



THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES

Steps to Pass a Local Ordinance

Sometimes the best way to help animals in your community is to pass a local ordinance. This puts in place a set of rules to protect animals, but also protects public safety, helps resolve community issues, improves enforcement and resources for residents and may contribute to better state legislation.

However, it is important to note that there are often times when laws cannot be used as a sole measure to address issues. It is critical for animal welfare advocates and animal care and service organizations to reach their communities with positive animal care messages and to provide accessible services to the public. Without those steps, it is unlikely for legislation to have any meaningful effect.

1. Learn the process

The process for local legislation varies around the country, so get familiar with how things work in your community. An official or employee in your local government may be able to help you. You should also become familiar with any existing state laws on the subject. Attend a few meetings of the governing body you hope to influence. Listen to the kinds of questions they ask and the issues they take most seriously. By understanding their general concerns, you'll be able to craft your arguments accordingly.

2. Find a friend in office

Public officials tend to take their constituents' interests seriously, so try talking to your own council member or alderman first. As much as we'd like the people we vote for to agree with us, this may not always work. If your own council member isn't interested, don't despair. Try to find another official with an interest in animal issues and pitch your idea to them. Often, your local animal control bureau or non-profit humane society can point you towards a sympathetic decision-maker.

3. Get community support

Supporting a local ordinance means doing things like testifying at council meetings, contacting council members to express support for the ordinance and informing others about the ordinance. Even in big cities, very few people tend to get involved in local government (which means a small group of people are changing laws and policies), so getting active community support can make or break the legislation you are trying to pass. A diverse coalition will show your elected officials that a significant portion of the community supports your efforts.

4. Draft the ordinance

You may already know what you want your ordinance to say, but it will have to be crafted into an appropriate legislative format. If you write the ordinance yourself, someone from your local government may be able to help you by putting your ideas into the proper format. Finding a sample of the proposed legislation in another locality may serve as a model.



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5. Prepare for the opposition

While every community is different, the odds are that someone in your area will oppose the ordinance. Be sure to prepare the sponsor of the ordinance with information about the opponent's concerns, and the data, facts and talking points to address them, well in advance of the hearing. Creating a short factsheet with common arguments and answers can be very helpful to your sponsor. Additionally, a letter to the leadership of a local opposition group soon after the issue is introduced can go a long way.

6. Go public

Local officials read local papers! Schedule a meeting with the editor or editorial board of your local paper to ask them to support your proposal. Contact other media outlets, including television and radio, to let them know about your efforts. Write letters to the editor of your local paper, remembering to state your case concisely (most papers prefer letters of 150-250 words).

7. Testify

If your council calls a public meeting to discuss your proposal, you should testify alongside members of your coalition. Plan ahead of time to make sure that everyone doesn't speak on the exact same points (a common problem at public hearings). You may have limited time, so dividing talking points among a handful of speakers can ensure that all of your key arguments are heard. It is particularly helpful if you can get animal control officers to testify on behalf of their agencies. Enforcement professionals in uniform add an additional air of importance and mainstream acceptance to an issue. It's especially important to have an individual who will be enforcing the ordinance—this varies by community.

8. Compromise (if needed)

As easy and straightforward as this all sounds, things may not run so smoothly. Whether because of enforcement issues or strong opposition, sometimes you may have to compromise on your ordinance. This is ok. Be prepared to compromise ahead of time. Know what parts of your ordinance are most important and which ones can be set aside, if needed.

9. Regroup after defeat

You may not win your battle the first time around, but don't give up. Maybe your council just wasn't ready for this particular issue at this time. Talk to those councilmembers who voted against your bill and find out why. You can learn from this experience and try to pass a better bill in the future.

10. Celebrate victory, but remain vigilant

You've completed a great accomplishment, so be proud of all of your hard work. Unfortunately, passing an ordinance doesn't mean that it will be enacted as is, well-enforced, or will remain a part of local law forever. Sometimes city or county attorneys will change the language of legislation that has been passed. In other cases, the law may be challenged in court and defeated. Whatever the situation, keep an eye out for related issues in your community after your ordinance has passed, and be prepared to provide support.