Best Practices for Committees to Work Effectively with Municipal Leaders

Copyright Vermont League of Cities and Towns
Current as of: 11/11/2026

The principles summarized on this webpage can help any committee or commission clarify their purpose and communicate effectively with municipal leaders.

This information was presented in the 2025 Annual Vermont Energy and Climate Action Network (VECAN) conference during an interactive panel designed to help participants learn what makes our towns run and techniques that energy committees can use to flourish. The Best Practices shared by panelists Brian Cali (Reading Energy Committee Chair), Stephanie Moffett-Hynds (Arlington Energy Committee Chair), and Alyssa Johnson (Waterbury Selectboard Chair) received high praise from session participants. The panel's moderator, VLCT's Project & Funding Specialist Bonnie Waninger, combined the best practices with additional tips from people who participated in the VECAN session — to compile this insightful resource for VLCT members.

Building Trust

Building trust is essential for fostering strong relationships, enhancing communication, and creating a positive environment for your community.

- **Know your role.** Is your committee an ad hoc group of interested citizens (a community committee) or an advisory or action committee appointed by the selectboard (a municipal committee)? Committee authority within local government varies based on its role.
- **Roles can evolve.** Community energy committees that aren't appointed by the municipality can use a trusted partner, such as a regional planning commission, to bridge trust gaps.
- **Start with low-hanging fruit.** Celebrate work completed by the town. Use existing plans (e.g., Town Plan, Capital Plan, workplans) to identify work the town

Copyright Vermont League of Cities and Towns
Current as of: 11/11/2026

hopes to complete.

- **Invest in your community by working with students.** High school or college students may be looking for project work. Can they help you gather and organize data or complete community build projects such as Window Dressers?
- **Don't go rogue**. If you disagree with the town's decision, don't operate outside the trust area you've built. If you go around the selectboard or town manager or become political, you may lose the trust you have.
- **Talk to your community's residents.** They are your municipality's biggest stakeholder. Know when residents can help make decisions and when voters must make decisions (such as a bond vote).
- **Be clear, consistent, and kind when communicating.** Municipal elected and appointed leaders are community volunteers too. They are doing their best. Local leaders are often putting out fires.
- **Clearly define your ask.** When approaching local leaders, be clear about whether you are informing them or asking for something. If asking, define what you need them to do and by when.
- **Build relationships with new local leaders.** Most need time to learn their role and how it interacts with your committee or commission. Don't assume they know the history of your work or issue.
- **Be patient.** Local leaders receive a plethora of emails. They may not respond or may not remember your email. It's okay to remind them if you do it kindly.
- **People have different communication styles.** You need to match them. Figure out how each selectboard member likes to receive communication. Some prefer emails and others prefer texts, etc. It's okay to ask.
- **Show up for the community outside your committee work.** Be a part of the community to build trust with residents and to hear and understand their perspectives. For instance, participate in flood cleanouts or serve meals at the food bank.

Copyright Vermont League of Cities and Towns
Current as of: 11/11/2026

- **Deliver on commitments and projects**. Follow through if you make commitments.
- **Don't surprise local leadership.** The selectboard and town manager or administrator shouldn't be the last to know about your work. Keep them informed about your plans, accomplishments, and challenges.
- **Celebrate and share success.** Did your efforts provide critical or essential services or save the municipality money? Make sure you celebrate and share those successes to keep your work visible. It builds community pride.

Coordinating Effectively

The Vermont Supreme Court noted that "The overlapping duties of municipal entities require a 'spirit of cooperation'." Cooperation fosters a sense of unity and shared responsibility, which is crucial for addressing the complex issues and challenges that communities face.

- **Provide written information.** Help local leadership understand the background for a project or action –and answer questions they might have or might need to answer from residents. A brief memo that describes the "why" of the project, identifies questions that still need to be answered, and clarifies decision-making points as well as "the ask" can be very helpful.
- **Treat people with dignity by avoiding using "they".** Grouping people into "they" – such as saying "they hate solar" – not only suggests you have contempt for people and their beliefs and ideas, but it also suggests common ground for resolution can't be found.
- **Always accept and address questions.** What do the selectboard or voters want to know? Build a Q&A webpage or a document that you and local leaders can use to answer questions.

Copyright Vermont League of Cities and Towns
Current as of: 11/11/2026

- **Learn the "why" when there is project opposition.** People might not dislike or disagree with the project; they may simply have concerns that haven't been addressed. For example, people might not dislike solar: they might just be reacting to solar siting or not want a big field of solar panels.
- **If asked to gather information, share what you've learned.** Sharing is essential for fostering collaboration, problem solving, and decision-making. You might not like what you've learned, but sharing that information shows you are willing to learn.
- **Ask local leadership to choose the path forward.** Knowing when you have the authority to make decisions is important. Equally important is involving local leadership in choosing the path forward when there are options. Involvement in the decision-making process vests local leadership in outcomes.
- **Know who must decide.** Accountability ultimately rests with whoever has legal authority. Know when the committee can decide and when voters or local leadership must decide.
- **Attend selectboard meetings.** It builds relationships. It also helps you understand how and why the selectboard makes decisions, and it provides context for other issues the selectboard is addressing.
- **Don't assume local leadership knows about your work.** Whether you hold an annual event or hold an event that doesn't involve local government, tell local leadership about it every year. Don't assume they know.
- **Ask to lead.** If your Town Plan, Capital Plan, or local leadership has specific goals and objectives related to your committee's role, ask if the committee can be the lead in implementing the work. Local leadership appreciates having help!
- **Be your own coordinator.** Your Town Administrator, Town Manager, or a legislative body member may love your work and offer to act as your liaison to the legislative body. It's best practice for your committee to act as its own information transmitter so that local leadership knows YOU.

Copyright Vermont League of Cities and Towns
Current as of: 11/11/2026

- **Ask about capital planning.** If your committee's work relates to capital items (such as buildings, vehicles, or infrastructure), ask if your municipality has a capital plan and how your committee can participate in furthering it. Capital planning must be done in collaboration with local leadership.
- **Ask what the municipality's process is.** Every town accomplishes its work differently. Ask what the municipality's process is – don't assume you know.

Aligning with Priorities and Capacity

By ensuring your work aligns with that of local leadership and voters, your work will be more responsive and have a stronger effect.

- **Anchor the project in existing priorities.** Identify how you arrived at the project. Is it listed in the Town Plan or the Capital Plan? Is it part of the Selectboard's or Highway Supervisor's wish list or annual workplan? Use the things local leadership and town residents agree are priorities and are already moving forward as a launch point.
- **Develop data related to priorities in your focus area.** Having data can provide a road map for your committee's work within existing municipal priorities and/or may help the municipality's priorities evolve.
- **Aim your data and messaging at people's interests.** Find out what people's concerns are and aim your data there. Individuals engaged in local leadership may have different personal priorities. Find common ground.
- **Realize that every perspective is valid and thank people for their contributions.** Hearing different perspectives may mean that you can't do what you wanted, or that you must adapt the way you planned to do it to better align with town priorities and capacity.
- **Know your town's capacity, and your own!** Every town is different and has different capacities. Know yours and the town's before making commitments.

Copyright Vermont League of Cities and Towns
Current as of: 11/11/2026

- **Financial capacity drives most municipal decisions.** Local government has a finite financial capacity. The annual budgeting process shapes how that capacity is allocated to municipal services. Your project's planning should incorporate financial considerations, and your committee should participate in the budgeting process.
- **Ask for next step ideas.** When celebrating success or addressing challenges, ask people what they think the next step projects or activities should be.

Implementing Plans (and Energy Audits)

Local leaders have so much on their plates. Many plans are developed but never implemented. Actions you can take to move implementation forward include:

- **Keep showing up.** If your community isn't making progress implementing its plans, show up at selectboard meetings and ask (kindly!) about progress. Persistence pays!
- **Ask how you can help.** When attending meetings or in one-to-one conversations with local leaders or staff, ask about specific roles your committee or commission can play to help move projects forward. Better yet, suggest a role you can play.
- **Ask for advice.** Seek out the plan developer (or the energy auditor) and ask them what they suggest as first steps. They can offer professional advice and advise you about best practices implemented elsewhere.
- **Ask for permission to get quotes for pricing.** If implementing a plan (or audit) costs money, ask the legislative body for permission to seek quotes for pricing so they have cost information for budgeting purposes.
- **Meet individually with local leaders**. A one-to-one discussion will help you learn about individual priorities, what local leadership is working on, and what else is happening that might be holding their focus.

Copyright Vermont League of Cities and Towns
Current as of: 11/11/2026

- **Start a building fund to save toward the future.** Assess your legislative body's interest in starting or growing a building fund, then offer to work with them on a voter campaign that helps residents understand needs and benefits.

Publication Date

11/03/2025

Copyright Vermont League of Cities and Towns
Current as of: 11/11/2026