

Guidance for Vermont Climate Council when receiving public comment

This recommended guidance reflects recommendations from the Just Transitions Subcommittee of the Climate Council. Since August 2024, subcommittees have been following a version of this document during their work to update the Climate Action Plan. The guidance has been revised based on Steering Committee input and put forward to the Council for adoption for its own meetings.

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

Recommendations for considering public comment throughout the drafting process

1) There are multiple pathways for public comment to occur and influence the process of updating Vermont's Climate Action Plan.

- a. Throughout the process:
 - i. Comments submitted through the Climate Action Office's website or via the voicemail box
 1. All written comments are logged on the website's [Get Involved page](#) and can be seen by everyone
 2. The Climate Action Office will summarize these comments during dedicated time at each Council meeting in 2025 and circulate a summary along with other meeting materials. Comments will be read aloud, though longer comments or multiple comments on the same topic may be summarized or paraphrased. Links to full comments will be provided.
 - ii. Input received during engagement activities focused on Vermonters who are less likely to participate in a policy process such as this one
 1. These activities are being led by the Climate Action Office and the Consensus Building Institute and are summarized in quarterly reports
 2. Council meetings will continue to dedicate time to reviewing these engagement activities. Reports can be found on the [Climate Change in Vermont Resources webpage](#) (search 'engagement').
 - iii. Public comments during Council and subcommittee meetings (details below)
- b. Proactive public engagement during April 2025 around the draft Updated Climate Action Plan
 - i. The Climate Action Office will organize multiple types of in-person and virtual activities to receive meaningful input on the draft plan.

- ii. Climate Council meetings in May will include time to discuss and digest the outcomes of the public engagement events. Engagement outcomes will be summarized in ways that support their influence.

Oral comment given at Vermont Climate Council meetings

- Preparing the meeting:
 - When to schedule public comment: As a general principle, public comment should be scheduled *after* sharing substantive information and holding initial discussion, but *before* the final deliberation and decision-making. In practice, the Council will be holding significant discussions and deliberations during its meetings in January and February, then making decisions on draft content for the updated Climate Action Plan in March. The Steering Committee encourages a flexible approach around when to schedule public comment on any particular agenda, while respecting the principle that comments should be able to influence Council decisions. Similarly, agendas may include a single comment period or multiple periods if there are multiple clear decision-points in the meeting.
 - Amount of public comment time: Schedule a predictable amount of time each meeting, totaling about 20-30 minutes.
 - The Council asks members of the public to keep their cameras off until public comment periods. This guidance should be noted on the agenda and noted verbally at the beginning of the meeting.
 - 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.
 - Individual commenters will have a 2-minute time limit. If someone is going over their allotted time, the facilitator will respectfully ask them to wrap up and indicate how they can submit further comment (ex: written comment; follow-up conversation).
 - If many hands are raised at the start of a public comment period during a Council meeting, the facilitator will aim to first call on individuals who haven't spoken in the previous two meetings.
 - The facilitator will set basic guidelines for respectful interaction, such as no personal attacks (i.e., 'Let's be tough on the issues, not each other.')
 - The Council is a diverse body of 23 members and will have difficulty responding and reacting to comments in real time. At the end of the public comment period, Councilors will aim to answer direct questions, to the extent they can in real time.
 - End the public comment period at the end of the allotted time. If people still have their hands up, direct them to these other channels for providing comment:
 - [Get Involved webpage](#)
 - Voicemail: 802-404-2729
 - 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.
- Include a summary of public comments in the meeting notes.
- 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 Council member may offer to contact the commenter directly to have a conversation. The Council 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 the Climate Council. Let them know that comments will be noted in the minutes and addressed in the discussion.