COLLECTION II — CIVIC PARTICIPATION & VOTING

How to Attend a Public Meeting

What to expect at a town board, school board, or county legislature meeting, and how to make your voice heard.

By Daniel P. Devine · Civest Sphere · November 2026

Your right to be there

New York's **Open Meetings Law** requires most public bodies, including town boards, county legislatures, school boards, and planning and zoning boards, to meet in public and give advance notice. Anyone can attend. You don't have to live in the town or explain why you're there.

The law guarantees your right to watch, not to speak. Most boards still set aside time for public comment, under rules they set.

Before you go

1. **Find the schedule.** Meeting dates are posted on the government's website and often on a bulletin board at town hall.
2. **Read the agenda.** It's usually posted a few days before. Look for the items you care about, and any supporting documents.
3. **Check the public comment rules.** Some boards require you to sign up in advance or at the door. Many limit speakers to about three minutes.
4. **Know who's who.** Look up the board members' names so you can follow the discussion.

At the meeting

- **Arrive early** to sign up to speak and get a copy of the agenda.
- **Executive session:** the board may leave to meet privately. The law allows this only for specific topics, like litigation, certain personnel matters, or real estate deals, and the board must vote in public to go into it.
- **Public hearings** are formal opportunities to comment on a specific proposal, such as a zoning change or the budget. Your comments become part of the record.

Speaking during public comment

1. State your name and where you live.
2. Say which agenda item or issue you're speaking about.
3. Make one or two clear points, with a specific request.
4. Bring a written copy to hand to the clerk so it's in the record.
5. Stay respectful. You're more persuasive when you stay calm.

After the meeting

Minutes must be made available within two weeks. Check them to see how your issue was recorded. If the meeting was recorded or livestreamed, the video is a useful record too. Follow up with board members by email.

> OFFICIAL SOURCES
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> - NY Committee on Open Government (https://opengovernment.ny.gov)

Last reviewed November 2026. This guide is general information, not legal advice. Laws, deadlines and procedures change, so confirm details with the official source before you act.

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