

# Best practices for Vermont Climate Council Subcommittees when receiving public comment

*This recommended guidance is put forward by the Just Transitions Subcommittee of the Climate Council. While the guidance has been drafted specifically for Subcommittees, the Vermont Climate Council could also consider assessing the Council's public comment practices and adopting similar practices laid out below.*

*Purpose: A strong public comment practice results in a better process, a better product, and a Plan that is more inclusive of Vermonters' voices.*

## Overall recommendations for considering public comment throughout the drafting process

- 1) Stage 1: Big picture priority setting and gap analysis**
  - a. Read the Vermont Voices on Climate reports ([2023 Q3](#), [2023 Q4](#), and [2024 Q1](#)) and the [2021 Climate Action Plan Public Engagement Findings](#).
  - b. Actively refer to these materials when creating the subcommittee's work plan, focal areas, and framing of gaps.
- 2) Stage 2: Drafting new actions; refining existing actions**
  - a. The autumn stakeholder meetings will result in valuable input for this stage.
  - b. Subcommittees will have meetings following their stakeholder meetings that are dedicated to digesting and discussing what was heard.
  - c. Actively refer to the outcomes of the stakeholder meetings when drafting and refining actions.

## Oral comment given at subcommittee meetings

- Preparing the meeting:
  - Public comment should be scheduled *after* sharing substantive information and holding initial discussion, but *before* the subcommittee's final deliberation and decision-making. That way, public comment can be considered in the subcommittees' deliberation and decision. This should be done for each meaningful decision made in the meeting. So, if there are two major decision points, there would be two corresponding public comment periods. Best practice is to build in enough time for public comment so that all can comment.
  - If the group has a guideline about when members of the public should have their cameras off or on, please write that guideline on the agenda and note it verbally at the beginning of the meeting. For instance, subcommittees might ask members of the public to keep their cameras off until public comment periods.
  - When taking public comment on a written document, ensure a plain language version or plain language summary is available. (This applies to written comment as well.) See *resources appendix*.

- During the meeting:
  - When introducing the public comment period, set clear expectations. Is there a time limit? If so, explain the purpose of the time limit (ex: so that everyone has a chance to be heard; so that we can get to everything on the agenda). If the public comment process is quite formal, it can be helpful to acknowledge that. If someone is going over their allotted time, respectfully ask them to wrap up and indicate how they can submit further comment (ex: written comment; follow-up conversation). Also, set basic guidelines for respectful interaction, such as no personal attacks (i.e., ‘Let’s be tough on the issues, not each other.’)
  - Strive to speak in plain language. *See resources appendix.*
  - Consider making dedicated space, working with partners, to invite testimony from people who are on the frontlines of climate change. The person who is taking minutes summarizes comments in the notes.
  - Subcommittees are encouraged to respond directly to public comments by specifically addressing comments during discussion. This might include explaining why a decision was made that does not align with a public comment.
  - Subcommittees are encouraged to respond to informational questions and clarifying questions.
  - When a comment is relevant to another subcommittee, share the comment or minutes with that subcommittee.
  - Invite commenters to clearly indicate if they would like follow-up (ex: they have a question or are interested in more information). If a follow-up conversation is merited, a subcommittee member may offer to contact the commenter directly to have a conversation. The subcommittee member and the commenter would then exchange contact information privately in the chat.
  - Thank each commenter for taking the time and effort to share their perspective with your subcommittee. Let them know that comments will be noted in the minutes and addressed in the discussion.
- After the meeting:
  - Alert Sophi Veltrop ([sophi.veltrop@vermont.gov](mailto:sophi.veltrop@vermont.gov)) that minutes are ready whenever public comment was made at a meeting. She will then enter them into our comprehensive public comment library.

## Written comment received through public comment form and/or survey

- Preparing the meeting:
  - Include time in the agenda to read written comments aloud during the public comment period. You only need to read those that are directed to your subcommittee, and have occurred since your last meeting.
  - Identify a subcommittee member or co-chair to read the public comments aloud.
- During the meeting:
  - Written comments are to be read during the public comment period after oral public comment has been given. Longer comments, or multiple comments on the same topic, may be summarized or paraphrased (ex: we received a comment expressing support for composting because of XYZ; we received five comments regarding wind energy in Vermont—two were opposed and three were supportive).

- Ask if anyone would like to hear any of the paraphrased comments read in full. If so, read those ones aloud in full.
  - The person who is taking minutes summarizes comments in the notes.
- Other:
  - Written comments that pertain to your subcommittee are emailed to the full subcommittee when they are submitted.
    - When someone submits a written comment through the online form, they receive an auto-reply email; this will be updated to reflect the above process.