

Sample Suggestions for Organizing a Forum and Agenda
Town of [Name of Town] Candidate Forum
[Date, Start/Finish Time, Location]

- Invite the clerk, treasurer, school board, planning commission and other local board or commission to co-host the meeting. Join with neighboring towns for a multi-town forum.
- Invite a member of the local news media, your town moderator or a respected citizen to moderate. Make sure the moderator knows that he or she is managing the forum and therefore not participating in any debate or argument that may ensue.
- The chair of the selectboard should act as the host. Introduce candidates and the moderator. Ask local officials to introduce themselves. If there is no moderator, the chair should moderate.
- Have available prepared questions to ask each candidate. Sample questions are included. Inform candidates that they will have a specific amount of time (3-5 minutes) to answer a question, and that there will be time for further discussion at the end of the meeting. The chair may want to assign board or commission members prepared questions to ask.
- Consider providing questions to candidates ahead of time, so they may prepare answers.
- Arrange chairs in a semi-circle if possible, with candidates and moderator in front, on same level as audience. This encourages dialogue when the agenda gets to that point.
- Provide time for audience members to ask questions. You may want to suggest that the discussion continue outside the forum if specific to a small group of people or if you are running out of time.
- Refreshments are always welcome!

SAMPLE AGENDA

- 1. Introduce candidates and board/commissions members.**
By selectboard chair.
- 2. Explain Candidate Forum format for evening.**
By selectboard chair or moderator if there is one.
- 3. Ask prepared questions of each candidate, with a specific timeframe for answering.**
Moderator or chair keeps track of time.
- 4. Allow time for additional questions from audience, board or commission members.**
Specify an amount of time for questions. Moderator or chair manages questions.
- 5. Candidates may make closing remarks.**
Specify an amount of time here, too. It may not be necessary, but if you have a run-on speaker, it is helpful to remind him or her of the time limit that was established.
- 6. Thank candidates, board and commission members, and public for their participation.**
Thank yous are very important!

**SAMPLE INVITATION TO CANDIDATE
TO ATTEND TOWN (S) OF _____ CANDIDATE FORUM**

[Date]

[Candidate/Legislator]

[Street Address]

[City, State, Zip code]

[or email] (both may be obtained from the Secretary of State's Candidate List
<https://www.sec.state.vt.us/elections/candidates.aspx>)

Dear [Name of Candidate/Legislator],

The [Selectboard/City Council/Board of Trustees] of [Municipality Name] invites you to participate in a Candidate Forum on Local Government Legislative Issues on [date] at [location] from [start time] to [finish time].

Legislators introduce well over 1,000 bills during the course of a biennium. At least a third of them, if enacted, would affect local governments. During the 2017-2018 legislative biennium, bills addressed issues such as economic development, the open meeting law; elections; water quality and municipal roads permit mandates; public safety; transportation and education funding; state budgets; and rental housing.

We look forward to discussing your position on local government priorities, including:

- Growing the local economy,
- Municipal authority and flexibility to discharge responsibilities,
- Transportation funding,
- Effective stormwater and water quality management,
- Opioid crisis and its devastating impact on our communities,
- Continuous state deficits and effect of federal tax law changes in Vermont,
- Siting of renewable energy facilities.

We trust this forum will be a first step in establishing a long-term and close partnership between [Name of Municipality] and you as our voice in the Legislature. We will also welcome the opportunity to meet with you during the session to review progress on these very important issues.

Please call [Name] by [Date] to confirm attendance at this forum. Thank you for your interest!

Sincerely,

Chair, Local Legislative Body

SAMPLE PRESS RELEASE/WEBSITE NOTICE

Selectboard/City Council in Town/City of _____ to Host Candidates' Forum

The [town/city] [selectboard/city council] will hold a Legislative Candidates' Forum on [date] at [location] from [start time] to [end time].

The [board/council] will pose questions of the candidates on the following subjects:

- Growing the local economy,
- Municipal authority and flexibility to discharge responsibilities,
- Transportation funding,
- Effective stormwater and water quality management,
- Opioid crisis and its devastating impact on our communities,
- Continuous state deficits and effect of federal tax law changes in Vermont,
- Siting of renewable energy facilities.

According to [name], chairperson of the [board/council], [town/city] expects the forum to be the beginning of active involvement in legislative matters by the [selectboard/council]. [Name] said, "Every day the Legislature considers bills that affect [city/town]. We owe it to our taxpayers and citizens to participate in decisions that affect the safety of our citizens and our roads, waterways, property tax base, and ability to provide essential services." The [town/city] forum is part of a statewide effort to involve local officials actively in the legislative process.

The [legislators/candidates] invited to participate include [list Senate and House members and candidates]. The public is welcome and encouraged to attend.

(If your cable television company broadcasts your meeting, include information about when the forum will air.) Include hyperlinks to any media posted on your website.

Suggested Questions to Ask Candidates

(These are only suggestions. You may have others that are specific to your city or town.)

Municipal Self Governance. Vermont, one of five pure “Dillon’s Rule” states, has one of the most centralized governments in the country. There is no initiative or referendum at the state level and municipalities may only do those things that the legislature expressly grants them permission in statute to do. Municipal elected officials and citizens need the authority and flexibility to make decisions affecting their communities.

What will you do to provide authority and flexibility so municipalities can effectively deliver necessary services to their citizens?

Do you support allowing municipal governance charters to take effect upon final adoption by the voters, without action from the General Assembly?

How will you ensure that the legislature does not enact unfunded mandates that further burden the property tax or shift costs to local governments?

Transportation. Municipalities maintain 13,000 of Vermont’s total 15,804 highway miles. Year after year, the level of funding for municipal transportation programs remains anemic. Costs to towns for general highway obligations grow steadily and new obligations, such as the water quality-based Municipal Roads General Permit, are thrust upon towns without sufficient funding sources.

Where will funding for local transportation programs come from if current sources of funding remain inadequate?

How will you ensure municipalities receive a fair share of any new transportation dollars funds for mandated municipal highway projects?

Tax Burden. Vermont’s state and local tax burdens are consistently among the highest in the nation. As well, between 70 and 90 percent of any town’s property tax bill is directed toward education, leaving little room for municipalities to carry out the core functions and responsibilities of local government. Efforts to revamp the education property tax system foundered last session.

What will you do to reduce the overall tax burden on Vermonters? How will you stop the shift of mandated program costs to the over-burdened property tax? Will you support legislation to remove exemptions from paying property taxes that the legislature has enacted?

Stormwater and Wastewater. The federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) issued total maximum daily loads (TMDLs) for Lake Champlain in 2016 and Lake Memphremagog in 2017. Now it is considering a TMDL for the Connecticut River. Costs for mandated water quality improvement projects will run into the hundreds of millions of dollars.

How do you propose that Vermonters pay for these programs and how much should municipalities pay for them?

How will you evaluate the effectiveness of stormwater management mandates in cleaning up the waters of the state?

Education Funding System. Implementation of Act 46, the school consolidation law enacted in 2015, is well under way, and it is evident that the model neither fits all school districts nor is expected to save money statewide. Ninety-five school districts and 90 towns submitted alternative proposals to the Secretary of Education. The interim secretary analyzed them and issued her own draft report in June. A final Act 46 plan is due to the legislature November 20.

What will you do to ensure that community preferences are respected without costing the state education fund additional money?

Suggested Questions to Ask Candidates

(These are only suggestions. You may have others that are specific to your city or town.)

How do you propose to reform the education funding system?

Opioid Epidemic. Opioid addiction and its repercussions touch every corner of the state. The Initial Report of the Governor's Opioid Coordination Council, released last January, includes strategies for addressing the epidemic.

What will you do to ensure universal availability of opioid addiction treatment on demand and funding sources to provide such services? How will you empower municipalities to respond to opioid addiction-induced crises in appropriate ways?