

MAKING PUBLIC COMMENTS AT BRTB MEETINGS: A BRIEF HOW TO GUIDE

At the beginning of each meeting of the Baltimore Regional Transportation Board (BRTB) members of the public have an opportunity to make comments. This is a very important, regular, on the record opportunity to be heard by BRTB members. This *How To Guide* gives you a series of questions that will help you determine if making comments at BRTB meetings is your most effective strategy for getting your message heard, and will give you hints about how to make the most impact.

1. WHAT DO YOU WANT TO ACCOMPLISH BY MAKING COMMENTS AT A BRTB MEETING?

Possible Responses

- ❖ **I want to share information with the BRTB.** Before doing this, you should figure out if the Board members are already aware of your information. If so, do they need to hear it again? There may be value in repeating information to emphasize a position or opinion, but it also may come across as repetitive and unnecessary.
- ❖ **There's an action I want the BRTB to take.** This is likely to be the most effective use of this technique. For example, you want the BRTB to include or take out a particular project from a Plan or Program, or you want them to hear a new idea or concept (e.g. the recent list of transportation control measures that the Baltimore Regional Partnership asked the BRTB to consider).
- ❖ **I want to discuss an issue with the BRTB.** The opportunity for public comment at a BRTB meeting is much more of a formal hearing structure than an informal dialogue format. The BRTB members will hear your comments but, with a full agenda to follow, they are not likely to engage in much discussion.

2. ARE YOU SURE YOU'RE TALKING TO THE RIGHT PEOPLE? DOES THE BRTB HAVE THE AUTHORITY TO DO WHAT YOU'RE ASKING THEM TO DO?

Possible Responses

- ❖ **Yes.** You want the BRTB to consider your comments on a Long Range Plan, Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) or some aspect of either of those documents.
- ❖ **No.** If you are concerned about a change in bus service or perhaps the site of a future service, you should be aware of two facts: first, the BRTB is not responsible for operating different services. If bus service, for example, is the issue, the MTA is responsible and you should contact them. Second, the BRTB is not responsible for project planning. Once a project has been approved to take place (the BRTB's role), the how and where become the responsibility of the local jurisdictions or the state.

3. ARE THERE OTHER STRATEGIES YOU MIGHT USE TO ACCOMPLISH YOUR PURPOSE?

Possible Responses

- ❖ **Yes, I can talk with BRTB members on a one-to-one informal basis.** Taking advantage of informal opportunities for discussing issues can be very effective. In fact, discussing issues on an informal basis with BRTB members should lay the groundwork for any formal testimony that you give.
- ❖ **Yes, I can participate at committee and subcommittee meetings.** A great deal of work that supports the BRTB's decisions goes on at various committee and subcommittee meetings. Observing these meetings, asking questions and making comments can be a good way to get your ideas across.
- ❖ **Yes, I can submit written comments.** Written comments work for some participants but not all. If you can submit written comments, you'll be on the record, and you'll receive a written response too. Again, though, don't overuse this opportunity or it will lose its effectiveness.
- ❖ **No, this is the best strategy to accomplish my purpose.** If the public participation opportunity at the BRTB meetings is truly the best strategy for you, make sure you consider the guidelines in the next section.

4. GUIDELINES FOR MAKING PUBLIC COMMENTS

Figure out what you want the BRTB to do. Have something specific in mind. If you don't, your comments will have much less impact.

Use the public participation opportunity wisely. In other words, make sure you are making comments at times when they will make the most impact. If you overuse this opportunity, your comments will be much less effective.

Do your own evaluation. If you have presented comments a number of times, look back over those times and try to determine if you've made an impact. If it's difficult to figure out, ask one or more BRTB members to talk to you about when your comments had the biggest impact on them.

Be creative. Reading from a sheet of paper is a standard way of presenting comments. Work on grabbing the members' attention by showing maps, passing around a report that supports your position, passing around pictures of a problem area or service, or bringing others in to testify with you. Make sure you are prepared to pass around copies of handouts. Twenty-five copies is a good number to bring.

Understand the power of numbers. An individual testifying on behalf of an organization will almost always have more impact than a single individual. If you don't belong to an organization, bring in others who support your position to testify too.

Check in with Public Involvement staff. If you're unsure what you want the BRTB to do, or how best to present your information, check in with the Public Involvement Coordinator who can give you some tips.

For more information, contact the Public Involvement Coordinator at 410-732-0500 x1047 or comments@baltometro.org. You can think through these questions yourself, discuss with other interested individuals or groups, or contact the Public Involvement Coordinator to discuss them.