

Voicing Concerns: Public Comment Policies of Rhode Island City and Town Councils and School Committees

January 2024



ACLU

AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION
FOUNDATION

Rhode Island

Voicing Concerns:

Public Comment Policies of Rhode Island City and Town Councils and School Committees

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	5
Substantive Limits on Speech	7
Lack of Any Public Comment Period	7
Limitations Based on the Agenda	7
“Personnel” and “Decorum” Limitations	8
Procedural Limits on Speech	11
Requiring Advance Notice to Speak	11
When the Public Comment Period Is Held During the Meeting	13
Amount of Time Set Aside for Public Comment	14
Amount of Time Individuals are Allowed to Speak	15
Availability of the Rules Governing the Public Comment Period	17
Recommendations and Conclusion	18
Appendix A (City and Town Councils)	20
Appendix B (School Committees)	28



Executive Summary

The ability to speak out at town meetings is a New England tradition. However, a review of the policies of Rhode Island's 39 city and town councils and 34 school districts shows a wide variation in how these key public bodies allow residents to speak during their "public comment" periods. This report provides an overview of their policies, along with a series of recommendations designed to ensure that members of the public have a meaningful opportunity to be heard before their representative officials.

As explained in more detail in this report, there are a number of procedural and substantive barriers that public bodies can impose which unduly hinder public participation at council and school committee meetings.¹ If a public body sets a short amount of time for public comment, controversial and complex issues may not receive the proper attention they deserve. Unreasonable advance sign-in requirements can also gratuitously limit the opportunities for members of the public to speak. Many public bodies establish inappropriate limits on what people can talk about during the "public comment" period, either by allowing comments dependent on whether the topic is on the agenda for the meeting or by relying on broadly worded "decorum" policies that raise significant First Amendment concerns.

Our review of the policies found, among other things, the following:

- Four of the public bodies we examined appear to offer no public comment period at all during their meetings.
- Altogether, about one-fifth of city and town councils and school committees set very brief periods of time for public comment — some as short as 15 minutes — that have the effect of vastly limiting the number of people who can speak when important issues affecting the community are being considered.
- Public bodies that explicitly set limits on how long individual speakers may talk usually do so in the 2-5 minute range. To their credit, a handful of public bodies allow for public comment at both the beginning and end of their meetings.
- Some public bodies establish unnecessary advance sign-up requirements, including one town council that requires the prospective speaker to sign up at least five days in advance!
- More than a few councils and school committees limit individuals from commenting on topics depending on whether they appear on the agenda. Ironically, some allow comments only on items that appear on the agenda, while others allow comment only on topics not on the agenda.
- A number of public bodies ban any discussion of "personnel" or have broadly worded "decorum" rules — banning remarks that are deemed to be "personal attacks" or comments that are "uncivil," "derogatory," "impertinent," or "inappropriate," to cite a few. All of these rules are subject to legal challenge as a violation of the public's First Amendment rights.

¹ The references to "school committees" throughout this report also include the Providence school board and the Central Falls school board of trustees.

Based on our research, this report offers a series of recommendations designed to promote reasonable and meaningful public input at council and school committee meetings. Among those recommendations are:



Every city and town council and school committee should set aside time at their meetings for public comment.



While reasonable time limits can, and should, be set on how long any individual can speak, public bodies should not set overall time limits for public comment that prevent members of the public from being able to have a say at these meetings.



Sign-up requirements immediately prior to a meeting may be established, but people who have not signed up should still be given the opportunity to speak at the end of the comment period.



While comments can appropriately be limited to matters that fall within the jurisdiction of the public body, no restrictions on the content of comments should be imposed based on whether the topic is or is not on the agenda at any given meeting.



Public bodies can request that speakers be respectful and courteous when talking, but the only specified enforceable limitation should be that speakers cannot be actually disruptive of the meeting.

Because this report has relied upon available agendas and policies, we realize it may not capture the actual practices of some public bodies. We welcome revisions and corrections from readers.



- indicates a public comment practice that supports First Amendment rights and public participation
- indicates a public comment practice that diminishes First Amendment rights or public participation

Light Blue indicates City/Town Council

Light Pink indicates School Committee

Introduction

One of Norman Rockwell's most iconic paintings is a representation of "Freedom of Speech," one of the four freedoms famously pronounced by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in a State of the Union address during World War II. The picture depicts a man standing up at a town meeting, as members of the community listen attentively to his comments. While the depicted orderliness of the discussion is a welcome respite from the acrimony that occasionally fills some public meetings, Rockwell's idealistic view of the town meeting and its particular lofty place in democratic society is a symbolic reminder of a long-standing New England ritual.

In light of the "town meeting" tradition, it may seem somewhat surprising that Rhode Island's open meetings law, while seeking to ensure that public bodies conduct their business in a transparent manner before the public, does not provide any guarantee for individuals to speak at those meetings. Despite this lack of a statutory requirement, the two major municipal public bodies in Rhode Island governance — the city/town council and the school committee — almost all set aside some period of time, at most meetings, to give the public a chance to speak.² For elected officials, while these public forums may sometimes be burdensome and time-consuming, and occasionally even infuriating, to sit through, it is a fundamental component of public service. Indeed, it could be argued that public comment is an essential feature of local democracy and one of the best ways to promote both civic engagement and a connection between public bodies and the communities they serve.



Sketched interpretation of Norman Rockwell's Freedom of Speech

Because this is such an extremely important aspect of open government, the ACLU of Rhode Island decided to examine the "public comment" policies of all city and town councils and school committees in the state.³ In order to evaluate their openness, we were interested in examining them in two key respects: content restrictions and procedural restrictions.

First, does the public body set any *substantive* content-based restrictions on what people can say during the public comment period? While court decisions make clear that public bodies have the right to impose reasonable "time, place and manner" restrictions on speech at government meetings, entities can quickly run afoul of the First Amendment once they begin setting limits on *what* can be said.

A recent incident in Warwick exemplifies this well. The ACLU of Rhode Island sued the Warwick City Council when a member of the public was cut off from speaking during the public comment period after he began to talk about alleged ethical misconduct of one of the Council members. In addition to disingenuously claiming that the speaker's comments did not involve a topic "directly affecting City government," as per the Council rules, a member of the Council also claimed that the speaker violated an unwritten policy banning commenters from making "personal attacks." The ACLU's lawsuit led to the entry of a consent order allowing the plaintiff to speak at the next

² As noted later, we found three city and town councils and one school committee that appear to provide no public comment period at all during their regular sessions.

³ This report follows [one that we issued in May 2023](#), that examined the policies of city and town councils and school committees in providing members of the public remote access to their meetings post-Covid.

Council meeting to finish his comments and acknowledging his right to speak on similar matters in the future without interference.⁴

This report helps answer the question of whether other public bodies are also utilizing potentially unconstitutional policies that limit what constituents can say during public comment periods, and whether they might therefore want to reconsider them. In short, the answer is: they are, and they should reconsider.

Second, we were interested in examining what sort of *procedural* parameters the public body established for people to speak at a meeting. For example, are there time limits for the public comment period, and are people required to provide advance notice to speak? Studying these details helps in determining whether public bodies may be imposing procedural restrictions that have the effect of undercutting the goal of allowing meaningful public comment in the first place.

We hope that the results set out in this report will encourage both elected officials and constituents to seek changes in any overly restrictive public comment policies that are in effect in their community.

In order to gather the information for this report, we primarily examined the published agendas of the public bodies. If there are guidelines that a public body has set on the presentation of comments during public comment periods, it makes sense that they would — and should — be specified on the agenda available to members of the public. However, we also searched council and school committee websites to determine if any rules governing the conduct of their public comment period could easily be found there. If those two sources revealed nothing, there may be policies or practices in place that we failed to uncover, and the ACLU of Rhode Island welcomes corrections and additions to the data we have compiled. Of course, this review also cannot address situations where written policies are outdated and do not align with actual practices of the public body or where those policies are waived on an ad hoc basis.

We hope that the results set out in this report will encourage both elected officials and constituents to seek changes in any overly restrictive public comment policies that are in effect in their community. As this report shows, there are vast differences in the ways that public bodies handle public comment, and there is no reason for them to have anything but the best policies in place to promote public participation.⁵

⁴[*Cote v. Travis, U.S. District Court of Rhode Island, C.A. 23-0346.*](#)

⁵ We note that the “public comment” periods this report examines should not be confused with specific separate procedures that some public bodies have to allow people to formally petition to be placed on an agenda to discuss a particular item.

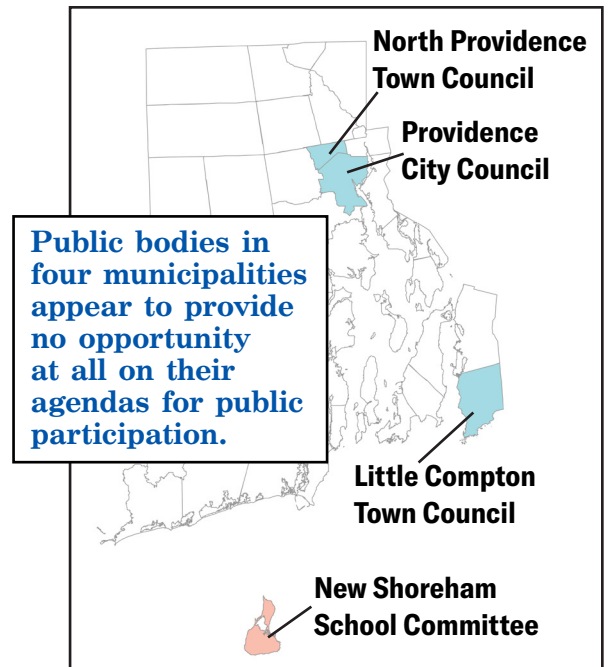
Substantive Limits on Speech

Many public bodies impose limitations on the content and substance of comments that members of the public can make. The restrictions often take two forms. Both are problematic, although one raises serious First Amendment concerns that the other does not.



Lack of Any Public Comment Period

Perhaps the most extreme substantive limit on speech is the inability to comment at all. Surprisingly, public bodies in four municipalities — including the state’s capital city — appear to provide no opportunity at all on their agendas for public participation. Specifically, the Providence City Council and the North Providence and Little Compton Town Councils include nothing on their agendas indicating an opportunity for public input at their council meetings. On the school committee side, one — New Shoreham — appears to offer no time for public comment.



The ACLU of Rhode Island believes that all councils and school committees should set aside a time for public comment on their agendas, and these four public bodies should join the rest of their colleagues in doing so.



Limitations Based on the Agenda

More than a few public bodies enforce a limit on the topics that can be discussed based on what appears on the meeting agenda. Paradoxically, some councils and school committees allow people to speak only on agenda items, while others allow people to speak only on non-agenda items. Either approach is poor public policy.

To bar people from speaking on items that are directly on the agenda seems to turn the idea behind a public comment period on its head. One would expect public bodies to be especially interested in hearing from constituents on the items that are the actual topic of discussion at the meeting.

On the other hand, barring members of the public from speaking on any matters that are not on the agenda means that a public body can avoid certain relevant topics that the public is concerned about by simply not including them on their meeting docket. Certainly, members of public bodies should be curious to hear from the public about new topics that constituents believe should be the subject of discussion.

Below is a list of the public bodies and school committees that set limits on topics to be discussed based on whether the subject matter is on the agenda:⁶

City and Town Councils	
Speak only on topics on the agenda	Speak only on topics NOT on the agenda
Central Falls South Kingstown Tiverton	Barrington Charlestown Newport ⁷ Richmond Scituate
School Committees	
Speak only on topics on the agenda	Speak only on topics NOT on the agenda
Burrillville Little Compton Middletown North Providence Portsmouth Smithfield	Chariho ⁸ Cranston ⁹ East Greenwich ¹⁰ Newport Tiverton

Public bodies should certainly be able to require commenters to limit their remarks to topics that are within the jurisdiction of the entity, but it is another matter entirely to limit the public’s ability to speak on relevant topics based on whether or not the topic is on the agenda at any given meeting. Any such limitations imposed by public bodies — including prohibitions on addressing more than one topic in the amount of time allotted for a person to speak — should be repealed.



“Personnel” and “Decorum” Limitations

The second type of content restriction comes in a few guises, but it is even more problematic and raises serious First Amendment concerns. One example involves a ban on speakers addressing “personnel” issues. A few councils — like Middletown and Newport — and school committees — including Barrington and East Providence — fall into this category.

There are at least two problems with such a restriction. While the prohibition is often written in neutral terms, we have little doubt it is enforced selectively, to stifle only talk that is critical of municipal personnel. It is hard to believe that a school committee, for example, would stop a parent from standing up to commend the work of the school principal, even though that is a “personnel” matter as much as is a demand that the principal be fired. Further, even if enforced neutrally, a content-based restriction on clearly relevant “personnel” comments is constitutionally suspect.

⁶ Middletown Town Council allows residents to speak on any item, but requires they choose one topic in advance.

⁷ Newport City Council further limits speakers to addressing only one topic in their remarks.

⁸ Chariho School Committee agenda indicates public may speak on agenda items as determined by Committee Chair.

⁹ While Cranston School Committee limits most residents to speak only on non-agenda items, students are given the opportunity to speak on any topic.

¹⁰ The East Greenwich School committee’s policy book indicates that residents can only speak on topics not on the agenda, but the agenda we looked at did not contain that language.

In terms of other content prohibitions, alone among the policies we examined, the partisan-elected Pawtucket City Council dubiously bars public comments “for any purpose determined by the Chair or any member of the council to be strictly political in nature.”

More often, questionable restrictions appear as “decorum” rules, requiring that speakers be civil and not make “personal attacks” or “defamatory” comments — including against members of the council or committee. As demonstrated by the ACLU’s lawsuit against the Warwick City Council, these are constitutionally dubious limitations on speech.

It is hard to believe that a school committee, for example, would stop a parent from standing up to commend the work of the school principal, even though that is a “personnel” matter as much as is a demand that the principal be fired.

While public bodies have the clear authority to take action to prevent individuals from disrupting a meeting — a standard that many policies reference — the First Amendment does not allow them to silence people merely because their comments are critical, discourteous, or overly hyperbolic in castigating members of the public body, public officials, or others. That type of commentary may not be the best or most effective way to get a point across, but it is part of the give and take of municipal debate in the public sphere.

A recent decision from the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court on this topic is instructive. The case involved a resident of Southborough, MA who had a heated exchange with the town’s “board of selectmen” at a public meeting. The resident critiqued the board for open meetings violations, and the comments soon led to a testy exchange with one selectman, whom the speaker called “a Hitler,” which then prompted the board to recess the meeting. The resident then sued the board over its “civility code,” which provided that:

All remarks and dialogue in public meetings must be respectful and courteous, free of rude, personal, or slanderous remarks. Inappropriate language and/or shouting will not be tolerated. Furthermore, no person may offer comment without permission of the [c]hair, and all persons shall, at the request of the [c]hair, be silent. No person shall disrupt the proceedings of a meeting.

Relying on its state Constitution’s free speech guarantee, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court unanimously struck down the code. The court pointed out:

Although civility can and should be encouraged in political discourse, it cannot be required. In this country, we have never concluded that there is a compelling need to mandate that political discourse with those with whom we strongly disagree be courteous and respectful. Rather, we have concluded that political speech must remain ‘uninhibited, robust, and wide-open.’

• • •

[T]he policy’s requirement that the speech directed at government officials ‘be respectful and courteous, [and] free of rude ... remarks’ appears to cross the line into viewpoint discrimination: allowing lavish praise but disallowing harsh criticism of government officials. As the Supreme Court has explained, ‘[w]hen the government targets not subject matter, but particular views taken by speakers on a subject, the violation of the First Amendment is all the more blatant.’

Barron v. Kolenda, 203 N.E.3d 1125, 1138-39 (Mass. 2023)(citations omitted)

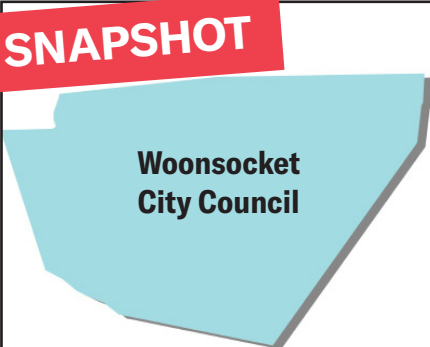
In striking down the code, however, the court reminded public bodies that they were not rendered impotent to control the conduct of their meetings:

Reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions could include designating when and where a public comment session may occur, how long it might last, the time limits for each person speaking during the public comment session, and rules preventing speakers from disrupting others and removing those who do.
Id. at 1140.

Some of the public bodies whose policies we reviewed appear to recognize the limits the First Amendment imposes and instead seek voluntary cooperation from speakers. A good example is the Jamestown Town Council, whose rules politely state that the Council “hopes that citizens and Councilors alike will be respectful of each other’s right to speak, tolerant of different points of view, and mindful of everyone’s time.” At least as worded, the Council’s rules appear to be advisory and do not threaten silence for those who fail to be “respectful” while speaking.

However, many public bodies go further and contain the type of vague prohibitions on speech that the Massachusetts court found unconstitutional. A representative example is the Warren Town Council, which *requires* that speakers to “be courteous in their language and deportment.”

Quite a few public bodies contain explicit viewpoint-based prohibitions, “allowing lavish praise but disallowing harsh criticism of government officials,” as the Massachusetts court put it. Such policies clearly leap into constitutionally forbidden territory. The Johnston Town Council, for example, bars speakers from “engaging in personal attacks,” as does the Pawtucket City Council. Of course, a major problem with policies and rules like those is not just their discriminatory viewpoint-based nature. It is that they leave tremendous room for interpretation as to when allowable criticism turns into an illegitimate “personal attack” that can be stifled.



- Public comment rules are easily available
- Individuals can speak for 5 minutes
- Problematic "decorum" limitations, including a ban on "derogatory" comments towards the City

Woonsocket even goes so far as to ban speakers from bad-mouthing the City itself, stating: “Remarks from anyone that are slanderous,¹¹ offensive, or derogatory towards individuals *or the City* may result in the removal from the City Council Chambers.” (emphasis added) The Warren Town Council bars any comments on “personalities,” whatever that means, and particularly puts the kibosh on “derogatory remarks or insinuations in respect to any members of the council.” And Hopkinton will not allow any “impertinent” remarks. All of these policies raise substantial free speech concerns.

¹¹ While slander is not protected by the First Amendment, the U.S. Supreme Court’s seminal 1964 decision in *New York Times v. Sullivan* sets an extremely high standard to pursue slander or libel actions against public officials or others in the public eye. In any event, these are matters to be handled after the fact in a suit for damages, not by public bodies making snap judgments as to whether a person’s comments may legally qualify as slanderous.

School committees also have their fair share of facially unconstitutional policies. Narragansett and Tiverton prohibit any “breach of respect.” Cranston disallows any comments “attacking a committee member’s motives.” Foster-Glocester bars any comments or statements that are “critical about a specific individual.” Lincoln prohibits any comments that are “uncivil,” “volatile,” or “hostile,” and Warwick, taking vagueness to its heights, bans any “inappropriate or salacious remarks.”

The ACLU of Rhode Island believes that public bodies can take action against any person who interrupts other speakers, talks off-topic, makes threats against public body members or others, or otherwise disrupts a meeting. However, uncivil commentary and criticism of individuals, including of the public body members, is entitled to its own level of respect under the First Amendment. Rules or policies that prohibit indecorous commentary should be repealed.

Procedural Limits on Speech




Requiring Advance Notice to Speak

Some public bodies require individuals to sign up to speak in advance. If structured for administrative ease — to be able to call people in the order they signed up, for example — such a requirement is not objectionable. But if enforced strictly, it can be a considerable obstacle for some members of the public. Sign-up requirements can be used to bar a person who arrives to a meeting five minutes late from being able to speak. If the public comment period appears later in the meeting, a person who had not planned to speak could be barred from doing so if they decided they would like to respond to something that happened or was discussed during the meeting. Sign-up requirements can also sometimes create a barrier for people who are not familiar with the process; whether it is meant literally, the policy of one school committee, for example, specifically requires people to sign up with the chair of the public body.¹²

Leaving aside the three councils that provide no opportunity for public testimony at all, one town council stands out among the rest in terms of its lack of consideration for public comment. The Johnston Town Council’s rules require individuals to sign up *five days in advance* of the meeting at which they wish to speak, long before the Council’s agenda for the meeting even has to be posted.¹³ Johnston further requires the person to indicate with precision the topic they wish to discuss or else forfeit their opportunity to speak.

SNAPSHOT



**Johnston
Town Council**


- ☑ Public comment rules are easily available
- ⊖ Must sign up 5 days in advance of meeting to speak
- ⊖ Problematic "decorum" limitation, including a ban on "personal attacks"

¹² The school committee with this policy is Pawtucket.

¹³ Under the Johnston Town Council’s rules, a person “desiring to address the Town Council on a topic shall file an application at the office of the Town Clerk, no later than the Wednesday of the week before the next Council Meeting.” One could question whether [such a requirement comports with the Town’s Charter](#), which specifically provides that “citizens shall have a reasonable opportunity to be heard” at Council meetings.

A few other restrictive council policies are worth noting. Pawtucket requires sign-up 10 minutes in advance of the meeting. Middletown requires submission of a public participation form by 5:00 PM the day of the meeting. East Providence requires individuals to sign up at least five minutes ahead of the meeting and specify the topic they want to speak on. Warren also requires the person to indicate the topic of their remarks. It is unknown to us how this requirement works in practice, and whether these councils summarily prevent a person from speaking based on the topic they have indicated they wish to talk about.

As for school committee policies on the subject, Newport requires the person to specify the topic they wish to talk about, as does Providence, which also requires that a request to speak be submitted in writing by 4:00 PM of the day of the meeting. Barrington requires people to sign up with an email address. As previously noted, Pawtucket is strangely specific in requiring people to sign up with the school committee chair. A handful of other school committees also have explicit requirements for signing up, and it is likely that others do so as well but don't specifically mention it in their rules or policies.

SNAPSHOT	 <p>Providence School Board</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No restrictive "decorum" limitations<input type="checkbox"/> Requires written requests to speak be submitted by 4:00 PM of the day of the meeting<input type="checkbox"/> Requires speakers to identify the topic they wish to speak about prior to the meeting<input type="checkbox"/> 30 minutes total allocated for all public comments
-----------------	--	---

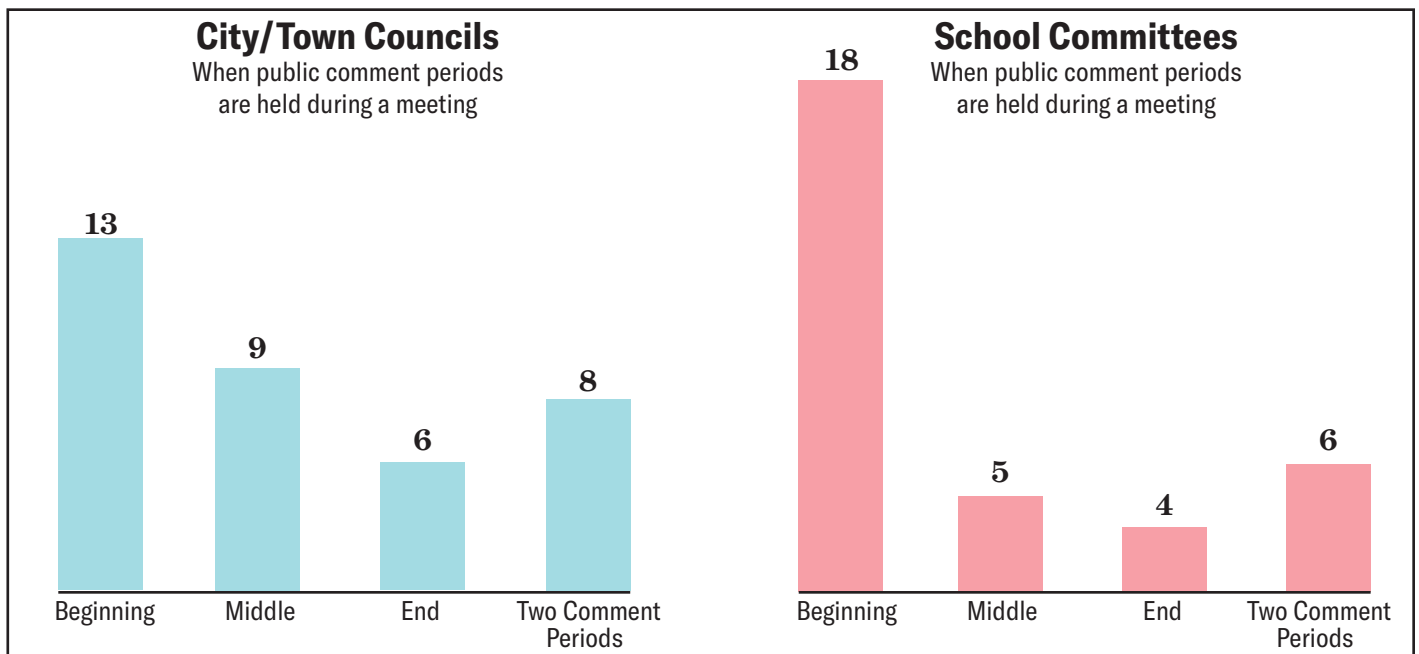
The ACLU of Rhode Island believes that, while sign-up requirements imposed immediately in advance of a meeting are not unreasonable, people failing to sign up should still be allowed to speak once all others have completed their comments. In addition, public bodies should not engage in a "prior restraint" by requiring individuals to specify in advance the topic they wish to talk about. While, as mentioned previously, it is certainly appropriate for councils or school committees to limit people to addressing only issues that, broadly construed, fall within the public body's scope of authority, that determination should not be made before the person has the opportunity to speak.



When the Public Comment Period is Held During the Meeting

Public bodies show a diverse array of approaches as to when the public comment period is scheduled during the meeting. Some hold it at the beginning of the meeting, some in the middle, and some at the end. There are pros and cons as to which approach is best for the public. Some public bodies solve the dilemma of which to choose by offering opportunities to speak at two different times during a meeting, usually the beginning and the end.

Having public discussion at the beginning of the meeting allows individuals to make their views known on items that will be discussed later on the agenda, and thereby allows the public body to take the comments into consideration during their deliberations.¹⁴ In the case of lengthy meetings, this timing also ensures that people will not have to possibly wait hours before being able to speak or, due to other commitments, leave before the time for public comment begins.



On the other hand, saving speaking periods for the end of the meeting provides the public an opportunity to offer quick feedback on the actions that council or committee members have or have not taken or on statements they have made. The biggest drawback, of course, is that if a meeting drags on, planned speakers — or other members of the crowd whom they would like to hear their comments — may have to leave before the public comment period is reached.

Those public bodies that have their public comment periods sometime in the middle of the meeting may be trying to reach a happy medium, but depending on its placement and how the rest of the agenda is set up, it could be the worst of both worlds. Establishing public comment periods at both the beginning and the end of meetings obviously offers the greatest opportunity for public response.

According to our review, over half of the state’s school districts — 18 in total — hold their public comment periods at the beginning of the meeting, with five committees holding it at some point in

¹⁴ As noted previously, however, some public bodies allow people to speak on non-agenda items only.

the middle, and four at the end. Six school committees — Barrington, Coventry, Cranston, Lincoln, Smithfield and Westerly¹⁵ — offer two public comment periods.

For city and town councils, the results were even more varied: 13 held public comment at the beginning of their meetings, nine in the middle, six at the end, and eight over two time periods. The councils allowing for two public comment periods were Coventry, Cranston, Cumberland, East Greenwich, Gloucester, Hopkinton, North Smithfield, and Westerly.

The ACLU of Rhode Island believes that having two public comment periods is ideal, and the fact that a fair number of councils and school committees use this approach is an indication that it is not an unduly burdensome method to encourage public participation.



Amount of Time Set Aside for Public Comment

City and town councils and school committees often deal with contentious issues. It is important that people affected by the decisions made on these issues be allowed to speak out directly to their elected representatives at these meetings. Strict limits on the total amount of time that will be allocated for public speaking can hinder the free discourse that is crucial to local governance. Our survey found that, at least on paper, most public bodies do not have overall time limits on their public comment agenda items. Of those that do, the amount of time set for the public comment period can be quite circumscribed, sometimes as short as 15 minutes. However, this report cannot analyze whether public bodies with such limits waive them when a substantial number of people show up to speak — or whether public bodies with no explicit time limits end up imposing them on an ad hoc basis or at the Chair’s discretion.

Community issues that prompt large debate deserve a forum that is not captive to arbitrary time limitations.

SNAPSHOT



- ⊗ Sign-up requirement
- ⊗ 30 minutes total allocated for all public comments
- ⊗ Only comments about items not on the agenda allowed
- ⊗ Problematic "decorum" limitation, prohibiting any "breach of respect"

When it came to city and town councils, we found that four communities — East Providence, Narragansett, Pawtucket, and Warwick¹⁶ — set a maximum of 30 minutes for public comment.¹⁷ Four other communities — Exeter, Middletown, Newport, and Warren — allowed only 15 minutes.

¹⁵ In September 2023, the Westerly School Committee [voted to repeal its entire policy](#) governing the responsibilities of individuals wishing to speak at public meetings. However, as far as we can tell, the existence of two public comment periods remains.

¹⁶ The Warwick City Council’s rules set the time for public comment at 15 minutes, but the agendas indicate that 30 minutes is offered.

¹⁷ Narragansett Town Council and Pawtucket City Council specify that the discussion can be extended at the discretion of the chair.

East Greenwich, which offers two separate public comment periods during a meeting, set a 15-minute time period for one and 30 minutes for the other.

On the school committee side, six communities — Chariho, Coventry, Narragansett, Providence, Tiverton and Warwick — set aside 30 minutes for public comment, while two committees — Bristol-Warren and Exeter-West Greenwich — offer 15 minutes. Like the East Greenwich Town Council, the Smithfield School Committee has two public comment periods of different lengths.

Any overall time limits on a public comment period should generally be scrapped.¹⁸ Community issues that prompt large debate deserve a forum that is not captive to arbitrary time limitations. One option that could be considered for unduly lengthy meetings with a great deal of public testimony is, when it would work logistically, setting a specific cut-off time for adjournment and offering to finish the agenda at a later date. There are other ways that public bodies can control the discussion of controversial issues and attempts at audience filibustering.



The Amount of Time that Individuals Are Allowed to Speak

Much less problematic than overall time limits for public comment is the setting of limits on how long any individual speaker can talk. This is an often-necessary restriction that helps ensure an opportunity for all who want to speak and cuts down on attempts by individuals to “take over” a meeting. Public bodies can also voluntarily encourage speakers not to be repetitious and can request large crowds of attendees representing a particular group or coalition to find a spokesperson to comment for all, or most, of them.

SNAPSHOT

East Greenwich
Town Council

- Two public comment periods
- 5 minutes and 3 minutes per person, each period
- No restrictive "decorum" limitations
- Sign-up requirement
- 30 minutes allocated for the first section, 15 minutes allocated for the second section of public comments

While we consider individual speaking time limits to be an appropriate “time, place and manner” restriction to guide a public meeting, they also highlight the unwarranted effect of limiting the **overall** amount of time for a public comment period. If, for example, a public body sets a time limit of three minutes for each speaker but schedules only 15 minutes altogether for the public comment period, that means as few as five people could get to speak at the meeting, no matter how important the issue or its effect on the populace.

Not surprisingly, those public bodies with an overall time limit for public comment usually specify a time limit for individual speakers as well. While the range of time given for individuals to speak varies, almost all the public bodies we analyzed set a time limit of between two and five minutes. Most set a three-minute limit.

¹⁸ For public bodies offering two public comment periods, a reasonable time cap on one of the sessions may be appropriate.

The public bodies that specify set time limits on speakers are listed below:

City and Town Councils	
Two minutes	Charlestown
Three minutes	Barrington, East Providence, Exeter, Hopkinton, Johnston, Narragansett, Newport, North Kingstown, Richmond, Tiverton, Warren
Four minutes	Cranston
Five minutes	Central Falls, Middletown, Pawtucket, South Kingstown, Warwick, Woonsocket
Two time periods to speak	East Greenwich (3 and 5 minutes), North Smithfield (3 and 3 minutes), ¹⁹ Westerly (10 and 5 minutes)
School Committees	
Two minutes	East Greenwich, Portsmouth, Warwick
Two to Four minutes	Chariho
Three minutes	Barrington, Bristol-Warren, Coventry, Cranston, Exeter-West Greenwich, Little Compton, Narragansett, Newport, North Kingstown, Providence, Tiverton
Five minutes	East Providence, Johnston, Middletown, North Providence, Smithfield, Westerly, Woonsocket
Two time periods to speak	Lincoln (5 and 3 minutes)

We believe that public bodies can consider setting a reasonable maximum period of time for individual speakers. In general, we recommend a time limit of five minutes. However, when a public body offers two periods of time to speak at a meeting, or when there are a sufficient number of speakers at any meeting that would make a five minute limit untenable for both the public body and audience members and participants, this limit can be shortened. In any situation, however, individual speakers should be allowed no less than three minutes to speak. Such a minimum is necessary to allow individuals to make their points cogently and without being rushed. Of course, if there are very few speakers, the public body should consider providing more than five minutes for comments.

¹⁹ Until October of 2023, [North Smithfield Town Council](#) had a uniquely generous policy of allowing individuals to speak for 15 minutes during the two “public comment” periods it offered at meetings.



Availability of the Rules Governing the Public Comment Period

The final issue we examined was how well the public body publicized its policies governing public comment. If people are required to sign up in advance to speak or will be limited in how long they can speak, the public body should make that clear well in advance by citing its rules directly on the written agenda. Some city and town councils, such as the East Providence City Council, and school committees, like the Barrington School Committee, do that. For others — like the Charlestown Town Council and the Lincoln School Committee — their policies can be found through a link on the public body’s homepage. Yet others can only be found by searching through the public body’s online handbook or manual. For thirteen city and town councils and seven school committees, we were unable to find complete public comment rules anywhere; therefore, they may have very problematic policies that we are not even aware of.²⁰

We strongly believe that, as a matter of policy, the rules for speaking during the comment period should appear directly on the agendas of municipal councils and school committees.

²⁰ **City and Town Councils:** Barrington; Bristol; Burrillville; Cumberland; Foster; Gloucester; Lincoln; New Shoreham; North Kingstown; Portsmouth; Scituate; West Greenwich; West Warwick.

School Committees: Cumberland; Jamestown; New Shoreham; Scituate; South Kingstown; Warwick; West Warwick.

Recommendations and Conclusion



All city and town councils and school committees should set aside time at their meetings for public comment.



As a general rule, overall time limits on a public comment period should be scrapped, although decisions to end meetings at a specified time and reconvene at a later date may be a viable option to avoid marathon sessions.

Public bodies can consider setting a reasonable maximum period of time for individual speakers. In general, we recommend a time limit of five minutes. However, when a public body offers two periods of time to speak at a meeting, or when there are a sufficient number of speakers at any meeting that would make a five minute limit untenable for both the public body and audience members and participants, a three minute time limit should be considered.

If feasible, having two public comment periods, one at the beginning and one at the end of the meeting, is ideal.



Sign-up requirements immediately prior to a meeting may be established, but people who have not signed up should still be given the opportunity to speak at the end of the comment period.

Individuals should not be required to specify in advance of a meeting the topics that they wish to address, nor should there be a limit on the number of topics they can address within the time period allotted to them.



While it's appropriate to request people to address only matters that, broadly construed, fall within the jurisdiction of the public body, no limitations on the content of comments should be imposed based on whether the topic is or is not on the agenda at any given meeting.

Public bodies can request that speakers be respectful and courteous when talking, but the only specified enforceable limitation should be that speakers cannot be actually disruptive of the meeting. Further, the disruptive reaction of the audience cannot serve as the basis for silencing a non-disruptive speaker.



Any rules governing the public comment period — such as the amount of time that individuals have to speak — should be specified on the agenda.

We believe these recommendations are not only feasible to enact, but critical for ensuring the best opportunities for public participation in local government. We strongly encourage all public bodies to take steps to adopt these recommendations, if they are not already in place.

Appendices²¹

²¹The data for this report were collected and prepared by ACLU staff members Megan Khatchadourian and Zoe Chakoian.

Appendix A – City and Town Councils

To access all hyperlinks included in this appendix, please see our digital version at riaclu.org.

City/Town Council	Total Time for Comments	Time Limit for Individual Public Comments	Advance Notice Required	Limits on Content of Comments
Barrington	None specified	3 minutes	None specified	Topic not already on agenda
Bristol	None specified	None specified	Yes. Must notify clerk prior to start of meeting and sign in.	None specified
Burrillville	None specified	None specified	None specified	None specified
Central Falls	None specified	5 minutes	None specified	Topic on agenda
Charlestown	None specified	2 minutes (only stated in Council Rules).	None specified	Topic not already on agenda
Coventry	None specified	None specified	None specified	Two opportunities to speak: one on agenda items, and one for non-agenda items.
Cranston	None specified	4 minutes	None specified	Two opportunities to speak: one on agenda items, and one for non-agenda items.
Cumberland	None specified	None specified	None specified	None specified
East Greenwich	15 minutes for items not on agenda during first public comment period; 30 minutes for second comment period.	3 minutes for first period; 5 minutes for second period.	Yes. Must sign in prior to start of meeting (listed in council rules, but not on agenda).	Two opportunities to speak: one on agenda items, and one on any subject.
East Providence	30 minutes	3 minutes	Yes. Sign-in sheet available 45 minutes prior to meeting start and delivered to Council President 5 minutes prior to meeting start. Must indicate subject of comments.	None specified

Decorum Language	Availability of Public Comment Rules	Point During Meeting When Public Comment Occurs	Sample Agenda
No	Agenda indicates process for making comments.	Towards end of meeting	https://clerkshq.com/Barrington-ri?docId=AGENDA&path=BarringtonDocket%2CAGENDA%2C
No	Agenda mentions signing in prior to start of meeting.	Middle of meeting	https://mccmeetings.blob.coreusgovcloudapi.net/bristolri-pubu/MEET-Packet-09621270a01c43c7a6f28b2a8c32d481.pdf
No	No	Beginning	https://www.burrillville.org/sites/g/files/vyhlif2886/f/agendas/10-11-2023_regular_meeting.pdf
Yes, but no specific limits. The “President shall enforce order and decorum.”	Yes. Link to Council Rules on City Council's webpage.	Beginning	https://clerkshq.com/CentralFalls-ri?docId=sep11_23ag&path=CF_CityCouncil_CF_Agendas.sep11_23ag
No	Yes. Link found on Town Council's webpage.	Beginning	https://charlestownri.iqm2.com/citizens/FileOpen.aspx?Type=1&ID=3214&Inline=True
Yes, but only a ban on disruptive behavior.	Agenda indicates the limit on contents and decorum language.	Beginning and end	https://coventryri.civicweb.net/filepro/documents/52864/?preview=52865
Yes, but no specific limits. President is “empowered to enforce order and decorum ... to ensure civility in the proceedings.”	Yes. Link found on City Council's homepage.	Beginning and end	https://www.cranstonri.gov/city-council20230828/
No	No	Beginning and end	https://clerkshq.com/Cumberland-ri?docId=AGENDA&path=cumberlandDocket.AGENDA
No	Yes. Link found at bottom of Town Council's webpage.	Beginning and end	https://d3n9y02raazwpg.cloudfront.net/eastgreenwichri/ae19f27b-e2d5-11ed-95dd-0050569183fa-fb0554f7-4701-42e4-bb17-d8b81969e6dd-1695645842.pdf
No	Yes. Language about time limits on agenda; full rules found in 2023 resolutions.	Middle of meeting	https://clerkshq.com/EastProvidence-ri?docId=oct03_23ag&path=East_Prov_CC,East_Prov_Agenda.oct03_23ag

City/Town Council	Total Time for Comments	Time Limit for Individual Public Comments	Advance Notice Required	Limits on Content of Comments
Exeter	15 minutes	3 minutes	None specified	No
Foster	None specified	None specified	None specified	None specified
Glocester	None specified	None specified	None specified	Two opportunities to speak: one on agenda items, and one for non-agenda items.
Hopkinton	None specified	3 minutes	None specified	None specified
Jamestown	None specified	None specified	No	No
Johnston	None specified	3 minutes	Yes. Must file an application with Town Clerk five days prior to meeting, stating topic to be discussed.	None specified
Lincoln	None specified	None specified	None specified	None specified
Little Compton	No public comment period specified	No public comment period specified	No public comment period specified	No public comment period specified
Middletown	15 minutes (stated on Open Forum form that those wanting to speak are required to fill out).	5 minutes	Yes. Must submit Town Council Meeting Public Participation Form no later than 5pm on day of meeting.	Yes. May only speak on one topic, whether on or off the agenda. "Comments must be substantive town business, neither discussed during the regular meeting" nor "related to personnel or job performance."

Decorum Language	Availability of Public Comment Rules	Point During Meeting When Public Comment Occurs	Sample Agenda
Yes, included on agenda, but nothing specific. Cites Council By-laws that “order must be preserved” and that interrupting or delaying meetings is prohibited.	Yes. Included on agenda.	Beginning	https://www.exeterri.gov/sites/default/files/fileattachments/town_council/meeting/4037/regular_-_oct_2_2023.pdf
No	No	Beginning	https://www.townoffoster.com/town-council/agenda/meeting-agenda-63
No	No	Beginning and end	https://www.glocesterri.gov/2023-09-07_Agenda.pdf
Yes, in council rules. “Any person making personal, impertinent, or slanderous remarks or who shall become boisterous while addressing the Town Council shall be... barred from further audience before the Town Council at that meeting, unless permission to continue be granted by a majority vote.”	Yes. Link found on Town Council's homepage.	Beginning and end	https://www.hopkintonri.gov/sites/g/files/vyhlf8546/f/agendas/town_council_agenda_-_october_2_2023.pdf
Yes, but written as advisory: “The Town Council hopes that citizens and Councilors alike will be respectful of each other’s right to speak [and] tolerant of different points of view.”	Yes. Link found on Town Council homepage, plus public comment language on agenda and in Town Council Rules.	Middle of meeting	https://www.jamestownri.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/80162/638223577882470000
Yes. “Persons using profanity, engaging in personal attacks or otherwise determined to be out of order by the President while addressing the Council may be asked to stand down and/or subject to expulsion.”	Yes. Language on public comment rules included on agenda and Town Council Rules.	End of meeting	https://clerkshq.com/Johnston-ri?docId=AGENDA&path=Johnston_Docket.AGENDA
No	No	End of meeting	https://lincolnri.portal.civicclerk.com/event/4755/files
No public comment period specified	Town Code outlines rules for holding Open Forums, but these are events separate from regular Council meetings.	No indication that public comment period is conducted.	https://cms6.revize.com/revizelittlecompton/10-05-2023.pdf
Yes. “The general public must act in a civil, courteous, respectful, considerate, and professional manner and avoid uncivil, abrasive, hostile, or obstructive conduct which impedes the town’s business.”	Yes. Included on agenda.	Middle of meeting	https://clerkshq.com/Middletown-ri?docId=AGENDA&path=Middletown_Council.Middletown_Council_Agendas.AGENDA

City/Town Council	Total Time for Comments	Time Limit for Individual Public Comments	Advance Notice Required	Limits on Content of Comments
Narragansett	30 minutes (can be extended at the discretion of president).	3 minutes (can be extended at the discretion of the president).	Yes. Must sign in prior to start of meeting.	None specified
New Shoreham	None specified	None specified	None specified	None specified
Newport	15 minutes	3 minutes	Yes. Must sign in with the City Clerk.	May only speak on one topic not already on agenda. No comments regarding personnel or job performance are allowed.
North Kingstown	None specified	3 minutes	None specified	None specified
North Providence	No public comment period specified	No public comment period specified	No public comment period specified	No public comment period specified
North Smithfield	None specified	3 minutes respectively for both Public Forum sections.	Yes. Must sign in prior to start of meeting.	Two opportunities to speak: one on agenda items, and one for non-agenda items.
Pawtucket	30 minutes (can be extended at the discretion of the president).	5 minutes	Yes. Must sign in at City Hall 10 minutes prior to the start of the public input period. Comments are made prior to start of meeting.	No instructions listed on agenda. Council Rules have section on public input that is much more in depth.
Portsmouth	None specified	None specified	None specified	None specified
Providence	No public comment period specified	No public comment period specified	No public comment period specified	No public comment period specified

Decorum Language	Availability of Public Comment Rules	Point During Meeting When Public Comment Occurs	Sample Agenda
Yes, included in Rules, but nothing specific. The Council President “shall enforce order and decorum.”	Yes. Link found on Town Council homepage, plus public comment language on agenda and in Town Council Rules.	Beginning	https://opengov.sos.ri.gov/Common/DownloadMeetingFiles?FilePath=\Notices\4815\2023\471746.pdf
No	No	Beginning	https://clerkshq.com/NewShoreham-RI?docId=oct02_23ag&path=NewShoreham_TownCouncil,NewShoreham_Council_Agendas,oct02_23ag
Yes. “It is expected that” speakers will “conduct themselves with courtesy and respect and not engage in improper criticism or attack of members or staff.”	Yes. Rules are found in resolution link on City Council’s webpage, and included on agenda.	Beginning	https://www.clerkshq.com/Newport-ri?docId=oct11_23dk&path=Newport_Dockets,oct11_23dk
No	No	Beginning	https://ri-northkingstown.civicplus.com/AgendaCenter/ViewFile/Agenda/_09252023-2480
No public comment period specified	No public comment period specified	No indication that public comment period is conducted.	https://opengov.sos.ri.gov/Common/DownloadMeetingFiles?FilePath=\Notices\4352\2023\472089.pdf
Yes, but nothing specific. The President will “enforce order and decorum among all persons in the Town Council Chamber.”	Yes. Link found on Town Council homepage, plus public comment language in Town Council Rules.	Beginning and end	https://clerkshq.com/NorthSmithfield-ri?docId=sep19_23ag_3&path=NSmithfield_Docket%2Csep19_23ag%2Csep19_23ag_3%2C
Yes. “No person shall be allowed to use said public input period for any purpose determined by the Chair or any member of the council to be strictly political in nature or intended to be a political endorsement of any person or persons.” Also, no person shall be allowed to use the public input period for any purpose determined by the chair or any member of the council to be a personal attack.	Yes. Section in City Council Rules. No “rules” listed on agenda other than signing-in.	Beginning (public input period occurs during the Pre-Council portion of the City Council meeting.)	https://clerkshq.com/Pawtucket-ri?docId=AGENDA&path=Pawtucket_Docket,AGENDA,ri?docId=AGENDA&path=Pawtucket_Docket,AGENDA
Yes. “The President shall preserve decorum and order, and shall have the authority to have removed from the Town Council meeting any elector or member of the public that breaches such rules of decorum and order.”	No	End of meeting	https://www.portsmouthri.gov/AgendaCenter/ViewFile/Agenda/_10102023-1293?html=true
Yes. “President shall enforce order and decorum” and “any person addressing the City Council, by permission or by request shall, while speaking, be subject to the same rules” as pertain to City Council members.	No. Only general decorum rules are included in the Council Rules.	No indication that public comment period is conducted.	https://providenceri.iqm2.com/Citizens/FileOpen.aspx?Type=1&ID=11580&Inline=True

City/Town Council	Total Time for Comments	Time Limit for Individual Public Comments	Advance Notice Required	Limits on Content of Comments
Richmond	Presiding officer has the authority to limit total length for the public comment period.	Presiding officer has authority to limit the length of time each member of the public may speak to 3 minutes.	None specified	Topic not already on agenda, unless presiding officer designates time for items on the agenda.
Scituate	None specified	None specified	None specified	Topic not already on agenda
Smithfield	None specified	None specified	None specified	None specified
South Kingstown	None specified	5 minutes (can be extended at discretion of council president).	None specified	Topic on agenda
Tiverton	None specified	3 minutes	None specified	Topic on agenda
Warren	15 minutes	3 minutes	Yes. Sign in prior to the start of the meeting. Must specify nature of remarks on sheet.	Various opportunities to speak: Topics not on the agenda can be addressed at the beginning of the meeting; topics on the agenda can be addressed after each agenda item.
Warwick	30 minutes (can be extended with a unanimous vote of the council). Council meets twice a month, but public comment is only heard once a month.	5 minutes (but if more than six speakers are signed up, it will be reflective so as to not exceed 30 minutes).	Yes. Must sign in prior to start of meeting.	Issues directly affecting Warwick City government. (This language was previously interpreted in an inappropriately narrow manner; see Cote v. Travis .)
West Greenwich	None specified	None specified	None specified	None specified
West Warwick	None specified	None specified	None specified	None specified
Westerly	None specified	10 minutes at beginning, up to 5 minutes at end.	No. While a sign-in sheet is provided, any person who does not sign up but wishes to speak will be allowed to do so.	Two opportunities to speak: one on agenda items, and one for non-agenda items.
Woonsocket	None specified	5 minutes	None specified	None specified

Decorum Language	Availability of Public Comment Rules	Point During Meeting When Public Comment Occurs	Sample Agenda
No	Yes. Link to rules included on agenda.	Middle of meeting	https://clerkshq.com/Richmond-ri?docId=oct03_23ag&path=Richmond_TownCouncil,Richmond_Agenda,oct03_23ag
No	No	Middle of meeting	https://clerkshq.com/Scituate-ri?docId=oct12_23ag&path=Scituate_Docket,oct12_23ag
Yes, in the Council Rules. The presiding officer has the duty to "require all speakers... maintain a civil, non-confrontational tone of voice and to direct their comments to the Council."	Yes. Council Rules available on council webpage.	End of meeting	https://clerkshq.com/Smithfield-ri?docId=AGENDA&path=Smithfield_Docket,AGENDA
Yes. Public subject to same rules of civility as council members.	Yes. Contained within agenda and found on council webpage.	Middle of meeting	https://clerkshq.com/SouthKingstown-ri?docId=AGENDA_11&path=SouthKingstown_Docket%2CAGENDA%2CAGENDA_11%2C
Yes, in Council rules. Persons are subject to removal if being "disorderly or disruptive, or failing to comply with rules after warning."	Yes. Council rules found on Town Council's webpage.	Middle of meeting	https://opengov.sos.ri.gov/Common/DownloadMeetingFiles?FilePath=\Notices\4672\2023\472367.pdf
Yes, contained in council rules. "All speakers ... shall be courteous in their language and deportment and shall not engage in or discuss or comment on personalities, or indulge in derogatory remarks or insinuations in respect to any members of the council..."	Yes. Council Rules found on Town Council's webpage.	Beginning	https://clerkshq.com/Warren-ri?docId=AGENDA&path=Warren_Docket,AGENDA
Yes. "The President shall enforce order and decorum among persons outside the rail and any person addressing the City Council."	Yes. Included on agenda. (City Council Rules state 15 minutes for public comment, but agendas state 30 minutes.)	Prior to start of Consent Agenda	https://www.warwickri.gov/sites/g/files/vyhlf1391/f/agendas/09-18-2023_regular_business_regular_public_hearing_meeting_draft.pdf
No	No	Middle of meeting	https://opengov.sos.ri.gov/Common/DownloadMeetingFiles?FilePath=\Notices\4289\2023\473120.pdf
No	No	End of meeting	https://clerkshq.com/WestWarwick-ri?docId=AGENDA&path=West_Warwick_Council,West_Warwick_Agenda,AGENDA
Yes. "Citizens will conduct themselves in an orderly and respectful fashion."	Yes. Included on agenda.	Beginning and end	https://clerkshq.com/Westerly-ri?docId=AGENDA&path=Westerly_TCAgendas,AGENDA
Yes. Remarks that are slanderous, offensive, or derogatory towards individuals or the City may result in removal from the City Council Chambers.	Yes. Found on City Council's homepage.	Beginning	https://woonsocketri.civicweb.net/document/54630/?printPdf=true

Appendix B – School Committees

To access all hyperlinks included in this appendix, please see our digital version at riaclu.org.

School Committee	Total Time for Comments	Time Limit for Individual Public Comments	Advance Notice Required	Limits on Content of Comments	Availability of Public Comment Rules
Barrington	None specified	3 minutes	Speakers must sign in with an email address.	No personnel matters may be discussed.	Yes. Available on agenda and a link is found on Council's webpage.
Bristol-Warren	15 minutes	3 minutes	Rules state that you must complete a form to speak, but no mention of that on agenda.	None specified	Yes. Must search board policy book.
Burrillville	None specified	None specified	None specified	Must be directly related to public agenda items.	Yes. Listed on agenda.
Central Falls	None specified	None specified	None specified	None specified	Agenda merely indicates when public comments are heard.
Chariho	May not exceed 30 minutes	"The Chair will have the discretion to limit each person to 2-4 minutes."	Must sign in	Topic not already on agenda; however, public may have right to speak on agenda items as determined by the Chair.	Yes. Link to rules is on the School Committee website.
Coventry	May not exceed 30 minutes	3 minutes (longer comments can be submitted in writing to Chair).	None specified	Must fall within the committee's responsibilities and/or identified on the meeting agenda.	Yes. Must search board policy book.
Cranston	None specified	3 minutes (time can be extended to up to five minutes at discretion of Chair).*	Must sign in*	Two opportunities: one for students who may speak on anything, one for public to speak on items not on the agenda.	Yes. Must search board policy book for them.
Cumberland	None specified	None specified	None specified	None specified	Agenda merely advises of public's ability to be heard.

Point During Meeting When Public Comment Occurs	Decorum Language	Miscellaneous	Sample Sample Agenda
Beginning and end of meeting	No		https://core-docs.s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/documents/asset/uploaded_file/995/Barrington_Schools/3621160/2023_October_12_SC_agenda.pdf
Beginning of meeting	No		https://www.bwrsd.org/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=5832&dataid=14328&FileName=10.11.23%20Hyperlinked%20Agenda-%20Public.pdf
Middle of meeting	Speakers are expected to be reasonable and respectful with their comments.		https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1DR8UKEyWc2SLyXuqXuhnD5fS9DmF6pBM
Middle of meeting	No		https://core-docs.s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/documents/asset/uploaded_file/530/Central_Falls_School_District/3564692/DownloadMeetingFiles.pdf
Beginning of meeting	No		https://www.chariho.k12.ri.us/school_committee/meeting_schedule
Beginning and end of meeting	Yes. Disruptive comments and conduct will not be tolerated. Disruptive comments and conduct include profanity, vulgarity, threats, interruptions of another speaker, and any other comments or conduct that cause or are likely to cause an imminent disruption of the meeting.		https://www.coventryschools.net/docs/district/agendas/sc%20agendas/230622sc.pdf?id=4978
Beginning and end of meeting**	Yes. According to Committee Rules, speakers must maintain a courteous tone, refrain from personal remarks or attacking a committee member's motives.	*Information only contained within policy book, not on agenda. **Policy book indicates comments at the end of meeting only, agenda lists two comment periods.	https://opengov.sos.ri.gov/Common/DownloadMeetingFiles?FilePath=Notices\4226\2023\469381.pdf
Middle of meeting	No		https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1oewpxKxzeta6p9k6NBWL-nBVt_XNQmD

School Committee	Total Time for Comments	Time Limit for Individual Public Comments	Advance Notice Required	Limits on Content of Comments	Availability of Public Comment Rules
East Greenwich	None specified	2 minutes*	None specified	None specified on agenda*	Yes. Must search board policy book for them.
East Providence	None specified	5 minutes*	None specified	No comments on personnel issues, sensitive information regarding students, or confidential matters shall be permitted.*	Yes. Must search board policy book for them.
Exeter-West Greenwich	15 minutes	3 minutes (Agenda states, "Chair may limit or terminate a discussion.")	None specified	"No comment should address personnel, litigation or negotiations as restricted by open meeting regulations."	Yes. Link to by-laws found on committee's webpage.
Foster-Glocester	None specified	None specified	None specified	None specified	Yes. Must search board policy book for them.
Jamestown	None specified	None specified	None specified	None specified	No
Johnston	None specified	5 minutes*	Yes, must fill out public participation form.*	"The Chair of the School Committee will stop any comments on individual students or employees."*	Yes. Must search through School Committee Policy Handbook.
Lincoln	None specified	5 minutes (Right to Be Heard); 3 minutes (Community Comment)*	Right to be Heard must fill out form and submit to Chair. Community Comment does not require any advance notice.*	Two opportunities to speak: one on topics on agenda, one for other topics.*	Yes. Link is on committee's webpage.
Little Compton	None specified	3 minutes*	Yes, must sign up in advance.	"...items that are on the agenda of that meeting or that they would like to see on future Agendas." Additionally, "no comments on personnel issues or confidential matters shall be permitted during Public Input."**	Yes. Must search board policy book for them.

Point During Meeting When Public Comment Occurs	Decorum Language	Miscellaneous	Sample Agenda
Beginning of meeting	No	*School Committee agendas will have a standing statement regarding public comment such as: "This is for public comment for items not on the agenda. Speakers will need to state their name and address for the record and there is a two-minute limit." NOTE: This language is not on the agendas we looked at.	https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1691538656/egsdnet/kzeia9jwonwdliva2vpn/10-25-22EastGreenwichSchoolCommitteeAgenda.pdf
End of meeting	No	*Information about public comment only contained within rules, no information on agenda.	https://opengov.sos.ri.gov/Common/DownloadMeetingFiles?FilePath=\Notices\4681\2023\472208.pdf
Beginning of meeting	Yes. "Maintain respectful decorum at meetings."	Public Comment rules listed on agenda under Open Forum.	https://opengov.sos.ri.gov/Common/DownloadMeetingFiles?FilePath=\Notices\4067\2023\472132.pdf
End of meeting	Yes. If comments or statements become negative or critical about a specific individual, even if unnamed but readily discernable, the speaker will be ruled out of order.		https://cdnsm5-ss11.sharpschool.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server_87879/Image/Foster-Glocester/District/SchoolCommittee/23_24_Agendas/School%20Committee%20Agenda%20October%203%20630pm.pdf
Beginning of meeting	No		https://docs.google.com/document/d/13MrjWl65pkZfKwg9VnMvCG5Crhrxfr5qA74LnhjmqrA/edit
Beginning of meeting	No	*Only mentioned in rules, not on agenda.	https://opengov.sos.ri.gov/Common/DownloadMeetingFiles?FilePath=\Notices\4227\2023\471851.pdf
Beginning (Right to be Heard); End (Community Comment)	Yes. "Comments or behaviors that are disruptive, volatile, uncivil, hostile, and or malign are not acceptable and will not be considered..."	*All details are from By-Laws. Agenda states: "Right to be Heard (as per School Committee's By-Laws)" but does not include any additional details.	https://opengov.sos.ri.gov/Common/DownloadMeetingFiles?FilePath=\Notices\4342\2023\469498.pdf
End of meeting	Separate general civility policy in school committee handbook.	*Agenda states, "Chair may use discretion to identify and allow public input."	https://go.boarddocs.com/ri/lcompton/Board.nsf/Public#

School Committee	Total Time for Comments	Time Limit for Individual Public Comments	Advance Notice Required	Limits on Content of Comments	Availability of Public Comment Rules
Middletown	None specified	5 minutes*	Yes, must inform Superintendent prior to start of meeting.*	Topic on agenda*	Yes. Must search board policy book for them.
Narragansett	30 minutes*	3 minutes*	None specified	No	Yes. Must search board policy book for them.
Newport	None specified	3 minutes	Yes, must complete written request prior to start of meeting with topic of comment.	Topic not on agenda	Yes. Listed on electronic agenda.
New Shoreham	No public comment period specified	No public comment period specified	No public comment period specified	No public comment period specified	No public comment period specified
North Kingstown	None specified	3 minutes	None specified	None Specified	Yes. Must search through School Committee Policy Handbook.
North Providence	None specified	5 minutes*	None specified	Topic on agenda	Yes. Link to by-laws found on Council's webpage.
North Smithfield	None specified	None specified	None specified	Two opportunities to speak: one on topics on agenda (Public Comment), one for topics not on agenda (Community Comment).	Yes. Must search board policy book for them.
Pawtucket	Chairperson determines length of comment period and announces prior to start of public comment.*	None specified	Yes, must sign up with Committee Chair before speaking.	None specified	Yes. Must search board policy book for them.
Portsmouth	None specified	2 minutes	None specified	Topic on agenda	Yes. Must search board policy book for them.
Providence	30 minutes	3 minutes	Yes, must provide topic to be discussed in writing by 4pm on day of meeting.	None specified	Yes. Must search board policy book for them.

Point During Meeting When Public Comment Occurs	Decorum Language	Miscellaneous	Sample Agenda
Beginning of meeting	No	*Information about public comment is listed on agenda.	https://clerkshq.com/Middletown-ri?docId=oct04_23scag&path=Middletown_School%2CMiddletown_School_Agendas%2Coct04_23scag%2C
Beginning of meeting	Yes. "Refrain from words or statements which... are construed as insults and tend to violence or breach of peace, refrain from obscenity, vulgarity, or other breach of respect."	*Information about public comment only contained within rules, not on agenda.	https://cdns5-ss13.sharpschool.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server_162655/File/School%20Committee/AGENDAS/2023-2024/October%2018.%202023_ND.pdf
Beginning of meeting	No		https://go.boarddocs.com/ri/npsri/Board.nsf/Public
No public comment period specified	No public comment period specified	No indication that public comment period is conducted.	https://opengov.sos.ri.gov/Common/DownloadMeetingFiles?FilePath=\Notices\4274\2023\470750.pdf
Beginning of meeting	Yes. "Comments are to be civil and courteous."		https://northkingstownschoolri.igm2.com/Citizens/FileOpen.aspx?Type=1&ID=1412&Inline=True
Beginning of meeting	No	*Only listed in by-laws, not on actual agenda.	https://opengov.sos.ri.gov/Common/DownloadMeetingFiles?FilePath=\Notices\4366\2023\471325.pdf
Beginning of meeting	No	During Community Comment period, the public may ask questions of committee members at the prerogative of the chair. The chair may set limits on comments.	https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1x-j8VIWuJ8FZUBrelypCYmRIneJZnlvc
Middle of meeting	Yes. "Improper conduct will not be allowed. Defamatory remarks are always out of order."*	*Only listed in rules, not on actual agenda.	https://opengov.sos.ri.gov/Common/DownloadMeetingFiles?FilePath=\Notices\4832\2023\472433.pdf
Beginning of meeting	The Chair may limit discussion in order to maintain order, avoid inappropriate comments.		https://opengov.sos.ri.gov/Common/DownloadMeetingFiles?FilePath=\Notices\4229\2023\472296.pdf
Beginning of meeting	No		https://providencepublicic-board.com/public_agendaview.aspx?mtgId=1282&CS=No

School Committee	Total Time for Comments	Time Limit for Individual Public Comments	Advance Notice Required	Limits on Content of Comments	Availability of Public Comment Rules
Scituate	None specified	None specified	None specified	None specified	No
Smithfield	15 minutes (Public Comment); 30 minutes (Open Forum)*	5 minutes*	Yes, determines order in which individuals speak.*	Topic on agenda*	Yes. Must search board policy book for them.
South Kingstown	None specified	None specified	Yes, must sign in.	None specified	No
Tiverton	30 minutes*	3 minutes*	Yes, must sign in prior to meeting.*	Topic not on agenda.	Yes. Must search board policy book for them.
Warwick	30 minutes (the Chair may extend in limited circumstances).	2 minutes	None specified	One comment per person	No
West Warwick	None specified	None specified	None specified	None specified	No
Westerly	None specified	5 minutes, with a possible additional 5 minutes after all present have opportunity to speak.	None specified	Yes, topics on agenda in the beginning, topics not on agenda at the end. Additionally, speakers cannot "criticize by name a member of the School Committee or an employee of the School District."*	By-laws found linked on committee's webpage. Separate limits found in school policy book.
Woonsocket	None specified	5 minutes*	None specified	None specified	Yes. By-laws found linked on committee's webpage.

Point During Meeting When Public Comment Occurs	Decorum Language	Miscellaneous	Sample Agenda
Beginning of meeting	No		https://cms5.revize.com/revize/scituateri/School%20Committee%20Agenda%2010.3.2023%20Final.pdf
End of meeting (Open Forum); Public Comment allowed after each agenda item.	Yes. "Speakers are expected to be civil, reasonable and respectful with their comments. Personal attacks will not be tolerated.	*Information is only available in policy, not on agenda.	https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/19Ri_X2VdbsMYr1iOtAS_agDdXkke09uu
Beginning of meeting	No		https://go.boarddocs.com/ri/soki/Board.nsf/Public#
Beginning of meeting	Yes. "Refrain from obscenity, vulgarity, or other breach of respect."*	*Information is only available in policy, not on agenda.	https://opengov.sos.ri.gov/Common/DownloadMeetingFiles?FilePath=%5CNotices%5C4298%5C2023%5C465171.pdf
Middle of meeting	Yes. Comments shall not contain "inappropriate or salacious" remarks.	The Chair may suspend public comment if they deem necessary.	https://opengov.sos.ri.gov/Common/DownloadMeetingFiles?FilePath=\Notices\4224\2023\465169.pdf
End of meeting	No	"Audience of Citizens" period at end of meeting in agenda.	https://opengov.sos.ri.gov/Common/DownloadMeetingFiles?FilePath=\Notices\4403\2023\472500.pdf
Beginning and end of meeting	"Make his/her remarks in a courteous manner."*	* Found only in school policy book, not in the by-laws. NOTE: There may be recent changes to the Committee's policies that are not reflected in their digital policy book at the time of this report, specifically repealing the decorum requirements	https://opengov.sos.ri.gov/Common/DownloadMeetingFiles?FilePath=\Notices\4478\2023\466148.pdf
Beginning of meeting	Yes. "Comments should be in good decorum."	Section of meeting when public may address the committee is titled "Good and Welfare." *Included on agenda but not in the rules.	https://opengov.sos.ri.gov/Common/DownloadMeetingFiles?FilePath=\Notices\4230\2023\472523.pdf



Rhode Island

American Civil Liberties Union of Rhode Island
128 Dorrance St., Suite 400
Providence, RI 02903
P: (401) 831-7171
F: (401) 831-7175
info@riaclu.org
www.riaclu.org
Social media platforms: @riaclu

This report was published by the American Civil Liberties Union Foundation of Rhode Island.