

Tools of the Trade...

Anatomy of a Press Release

People are more likely to respond, either by showing up or sending written comments, if they have access to information. Your press release should provide enough information to provide a snapshot of the proposal and encourage public interest and participation.

Every good press release answers the “J” (journalism) questions: who, what, when, where, why, and how.

- *Who*: Identification of participating parties (organization or department sponsoring the event or action; name of applicant or applicants; groups impacted or encouraged to participate, etc.)
- *What*: Identification of type of meeting, event, or project (e.g. public hearing, receipt of grant, regular meeting or special meeting)
- *When*: Identification of either specific time or general timeframe.
- *Where*: Identification of location of meeting, project, proposal, etc.
- *Why*: Identification of purpose (to garner public input, provide general information, etc.)
- *How*: Identification of process (public hearing, presentation, specific activity).

Starting Points

Before you start composing the press release, take a scrap sheet of paper and write an answer or answers to each of the questions. Remember that your press release is likely to have multiple answers to each of the questions. While scribbling down notes in advance may add 10 minutes to the process, it will help to ensure that you are not leaving anything out of your press release

For example, you are asked to write a press release for a Planning Commission public hearing on a cell tower proposal.

- *Who*. Planning Commission (holding the public hearing); Planning Department (additional information about the proposal); Applicant (Terror Towers Inc.).
- *What*. Public Hearing (Planning Commission action); type of proposal (rezoning and special use permit); specific proposal (placement of 250' cell tower in city park).
- *When*. Time and date of public hearing (7 p.m. Tuesday, April 5, 2011); timeframe of proposal or of future action.
- *Where*. Location of meeting (Town Council chambers, 3rd floor of Town Hall); location of proposal (northwest corner of Xville city park), *location* of where citizens can view the proposal.
- *Why*. The purpose of the public hearing (garner public comment). The purpose of the tower and tower location. (improve cell reception in the area; increased monies in public coffer from lot rent).
- *How*. How was the site chosen? How will the tower be constructed?

The basic information should appear in your first paragraph, and preferably in your first two sentences.

The Xville Planning Commission (*who*) will hold a public hearing (*how & what*) to garner citizen comments (*why*) on a proposed Cell Tower (*what*) for the northwest corner of the Xville City Park (*where*). The public hearing will be held (*what and implied who*) at 7:00 p.m. on April 5, 2011 (*when*) in the Town Council Chambers, on the third floor of Town Hall (*where*).

The paragraphs that follow generally expand on the specifics of the “J” questions.

Terror Towers, Inc., a subsidiary of National Mobile Corporation, (*who*) submitted the proposal for a 255 foot lattice tower (*what*) on April 3rd (*when*), as part of a nationwide push to upgrade G5 coverage. (*why*). The Terror Towers application states that the company would need to install arrays in seven existing locations in order to provide the same level of coverage (*why*).

The proposed tower is designed to accommodate 21 arrays for National Mobile Corporation, as well as provide co-location opportunities for an addition four to five carriers. (*what*) According to the application materials, available at the Xville Planning Department, Terror Towers has agreed to provide a free co-location for the Xville's emergency services as part of the deal. (*what*)

The size of the proposed tower and the additional utility shed, which will be built on a .25 acre concrete slab (*what*), will require the removal of “Founder's Grove,” the stand of 100 year old maples at the corner of Broadway and First Streets (*how*). If approved, the construction of the tower will begin in July. (*when*)

Copies of the application materials are available, upon request, from the Xville Planning Department. Citizens who wish to comment on the proposal, but who are unable to attend the public hearing, may submit their comments in writing. All comments must be submitted no later than 12:00 p.m. on April 5th.

There are some basic rules that apply to press releases that do not apply to the press.

1. Don't editorialize. Even if it is the dumbest proposal you've seen, you can't say that. Or, at least, you can not say it directly. The chances are pretty good that others, including your local paper, will pick up on the apparent stupidity. Leave the editorializing to the whims of the editorial staff--its their job and they are generally pretty good at it.
2. Don't publicly blow the whistle. You may be aware that the proposal is being submitted by the mayor's wife's sister's brother-in-law or that one of the councilmen had suggested the location to get back at a political rival. Leave the politics and the personal to the politicians and the newspaper reporters. While your press release isn't the place for noting problems with the proposal, your staff analysis, which is also a public document, is. If there are legitimate, planning related concerns, they need to be included there.
3. Never use humor. Press releases are meant to be 1) informative and 2) dull. While the subject may be ripe for one liners, resist the temptation and hold your comments for happy hour.