



**State of Vermont
Office of the Secretary of State**

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**Sarah Copeland Hanzas, Secretary of State
S. Lauren Hibbert, Deputy Secretary**

UNAPPROVED MINUTES

Act 133 Working Group on Participation and Accessibility of Municipal Public Meetings and Elections

August 29, 2024

Hybrid: 128 State Street and Teams

1. Introductions

The meeting was called to order at 2:30 p.m. by Lauren Hibbert, Deputy Secretary of State.

Stakeholders present:

Diane Judd, Vermont Municipal Clerks and Treasurers Association President and Holland Town Clerk (VMCTA appointee)

Susan Clark, Middlesex Town Moderator and public engagement specialist (VLCT appointee)

Lindsey Owen, Disability Rights Vermont Executive Director (DRVT appointee)

Ted Brady, Vermont League of Cities and Towns Executive Director (sitting in for VLCT appointee Andy Hooper)

Meghan O'Rourke, CCTV Co-Director (Vermont Access Network appointee)

Tim Arsenault, Vernon Town Clerk and Moderator (VMCTA appointee)

Secretary of State staff present:

Lauren Hibbert, Deputy Secretary of State

Jenny Prosser, General Counsel & Director of Municipal Assistance

Absent:

Andy Hooper, Middlebury Selectboard (VLCT appointee)

David Englander, Vermont School Boards Association Director of Legal & Policy Services (VSBA appointee)

Big Hartman, Human Rights Commission Executive Director & General Counsel (HRC appointee)

Discussion: Member appointment process and invitation/welcoming of additional voices, including members of the public. Lauren noted that Act 133 required that Working Group's first meeting be held by September 1, 2024. Future meetings will be scheduled with significantly more advance notice.

2. Project Plan

Lauren Hibbert shared SOS's project plan document, which will be used to steer and track Working Group's progress in handling the eight topics assigned by Act 133 to be addressed in its Legislative Report due November 1, 2025. [The project plan will be continuously updated and is available upon request pursuant to Vermont's Public Records Act, 1 V.S.A. §§ 315-320.]

The goals of the Working Group are to make recommendations that:

- improve the accessibility of and participation in meetings of local public bodies, annual municipal meetings, and local elections; and
- increase transparency, accountability, and trust in government.

The primary SOS staff assisting the Working Group are Lauren Hibbert and Jenny Prosser.

Topics to be addressed in the Report:

1. Recommend best practices for:
 - a. Running effective and inclusive meetings and maximizing participation and accessibility in electronic, hybrid, and in-person annual meetings and meetings of public bodies
 - b. The use of universal design for annual meetings and meetings of public bodies
 - c. Training public bodies for compliance with the Open Meeting Law
 - d. Recording meetings of municipal public bodies and the means and timeline for posting those recordings for public access
2. Report on the findings of the Civic Health Index study by the Secretary of State and how to reduce barriers to participation in public service
3. Identify the technical assistance, equipment, and training necessary for municipalities to run effective and inclusive remote or hybrid public meetings
4. Produce a guide for accessibility for polling and public meeting locations
5. Study the feasibility of using electronic platforms to support remote attendance and voting at annual meetings
6. Analyze voter turnout and the voting methods currently used throughout the State
7. Investigate whether increased use of resources for participants such as childcare, hearing devices, translators, transportation, food, and hybrid meetings could increase participation in local public meetings
8. Study other topics as determined by the group that could improve participation and access to local public meetings

Logistics:

The Working Group is to meet 10 times. The goal is to produce a final draft of the Report by October 2025 for submission to the Legislature by November 1, 2025.

Jenny Prosser will keep minutes, which will be posted on the SOS website. The Project Plan will chart the Working Group's planning and decision-making path. Lauren Hibbert will share the Plan before each meeting.

Decision Points identified so far:

1. Should we ask the Legislature for more time?
2. Should we assign one topic to each meeting?
3. How do we engage with the public through this process?
4. Drafting the report: One person vs. dividing up. Format/style to meet needs of all learners.

Discussion:

Meghan O'Rourke emphasized that funding availability may be relevant to all recommendations.

Lindsey Owen noted the breadth of the topics to be covered and suggested we consider whether we might ask for additional time to make recommendations and/or a way for the Working Group to support and review implementation of its recommendations.

Ted O'Brady suggested taking on one topic each meeting, though contingent on staff capacity to produce wireframe in advance of each meeting.

Lauren Hibbert advised that Group could ask the Legislative Committees of jurisdiction in coming legislative session for time extension on one or more topics, but noted tension between desire to move toward effective change quickly, e.g. this election season, versus the time it may take to produce effective recommendations. Lauren noted that we cannot commit any individual or group to anything unachievable, and in recommending best practices and improvements we must also name any relevant barriers and explain any changes that need to happen.

Lauren Hibbert suggested that the Group review the current state of the law as amended by Act 133, as well as identify Subject Matter Expert(s) for each topic, at its next meeting.

3. Identification of Specific Interests of the Members

#1 best practices on effective and inclusive meetings: VAN, SOS, VMCTA, VLCT

#2 civic health index report: SOS, VAN

#3 remote/hybrid tech needs: VAN, VMCTA, VLCT

Meghan O'Rourke advised that Vermont Access Network has an inventory of how municipalities are using 3rd party access management organizations (AMOs)

#4: accessibility guide for polling places: DRVT

Lindsey Owen advised that DRVT has polling location accessibility surveys that can be used as starting point. Staff has examined nearly all polling places.

#5: feasibility of hybrid town meetings: VMCTA

#6: voter turnout and methods: SOS, VMCTA

#7: improving personal/family/accessibility resources for voters: DRV, VMCTA

#8: TBD

Lauren advised that this list is fluid for now and suggested that each participant jot down their impressions and ideas for report structuring regarding each identified interest.

4. Scheduling Decisions

Lauren Hibbert suggested sticking with Thursday afternoons, and will send out Doodle poll for next meeting the 3rd or 4th week of October.

Susan Clark requested that Group hold an in-person meeting early on. Lauren Hibbert noted that Group's meetings are hybrid; Group could plan to have attendees gather in person as early as October.

5. Public Comment

No members of the public present. Lauren Hibbert reiterated need for Group to attend to public engagement.

The meeting adjourned at 3:37 p.m.