

Making Submissions to Council Planning Processes: Tips from Rachel Bowen, Palmerston North City Councillor¹

The Environment Network Manawatu thanks Councillor Rachel Bowen for her willingness to speak at our 23 June 2014 community workshop on making submissions. The following notes are based on her oral presentation to the workshop participants. Rachel stressed that she spoke as a first-term councillor and that her tips reflect that perspective, which may very well be advantageous as there will always be some councillors new to the process.

Question: Is it possible and advantageous to influence a plan before the draft plan is produced?

1. **Councillors welcome relationships with constituents.** Prior to the public release of a draft plan, it is possible to share ideas by building relationships with councillors. Council also engages stakeholders and community groups about ongoing projects or particular issues.
2. **Irrespective of the planning process, PNCC wants to engage around good ideas.** There may or may not be an advantage to getting any particular idea into PNCC before the draft plan is produced. However, PNCC is definitely interested in working with people on an ongoing basis.

Question: How can you get involved once a draft plan is released?

1. **Attend a community meeting to learn more.** Once a draft plan goes out for consultation, PNCC holds community meetings. If you're thinking about submitting, you might find that a meeting is a helpful way to learn more about the plan, to discuss ideas, and to learn more about making submissions.
2. **Make sure you submit if you have a good idea.** Discussions that take place at community meetings or one-on-one with councillors and staff are not a part of the formal submission process. **Once a draft annual plan goes out to consultation, a submission is *required* to progress an idea.** Even the very best ideas cannot be added after a draft has been released if they are raised outside of the formal submission process.
3. **There are a variety of ways to submit.** Right now, people may submit in person, by email, by post, or even by phone. PNCC may consider other ways to submit in the future (e.g. Facebook posts, perhaps).

Question: How can you make a good submission?

1. **Provide some background for your submission.** Remember that there will always be some new councillors. Never assume these Councillors have more knowledge than you about any particular subject. Respect that many of the Councillors *might* know more than you, but this cannot be assumed.

¹ Notes by Sharon Stevens, ENM Project Coordinator. Available online from the ENM web site, <http://enm.org.nz>, under the menu items "resources" or "submissions."

2. **Use brevity to help your key points stick out.** Although some background to your submission is helpful, be aware that it is easy for your key points to get lost in the paperwork. The PNCC 2013 draft *annual* plan—not even a long-term plan—received 185 submissions that required two thick binders to collate. Councillors will certainly read your submission, but you need to help them focus on what matters most.
3. **Say who you represent.** What is your constituency? Where are they located? What are their numbers? While anyone can submit on a plan, PNCC care most about local submitters.
4. **Say what you want.** Don't just complain about problems. Give solutions and ideas. Name the outcomes you would like.
5. **Say how you can support a good idea.** What can community groups offer to help move forward with the idea? If the community is willing to get behind a project with some practical support, councillors are more likely to seriously considering allocating resources as well.

Question: How can you make the oral submission process work for you?

1. **Please do oral submissions if possible.** The councillors have too much to read. While they do read it all, orals provide welcome reminders of key points.
2. **Leave time for questions.** PNCC uses a “traffic light” system to help oral submitters time their submission. The light goes through a green, amber, and red phase followed by a buzzer when the time is out. The best use of this system is to make sure to leave time for questions. If Councillors are interested in an idea, they'll want to ask you some specific things about it.
3. **Props and other quirky gimmicks can help a good submission stand out.** Any “extras” (ukuleles, babies, crowds) may help your submission stick out. This is helpful so long as your submission has substance—so long as it is persuasive in itself. Gimmicks might backfire, however, if they are just drawing attention to a poor quality submission.