

LEGISLATIVE HEARINGS-An Opportunity for Public Comment

By Sue Crawford, Associate Member of MREMA, Owner of Sue Crawford Consulting Services, 158 Highland Ave., Gardiner, ME 04345 phone 582-1588

suecrawford@verizon.net

The Maine Legislature is comprised of 17 joint standing committees. These committees have the responsibility of holding public hearings and work sessions to determine the fate of proposed legislation. Their areas of jurisdiction include:

- Agriculture, conservation and forestry
- Appropriations and financial affairs
- Business, research and economic development (includes housing)**
- Criminal justice and public safety
- Education and cultural affairs
- Health and human services
- Inland fisheries and wildlife
- Insurance and financial services
- Judiciary
- Labor
- Legal and veterans affairs
- Marine resources
- Natural resources
- State and local government
- Taxation
- Transportation
- Utilities and energy

Generally the first course of action for the Speaker of the House and the President of the Senate is to make their appointments to committees. Legislators vie for committees that are of interest to them. Each committee has thirteen legislators – three Senators and ten Representatives. There is a Senate Chair and House Chair. They represent the party that controls the chamber they represent. Currently that is the Democratic party. You will also note that there will almost always be at least seven members representing the controlling party. The “chairs” are the Legislature’s “leadership team.”

A bill is introduced on the floor of the Senate or House of Representatives and is referred to, we hope, the appropriate joint standing committee. The committee sets public hearings where it accepts testimony both in support of and in opposition of proposed legislation. In some cases people will testify neither in support of nor in opposition of a bill, rather as a person with expertise in the area. Quite often state agencies will testify neither in favor of or opposition of, they will present their testimony but are primarily before the committee to answer any specific questions Legislators may pose.

Once you have reviewed the bill in its entirety and decide that the bill deserves your attention, you need to draft your testimony. Testimony generally begins with a centered

heading that looks something like “Testimony in (favor of) or (in opposition of) LD (the number) An Act (followed by the bill title) presented by (your name).”

The text of your testimony begins with “Senator (name of the Senate Chair), Representative (name of the House Chair) and members of the Joint Standing Committee on (name of the committee). My name is _____ and I am before you today to present testimony in (favor of or opposition of) LD (the number), An Act (bill title). Next you should tell the committee a little about yourself. Where do you live and why do you think your testimony is relevant. For example, “I am the owner of XYZ property management. We house over XXXX low income residents throughout the state of Maine.” There are several twists you can use, but select the one that fits your reason for testifying. The body of your testimony needs to explain your opinion based on the facts, as you know them. Testimony concludes with your appreciation of the committee’s consideration of your view, a request that they support your opinion and an offer to answer any questions. Example, “Thank you for your consideration of my testimony. I urge your (opposition of, or your favorable vote in support of) this proposed legislation. At this time I would be pleased to entertain any of your questions.”

After you have prepared your testimony, make twenty copies to take to the hearing. When your bill is called, the chair of the committee will ask for testimony and will be specific in asking for testimony in favor of the bill and then in opposition of the bill and after that neither for nor against. As you walk to the front of the room, you’ll notice a person at a desk setting away from the committee, that person is the committee clerk. Give the clerk copies of your testimony, keeping one for yourself. Once you get to the podium there will be a sign in sheet for your name. It’s a good idea to carry a pen in your pocket just in case the person before you walks away with it. Sign in and begin. If you are nervous, just read the testimony. This process intimidates lots of people, and Legislators are very understanding and do not view your testimony any less important if you find it necessary to read it rather than recite it. Getting your voice heard is the most important element of this process. I believe the best testimony usually is no more than three minutes. Committee members will ask questions if they have them.

Public comment has changed the minds of legislators repeatedly. They know YOU put them in office. They care about your thoughts and appreciate your willingness to share your expertise. If you decide to testify on a piece of legislation and would find my feedback helpful, please feel free to contact me via e-mail at suecrawford@verizon.net.