



## The African American Tobacco Control Leadership Council

**Description:** A document designed to guide those preparing to deliver public comment on a tobacco-related issue at a decision maker meeting (i.e. city council meeting).

### Crafting Your Message and Other Helpful Tools

#### **Do I have to write something?**

Yes, you will need to prepare a written statement. *Practice reading this out loud. Writing words for speaking is different from writing words for reading.*

Typically the committee chair will set time limits. This can vary from meeting to meeting, however, the standard allowed time tends to be 3 minutes. It is wise to bring a backup in case you are asked to limit your remarks to 2 minutes.

#### **How should I structure my remarks?**

##### ***The Opening***

Make your opening statement. This typically takes the form of “Thank you Mayor XX and members of the Council. My name is Mary Smith, speaking today on behalf of [the group you’re representing].” If you aren’t representing any group, just say, “I’m representing myself.” If you live in the city, include your district number and state your council representative. *“I am pleased to be before the committee today...”*

##### ***The Body***

**Position.** Be clear about your position, if you are able to take one. *“I’m here today to support a City-wide ordinance ending the sale of all flavored tobacco products.”*

**Establish credibility.** Personal qualifications, academic degrees, work experience. Explain a little bit about who you are. Helps answer their unspoken question, “Why should we listen to you?” *“I’m a California native and live in San Jose, where I have worked as a nurse for the last 17 years.”* Explain a little bit about why you’re testifying. For example: *“I thought the committee would benefit from hearing from someone who provides direct patient care to the children affected by this bill.”*

**Tell your story. Personal stories carry weight.** If you have a personal story relevant to the ordinance, it demonstrates to the members of the council the real-world impact



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and importance that the bill will have if it becomes law. Paradoxically, the tale of one person's experience can be more persuasive than a flurry of statistics about thousands of people, because a story carries moral and emotional weight that pure numbers don't. Good testimony combines both. Each of us has a story that can move others. It's important when testifying to appeal both to the "head" and the "heart" in order to gain support for your cause.

**Summarize the arguments.** When you finish explaining your points, reiterate them as a summary. *"In summary, I believe there are three reasons why the council should support the ordinance to end the sale of flavored tobacco products."*

### ***The Closing***

At the end of your testimony thank the Mayor and Council for their time and make yourself available. *"Thank you, Mayor and council members, for the opportunity to appear before you today. I stand ready to answer any questions you might have."*

### **Planning For the Hearing**

#### ***What should I have with me?***

- Two versions of your statement. *(one longer and one shorter)* that you will read from.
- Reading glasses. *If needed.*
- Pen or pencil. *For jotting down last-minute thoughts.*

#### ***What should I wear?***

Wear business casual attire or something presentable (at least from the waist up for a webinar) just in case the council allows attendees to turn their cameras on.

#### ***How do participate?***

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, meetings are often held virtually. In the event that public comment is only allowed by recording or

Just as you would arrive early for an in person meeting, plan to join the webinar about 15 minutes prior to the beginning of the hearing. Check your video and audio settings, make sure the lighting is right, your connection is stable, and the camera is properly positioned. Council hearings can take hours, so plan accordingly. **Pay attention to the background, don't walk around or have others walking around in the background.**



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**Be patient.** Meetings are often lengthy and discussion items can run long, meaning you will have to wait until later in the meeting to make your comment. Be aware that the agenda is subject to change at the decision makers' discretion.

### ***How do I address the committee members?***

There is typically a protocol that you must follow. You can only speak when addressed by name.

- **Mayor:** Mr. Mayor or Madam Mayor. **Mayor Pro-tem:** Mr. Vice-Chairman or Madam Vice-Chair. Or address by "*Title Last Name*" to avoid assuming gender identity (i.e. Mayor Butts).
- **Other Members:** Council Member \_\_\_\_\_.

### ***How shall I respond to questions? Answering strategy.***

Prepare in advance on a strategy for handling questions in general. Always be honest and direct.

Because members come and go during the hearing, you may find yourself answering the same question over and over. It is ok to restate your answer in a different way or add additional information.

### ***What if I don't know the answer to a question?***

If you don't know, say so. Speculation about something you "think" might be true is not appropriate. It's always okay to say, "*That's a good question and I don't know the answer. Let me find out and get back to you.*" Whenever you promise to follow up, be sure that you do in a timely manner.

*Never make up an answer. And never testify above your level of expertise. There will be bill experts in the room that can speak to implementation, cost, etc.*

**Non-question.** *Be prepared for when a Member uses his or her time to state personal views. You may not need to answer. If you are unsure, you may ask the Member for clarification if you're not sure. "Sir, did I miss a question?"*



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### ***Some cautions & considerations.***

Humor may be misunderstood by some Members and may not go over well.

Never personally attack or insult a Member.

Do not take a Member's comments personally. *They are doing their job, as they perceive it. Your job is to remain cool and professional.* Some Members may appear distracted, but do not assume this is true. If a Member poses a question and looks down or away, respond to the question. *Members assume that you will proceed, ignoring their distractions.*

Distractions are the norm. Members and their staff talk to each other, pass notes, and read materials.

### **DOs and DON'Ts**

- Feel free to pause for a few seconds to compose your thoughts before answering a question.
- Be confident and direct, strong but polite. Legislators are used to being treated with respect, so regardless of what you think of their personalities or their stance on an issue, always be diplomatic. It's appropriate to disagree with a member, but do so in a thoughtful and considerate way.
- Be honest. There's a temptation, especially if you're nervous, to fudge things a little bit to strengthen your case. Don't—it will only weaken your testimony and undermine your credibility.
- Stay on topic!
- Be sure to reference the specific agenda item and mention which decision maker district you reside in.
- Speak (don't read) to the members of the committee. If you can, time and practice your testimony so that you're comfortable speaking in a concise manner



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directly to the committee while making eye contact, rather than reading word-for-word. Bring an outline of your key points to use as a guide.

- Go with the flow. Even if someone has already gotten up and delivered testimony very similar to yours feel free to lift your voice. Your contribution is important.
- If the meeting is conducted in person, make eye contact with the decision makers. If conducted virtually, try the best you can to make a connection. (i.e. “My name is \_\_\_\_ and I live in district \_\_ of Councilmember \_\_\_\_’s district...”)



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### **Talking Points and Sample Script**

Below you will find a sample script and some key points to consider including in your statement. **Feel free to personalize your statement** with your own story of why you are passionate about this issue.

**Remember that you will only have 2-3 minutes to speak. We highly recommend that you practice your statement ahead of time to avoid being cut off.**

#### **Sample Script:**

*Hello Council Members,*

*My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I'm a Cupertino resident/ student/ teacher/ nurse/ etc. and my comments are with regards to the TRL discussion.*

#### **(Feel free to include one of the bullets below or create your own)**

- Given the current pandemic, local leaders are doing everything in their power to protect residents against the Coronavirus. Smoking cigarettes and vaping weakens the lungs. Now is the time for the council to implement stronger tobacco control measures.*
- Menthol is the tobacco industry's most popular flavor. They target their advertising at young people, a practice perfected through decades of targeting African Americans to buy their products. It's no surprise that 45,000 Black people die every year from kids 12 to 17 years old who smoke, 57 percent use menthol, especially youth of color.*
- Tobacco flavors including menthol, grape, and cotton candy are highly appealing to youth. Almost all youth e-cigarette users are using flavored e-cigarettes. According to a state survey given to students: 47% of 11<sup>th</sup> graders believe that it is either very or fairly easy to obtain e-cigarettes or vaping devices.*
- I support a comprehensive ordinance that ends the sale of flavored tobacco products and menthol cigarettes with NO EXEMPTIONS of any kind! Thank you for taking a stand against Big Tobacco and protecting San Jose youth, families, and Black lives.*