



Influencing Decisions that Affect Your Environment

Do you find it intimidating to express your viewpoints about conservation issues to your neighbors or at public meetings, and feel frustrated when decisions are made that ignore impacts to our environment? Civic involvement takes time and effort, but with the right tools, you can influence the decisions that affect your environment.

You elect people to represent your values, and it's up to you to tell them what those values are and why an issue is important to you and your community. Your elected representatives work for you, and need to hear from you in order to do their job. This tool will help you determine which level of government is responsible for decisions, wade through the decision-making process for local governments, discover which staff or elected officials to contact, decide when in the process you can be most influential, and learn the best way to approach government officials to have a productive dialog about the watershed issues you are concerned about. Please refer to our *Communicating Environmentally* (link) tool for help with developing and presenting your message.

Government Officials Work for You

Getting to know your elected officials and local government staff is key to understanding how decisions are made and getting your points across. By using the following steps you will become more comfortable and confident approaching staff and decision-makers. Remember, you also pay taxes to support a functioning government and provide for the staff who administer the laws. They are a tremendous source of information about development in your neighborhood, how laws affecting the environment are interpreted, and when you can be most influential in decision making.

Make Friends Before You Ask for Favors

The cornerstone of successful advocacy is establishing relationships. Get to know your elected officials, whether at the state or local level, *before* asking them to support your position. When state officials hold office hours in your district, stop by to introduce yourself and tell them about you and/or your organization's interests and purpose. Make an appointment with your local elected officials and do the same – you'd be surprised how pleased they are to meet their constituents and not be asked to do something! Then, when the time comes to ask them to take an action, they have context and a good impression of you in mind.

Do Onto Others

While sometimes it is easy to forget, elected officials are just people and often our neighbors. They put their pants on one leg at a time just as we do, and they respond to human interactions as we do too. Whether you are starting to build a relationship with them, presenting your concerns or speaking at a public hearing, it is crucial to treat elected officials with the respect you want from them. Shouting, ranting, ridiculing, accusing and finger-shaking may make good television, but doesn't do much to win decision makers to your side.

Be respectful when presenting your views and thank them for listening, whether in a public forum or a chance encounter at the grocery store.

Get Your Facts Straight

Getting caught making false statements, citing unsubstantiated rumors or exaggerating issues hurts your credibility and your ability to influence decisions. Be prepared, and speak about what you know. If asked a question you can't answer, you can never go wrong by responding: "I don't know the answer to your question, but I will find out and get back to you." And then of course, get back to them with the answer – it's an opportunity to make your case again and to convey how serious you are about the issue.

Make it Personal

Elected officials want to know why an issue is important to you, and are especially responsive to constituents in their district. It's your job to educate them, and bring the issue home to them. Even if a legislator hears from just a handful of people from their district about a particular issue, and all are supporting the same cause and relating why that issue is important to them personally, their family or their community, a serious impression will have been made. See Representative Gary Sherman's guiding principles for working with an elected official (PDF), former Senator Roger Breske's tongue-in-cheek version (PDF), and *Getting the Most From Legislative Visits* (PDF) for tips on how to prepare for meetings with legislators.



Video (Click on image above): Representative Steve Hilgenberg, District 51, describes the importance of hearing from and being educated by constituents.

Just a Phone Call Away

With all the opportunities for direct communication in this day and age, contacting elected officials is simple and straight forward. Each legislator has their own preference for how they like to be contacted, but all have staff who can arrange appointments, relay your phone call, and help respond to letters and email. There is no reason to feel intimidated or that you're bothering them – remember, it's their job to represent you. Representative Sherman's guidelines also provide tips for making contact with legislators, and his advice applies to contacting local elected officials as well.

Who Decides?

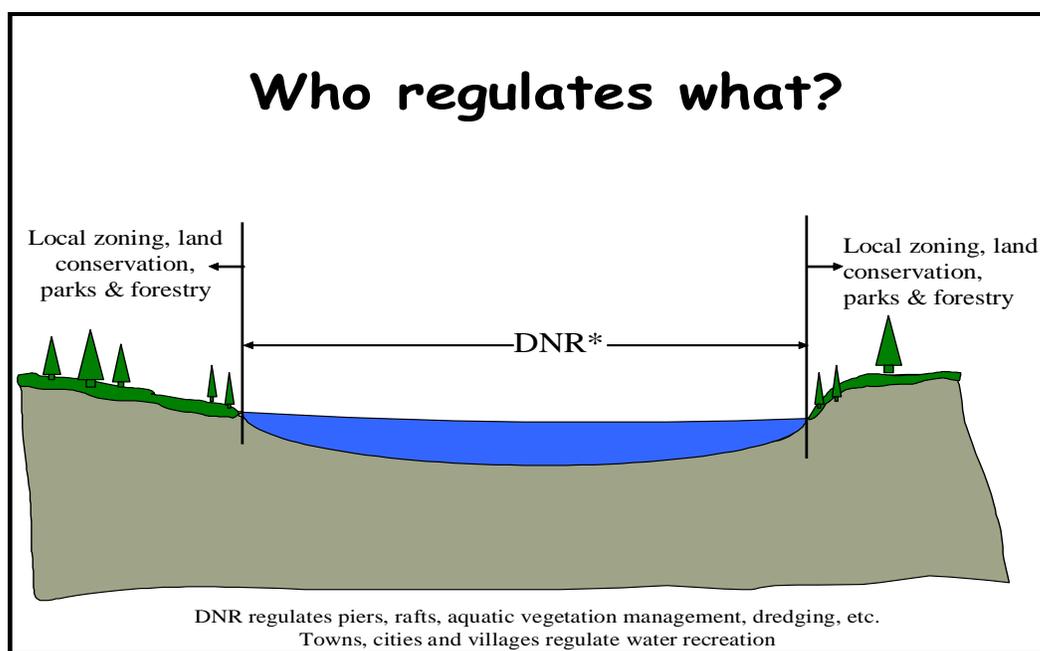
While state laws affect all of us, the first place many of us get involved is in local government decisions, where the issues affect us directly. The state Department of Natural Resources is also frequently involved in site-specific decisions about development in and with the potential to impact waterways. The key is to first figure out who has the authority for the decision at hand, and then learn where in the decision-making process you can best affect the outcome. The difficulty is that Wisconsin has a proud tradition of grassroots government and everyone does things a little differently. Finding out who makes decisions at the local level and learning the steps in the decision making process are major endeavors in themselves. This tool will help you figure out what level of government is responsible for the actions you're concerned about, and provide ideas on who to contact to get in the loop and to press for results.

DNR: Keeper of the Clean Water Act and the Public Trust

When it comes to activities that direct pollution into waterways, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources is charged with making decisions to implement the federal Clean Water Act. Controlling stormwater runoff from farms, cities, roads and construction sites, and issuing permits for direct discharges into rivers from wastewater treatment plants or factories are all under DNR oversight.

DNR also has authority for activities on the banks and within waterways, such as grading along the bank, installing piers and dredging the bed. Some permits for discharges to waterways and for activities in waterways provide opportunities for public comment. *Who Makes River Related Decisions (PDF)* provides more details about DNR's responsibilities.

On the [citizen stream monitoring website](#) you can use a clickable map to find a DNR river specialist in your region and learn whether you can participate in a specific permit decision.



Land Use is Local

Protecting waterways or any of the natural resources you value is commonly closely tied to decisions about how the land is used and developed - as goes the land, so goes the water. Most land use decisions are made at the local level, and whether the issue is under city, county or town jurisdiction, most land use decisions originate in the planning and zoning department. We have included many resources from the Center for Land Use Education at UW-Stevens Point and 1000 Friends of Wisconsin to help you learn the basics of land use decisions.

In general, incorporated cities are responsible for planning future land uses and for making decisions about land development within city limits. Outside of cities, county government is responsible for implementing the state's Shoreland Zoning Code, which sets standards for development within 300 feet of navigable rivers and streams, and within 1000 feet of lakes.

Counties typically adopt zoning and land division regulations for unincorporated areas, regulating the type and scale of development permitted. Towns within each county may abide by county zoning, opt out of zoning altogether, or choose to adopt their own zoning, and may have their own subdivision regulations as well. Where county zoning applies, towns can take a position on zoning changes or other development proposals, but the county may overrule the town's decision. If a county and one of its towns have different subdivision regulations, the most restrictive applies. To influence the outcome of a development proposal in an unincorporated area, be it a change in zoning to allow for different land uses, a housing subdivision or a new industrial use, the first step is to determine if it's the county or the town that has authority for zoning and subdivision. And even if it turns out it's the town that has final say, **the best place to find out is the county planning agency** – they will be aware of which of their towns, if any, have separate zoning authority or a more restrictive subdivision ordinance, and will be familiar with the decision-making process.

The Earlier the Better

Wisconsin's Smart Growth law requires that by January 1, 2010, all zoning ordinances, land division ordinances and official zoning maps must be consistent with an adopted comprehensive plan. A comprehensive plan articulates the community's vision of how it will grow and develop, providing the rationale for zoning decisions. The planning process is by far the best opportunity to influence the future of your community. Approximately 80% of local governments in Wisconsin are on track to adopt a plan by 2010, but others are lagging behind or avoiding the planning exercise altogether. If your community is still working on its comprehensive plan, now is the time to join in. If your community is one of the 20% lagging behind, your first order of business is to encourage local officials to get started. The comprehensive plan provides the back-up for zoning decisions, making it much harder to change zoning on a whim (or because a moneyed developer wants to build a subdivision in the middle of farmland).

Time and probably a lawsuit or two will tell if there are consequences for counties or towns that have not completed comprehensive plans, but technically, zoning and land division ordinances and zoning maps that do not match with the policies of a comprehensive plan will no longer be in effect after January 1, 2010. Without planning there can be no zoning, and without zoning, there are no guidelines for determining what can or can't happen on the land.

Who Do You Call First?

Most Wisconsin counties have planning offices, and at the very least, a zoning administrator - start there with inquiries about development proposals. They can direct you to the appropriate town process if applicable, and tell you when and if there will be opportunity for public input. There are some development decisions that are made by staff, for example, most building permits, where there is little to no opportunity to intervene. Decisions about variances from local zoning ordinances are made by the Board of Adjustments (sometimes known as Board of Appeals) and are subject to public comment, and decisions to change zoning are made by the county board. In either case, the Board of Adjustments and the county board relies heavily on the research and recommendations of staff; developing a congenial, respectful relationship with staff should also be your priority. The first things you need to know are:

- Who will make the final decision, the county board, a committee, or staff?
- Which committee works on your issue?
- Who is on the committee, both elected official and citizens?
- What is their decision making process?
- Is there a public input process?

Another excellent resource for information is the county clerk. They have their finger on the pulse of county activities, public hearing schedules and the best staff contacts for details. When in doubt, get to know your county clerk and count on them as your first point of contact.

Links:



Video (Click on image to the left):
Eric Olson of the UW-Stevens Point/Extension Center for Land Use Education talks about the key points in land use decisions for citizen

[A Citizens' Guide to Land Use in Wisconsin](#) This easy to read layperson's guide to how land use decisions are made in Wisconsin was produced by 1000 Friends of Wisconsin.

[To Play the Game – You Need to Know the Rules](#) Town/county relationships in zoning administration.

Working Effectively with County Government to Protect Rivers, Lakes and Streams (PDF) provides a general overview of decision-making by counties.

Public Participation in Government Decision-Making (PDF), Power Point presentation by Eric Olson and Rebecca Roberts of UW-Stevens Point/Extension Center for Land Use Education, provides a step by step guide to local land use decision-making and where citizens can have the greatest impact.

Be Part of the Process

Participating in the governmental process at whatever level you can is very important to be effective in influencing public policy and decisions about projects that affect your environment, and the earlier you get involved the better chance you have of making a difference. Once an issue goes to public hearing, considerable staff time and effort have been expended and swaying the outcome with new information becomes much more difficult. Further, land use decisions that must be decided by the municipal board are typically discussed first by the planning committee of the board – these committee meetings are often the most important part of the process as the full board looks to the committee for their recommendations.

Planning Commission Meetings – Where the Action Is

We all lead busy lives and value our evenings to relax, but that's when the real work gets done by local governments. Planning committee meetings serve at least three important functions for citizens who want to influence local decisions: it is often the best opportunity to provide information and testimony to elected officials; it is a great way to keep up on local development activities and pending proposals before they are too far along to influence; and it is an excellent way to demonstrate your commitment, interest and expertise. Short of getting elected yourself, the ultimate way to influence local decision-making, **becoming a regular, respectful, knowledgeable participant in planning committee meetings can be one of the strongest ways to impact decision-making.** Before long, you may be seen as the resident expert and find your advice and recommendations are in demand.

To get started:

- Read up on past meeting minutes
- Sign up for meeting announcements
- Be a presence at meetings
- Research the issues of concern and the decision making process
- Ask questions (when appropriate) at meetings
- Request a personal meeting with staff (when appropriate) to have more time to discuss your concerns

To have a long-term impact you can ask to be appointed to a committee or even get elected so you can work on the issues you care about from the inside.

Speaking Up at Public Hearings

While public hearings typically occur once a proposal is nearing the end of the decision-making process, you should not miss the opportunity to make your case on the record. If you have worked on your relationships with elected officials and staff and done your homework, your comments will be noticed and hopefully considered.

Public notice and hearings are required by law for certain decisions, and written and verbal testimony becomes part of the permanent record for the issue. This is important for the decision-making process at hand, and also for reference for any legal challenges that may stem from the final decision. For these reasons, testimony should be concise, factual, brief and prepared to specifically address the issues under consideration. Be calm, be prepared, and follow the protocols established by the decision-making body, which vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, but are often provided with the hearing notice. Even if there are differences in protocol, the basic rules of thumb are:

- State your name, community of residence and position on the issue.
- Direct your comments to the committee chair, not the applicant (this is not a debate between the public and the applicant).
- State verifiable facts, not rumor or second hand information.
- Limit yourself to the time allotted (often only five minutes or less).
- Avoid repeating other testimony.
- Suggest alternatives or compromise if it is appropriate.
- Be as specific and concrete as you can in your comments and suggestions to provide the most valuable input.

Links:

The Public Hearing Process and Alternatives to Consider (PDF) provides basic information about public hearing procedures and tips to prepare.

[Responding to a Development Proposal, Section 2 of A Citizens' Guide to Land Use in Wisconsin](#) by 1000 Friends of Wisconsin, is a step by step guide to developing effective arguments against several types of land use decisions.

Conclusion

This tool has provided an overview of the civic engagement process. It is by no means comprehensive. There are many resources linked below that can provide you more detail on each topic we covered. Even if you do not have an issue to advocate for, we hope you will start participating in the governmental process so you will be more aware of the emerging issues in your community and the state. For assistance in communicating your message please read our *Communicating Environmentally* (link) tool.

Additional Links

[Zoning](#). by Brian Ohm and Kevin Struck from UW-Extension. 34 page document contains relevant details.

[Land division \(subdivision\) ordinances](#). 2007. Center for Land Use Education.

[Plan Commission Handbook](#). May 2002. Center for Land Use Education. This handbook is intended to assist plan commission members in understanding their various roles and related practices and law, and to help local government officials and citizens understand the role of the commission and their relationship to it. Topics include: Getting started as a plan commissioner; Plan commission basics; Planning; Plan implementation tools; and Resources for plan commissioners

[Zoning Board Handbook](#), 2nd edition. 2006. Center for Land Use Education. This handbook is intended to assist zoning board members, local government officials and citizens in understanding the role of the zoning board and the procedures and standards with which their decisions must comply. Chapter 21 focuses on shoreland zoning.

[Comprehensive Planning and Citizen Participation](#) This publication is intended to help local elected officials ensure purposeful citizen participation throughout the comprehensive planning process.

[Protecting Your Waterfront Investment : 10 Simple Shoreland Stewardship Practices](#)

Healthy watersheds make healthy lakes and higher property values -- this booklet show how property owners can take simple steps to curb pollutants, cut runoff, and capture and cleanse pollutant-carrying runoff before it reaches a waterway.

[Community Groundwater Planning and Implementation](#)

Five case studies documenting exemplary efforts by rural Wisconsin communities to protect or remediate groundwater. The case studies highlight the key people, their rationale, and the social, financial and political challenges they overcame to achieve their groundwater goals.

[Center for Land Use Education Fact Sheets](#)

Tools for Protecting Wetlands by the Wisconsin Wetlands Association helps citizens understand how to influence wetland protection at the local level.