

This is a **summary** of Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed's publication, *Speaking Out Guide – the Power of Public Participation*. The guide is a 30-page pocket guide to enable citizens to speak out effectively at public meetings. This guide informs readers about building coalitions, the planning processes, working with local officials, state regulations, participating at public meetings, publicizing your concerns, and much more.

The *Speaking Out Guide* is \$15 to cover our publishing and mailing expenses. To obtain your copy contact Chris Altomari at caltomari@thewatershed.org or call 609-737-3735.

The Power of Public Participation on Land Use Decisions

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If you have concerns about development issues in your community get involved! Depending on the issue, your concerns may be addressed through a few phone calls. However, for more complex projects, your participation may be more lengthy and valuable! Here are six major points to help your efforts!

1. Learn the Status of the Project - Contact the municipal clerk's office or planning department to understand the review process and important deadlines for hearings and comments. Learn about the status of the *Preliminary Site Plan Review*. Ask about the role of the township, county and state in the necessary review and decisions on pertinent site plans and permits. Do not miss these opportunities to get involved.

2. Ask Questions - Informally discuss the project plans with the Chair of the municipal Environmental Commission or members of the Town Council, or Planning Board to understand their position on the project; to understand the review process; and to express your initial concerns. Here are some initial questions to consider.

- How is the property it zoned? What is the minimal lot size 1-3 acres or more?
- Will the proposed development be serviced with public sewer and/or water? Or will on site septic systems and wells be used?
- Is the site in an area designated by the town within a conservation area or growth area?

3 Identify Partners: The support from neighbors, your town's environmental commission, or other local groups will be beneficial to affect decisions. These allies can quickly help you become more familiar with the planning process and how best to proceed to articulate your concerns and recommendations.

- Call your neighbors and friends – learn who may share your concerns and may be planning to get involved or attend upcoming meetings?
- Organize an evening of cake and coffee at your home to discuss everyone's concerns.
- Maintain positive rapport with your township officials – that includes the township clerk, town council, mayor, planning board, and environmental commission members. Obtain their contact information from the town clerk. Let them know that you have concerns about this project and request a meeting to discuss the issues.

- Find out how they feel about the project – can you count on their support!
- Ask what you can do to **HELP THEM** – how can you support their efforts.
- Ask if they have spoken with any officials from the state or NJDEP?

4. Summarize the Information - Develop a synopsis of the project and your concerns early in the process. Explore the positive or negative effects of the project on your neighborhood, town or region – the environment and community. Prioritize the most important or serious aspects and clarify your concerns so that others will understand these important issues.

- Did the Environmental Commission of Planning Bd. have any comments? Review these comment letters and write letter of support if appropriate.
- Does a town ordinances require an environmental assessment for major developments? Review this assessment if it has been submitted?
- Did your community outline goals or ordinances that are protective of natural resources? Review the site plan for consistency and compliance with these measures.

5. Publicize Your Concerns - There are many ways to publicize your concerns including, written comment letters, testimony, petitions, flyers, websites or news editorials. By publicizing your concerns you may gain more supporters, not only from your neighbors but also from the town officials. Many voices speaking together can have more influence on decisions than an individual!

6. Attend and Participate at Public Hearings

Speaking up or testifying at meetings and public hearings may seem overwhelming, especially when discussions are heated. Though you might feel intimidated, you can and must speak up for your concerns. You are an important representative of the community and have the right to communicate your position! But be ready for some long nights!

A. Be familiar with the public hearing process.

- The public may need to register to speak at a hearing. Be sure that your name gets on this list. You can decline to speak later if others have adequately addressed your concerns.
- The development applicant and his or her experts present the overall project, followed by specific aspects, such as site features, environmental concerns, building layout, parking details, or impacts to community services. Depending on the magnitude of the project, this testimony may occur over several nights.
- The planning board and its professionals have an opportunity to cross-examine, or question, the experts.
- Adjacent landowners and other members of the public may then *pose questions* to the applicant or professionals.
- Outline and prioritize the most significant points, since speaking time may be limited. Remember to relay your concerns in the form of a question. For example, “Can the developer explain how our local roads will handle the projected volume of traffic?”
- At the discretion of the board chairperson, the public may make comments, give opinions, or provide testimony at the end of the hearing, which can be late in the night.

B. Be an effective speaker.

- Introduce yourself to the board, and provide your address, and state why the issues concern you. Impacts to public health and safety and to the environment are important and valid concerns.
- Stay calm when discussing your concerns. Focus on the issues, not politics or personalities. It is important to be clear and concise in presenting your findings, and it demonstrates that you value their time.
- Always remember to thank the board for their time and attention.
- Being a good listener is just as important as being a good speaker. Come to a public hearing with an open mind, and be an active listener. It is important to hear all sides of the debate and really understand other opinions and messages so you can form your own response.