Town Council Meeting

April 14, 2026

Meeting Packet

Agenda Item #8

TOWN OF Summerfield
Town Hall: POB 970, 4117 Oak Ridge Road, Summerfield, NC 27358
ph: 336-643-8655 / www.summerfieldnc.gov

AGENDA ITEM: 8

APRIL 14, 2026 Attachment(s): Yes

8) OLD BUSINESS – Discussion of Public Forum

COUNCIL DIRECTION AND/OR ACTION:

Discuss options for holding a Public Forum.

ATTACHMENTS:

- Public Forum Information
- Public Forum Best Practices

NOTES:

The Town can hold public forums with different formats, including:

1.) Listening and Learning Session – Allow public comments and concerns. Rather than immediate back-and forth exchanges, the Council can take time to reflect on comments and discuss those issues at the next council meeting. This allows opportunities for additional time for citizens to be heard, and it isn't crammed into a regular meeting.

2.) Interactive Session with Questions and Answers – The town would choose a topic and have a presentation from staff if applicable. The community could then engage in a question-and-answer session with the help of a moderator. This would be a great way to bring everyone up to speed on a particular project or issue.

3.) Panel Discussion – The Council would choose a topic and have a discussion. Each member would get a few minutes to talk and then a moderator could take questions and comments from the public.

4.) Breakout Workshops – The Town would have different stations setup that the public could visit. An example would be to have a representative from each department at a different table. The Council could float freely to interact and learn with the public as they visit each station.

The above are just some examples and the council can create a public forum to match the Town's specific needs. I suggest beginning with a "Listening and Learning" public forum. Such a forum should provide notice to the public with a clearly defined topic area that is distributed well in advance. The suggested format would be:

- Register Speakers – Residents desiring to speak will provide written name & address
- Call to Order – Pledge, Invocation, Introductions
- Agenda Approval
- Opening Comments – Mayor describes the issue and how the forum will function
- Evaluate Length of Public Comments – Estimate number of speakers and allot time
- Public Comment Period – Residents called in the order of (ongoing) registration
- Closing Remarks – Mayor speaks and reminds council to consider the comments
- Adjournment

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PAUL SIMON PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE TOWN HALL MEETING REPORT
JULY, 2018

DISCUSSION

The Paul Simon Public Policy Institute is delighted to work with the Lugar Center on its University Project for Bipartisan Collaboration. The Simon Institute is eager to promote productive and non-partisan public discourse by examining the role of town hall meetings in American politics and by recommending a set of "best practices" for town hall meetings for consideration by the Illinois congressional delegation.

Congressional town hall meetings have been an important feature of America's culture of representative democracy for more than two centuries. In their ideal form, town hall meetings allow lawmakers to describe their work at home and in Washington and to listen to the concerns of their constituents. Open and vigorous dialogue benefits policymakers and the public.

Town hall meetings were an essential feature of Paul Simon's political life during the nearly four decades that he served in the Illinois House of Representatives, the Illinois Senate, the U.S.· House of Representatives, and the U.S. Senate.

In his memoir PS, Simon recalled that during his two terms in the U.S. Senate he returned to Illinois regularly and held town hall meetings in every county in the state at least twice and in almost all of the wards and townships of Cook County--more than 600 meetings in all. "I did it both for political purposes, obviously exposing my views to many who would never come to a Democratic political rally, and for philosophical reasons," he wrote. "I wanted to make sure that people who are unemployed or facing a huge hospital bill had access to their senator, and not simply the big contributors or those who could afford a trip to Washington."

In a 1986 essay, Simon said that town hall meetings were a critical aspect of his public service. "What do you learn in all of these meetings? Perhaps as important as any specific thing you

learn, people understand that government is not some distant creature, that they can express their opinions, ask questions, let people in positions of decision-making know what's on their minds. But it is more than that. For me, it is a chance to sense what people feel. To best serve the people of Illinois, I should not be sitting in Washington simply listening to what the highly paid lobbyists have to say. I need to touch the public pulse, to sense the public mood. And I need to talk to people about their specific problems, some widely known... but some unusual."

He added: "It's one thing to read about the farm problem, much different to talk to flesh- and-blood people whose agony is written on their faces and in what they say. It's one thing to know unemployment statistics, another to talk to a mother who is worried about the mental health of her son because he can't find a job. The people who took time to attend town meetings held in every corner of the state helped me to become a better senator."

Simon approached town hall meetings as listening and learning sessions. He would often sit at a desk in the front of the room with a notebook. He would make a brief opening statement and then invite questions or comments. He took careful notes as did an assistant. He did not profess to be omniscient and would often ask audience members for their views on issues.

The nature of the town hall meetings that Paul Simon experienced for most of his career has changed dramatically, driven by intensifying political polarization and advances in technology, especially the revolution in social media. Some conservative and liberal activist groups regard town hall meetings largely as opportunities to challenge lawmakers they oppose and to create embarrassing moments that can be captured on camera and then disseminated via social media.

An article about town hall meetings by Russell Berman in The Atlantic refers to "the cacophony of boos, jeers and deprecatory chants that make up the 21st century congressional town hall." Berman declares: "Town hall meetings have long since lost their innocence as the purest incarnation of American representative democracy. In the post-Tea Party era, they are largely performative events, set pieces for the pre-ordained political backlash. Activist groups mobilize attendance, ensure television coverage and Facebook live-streams, prepare talking points and detailed questions for constituents to ask. Citizens confront their legislators with increasing and perhaps slightly rehearsed passion, sometimes reading their questions from a script or shouting a monologue aimed as much at the cameras in the back as the congressman in front of them. In

response, congressional offices are trying harder to ensure the event hall is filled with actual constituents, not outsiders bused in from districts far and wide."

A US News & World Report article by Keith Lee Rupp questions if town halls can survive. "Blame it on social media that makes organizing flash mobs relatively simple. Blame it on our polarized politics that makes tolerance for other points of view seem like a quaint notion from long ago. Blame it on cable television and talk radio for teaching people that hyperbole and hyperventilation are acceptable substitutes for reasoned debate. There's plenty of blame to go around, and there's little evidence that political social behavior is going to change any time soon."

In response to this highly charged environment, a number of lawmakers have turned almost exclusively to virtual town hall meetings. These meetings can be conducted over the phone, Tele-town hall meetings, or over the internet, online town halls. Virtual town hall meetings allow the policymaker to communicate with a much larger audience than in-person town halls. However, they preclude face to face interaction and many constituents believe they are carefully constructed to prevent such direct contact.

The Simon Institute believes that in-person town hall meetings can remain a constructive part of our political discourse, but we urge lawmakers and the public to approach them differently in the future. Respectful discussions cannot be mandated, but they can be encouraged, and civility should be the coin of the realm in town hall meetings.

SIMON INSTITUTE RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There is continuing value for both lawmakers and the public in regular, in-person town hall meetings. While virtual town hall meetings and other types of meetings are also important ways for lawmakers and constituents to exchange views, they should not serve as substitutes for in-person town hall meetings. Face to face encounters are more powerful experiences for both policymakers and the public and are an essential feature of our democracy.
2. The current structure of town hall meetings should be reassessed, and careful consideration given to organizing them differently. Specifically, they should be recast as listening and learning sessions in which lawmakers are there to hear the views and

concerns of constituents. This might be aided by having lawmakers sit in a chair or behind a desk rather than standing before a podium. Creative ways should be examined to configure the room, so the meeting does not have an adversarial feel and also less of a "sage on stage" appearance. It might be helpful to devote some town hall meetings to a single topic and focus the discussion into generating ideas to address this issue.

3. Town hall meetings should be well advertised and held in easily accessible and comfortable accommodations. There is a need to balance venues that are large enough to allow for broad participation with the reality that large auditoriums often foster a more combative and adversarial atmosphere. Aggressive and creative efforts should be undertaken to broaden the range of people who attend town halls, so the audience is more diverse and includes both partisans and independents. Most Americans reside in the center of the ideological spectrum and virtually all analysts agree this vast group is significantly underrepresented in current town hall meetings.
4. Town hall meetings should be open to the public and the press. Streaming the event live should be done if possible. At a minimum, town hall meetings should be recorded (preferably video), and this recording should be put on the policymaker's website so that constituents who are unable to attend can view the full meeting. Attendees should be invited to sign in and a summary of the meeting should be provided to all who register.
5. If possible, town hall meetings should be moderated by a non-partisan community leader who explains the procedural guidelines and sets the tone for a respectful discussion. The public should be encouraged to behave with civility and decorum
6. The policymaker should give a brief opening statement of no more than ten minutes, reserving the vast majority of time in the town hall for questions and comments from the audience.
7. During the question and comment session, participants should identify themselves and present a brief question or statement. Strongly stated opinions are appropriate; rudeness or badgering are not. Shouting, interruptions, or demands for one-word answers are not acceptable and should be ruled out of order by the moderator.
8. Those attending town halls should prepare for these sessions like they would for a

professional meeting. Participants should strive to be factual and to tell personal stories rather than recite the talking points prepared by advocacy groups. Ideally, participants should provide a written statement of their views or concerns to the lawmaker or a staffer after the meeting.

9. The policymaker should hold a session with the press after the meeting, outlining areas of agreement, disagreement, and additional study. The policymaker should also respond to questions from the press.
10. Virtual town hall meetings can be an important tool for policymakers, allowing for communication with larger groups. When well-organized, they can reach large and diverse audiences, including constituents who may not be able to travel to in-person town halls. Virtual town hall meetings should have a neutral moderator and allow for unscripted and real time exchanges. While an excellent supplement to in-person town halls, they should not replace them.

The Simon Institute believes that town hall meetings can be productive and valuable for policymakers and the public. However, the ultimate success of town hall meetings requires the commitment of all who participate to be professional, civil, and respectful. Civility and respect can't be mandated, but they can be encouraged.

Legislators and district staff should experiment with formats and share best practices across state delegations and political affiliation. Effective town halls meetings benefit the policy making process. As such, it is in the policymakers' interest to widely disseminate models that prove successful.