

Skamania County Land Use Hearing Examiner Process

The following information explains the fundamental role of the Land Use Hearing Examiner and the process by which the Examiner renders land use decisions. ***This is not a complete description of the rules and laws governing the hearing process, but rather an overview to prepare applicants, appellants, and members of the public for participation in public proceedings.*** The land use hearing process is described in more detail in Chapter 2.80 of the Skamania County Code (SCC) and in the Land Use Hearing Examiner Rules of Procedure. Copies of the relevant ordinances and rules are available through the Skamania County Community Development Department.

The Hearing Examiner system assures fairness and due process protection for all persons involved in the land use hearing process. It is the Examiner's responsibility to render land use decisions in an efficient manner. County ordinances authorize the Hearing Examiner to conduct hearings on certain land use permit applications and appeals of administrative decisions. The specific applications and appeals under the Hearing Examiner's jurisdiction are listed in SCC 2.80.060.

Overview of the Process

Hearings before the Hearing Examiner are usually "open record hearings." The purpose of the open record hearing is to allow parties to present evidence as to whether the application or appeal under review satisfies the County's criteria for approval and other applicable state and local laws. The evidence submitted at the hearing, which may consist of oral testimony or written documents, is known as the "record" of the hearing. Because the Hearing Examiner's decision - and a court's decision on appeal of a Hearing Examiner's decision - is based on the record, **it is important that parties present all relevant information and arguments at the open record hearing.** When the hearing is concluded, the record is "closed" and no new evidence may be submitted.

Occasionally, the Hearing Examiner may leave the record open for submission of specific information that was not provided prior to or at the hearing. This can happen when the Examiner has questions the parties need time to answer or when interested parties at the hearing bring up relevant issue not addressed to the Examiner's satisfaction. If the Hearing Examiner determines the information is necessary for making a decision on the matter, the record will be "held open" for the specific information. When this occurs, the Hearing Examiner will be admitted. Typically, both the specific information requested and the deadline are spelled out in a Post-Hearing Order for Submission of Additional Evidence. The Order will usually state when the record will close. Generally, no new evidence may be submitted after the close of record, even on appeal.

Hearings on permit applications typically proceed in the following order:

- Introductory comments by the Hearing Examiner;
- Presentation by County staff, including staff's analysis of the application and recommendation;
- Presentation by the applicant;
- Public testimony, which may include questions for County staff or the applicant; and
- County and applicant responses to the issues and questions that have been raised.

Hearings on appeals typically proceed in the following order:

- Introductory comments by the Hearing Examiner;
- Presentation by the appellant, and any witnesses the appellant calls;

- Presentation by the County, and any witnesses the County calls;
- Presentation by the applicant, if different from the appellant, and any witnesses the applicant calls;
- Rebuttal testimony and/or concluding remarks by the parties.

Each hearing is audio recorded in order to establish a verbatim record of the testimony and procedures. All testimony is given under oath, and each person who testifies must identify him or herself for the record. The Hearing Examiner may establish time limits for testimony.

At the conclusion of the hearing, the Hearing Examiner closes the record and sets the due date for rendering his or her decision. No decision is issued at the hearing itself. The Hearing Examiner takes the case under advisement and prepares a written decision including findings of fact and conclusions of law.

The Hearing Examiner's final decision is mailed to parties of record (i.e., individuals who submit written or oral testimony, the applicant or appellant, and the County) and to other individuals who request a copy.

How to Participate Effectively

- Limit testimony and/or written documentation to the specific case at hand. Testimony about desired changes in the code is not relevant and will not be considered. Land use applications are required to be decided according to the rules in effect at the time of application. Changes to the code are more properly addressed to the Board of County Commissioners.

- Focus on facts that have some tendency to show that the project does or does not satisfy the County's criteria for approval or other applicable laws. The most persuasive testimony or written documentation is that which is based on the speaker's or writer's first-hand observations and, for technical issues, is within the speaker's or writer's area of expertise.

- To the extent possible, review the project documents and the relevant codes prior to the hearing.

- Be courteous and respectful to each participant.

- Direct your comments to the Hearing Examiner and not to members of the audience.

Due Process Considerations

- Land use hearings before the Hearing Examiner are quasi-judicial proceedings, which means that certain due process protections apply. Not only must quasi-judicial proceedings be fair; they must appear to be fair. Accordingly, the Hearing Examiner may not participate in any matter in which he or she has financial or personal interest.

Any person who has grounds to believe the Hearing Examiner may be influenced by a consideration outside the public record should promptly bring that concern to the attention of the Hearing Examiner prior to or at the hearing.

- If written testimony is submitted, it must be received prior to or at the public hearing for it to be considered by the Hearing Examiner. Written testimony should be addressed to the Hearing Examiner in care of the Community Development Department; should contain the writer's name and mailing address (the mailing address is needed to ensure the writer receives notice of the decision); should reference the application file number;

and should be legible. Comments should contain the specific reasons why the application should be approved, denied, or conditioned.

- The Hearing Examiner may not be contacted directly about specific applications. To ensure that the Hearing Examiner will remain free from bias or prejudice in the decision-making process, any contact with the Examiner must be through testimony or written statements submitted at the hearing, or through material submitted to Community Development Department staff for transmittal to the Hearing Examiner. Material submitted in an inappropriate manner will not be considered part of the record.

Appeals from Hearing Examiner Decisions

- Section 2.80.140 of the Skamania County Code contains information on appealing a Hearing Examiner's decision. To be considered, appeals must be filed by one of the parties of record with the appropriate decision-making body (Superior Court, Shorelines Hearings Board, or Columbia River Gorge Commission) within the time limits specified in the applicable statutes.