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## **Advocacy Guide for Municipal Officials: Adapted for COVID-19**

**We encourage all local officials to advocate on behalf of your municipalities during the COVID-19 pandemic.**

***Affecting policy is a vital endeavor and is only successful when citizens are involved.***

The Vermont legislature began meeting remotely in March 2020 and plans to continue to do so in 2021 for at least the month of January. This guide highlights changes that the state legislature made to move to remote operations. It explains how your advocacy efforts need to change to adapt to this new environment.

- Here you will find important information to help you explain your concerns to legislators effectively while the legislature is meeting remotely.
- The earlier in the session that you present your needs and concerns, the more likely your message will affect new policy.
- Your involvement is always a crucial component of VLCT's year-round advocacy for municipal interests, yet now it's more important than ever that you make legislators understand your municipality's issues and priorities.

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## **Why Your Involvement Matters**

Municipal leaders like you strive to improve the quality of life in your communities, and your residents know it. According to a 2020 Gallup Poll, 71 percent of Americans say they trust local government a great

deal or a fair amount.

Vermont is one of only four states in the country that remain true **Dillon's Rule** states – where local governments may exercise only those powers that the state has specifically granted to them or that are necessary for municipalities to exercise their enumerated powers. Vermont law specifically grants municipalities the authority to carry out certain endeavors, but mandates or preempts them from addressing many others, often without logic or consistency. Strong voices must advocate for local governments in our State House in order for municipalities to be heard. VLCT's Advocacy staff represent your interests day in and day out, but local officials need to participate by adding their lived experience to the messaging.

As a local official,

- **You have first-hand experience** of how legislative action affects your town.
- **You are well-informed** to represent your town's and region's interests to legislators.
- **You can affect the quality of life and economic success** in your town by helping to influence legislative action.
- **Your shared perspectives and personal stories** will keep legislators up to date with municipal priorities so they can make informed decisions.

The state legislature and state government largely regulate, fund, and limit the activities of local government. However, don't assume that legislators either know how local government works or anticipate the effects their bills have on municipalities. Because some legislators have never served at the local level, you can help by:

- educating your local legislators on priority topics,
- speaking from your personal experience,
- explaining the probable consequences of draft bills and policies,
- enumerating the cost that a legislative initiative will have on your community and the number of people it will affect,
- noting the projects that will be put on hold as you pivot to comply with new initiatives, and
- demonstrating where new legislative directives would conflict with current law.

**Your advocacy is invaluable.** You *will* make a difference by advising your legislators on the important contributions that Vermont's cities and towns make to the state's vitality – and how they can help ensure that vitality into the future.

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## Vermont General Assembly

The Vermont General Assembly is composed of two chambers: the Senate and the House of

Representatives. All statewide officers, as well as legislators, serve terms of two years. The House of Representatives has 150 members. Its members are elected to represent single and two-member districts based on population; fifty-eight districts choose one member and 46 choose two. The 30 senators are elected by 13 multi-member districts, also based on population.

In most years, the General Assembly convenes on the first Wednesday in January and ends in late April or early May. Due to the pandemic, the 2020 session was extended until September 25. Generally, legislators meet every Tuesday through Friday, except during the town meeting week break. Late in the session, legislators will also meet on Mondays, Saturdays, and evenings as needed. During the 2020 remote session, committees conducted their business via Zoom meetings and scheduled them not to conflict with those of the whole Senate or House.

## Committees

Much of the work of the legislature occurs in committees: there, issues are studied, policy is formed, and legislation is crafted. **Your best opportunity to influence the direction of legislation is when it is in committee.**

**There are different kinds of committees.** Standing committees (15 in the House and 11 in the Senate) generally meet Tuesdays through Fridays when the legislature is in session. The House standing committees meet all day, and each Representative serves on one committee. The Senate committees meet for half a day, and each Senator serves on both a morning and an afternoon committee. There are also a number of joint committees, most importantly the Joint Fiscal Committee, whose ten members review fiscal issues, approve grants to the state, and carry out rescissions pursuant to statute. You can find information about each House and Senate committee at [legislature.vermont.gov/committee](https://legislature.vermont.gov/committee) [1].

**House Committees:** Agriculture and Forest Products; Appropriations; Commerce and Economic Development; Corrections and Institutions; Education; Energy and Technology; General, Housing and Military Affairs; Government Operations; Health Care; Human Services; Judiciary; Natural Resources, Fish and Wildlife; Transportation; Ways and Means. There is also a Rules Committee that addresses the conduct of business in the House.

**Senate Committees:** Agriculture; Appropriations; Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs; Education; Finance; Government Operations; Health and Welfare; Institutions; Judiciary; Natural Resources and Energy; Transportation. A separate Rules Committee addresses the conduct of business in the Senate.

## How to Track Legislation

The Vermont State Legislature website, [legislature.vermont.gov](https://legislature.vermont.gov) [2], allows for detailed searching and tracking of daily legislative activity. Whether you are interested in just a summary of weekly activity during the legislative session or the language and history of specific bills, searching is easy. During the legislative session, the website allows you to:

- **Search for bills** by topic, bill number, the legislator who introduced the bill, bill status, and activity
- **Search current House and Senate Calendars and Journals**, which include information on action in the chambers that day
- **Search for your legislators** by name or town and learn their email addresses and telephone

number

- **View all legislative committees**, their members, schedules, and meeting agendas
- **Read testimony** from lobbyists, advocates, and citizens who are commenting on legislation – by witness name, bill number, or subject area

**When the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020, the legislature moved all legislative work online.** All committee meetings and House and Senate floor sessions are streamed on YouTube. For the first time, the public has real-time and recorded 24/7 free video access to all floor sessions, all committee meetings, and some chamber caucuses. Links to the daily committee streams can be found on each committee page and on the weekly committee agendas.

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## How to Communicate with Legislators

During a normal legislative session, the Vermont State House is a very busy place, full of lobbyists, students, tour groups, legislative and administrative staff, and constituents – all vying for the attention of legislators. **During the COVID-19 state of emergency, the regular dynamics of advocating under the golden dome are gone and have been replaced by email, text, and phone, from one's office or home to legislators who are doing the same.**

**Developing a relationship with your legislators is crucial to the success of your advocacy efforts.**

1. **If you do not already know your legislators, introduce yourself.** Invite them to one of your remote selectboard meetings or any community gathering to create relationships.
2. **Be prepared, use your time effectively, and be respectful of their time.**
3. Prior to discussing your issues or asking for something, **begin by acknowledging their hard work and service.** As a public official, you know how much work it takes to serve your community, and they too are working hard.
4. **Understand and explain the issue.** Make sure that before you talk to your legislator, you know the details of the issue and be aware of any counter arguments.
5. **All politics are local.** Connect the issue to your role and your community, and show your legislators the local effects of a bill or proposal. Be as specific and as factual as possible when stating your town's opinion on the legislation. Use stories, numbers, and statistics to support your point.
6. **Anticipate questions and criticisms about your position and the potential cost of it.** Emphasize that if the directive is not funded at the state level, it will require increased property taxes.
7. Understand that you need a majority of House and Senate votes to pass a measure. **The more support you can garner from disparate legislative entities, the better your chance of success.**
8. **Start early, because timing is everything.** Contacting your legislators to urge them to consider the municipal point of view doesn't do any good if the votes have already been cast. Every bill goes through a committee process, so contacting the right person at the right time is crucial. Read VLCT's [Weekly Legislative Reports](#) [3] and watch for the timely [Legislative Alerts and Updates](#) [4] that we publish during the session. And be sure to contact your Advocacy staff with any questions or concerns you may have. [Karen Horn](#) [5] and [Gwynn Zakov](#) [6] are here to help you!

## **Make Contact**

Should you call, or write? Personal contact is always the best way to communicate with legislators, and although in-person meetings are currently impractical, a phone call is a fast and easy way to connect with your legislator. Email leaves a record that can be stored and referred to later, but legislators receive numerous emails every day, and many go unread despite their best efforts. So if you send an email, follow up with a phone call to remind the legislator of your message. Follow these guidelines:

- Give credit and say thanks
- Be concise; offer solutions
- Make your conversation personal
- Give the local angle
- Be an *accurate* resource
- Don't be a stranger

## **Provide Testimony**

While the legislature is meeting remotely, testifying is easier and more accessible than ever. If you request or are asked to testify on a bill, you will do so on the Zoom platform. A committee assistant will schedule you on the agenda and send you an email invitation. Other than testifying remotely, there are no changes to how committee meetings are conducted. (If your internet connection is spotty, plan to go to a public WiFi spot or rely on a telephone connection to be sure you will be heard.)

During testimony, address legislators as "Representative Smith" or "Senator Jones." Clearly state your name and affiliation every time you speak and address your comments to the chairperson, or "Madame Chair" or "Mr. Chair." The Chair runs the meeting and is in charge in the committee "room." It is not always possible for the chair to see everyone who would like to speak in a Zoom meeting; thus, feel free to send the committee assistant a message asking to speak.

A professional appearance is important, even online! Speak clearly and be honest, accurate, and concise. You must be a credible source of information. It is, after all, your expertise and credibility that earn you a seat at the table. Know the answers before you are questioned. Do not try to guess at an answer. Instead, offer to find out the answer to the question or find someone who can accurately answer it. As Franklin Delano Roosevelt said, "Be sincere, be brief, be seated." Or, these days, be sincere, be brief, hit the mute button.

## **Follow Up**

If a legislator asks for more information, provide it as soon as possible. Don't hesitate to contact VLCT Advocacy staff for any information you may need. (And please keep VLCT and Advocacy staff informed!) Send an email thanking the chair for the opportunity to speak.

If you ask your legislator to take specific action, let him or her know what that action should be and when it is needed.

## **Use the Media**

Legislators read their local newspapers, listen to the radio, watch television, and follow electronic media, including Front Porch Forum. Write a thank-you note in the form of a letter to the editor or a post on

social media. Write an opinion piece. Seek an interview opportunity to get your point across to the public as well as to the legislature. Understand that journalists work on tight schedules and will seek opinions at variance with your own. This is their job. Make sure they have the facts from you, which builds your credibility as a reliable source to whom they will want to return for future stories.

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## VLCT Municipal Advocacy

### Legislative Principles

The Vermont League of Cities and Towns advocates for policies that support:

- authority, autonomy, and discretion on municipal matters exercised at the local level;
- financial and technical resources to ensure public health and safety to municipal constituents;
- enhanced quality of life, equity and inclusion for all Vermonters; and
- fiscal accountability and responsibility at all levels of government.

These principles recognize the common goals of all 246 member cities and towns of VLCT. Every year, advocacy initiatives tie back to these principles.

### Policy Committees

The [VLCT Municipal Policy](#) [7] guides the actions of the board of directors and the advocacy staff in the Vermont Legislature and at the federal level as needed. The five policy committees listed below review the municipal policy and recommend revisions in anticipation of the ensuing legislative biennium. The committees may also convene to address specific policy proposals or legislation.

- FAIR (Finance, Administration, and Intergovernmental Relations)
- Transportation
- Public Safety
- Quality of Life and Environment
- Water Quality

Policy committee members are municipal officials who have an interest in and a level of knowledge of the policies that the committees review. The VLCT president appoints members to the committees.

### Advocacy Staff

[Your Advocacy team](#) [8]- Director of Public Policy and Advocacy [Karen Horn](#) [9] and Municipal Policy Advocate [Gwynn Zakov](#) [10] - represent municipal interests at the state and federal levels. During every legislative session, they follow issues that develop (or don't) into bills and acts, looking out for and asserting the concerns of local government wherever appropriate. Karen and Gwynn also keep VLCT members apprised of this "sausage making" process in three formats:

[Weekly Legislative Reports](#) [3]. Each Friday during the legislative session, we publish a summary of the week's legislative activity, post it on our website, and email our members a link to it.

[Zoom Chats](#) [11]. During the legislative session, Karen and Gwynn host Zoom meetings to

summarize the progress of legislation that specifically affects cities and towns and to hear what's on members' minds. These take place on Mondays. Current information is at [vlct.org/AdvocacyChats](https://vlct.org/AdvocacyChats) [12].

**[Legislative Alerts and Updates](https://vlct.org/alerts-updates)** [4]. We issue *Legislative Alerts* when legislators need to hear from municipal officials about a particular issue and time is of the essence. A *Legislative Update* provides the status of legislative activity and is chiefly informational, meaning you do not need to contact your legislators. When Advocacy staff testify, we provide links to written testimony, all of which are posted at [vlct.org/alerts-updates](https://vlct.org/alerts-updates) [13].

The VLCT Advocacy team also participates in state agency rule-making, quasi-judicial hearings, and permit processes. They collaborate with affiliated local government organizations such as the Green Mountain Water Environment Association, the Vermont Municipal Clerks' and Treasurers' Association, and the Vermont Planners Association. At the federal level, they work with Vermont's congressional delegation and represent Vermont municipal interests in Congress and before federal agencies through VLCT's membership in the National League of Cities.



To learn more about VLCT's Advocacy service area, explore the Advocacy tab at [vlct.org](https://vlct.org) [14].

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## Resource Category:

- Guidance

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### Links

- [1] <https://legislature.vermont.gov/committee>
- [2] <https://legislature.vermont.gov/>
- [3] <https://www.vlct.org/advocacy/legislative-reports-archive>
- [4] <https://www.vlct.org/alerts-updates>
- [5] <mailto:khorn@vlct.org>
- [6] <mailto:gzakov@vlct.org>
- [7] <https://www.vlct.org/resource/2021-2022-vlct-municipal-policy>
- [8] <https://www.vlct.org/staff/Public-Policy-and-Advocacy>
- [9] <https://www.vlct.org/person/karen-horn>
- [10] <https://www.vlct.org/person/gwynn-zakov>

[11] <https://www.vlct.org/event/bi-weekly-chat-advocacy-staff>

[12] <http://www.vlct.org/AdvocacyChats>

[13] <http://www.vlct.org/alerts-updates>

[14] <https://www.vlct.org>