

Procedural Tips

For Holding a Hearing on a Draft Plan or Bylaw

Before the hearing

- Ensure that the hearing has been properly warned, and that the warned draft has page numbers.
- It is best to have a one-page synopsis of the proposed draft as a handout and included in any advance press.
- Have at least a few physical copies of the draft document available. Make sure all members of your body have the draft and that it is the SAME draft as what was warned. Do not have documents with different pagination, etc. as that just creates confusion.
- Have a projector and screen to project the draft document and maps, or the ability to share things onscreen if presenting online, this saves a lot of paper on something that is bound to be changed.
- Have at least one large color version of any relevant maps taped up or on an easel for physical meetings, and as a high-quality PDF for online meetings.
- If the hearing is expected to be contentious, consider having the chair turn the meeting over to the town moderator or another person not affiliated with the drafting to moderate the hearing.
- If members of your body intend to speak, they must get permission from the chair. Figure out ahead of time who is doing what – some may want to answer questions on specific parts. Go through the top ten expected questions and your answers ahead of time.
- Remember, the document is the body's draft, not a consultant's draft. Read it all.
- Remind members of the body to not be defensive and to address the chair, not a member of the audience.

Beginning the hearing

- To open the hearing, ensure that at least a majority of the board holding the hearing is present, and then the chair can call the hearing to order at the warned time.
- Begin by thanking people for coming, say what the hearing is for and what is next. For example, "Thank you all for coming, I am XXX, chair of the ZZ, and this is a

hearing on YY. After this hearing, the ZZ will make any needed changes and then . . .” Let people know if you will hold another hearing or if it will go to the Selectboard next. etc.

- Remember, the overall purpose of the hearing is to hear, so listen.
- Remind people to address whomever is running the meeting and not each other.
- Remind people that personal attacks are not allowed.
- Begin with a BRIEF overview of the document, try to keep it to about 5 minutes. People came to speak, not listen to you. Before opening up the floor for comments, let people know that (depending on the crowd size) there is a time limit so that all can speak – 2 minutes is usual. Be strict and fair. Only come back to a person that has already spoken after everyone else has.

During the hearing

- When opening up the floor, ask each speaker to state their name, and invite general or specific comments and questions, preferably by page number.
- If someone hates what you have done, thank them.
- If someone has a general dislike for the draft, see if there are any particular parts that they have issues with, then thank them.
- If someone has a comment that is not specific to the draft – e.g., government is bad, zoning is illegal, town plans are really zoning in disguise, this whole process is a waste of time – thank them, and then direct them to speak to the draft itself please.
- If someone has a question as to why a certain part of the draft is the way it is, have one person from the body answer briefly and not defensively.
- If there is a question, usually a technical one, and you don’t know the answer, say you don’t know and will find out and get back to them.
- When the hearing is done, thank everybody for coming and remind them of the next steps in the process.

After the hearing

- The body can close the hearing and open a meeting to discuss any changes and take action if desired, but if it is late and there has been a good discussion that may be best for another day.

