Advocacy Guide for Municipal Officials

The information below is designed to help you work effectively with the Vermont General Assembly. Click here for more about VLCT and our Legislative Policy.

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Why Your Involvement Matters

Why is it important for municipal officials to be involved in the legislative process? A common goal of municipal leaders is to improve the quality of life in their community. Local officials understand that much of what happens within their own borders is directed by others outside of their jurisdiction, primarily members of the state legislature.

Vermont is one of only four states in the country that remains a true Dillon’s Rule state - that is, a state in which local governments may exercise only those powers specifically granted to them or those that are necessary to exercise the enumerated powers. Vermont statutes specifically grant municipalities the authority to carry out certain endeavors, but mandates or preempts them from addressing others.

To be an effective leader in your town, you must recognize the significant role the legislature and other parts of state government play in regulating and funding the activities of local government. Your municipal responsibilities involve representing your hometown and region’s interests to legislators. You need to create opportunities in your hometown to influence legislative action that affects your city’s or town’s quality of life and economic success.

Legislators may not always recognize the effects that state legislation have on municipalities unless they hear about them from the local officials who must deal with them. Additionally, you can make a difference by advising your legislators of the importance that cities and towns contribute to Vermont’s vitality.
Vermont General Assembly

The Vermont General Assembly is composed of two chambers: the Senate and the House of Representatives. The General Assembly meets once a year, beginning the first Tuesday or Wednesday in January and generally ending in late April or early May every Tuesday through Friday except during the Town Meeting Day break. Late in the session, they will also assemble on Mondays and Saturdays as needed. Committee meetings are held either in the morning before the daily session starts or after the session adjourns in the afternoon.

The House of Representatives has 150 members. Its members are elected by single and two-member districts based on population. Fifty-eight districts choose one member and 46 choose two. The term of service is two years. The Senate has 30 members who are elected by 13 multi-member districts, also based on population.

Committees

Much of the work of the legislature occurs in committees where issues are studied, policy is formed, and legislation is crafted. 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.

**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.

Legislative Tracking

The [Vermont State Legislature website](#) 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.

The website allows you to:

- Search for bills by topic, bill number, the legislator who introduced the bill, bill status, and activity.
- 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; find email address and telephone number contact information.
- View all legislative committees, their members, schedules, and meeting agendas.
Communicating with Legislators

The State House. During the legislative session, the Vermont State House is a very busy place, full of legislators, lobbyists, students, tour groups, legislative and administrative staff, and constituents. It can be an intimidating and confusing edifice in which to effectively talk to your legislators. As a constituent, however, you can be a key influencer of policy. You have the most important voice your legislator can hear, and your physical presence shows your support for important issues that affect cities and towns.

Communicating with your legislators. Developing a relationship with your legislators is crucial to the success of your advocacy efforts. If you do not already know your legislator from community interactions, introduce yourself when you meet him or her for the first time, along with the name of your city or town and the office or position you hold there. Prior to discussing your issue or asking for something, it is always helpful to begin by thanking them for all their hard work and service. As a public official yourself, you know how much work it takes to serve your community, and it is always easier to say “thank you” before you say “please!”

Understand and explain the issue. Before you talk to your legislator, you need to know details of the issue. Not only should you understand your side of the issue, it is helpful to know any counter arguments that may exist. Connect the issue to your role, your community, and how it may affect your town. Use stories, numbers, and statistics to support your point.

All politics is local. Show your legislators the local effects of a bill or proposal. Be as specific and as factual as possible. Don’t be afraid to frankly state your town’s opinion on legislation that may affect your town.

Timing is everything. Contacting your legislator to urge him or her to consider the municipal point of view does no good if the votes have already been cast. Every bill goes through a committee process and, along the legislative way, contacting the right person at the right time is crucial. Read VLCT’s Weekly Legislative Report and watch for timely Legislative Alerts and Updates that are sent out during the session. And be sure to contact Advocacy staff (contact information below) with any questions or concerns you may have.

Making contact. Should you call or write? Personal contact with your legislator is always the best way to get across your point. However, making a phone call is the next best means of communication. A personal letter or an email can also be effective when it is short and contains original, specific details about how the issue affects you and your community. Be sure to identify the bill by number and subject. There are, after all, hundreds of bills introduced each session. Note that forwarding a verbatim email call to action from your association staff is always ineffective and can sometimes be damaging to your cause.

Remember:

- Give credit and say thanks.
- Make your point succinctly.
- Make your conversation personal.
- Give the local angle.
- Be an accurate resource.
- Don’t be a stranger.
Testimony. 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.

Be clean, neat, and professional in appearance. Sit up straight. Look directly at the person to whom you are speaking. Be honest, prepared, accurate, and concise. Be frank with your testimony and support your position with facts. You must be a credible source of information because it is your expertise and credibility that earn you a seat at the table. Remember to do your homework and 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. Lastly, your message should be brief and easy to understand. You may only have a few minutes to convey a complex issue.

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!)

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

Use the media. Legislators read their local newspapers and electronic media. Write a thank-you note in the form of a letter to the editor in your local paper. Your fellow townspeople will be able to see how much you appreciate the legislator’s support. Write an opinion piece. Seek an interview opportunity to get your point across to the public as well as the legislature.

Advocacy Opportunities and Staying in the Loop

Weekly Legislative Reports. Each Friday during the legislative session, VLCT Advocacy publishes a summary of the week’s legislative activity and posts it on our website. We email links to each report to our members.

Webinars. During the legislative session, VLCT Advocacy produces monthly webinars that summarize the progress of legislation that specifically affects cities and towns. The free webinars take place Mondays from noon to 1 p.m.

Legislative Alerts and Updates. VLCT usually issues Legislative Alerts as the legislative session is winding down – that is, when legislators need to hear from municipal officials about a particular issue and when time is of the essence. Legislative Updates provide the status of legislative activity. They are chiefly informational and do not require you to contact your legislators.

Local Government Day. Every February, local officials from across the state converge on Montpelier to spend a day with legislators and learn about issues in the State House that affect their towns. They attend committee meetings and meet one-on-one with their legislators. Often, Senate and House committees will meet jointly to hear from local officials directly. It a special opportunity for local officials to network with each other and their legislators and get an inside look at the day-to-day operations of the General Assembly.

About Us

Founded in 1967, the Vermont League of Cities and Towns (VLCT) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization
that serves Vermont’s municipalities and municipal officials. VLCT is owned by its member municipal governments, providing services to all 246 cities in towns in Vermont and an additional 141 associated member villages, counties, regional planning commissions, and housing authorities. The league provides education workshops, legal assistance, and consulting service for municipal officials, comprehensive insurance coverage for municipalities, and support for legislation that strengthens local government.

**Board of Directors**

An elected 13-member board of directors represents the general membership and governs the organization; its members must serve as a selectperson, mayor, manager, or clerk in a member municipality. The executive director is appointed by the board and manages the League’s day-to-day operations. Each fall, VLCT and its insurance trusts elect members to their boards at their annual meetings.

**Policy Committees**

The VLCT Municipal Policy guides the actions of the board of directors and the advocacy staff in the Vermont Legislature with respect to administrative actions and at the federal level as needed. Five policy committees – FAIR (Finance, Administration, and Intergovernmental Relations), Transportation, Public Safety, Quality of Life and Environment, and Water Quality – meet at least once during the summer to review the municipal policy and make recommendations for revisions in anticipation of the next legislative session. 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.

**Legislative Principles**

The Vermont League of Cities and Towns advocates for public policies that support authority, autonomy, and resources to cities and towns. Vermont municipalities support advocacy initiatives that enhance a positive quality of life and encourage fiscal accountability and responsibility. These principles recognize the common goals and of cities and towns. Every year, advocacy initiatives tie back to these core principles.

**Advocacy Staff**

The Public Policy and Advocacy Department represents municipal interests at the state and federal levels. The Advocacy team – Director of Public Policy and Advocacy Karen Horn and Municipal Policy Advocate Gwynn Zakov – are in the State House educating legislators about the effect their actions have on local government. They work to bring local issues to the attention of legislators so that they may be resolved in statute. Karen and Gwynn also participate in state agency rule-making, quasi-judicial hearings, and permit applications. At the federal level, VLCT represents Vermont municipal interests in Congress and before federal agencies through its membership with the National League of Cities and its work with Vermont’s congressional delegation.

**Image Resource:**
Links