

Sample Text/Format for Kent Commission Home Page

A public hearing (zoom) was held by the P&Z back in September 2021 to gather voter sentiment about a pending application for a residential development north of Kent town center. Knowing that many people were concerned about the application, I urged them to say so by letter or by registering to appear on the zoom connection. I was surprised to learn that there was little information readily available to the public to tell them how to participate. What was the time frame in which to submit written comments? To whom should the comments be addressed whether to the chair or to the Land Use Officer. Further, they could find the names of the P&Z commissioners but they could not find a simple description of the process by which decisions were routinely made and when further arguments at another hearing might be possible and what the scope of commissioners' powers were to make the irrevocable decisions.

I went looking at our other commission and department home pages, hoping to find a satisfactory template for such basic information, and found next to nothing. While state law does not seem to address this matter head on, there are numerous references to best practices for commissions and hearings in the State's own *General Statutes*, Chapter 90, Secs. 7-1 to 7-9d. Very little appears to be required; rather home rule prevails. It seems to me that on the rare occasion that the public wants to register their views to their elected representatives they are at a real disadvantage, especially in the Covid era when attendance in person is either discouraged or not permitted. Trying to suggest uniform practices across municipalities was obviously not going to be practical. But why not fix this oversight locally, forgetting any municipal models that may or may not exist elsewhere.

Sidebar: Apparently one of the P&Z Commissioners thought so, too. I chanced to attend by zoom the regular January 2022 meeting of the P&Z and heard Alice Hicks raise the same issue with Donna Hayes, the Land Use Officer whose duties include overseeing P&Z announcements. Alice asked Donna and the others why this information is not published where anyone can find it. The Commissioners batted the question around for a while, alluding to the September 2021 meeting when the date for submission of written comments changed about eight days before the hearing and was not published. It was explained that a holiday was approaching so the P&Z would need more time to read all the letters. Perhaps this was true, but it

certainly caused consternation among citizens who were told the deadline had passed.

Alice felt that the due date for the public's submission ought to be "cast in stone". Donna said notification of special hearings has to be made 48 hours before and the agenda 24 hours before according to state statute. She denied that any error was made in September. Other members of the commission thought Kent's practice of accepting submissions was already too lenient; that towns in Fairfield County routinely set deadlines farther in advance than our town does. Whatever the truth of this is, I wonder if we can't just suggest to all of Kent's commissions that they revisit their home pages and strive to make them more informative and interactive. *Following are some of the changes I would suggest, allowing for different needs for different commissions.*

1. Along with listing commissioners' names, give their terms which are often staggered. Over half the towns I surveyed follow this model and some of Kent's already do. Make it clear on each home page whether members are selected through party nomination and public vote or by appointment of the First Selectman.
2. The box typically found on the left side of the Home page should contain the schedule of the commission's regular meetings for the year, as well as the hours and the location of those meetings during normal times. Instructions on attending via zoom could also be provided during Covid times. Something about the distinction between Public Hearings, Open Meetings, Executive Sessions, and what constitutes a legal quorum might also be appropriate to define here. And wouldn't it be interesting to know when this particular commission was first created. Kent's Conservation Commission was created circa 1998 and its responsibilities carved out of those of Inland Wetlands.
3. The home page could also describe the commission's mission and jurisdiction; they might also include a sentence inviting the public to attend those meetings if interested; KCC has a place on every agenda where public comments are invited. Like most commissions we value citizens' questions and suggestions, but why not make that point on our home page. If there are vacancies on a commission, make that information prominent.

4. In the instance of commissions such as the Board of Appeals it would help to give a brief statement of the process of appeals, the time to make such appeals, the basis on which appeals will be heard, and give a link to a request a form.

5. Lastly, someone on the commission should be tasked with keeping their group's home page attractive and up to date. I would welcome a suitable image at the top of each one. News of a change in policy or a change in state law that could impact local practices should be highlighted. Right now the home pages of some commissions are many years out of date, with old news the only links offered. The result is that some of the commissions seem to be barely functioning when in fact they are very busy and productive. I'd like to

Clearly one size will not fit all when it comes to improving home pages but transparency is what everyone is looking for these days and presenting a more friendly attitude to the voters can only be a good thing. I suppose this suggestion would need to go to the Selectmen first if our commission supports this notion. I suggest everyone take a look at the assortment of Kent Commission home pages listed on the town's web site, open each one, and see what can be done to improve their appearance, appeal and informativeness, making more suggestions where merited. In a small way I think this might drive more people to want to participate in town government. And that is surely a good thing.

Knowing how sensitive some commissions are, let's be sure whatever we propose is respectful of their autonomy.