

Privilege of the Floor

Telling Your Elected Leaders What You Think

There are many ways in which any resident can bring attention to their elected leaders on an issue that the resident feels important. The most common method is to contact your elected leader(s) and engage them in a discussion in person, via the phone or perhaps by email or letter. Another method is to speak publicly during an open meeting of your local government by using “privilege of the floor.”

During most government meetings, privilege of the floor is one item on the meeting agenda and serves as that time in the meeting in which non-members of the board are permitted to speak to them about issues or concerns relevant to them. In most cases, those non-members (also known as the Public) must request the opportunity to speak and once called upon, deliver their remarks directly to the board. Typically, remarks are limited to a few minutes at most. Most importantly, the sitting members of the board being addressed are only obligated to listen; rarely will they engage in a back & forth discussion or answer questions posed by the citizen addressing them. They do, however, have to listen to what you have to say.

So what good is there in speaking by privilege of the floor? First, it is a direct public statement, to your elected officials, reflecting your thoughts about an issue before them. Often, it is the only official input from constituents that elected members may hear when considering a decision they will take. Since the substance of any remarks made during privilege of the floor are recorded in the official meeting minutes, they provide a permanent record of the concerns, issues and questions that constituents brought up at that meeting. Finally, in speaking directly to your elected officials, you take your concerns directly to those who will make decisions that directly affect the governance of your local community.

So, how can you participate in this way?

First, see what your local elected leaders will soon decide. Maybe it's the town budget; perhaps it is a new town code; it could even be how the town is handling - or not handling - matters related to public health, safety and welfare.

Next, think about your opinions or how you think the town officials should decide on the issue. Answer the question, “*how would I vote on this?*” or “*what should we do about that?*”

Then, organize and write down your thoughts into a short statement, read it aloud to yourself, and edit it again to make sure you can finish speaking in 3 minutes or so.

Finally, arrange to have “Privilege of the Floor” at the meeting. If you wish to speak to the Ontario County Board of Supervisors, you must give notice of your request to speak to the clerk of the board and/or your supervisor about 1 day before the meeting. For most other meetings, you simply need to speak up when the agenda item is announced and be prepared to give your prepared statement voice.

Our elected leaders are elected to serve us, their constituents. To do their job fully, they need to hear from us! And Privilege of the Floor is one of the most public ways we can make our voices heard.