

Fighting City Hall

How my speechmaking skills helped improve my community.

BY BOB BAXTER, DTM

You never know when your Toastmasters skills will come in handy. I discovered that for myself when I spoke out on a local transportation issue. The Regional Transportation District (RTD), a provider of bus service to an eight-county area in Colorado, proposed to do away with service to our community. We have a small, unpaved Park-n-Ride, where locals can park their cars and then catch a regional bus into the city. The RTD was going to vote on the matter at its board of directors meeting.

Like many governmental agencies, the board allows citizens the opportunity to speak at its monthly meetings. This was the community's only chance to convince the board not to discontinue service, and I planned to be among the speakers.

As I prepared my speech, I realized many of the techniques I was employing were learned in Toastmasters. The board permitted only three minutes for citizens to present their cases; even though most Toastmasters manual speeches are longer than three minutes, every one of them has a time limit. Starting with the first project in the *Competent Communication* manual (the Ice Breaker), we learn to keep our message within a certain time period.

I had only three minutes to deliver an organized message to the board with a beginning, middle and end, something that is addressed in the second CC project, "Organize Your Speech." My speech had a point: Convince the board not to shut us down. That's Project 3, "Get to the Point." When preparing my speech, I carefully selected the words that would give it the most impact (Project 4, "How to Say It"). As I practiced, I carefully planned the vocal inflections to enable my speech to keep the audience's attention (Project 6, "Vocal Variety").

Facts and figures would make my argument more convincing. I researched how many extra miles would be driven by all those extra cars if the Park-n-Ride was taken away (Project 7, "Research Your Topic"). My speech was designed to persuade and inspire the board to continue our bus service (projects 9 and 10, "Persuade with Power" and "Inspire Your Audience," respectively).

The big day arrived. As I awaited my turn to speak, I watched and listened to other citizens plea for their particular causes. I remember one speaker, in particular. Even though his voice was



When Bob Baxter spoke up to defend a local Park-n-Ride, he got more than what he expected.

steady, I was close enough to see his body trembling. He actually reminded me of myself when I gave my Ice Breaker nine years earlier.

When the board called my name, I walked confidently to the lectern and stated my case. I pointed to the director representing my district (Project 5, "Your Body Speaks") and declared, "Our Park-n-Ride may be only a dirt lot but it's not an embarrassment!"—something he had asserted in previous conversations. The time buzzer went off as I delivered the last word of my speech.

The board voted not to do away with our Park-n-Ride. We kept our bus service because a few residents stood up, used communication skills, and took advantage of an open public hearing to state our case. In the scheme

of worldwide political events, our triumph was small. But to my community, the victory made it better. I was able to make a difference because of the skills I learned from the *Competent Communication* manual.

Over the next two years, the board considered other plans to reduce our bus service. Each time, I spoke out. When the board wanted to impose a parking fee, I used skills learned in Project 8, "Get Comfortable with Visual Aids"; I brought a picture of our 30-year-old "temporary" dirt parking lot and asked the question "You want to charge us for parking in this?!" A group of our residents eventually persuaded the board to build a permanently paved and lighted Park-n-Ride. It is now in service with free parking.

(A side note: As I was lobbying for our Park-n-Ride, I encouraged the Regional Transportation District to start a Toastmasters club. In October 2013, RTD chartered the Rock the Dialogue club in Denver, Colorado.)

Don't be afraid to speak at City Hall and governmental board meetings. Deliver your message and your opinions. You can make a difference. **T**

BOB BAXTER, DTM, is a member of the Evening Stars Toastmasters in Denver, Colorado. He served as the District 26 governor for the 2008–2009 program year.