**How to…. make a municipal deputation**

Many people are interested in using deputations as an advocacy tool. However, it’s common to feel you don’t have the confidence or knowledge to make a deputation effectively. Here, we will go through what a deputation is, the benefits of a deputations, and how to make an effective deputation.

Each municipal government has different committees that are made up of councilors, Deputy Mayors and Mayors, or other elected officials. Sometimes these committees can also include members of the public (ex. an Accessibility Advisory Committee). For the purpose of this guide, we will be focusing on deputations made to elected committees, although Accessibility Advisory Committees often work in a similar way.

Each committee has their own specialized topic area (ex. Transportation). About once a month, the group of elected officials that make up that committee will come together to have a meeting. Agenda items may include issues relevant to the committee, updated information from city staff about projects related to their area and hearing from members of the public. They will then have in-depth discussions usually followed by a vote or listed recommendations for the broader city council.

Those items will then be discussed at the next city council meeting, where the entire city council will vote to accept or reject the recommendations.

# **What is a deputation?**

There are two types of deputations – a written deputation and a spoken deputation. It can be a written letter or email to a councilor or committee. It can also be a short (3-5 minute) speech. You will be told in advance how much time you have so you can prepare accordingly.

Committee meeting agendas usually have a spot for correspondence. It is important to note that this can vary greatly across different Canadian municipalities. Some will only accept correspondence on a particular agenda item, while some may accept correspondence about an issue not currently being discussed. If in doubt, reach out to the administrator that coordinates and oversees the committee.

# **Why make a deputation?**

* It is put on public record, which means it will be placed on the city’s website for anyone to see and learn from.
* It can be very powerful when everyone comes together to speak and advocate on a specific agenda item.
* It saves time by talking to many decision makers at once.
* When an item is already on the agenda, it could mean that a decision is being made about the issue. In providing a deputation, you would be stepping in at a critical point in the decision-making process to offer a meaningful influence.
* On the other hand, the item may not be on the agenda, and you will be raising a new issue that others aren’t aware of.

# **How to make a deputation**

As mentioned before, this will look different from municipality to municipality, but this document can still be used as general guidelines. If in doubt, check with your municipality’s website, and information will be there for you – or contact your municipalities administrator for more information.

## **1. Contact the Committee**

To depute at a committee, the first step is determining the appropriate committee that oversees decision making around your issue and the committee’s direct contact. Each will have one municipal member of staff who is solely there for administrative purposes (their title may vary by municipality. Ex. Secretary or Clerk). On the municipality’s website, you will find a heading like “city hall” or “committees” where you will find a list of committees. Click on the one you want, and you will find the staff contact to reach out to. Alternatively, you can call your local 3-1-1 line and explain that you want to contact a committee that oversees a particular area. Sometimes you can find information directly on the municipality’s website about how to make a written or spoken deputation.

Once you find the staff member’s contact information, use that to submit your written deputation or request to speak at the next agenda meeting. If it is tied to a specific agenda item, be sure to put down what the agenda item is. This makes it easier for the city administrator to put your deputation on the meeting agenda or slot you in for a spoken deputation.

## **2. Depute!**

It is important to remember that your deputation will become public and put on public record. For this reason, they will normally not accept anonymous submissions, so make sure your name and contact information are clearly visible. Remember to not use offensive language as that cannot be put on public record. Although your name will be attached to the deputation, your contact details will likely be redacted.

There are pros and cons to both types of deputations, whether you choose written or spoken. Deciding which to choose boils down to your preferences and strengths as an advocate. If you feel that you can write a great letter and that you need time to gather your thoughts, a written deputation is great. However, if you are a powerful speaker with a story to share, then a spoken deputation might be for you. Ultimately, it comes down to you and whatever you feel most confident with.

## **Option A – Written Deputations**

If you are submitting a written deputation, you are done, barring any further follow up after the committee meeting. You may want to attend the meeting it is read at in person or watch it online to see how the discussion goes.

## **Option B – Spoken Deputations**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, spoken deputations can be done a few different ways. A lot of municipalities have switched to an online or phone system. Other municipalities are still doing things in person. If you have a choice, do whatever is most comfortable for you. Over the phone or online can be just as powerful, especially if you have difficulty with transportation or other barriers that get in the way of going in person. If you do go the online route, make sure to check what software they use and whether it is accessible. You do not want to turn up on the day assuming that everything is fine not being able to login or use because of accessibility issues. When in doubt, ask ahead of time so that you feel confident.

Arrive at the beginning of the meeting or 15 minutes before if possible. This gives you time to gather your thoughts or sort out any tech issues. Things can get changed around on the agenda and you may be asked to speak earlier than you were scheduled. Often, if many people request to depute at a meeting, they will move the topic up to the beginning so that everyone has a chance to be heard. Attend the meeting from the beginning even if your agenda item isn’t until later, as you don’t want to miss your opportunity to be heard.

If you are going in person, the logistics will be specific to the municipality. Many places require photo I.D., so remember to bring that so you don’t get turned away at the door. You will often be issued a badge. Usually, you will have to go up to a podium or desk with a built-in mic to speak. When you get in the room make sure you know where it is.

Do not be afraid to ask city staff logistics questions when you arrive. You can also ask some of these questions when you make your request to speak. If applicable, let them know that you have sight loss and what your accommodation needs are. For example, if you need a sighted guide or any help to get up to the podium. It will help you feel confident not having to worry about how to get there. Always advocate for yourself, and don’t leave it to the last minute.

Bring notes if that will make you more comfortable. It will not make you look any less professional or unprepared. Whether you have notes or not, make sure to practice everything in advance. This will be what makes you look most prepared and confident.

# **How to find out when a topic will be on an agenda**

Finding out when an item will be on a committee meeting agenda is not always straightforward, but you can do is keep up to date about what things are coming down the pipeline and contact the committee’s staff member to see if they have any further details about when the item will be up for discussion. Committee members might not even know when specific items will be on an agenda until shortly before the meeting as timelines and priorities can shift. Agendas are usually posted online a few days before the meeting. As soon as you see the topic or issue you would like to depute on come up on a meeting agenda, make sure to call the committee admin to make your request.

Because the agenda is only posted three to five days before the committee or general council meeting, there is a tight turnaround time to prepare. Make sure that if you know there is something coming down the line which you would like to talk about, that you have it ready to go – even an outline.

Unfortunately, things can get complicated. An agenda may be published, and there will be city staff reports with information about the topic that you may want to respond to in the moment. The key is feeling confident in what you have to say. Have your speech outline ready if you do get put on the agenda. This is less of a concern if your topic is not already on the agenda.

# **Tips for putting your deputation together**

Remember that you will only have three to five minutes for your deputation. Normally, you will be given a warning and then cut off if you go over the allotted time limit. Be prepared that there may be a lot of people making deputations or other agenda items at the meeting. You may go in being told you have five minutes, but they may shorten your limit during the meeting. It is not personal, and it happens often. You may have five minutes worth of notes but be prepared with a shorter elevator pitch that you can express.

Introduce yourself; explain who you are and why you are there. Then go into how you are connected to the issue. Make sure you get to your main point quickly explaining what the issues is along with your recommendations. Councilors often wonder “What would you like me to do and how can I do what you are asking?” For example, if they are voting on a particular item, urge them to vote a particular way or take a particular action. This will all depend on what the exact issue is. Always make sure that you have a clear and specific request in your deputation. If you don’t, they will not know what information you have just provided.

# **After the deputation**

After you have completed the deputation, there is normally an opportunity for councilors to ask questions about what you have just said. They may not have questions though; you do not need to worry about either case. As a community member, it is very unlikely for them to grill you. However, you may get “devil’s advocate” type questions. For example, “I only have $X amount in the budget, what would you do if you were me?” or other unfair situation questions. If you are put in this situation, reinforce your message. You could respond along the lines of “I can’t tell you how to spend your money, but what I’m here to tell you is that however you decide to do this, it needs to take accessibility into account.” It is important to remember that it’s ok to not have the answer; it’s fine to say, “I’m not sure, but if you commit to me, I can report back with the answer.” And then simply follow up after the meeting with the administrator’s office to submit the supplementary information.

Once the item is complete, you can stay to the end of the meeting because it will be open to the public. If you choose to leave before the meeting is over, make sure the item is complete. This will mean waiting until everyone has been able to depute, the councilors have discussed the item, they have voted and given their recommendations. The outcome shared will certainly be very interesting to hear because you showed up to share your thoughts on it!

If you do leave early or would like to see anything again, everything should be posted online afterwards including minutes and a recording. You can also call 3-1-1 if you aren’t online but would still like the information. Municipalities are required to publish or provide all these things, so it will be available to you. Following the meeting, the councilors will take their vote outcome or recommendations to be discussed at the general city council for the final decision to be made.

# **Final thoughts**

Remember that what you say will be recorded. Often meetings are recorded on video, and media may be present if it is a contentious issue. This means that you may be approached by a member of the media after you’ve made the deputation if it has sparked interest in them. Know in advance what you would say by speaking with your local advocacy lead if you’re speaking as a private individual or on behalf of CNIB.

It generally is not the case, but smaller municipalities may allow you to depute at a general council meeting. However, the committee meeting is where you want to target your recommendations because more in-depth discussion will take place here. Everything you share will get forwarded to the general city council.

We have covered all the basic details about how to complete a deputation and why they are important, Deputations are a fantastic way to have your voice heard in your community. Your confidence is key. If in doubt at any stage including putting your deputation together, reach out to your local advocacy lead. CNIB has a wide range of key messages that we can share.

It's a long sounding name, but it’s not as scary as it sounds! Good luck!