

How to Pass a Local Resolution

Getting your City Council or County Board of Supervisors to pass a resolution in favor of a policy you support—or against a policy you are fighting—is an excellent way to boost your campaign. During the struggle against South African apartheid, local resolutions banning investment in the racist regime were key to eventually bringing down the government. More recently, Fair Trade activists have increased the demand for Fair Trade Certified coffee by passing resolutions that mandate cities only serve their employees the socially responsible blend. Non-binding resolutions that simply express the city’s opposition to or support for an idea can also be effective. For example, when citizens were fighting a corporate rights treaty called the Multilateral Agreement on Investments (MAI) in the late 1990s, non-binding resolutions declaring cities and towns “MAI-Free Zones” were essential in educating people about the dangers of the agreement, and eventually stopping it from becoming law.

Local resolutions represent grassroots democracy at its finest. They give ordinary citizens the opportunity to address pressing international issues right in their own community, and in the process increase awareness about things that may seem far away. They’re a concrete expression of the old bumper sticker: “Think Global-Act Local.”

So how can you pass a resolution in your community?

I. Plan Your Campaign

- **Determine what kind of resolution you want to pass.** Your overall campaign goals (ending US military aid to Colombia, fighting the FTAA, etc.) will naturally influence your decision. Depending upon the nature of your campaign, you may want to pass a binding resolution that will actually effect city policies or a non-binding one that is simply the expression of an opinion. You should know that, in general, non-binding resolutions are easier to pass. (A sample anti-FTAA resolution is enclosed. Global Exchange has other resolutions that may fit your campaign.)
- **Identify and reach out to supporters.** Campaigns work best when they are anchored by a *coalition* of groups and individuals. Who else might be interested in helping to pass the resolution? What natural allies do you have in the community? Try to find coalition partners sooner rather than later. Coalitions work best when everyone is involved in the process from the beginning.
- **Determine who will work with you to pass the resolution and what their roles will be.** As with any campaign effort—hosting a teach-in, organizing a demonstration, etc.— it is useful to make sure everyone knows their assigned tasks. When trying to pass a resolution, you probably want at least one person responsible for communicating with elected officials, at least one person responsible for working the media, and at least one person responsible for putting together public education materials. *Everyone* should work on spreading the word to the general public.

- **Plan a timeline for the resolution campaign.** Make sure you know when, and how often, the city council meets and how long it typically takes for a resolution to be passed. In bigger cities, it may take months for a resolution to become law.

II. Find a Champion—Someone in Local Government to Introduce Your Resolution.

- **Identify a county supervisor or member of the city council who you think will be sympathetic toward your issue.** This is essential. Without a government official who will actually take ownership of the issue and make it his or her cause, it will be difficult to successfully pass a resolution. You can identify likely champions by investigating officials' voting records and asking your coalition partners if they have any allies on the city council.
- **Make contact with your champion.** Find people who live in the official's district or ward and request a meeting with the representative. Once you arrange a meeting, try to organize as diverse a group as possible to represent your cause. By involving a wide range of coalition partners in the discussion, you demonstrate that your issue has community support. At the meeting, make a strong case for why the resolution is important and why the city should pass it. (For more tips on meeting with elected representatives, see "How to Make the System Work" in this toolbox.)
- **Get your champion to introduce the resolution to the council for a vote.** When you meet with the elected official, you should present them with sample text of the proposed resolution. This will make the official's job easier, and make them likelier to support your issue.
- **Chart the political landscape.** When meeting with your champion, ask them to predict which members of the city council are likely to support or oppose the resolution. Knowing your allies and opponents will help you in your campaign.

III. Work with City or County Staff.

- **Get to know the city staffers.** In many city halls, especially those in small towns, the unelected bureaucrats wield as much power as the elected representatives. That's because the staff are permanent and work full time, whereas the elected officials come and go and often work only part time. It's crucial, then, that you get the city staffers on your side. Ask for meetings with the city manager, the city attorney, the pension fund manager, the city purchaser, or whoever else may be affected by the proposed resolution. Explain to them why the resolution is important. If you gain their support, you are much closer to winning the campaign.

IV. Educate the Public.

- **Spread the word.** Without real public support, passing your resolution will be difficult. At the same time, one of the main reasons for working on a local resolution is to educate the public about the issue you care about. The resolution is, in a sense, a vehicle for educating the public. There are several ways you can do this.
- **Try to get the media interested.** Once your resolution is introduced and scheduled for a vote, contact the media and ask them to do a story about the campaign. Resolutions give local media a way

to cover larger issues through a community angle. Write letters to the editor and opeds in support of the resolution. (For more on media outreach, see “How to Work with the Media” in this toolbox.)

- **Host a public forum about the resolution.** It may be a good idea to hold a teach-in or other educational event to talk to your fellow residents about the resolution. Organize a film screening that addresses your issue. Bring an inspiring speaker into the community to talk about why the resolution is important. Global Exchange can suggest speakers that can boost your campaign. (For more information on hosting educational events, see “How to Organize a Teach-In” in this toolbox.)

V. Lobby Other Elected Representatives

- **Make contact with other officials.** “Lobbying” is just a fancy word for letting your elected officials know how you feel about an issue. Communicating with your representatives is a right, not a privilege. You should make sure all of the representatives on the city council have a packet of information about your resolution. Try to get constituents from different districts to arrange meetings with their representatives to show support for the resolution.

- **Expand the base of support.** As the date of the vote approaches, make sure you are working with residents across the city and asking them to call or write their representatives in support of the resolution. Constituents throughout your town should be contacting their representatives on the city council. There are some ways to coordinate this. Organize a city-wide “call-in” day during which people from every neighborhood will call their representatives in support of the resolution. If a particular representative is opposed to the resolution, do targeted outreach in that neighborhood.

- **Cover all the bases.** In some cases, especially with binding resolutions, committees or subcommittees will consider the resolution before the full city council does. Make sure you attend these meetings and present the argument for your resolution during the public comments section of any hearings.

- **Pack the house.** On the day your resolution is going to be voted on, make sure the city council chambers are filled with supporters of your resolution. Bring colorful and eye-catching signs to show support for the resolution. Encourage supporters to speak in favor of the resolution during the public comments section, and make sure you have a few people ready with prepared remarks. The day of the vote is your final chance to show that the community really cares about your issue.

VI. Follow Up

- **Make sure that what the resolution calls for actually happens.** This is crucial when it comes to binding resolutions. Keep in touch with your champion and city staff to ensure the resolution is being implemented. If it isn't, make sure all of your supporters, your champion, and the media hear about it.