforcement or a park program, that advocacy is most effective if you are contacting the Mayor’s staff and budget office before the budget is prepared- in the winter and spring. You can also contact Council members in that time frame to ask them to urge the Mayor to include the requested funding in the proposed budget.

In other contexts, the role of Council is legislative versus the role of the administration to operate and manage our City government. This statement is obvious on the surface; but think through your advocacy in relation to the roles of various individuals. A Council member can often set up a meeting with representatives from various departments to address an issue or operational concern and act as a liaison with the administration, but these issues rarely are the proper subject for a legislative solution. For example, a number of constituents in my District have been concerned about the use of a particular park. I am bringing together representatives from the Sheriff’s Office, Parks and neighbors to discuss options. As a District representative, I am happy to serve as the contact point, but sometimes the solution is just not within my ability as a legislator. Such is the case with numerous calls I have received about a sewer gas problem. I have contacted JEA and they continue to work on the problem, but no bill will provide the fix.

1. **Nuts and Bolts of Monitoring Legislation.**

When legislation is introduced, it will appear on the *City Council Agenda* for a First Reading and will be listed in *Matters Pending* after the date of that Council meeting. Both the Council Agendas and Matters Pending are available on the City Council page of the City website. Unless a bill states that it is an emergency, there will essentially be three weeks from the first reading until the first committee vote. ***This is the time in which you can be most effective as an advocate.*** Thus, I would recommend that individuals or organizations take the time every two weeks to skim the First Reading Ordinances and determine if any impact your area of interest. This isn’t as tough as it sounds. Most of the twenty or more new bills will not have anything to do with your area of interest, and unlike me, you won’t have to read the others.

From either the City Council Agenda or Matters Pending, note the bill numbers of interest. Or, on the City Council website, go directly to Legislative Bill Search (you can search for bills introduced in the last three weeks). Click on the bill number of interest. You will have the option of selecting the Original Text, the Bill Summary, and sometimes additional choices such as the Fact Sheet, Current Text, Substitutes, etc. I suggest starting with the Bill Summary, if it is available. The Bill Summary is prepared by City Council Research and gives a basic understanding of the bill. The Original Text is the language of the Ordinance as introduced and Current Text reflects changes after introduction. When you open the Original Text, you will often see an imbedded file in the upper left corner. Click on this file to see Exhibits and supplemental information. This is where you will often be able to gain more insight into why the legislation was introduced or who you need to contact to get additional information. If there is a Fact Sheet, it will not only contain background insight, but will give the name and contact information for someone responsible for the bill. If the bill was introduced by a Council member, he or she is your primary contact for information and person with the most influence over changes in the bill. If the bill was introduced by the Council President at the request of the Mayor, it is an administration bill and most likely there will be a departmental representative listed as the contact.

Gather the facts. Find out what the bill really does, who wants it and why. If you disagree, be prepared to make a factual case against the legislation. You may have information on previous pertinent legislation, history surrounding the issue, or topical information that Council members don’t possess. More than likely, if you are an issue advocate, you are far more knowledgeable on a topic than most Council members and a straightforward presentation of factual background or current research is helpful. This is the best time to raise policy disagreements or specific concerns with the language of the bill.

Contact the bill sponsor, your District council representative, and the At-Large council members. Perhaps there is a Council member who belongs to your organization. Civility will get you much further than threats. Make sure you include your address or let a District councilperson know if you live in his or her District. When I am receiving numerous emails on a subject, my first priority is to respond to people in my District. You may want to try to schedule an appointment if you need more time to explain your concern. Try to limit the amount of time you need to present your case to fifteen minutes recognizing that there are many people seeking the opportunity to advocate on different topics. If you can’t get an appointment (remember most Council members have other jobs), try catching a Council member before or after a committee meeting or City Council meeting- most walk into the audience to greet visitors.

You will also have an opportunity to speak before the full City Council at the Second Reading of the bill, generally two weeks after the First Reading (special rules apply to Land Use matters). Public comments are limited to three minutes per person, so you may want to coordinate to have several members of your group present different points in their allocated time at the City Council public hearing. This means that when the bill is discussed in committee the following week, Council members will be aware there are issues.

Committee meetings are open to the public, but public comment is only allowed with the permission of the Committee Chair, not by right. But committees and subcommittees are where the real work of vetting legislation occurs. Often, if one Council member can be convinced there is an issue with a bill, it can be deferred in committee for an additional two weeks, or longer, to allow time for concerned individuals to work with the Council member on possible amendments or solutions.

Bills can be assigned to multiple committees, and the video of committee meetings is available online from the City website. Even if your schedule prevents you from attending a committee meeting, if you watch the committee video discussion, you may discover a member who has reservations about a bill. If a bill passes every committee to which it is assigned unanimously, it is placed on the Consent Agenda at the next City Council meeting and is not voted on individually unless expressly pulled. If there is any opposition vote in committee, there will be an opportunity for discussion at full Council.

1. **Advocating for New Legislation.**

What if you believe there is a pressing need to address an issue, or want to fund a special project? You can work with a contact in the Mayor’s office, a department that may be responsible for similar programs, your District Council member, or any Council member who may have a particular interest in the subject matter. An ordinance can be introduced by any Council member, a Council Committee or by the Council President at the request of the Mayor or other party. The details regarding the process for drafting and introducing legislation can be found at www.coj.net under City Council, Rules of Council.

The more work you have done, such as finding sample ordinance language from other jurisdictions, the easier it will be to get your legislation drafted and introduced. If your proposal requires funding, try to identify possible funding sources. One organization that recently met with me about prospective legislation, had met with the Council Auditor, identified funding sources, prepared draft legislation, garnered the support of the City department that would oversee the project, and had prepared an informational packet about the merits of the project for the meeting. While that type of preparation does not insure support, it certainly gets the project over many hurdles. Another group met with me recently advocating for specific park improvements in two locations. In contrast, they wanted me to identify possible funding options. With current budget constraints, and a lack of support from the administration, that project is not likely to get off the ground quickly. You should reasonably expect to spend several months researching and building support for legislation before it is introduced.

Don’t forget that the Sunshine Law precludes Council members from discussing legislation with one another except in noticed meetings. Councilman Redman and I held a noticed meeting to discuss Monroe Street prior to introducing the legislation currently before Council, but the only other Council member who attended was Robin Lumb. Thus my advocacy for the bill has taken place in committee. So, even if you have a bill sponsor for a proposed piece of legislation, it will be your job to sell it to other Council members, as well. As individuals and groups, you can reach out to each member.

I hope these suggestions are helpful and provide an outline for neighborhood groups and others who wish to become more active. I am certain there are many other approaches which may be equally effective, but for the uninitiated, this article can serve as an introduction to becoming an effective advocate. Good Luck!