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[Cleveland City Council](#) members are elected by residents to represent them. A big part of their job is to discuss and vote on which laws to pass and how taxpayer money should be spent. That work has to be done during public meetings.

Cleveland City Council historically has not held a regular space for members of the public to share comments during its meetings. That changed recently with a new set of rules that open up opportunities for residents to speak at council's weekly meetings.

Since the process is fresh for all of us, we have some learning to do. This guide is a start. It covers the rules for signing up to make a comment, things to know before heading to City Hall and some history about the role of public comment and how it – finally – came to Cleveland.

## What is public comment?

Public comment is a way for residents to address government bodies or elected officials during meetings where they consider and vote on legislation. A public comment or participation period is a forum for residents to share information or opinion on community matters.

## Public comment at Cleveland City Council

Here's a bit about Cleveland City Council and how it functions:

- City Council holds **regular meetings**, where all [17 members](#) meet and do the business of the city by voting on legislation that creates or changes laws or by approving requests to spend money.
- City Council also holds **committee meetings**, where members discuss legislation and decide whether it should be voted on; there are currently [11 committees](#), (Additional info on how to make a comment at committee meetings appears below.)

- Occasionally, City Council will hold special community meetings to hear from residents on important issues.

## Public comment at regular council meetings

Starting Oct. 4, 2021, regular council meetings will include a public comment period, allowing for 10 pre-registered members of the public to comment for no more than three minutes each.

### Registration

Register online, by email or using a paper form between Wednesday at noon and Monday at 2 p.m. before the 7 p.m. council meeting. You'll receive a notification confirming you registered. Speaking slots are allotted by order of registration. If you're not among the first 10 registrations, you'll be notified that you don't have a speaking slot. The list starts fresh each week.

Find the **online forms** at:

<https://www.clevelandcitycouncil.org/resources/public-comment>

- There are two separate forms. One to register to speak at the upcoming council meeting and another to submit a written public comment.
- Download a **printable version** of the form [here](#).
- You can submit the downloaded form by:
  - Emailing it to [publiccomment@clevelandcitycouncil.org](mailto:publiccomment@clevelandcitycouncil.org)
  - Printing it and delivering it in person at Cleveland City Hall, Room 220, 601 Lakeside Ave. Paper forms will also be available there to fill out there (will have to go through security to go to council offices).
  - Mailing it to the address above (but it must arrive during the registration period.)
- Incomplete forms will not be accepted.
- Early registrations will not be accepted.
- Registration information is considered public record.
- **Accommodation Requests:** City Council is asking people who seek accommodations – such as for a disability or language assistance – to make the request **at least three business days before the accommodation is needed.** [This online form](#) can be used to make requests to access council's public facilities,

services or programs, including council meetings, council committee hearings, and ward events that include council members.

- Contact council staff member Anne Tillie at 216-664-4539 or at [atillie@clevelandcitycouncil.org](mailto:atillie@clevelandcitycouncil.org) for other ways to get assistance.

Below is a screenshot of the public comment registration form, showing the required fields.

**YOUR INFORMATION**

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**NAME**

**EMAIL \*** **PHONE \***

 

**DO YOU LIVE IN CLEVELAND?**

Yes  
 No

**WHAT WARD (NEIGHBORHOOD OR CITY DO YOU LIVE IN)? \***

**ARE YOU REPRESENTING AN ORGANIZATION? \***

Yes  
 No

**NAME OF THE ORGANIZATION YOU'RE REPRESENTING.**

**ARE YOU BEING PAID TO MAKE THESE COMMENTS? \***

Yes  
 No

**WHO OR WHAT GROUP IS PAYING YOU?**

**DO YOU NEED ANY ASSISTANCE?**

**WHAT TOPIC ARE YOU REQUESTING TO COMMENT ABOUT? \***

**BY SUBMITTING THIS FORM, I AGREE: \***

to comply with the Rules and Procedures for Public Comment;  
 that I know the information I have provided (except phone and/or email) will be a public record.

**SUBMIT**

Submissions are accepted up to 3 hours before a hearing if time slots are available

# What to know before you go

## Transportation and parking at City Hall

- You can park in the Willard Garage connected to City Hall on Lakeside Avenue. Cost is \$3.50 for the first hour. Each additional half hour is \$1.50, with a maximum cost of \$10. To find a Greater Cleveland RTA Bus Route, use GCRTA's "Plan a Trip" feature found at <http://www.riderta.com/routes>.
- There is a bicycle rack on the east side of City Hall, just past the FREE stamp.
- To get into City Hall, you will need a driver's license or other current identification card.
- At the security desk, tell the officer you are going to City Council chambers, which is located on the second floor.

## COVID-19 Safety Guidelines

- The capacity of council chambers is 112 people. This allows for approximately 60 members of the public to attend in addition to the regular council, staff, and administration.
- Everyone must wear a face mask and observe all City Hall COVID-19 protocols which include temperature checks and social distancing.

## Council's Rules for Public Comment

Council's new procedures for public comment contain limitations for speakers who participate. People who don't follow the rules may be asked to leave the council chamber.

The rules include:

- Speakers have up to three minutes for their comment and cannot yield remaining time to other speakers. Speakers can only address the topic they included on their registration form.
- Indecent or discriminatory language is not allowed.
- Speakers can address the council as a whole, but not individual council members.
- Speakers can't promote products, services, or political campaigns when speaking at the podium.
- Signs and banners are not permitted in council chambers.

Council's full procedures for public comment can be found here:

<https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/21068475/procedures-for-public-comment.pdf>

## Public comment at committee meetings

People looking to make a public comment at a committee meeting have to contact the council member who chairs or leads the committee and ask to speak at the meeting. The chairperson ultimately decides whether to invite someone to speak.

To request permission to speak, a resident would need to:

1. Figure out which committee they want to address.
3. Identify the [chair of that committee](#).
4. Figure out when the committee will meet. Here's council's [calendar](#).
3. Contact the chair and ask to speak at a meeting.

There is a general [contact form](#) on the website for residents to submit comments and questions. Each council member's web page has contact information for them or their assistants, as well as the submission form on the main contact page.

## The law and history of public comment in Cleveland

Ohio [law](#) and Cleveland's [city charter](#) mandate that government meetings be held publicly. But what does the law say about public comment at those meetings?

- Ohio law does not require or ban public comment
- Cleveland's city charter neither requires nor bans public comment
- The city charter gives council the authority to make its own rules

Before September 2021, City Council did not routinely hold a space for public comment in its regular meetings, except for a brief time in the 1920s and 1930s. Here is a bit of history.

According to Cleveland City Council's City Archivist Chuck Mocsiran:

- Cleveland's city charter did mandate public comment from 1924 to 1931
- At that time, Cleveland had a city manager and a [mayor position that was mostly ceremonial](#)

Here is a section of the 1924 city charter mandating public comment:

**Meetings of Council.**

**Section 8.** At eight o'clock p. m. on the first Monday in January next following a regular municipal election, the Council shall meet at the usual place for holding such meetings, at which time the newly

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elected members shall assume the duties of office. Thereafter the Council shall meet at such times as may be prescribed by ordinance or resolution, but not less frequently than once each week. Special meetings of the Council shall be called by the City Clerk upon the written request of the Mayor, the City Manager, or five members. At least twelve hours' written notice of special meetings shall be served personally on each member or left at his usual place of residence. Any such notice shall state the subject to be considered at the meeting and no other subject shall be there considered. All meetings of the Council, and of committees thereof, shall be open to the public and the Council shall provide by its rules that citizens shall have a reasonable opportunity to be heard at any such meeting in regard to any matter considered, or to be considered, thereat. Any citizen shall have access to the minutes and records of the Council at all reasonable times.

Despite that mandate, the city has no record of resident comments made to council during that time.

## Efforts to bring public comment to Cleveland

Frustration about the lack of public comment has grown in recent years, and on [Aug. 18, 2021](#), council members voted to change the rules to allow a reserved period of public comment at regular council meetings.

[On Sept. 20, 2021](#), Cleveland City Council voted to approve the current set of procedures for public comment, laying ground for a public comment at every regular City Council meeting.

[Clevelanders for Public Comment](#), a coalition of organizers and advocacy groups from across the city led the recent push for a regular public comment period at City Council. It

supported a [proposed city ordinance](#) written by Jessica Trivisonno, the director of economic development for the Northwest Neighborhoods community development corporation (CDC). The group's research for the ordinance showed that public comment is either mandated or regularly permitted in the legislative councils serving:

- [Cuyahoga County](#)
- [Akron](#)
- [Columbus](#)

Details such as when the public comment period occurs in a council meeting, how long people are permitted to speak, and how many people can speak per meeting varies. Nine Cleveland council members [endorsed](#) Clevelanders for Public Comment's ordinance, but it was never officially considered by council. Instead, Council President Kevin Kelley introduced a proposed change to council's rules in May that would allow for public comment.

A council rule change is more flexible; council can vote to suspend its rules and remove public comment from any meeting. Repealing an ordinance requires more steps and would provide increased notice to the public.

The original proposed rule change required speakers to be Cleveland residents or own a business in the city. It also required speakers to specify what ordinance or resolution they would speak about. Council voted on a rule change on Aug. 18, and approved the procedures for public comment on Sept. 20.

The procedures allow any member of the public to speak, and while speakers must stick to a specific topic, they aren't limited to talking about a particular ordinance or resolution on the meeting agenda.

*Created by the Cleveland Documenters team. Comments or questions? Email [documenters@neighborhoodgrants.org](mailto:documenters@neighborhoodgrants.org).*

*[Cleveland Documenters](#) pays and trains people to cover public meetings where government officials discuss important issues and decide how to spend taxpayer money.*