

**Oral Communications Testimony
by the League of Women Voters of Portland
to the Portland City Council, November 17, 2021**

I am Debbie Aiona representing the League of Women Voters of Portland. The League promotes political responsibility through informed and active participation in government. Up until a few years ago, Portlanders could participate in city government by testifying on reports presented to council. These reports cover an array of topics. Recent examples include the Office of Equity's strategic plan and reports on the State of Housing and the North/Northeast Neighborhood Housing Strategy.

A few years ago, we were taken by surprise when we learned that Council would not take oral testimony on the OIR Group police shootings report. In our experience this was an unprecedented change in procedure. Since then we have shared our concerns about this change in letters and meetings with commissioners and staff.

At a PCCEP meeting earlier this year, this issue came up. A member of the Mayor's staff stated that oral testimony on reports wasn't taken anytime during her years at City Hall. This prompted us to look back at the 2016 records, the year before Mayor Wheeler took office. Portland Copwatch joined the League in writing to the staffer, informing her of our finding that the public indeed was invited to testify every time a report was presented.

More recently, the League's concerns increased when we heard the City Attorney fail to mention during the council session's opening instructions that it's up to the presiding officer if oral testimony is taken on reports. Written information provided by the Council Clerk also fails to mention that fact.

It is our fear that over time, newly elected city commissioners and the public will begin to believe that testimony has never been allowed on reports. The League and several other organizations recently wrote to the City Attorney's and Auditor's offices asking them to inform the public that testimony on reports is allowed at the presiding officer's discretion. We hope, at a minimum, action will be taken on that recommendation.

Ideally, we would like the Mayor to once again take oral testimony on reports. We have witnessed valuable discussions take place between the public and elected officials in response to what was said. Furthermore, reports sometimes include recommendations for future policy making. The public is able to highlight those that seem most promising, especially after hearing further details provided in staff presentations. In addition, observers learn from those who testify and are able to identify others with an interest in the issue. This promotes collaboration and builds the network of those who can knowledgeably engage in future discussions.

Thank you.