

Model Pledge for Municipal Public Bodies: Guidelines for Member Conduct

This model pledge attempts to set the tone for good governance by having members of local public bodies agree that they will serve the best interests of their municipalities in a manner that's respectful of their fellow board members, other independently elected local officials, and the community that chose them to work on their behalf.

This pledge is aspirational, so it is not legally binding. Rather, it is a solemn promise a member of a public body makes to themselves and others. The penalty for violating it is a loss of respect and its enforcement mechanism is political.

Why Adopt this Pledge?

The National League of Cities (NLC), which describes itself as “an organization comprised of city, town and village leaders that are focused on improving the quality of life for their current and future constituents” identifies the lack of civility in politics as a fundamental barrier to resolving society's ills:

"All too often, Americans sense that real progress on critical public issues is impossible because they see policy debates among elected leaders degenerate into electioneering, posturing, name calling and worse." National League of Cities Center for Research & Innovation, *Beyond Civility: From Public Engagement to Problem Solving*, 2 (2011).

How, then, can our country solve its problems if the people we've entrusted to tackle them struggle to talk to each other? According to the NLC, the solution lies in fostering a “culture of

democratic governance.” As NLC defines it, democratic governance is, “the art of governing a community in participatory, deliberative, inclusive and collaborative ways.” A municipality must adhere to several principles when adopting this approach, such as supporting community involvement and creating opportunities for informed citizen engagement to fully harness the people’s problem-solving potential.

One way public bodies can help promote the practice of democratic governance at the local level is by pledging to abide by their own set of guiding principles. These principles can help:

1. set the tone for civil discourse throughout their community;
2. assure the citizenry that local decision making will be conducted in a civil and responsible manner; and
3. build peoples’ confidence in local government’s ability to effectively solve problems.

As the NLC acknowledges,

[w]hile city leaders have little control over the conduct and the civility of the national debates that are often the ripest targets for voter anger, they can work to ensure that local and regional decision making is conducted in a civil and responsible manner. Not only will this help build residents’ confidence in government’s ability to address problems effectively, but it also will set the tone for civil discourse throughout the community and provide a model for other levels of government. Id at

How to Customize and Adopt this Model Pledge

How to Customize this Pledge

A pledge, more so than an ordinance or policy, is inherently personal and no single model of general applicability will likely capture all of your specific public body's shared sentiments and objectives. Instead, this model represents a spirit of commitment meant to inspire the development of your own customized pledge, rather than a document to just blindly adopt.

This pledge should be viewed as a jumping off point, not a finished product. We invite and encourage you to tailor it to suit your particular needs. However, because it is meant to represent the values of your community, it would be best if each public body in your municipality adopted the same pledge, barring some unique characteristic or feature of a particular public body.

How to Adopt this Pledge

This pledge is administrative in nature, not regulatory. As such, it is relatively simple to adopt.

For consistency, it is advisable that selectboards adopt this pledge, not only for themselves, but for all other public bodies for which it's accountable (i.e. appointed by the selectboard). The selectboard and all other elected public bodies can adopt this pledge by a majority vote of their total membership at a meeting held in accordance with [Vermont's Open Meeting Law](#).

Once your public body has decided to adopt the pledge, we recommend taking the following steps:

1. Place the discussion and possible adoption of the pledge on the agenda for a future regular or special board meeting;
2. Discuss the pledge at a regular or special board meeting. The public should be allowed to ask questions and make comments or suggestions;

3. Make decisions (at a regular or special board meeting) about how and whether to change provisions of the model pledge;
4. Replace or remove all italicized language in the model pledge document; and
5. Vote to adopt the pledge at a duly warned regular or special board meeting.

The pledge will take effect as soon as it is adopted or at any such later date as specified by the board.

Disclaimer: This resource is only intended to provide information and it does **NOT** constitute legal advice. Readers with specific legal questions are encouraged to contact an attorney. The use or downloading of this resource does **NOT** create an attorney-client relationship and will not be treated in a confidential manner.

If you have additional questions please use the ask a question button to submit them.

[Ask a Question](#)

Publication Date

03/22/2024