

Chapter 1 Overview of the Town Hall Website

The Virginia Regulatory Town Hall (Town Hall) was the first comprehensive rulemaking website in the nation and has received numerous national and state awards. The website is managed by the [Virginia Department of Planning and Budget](#) (DPB). It displays the regulatory activity of executive branch agencies, as well as other agencies that choose to use the website. The Town Hall website is integrated with the legislature's [Regulation Information System](#) (RIS), which is maintained by the Registrar of Regulations, and the [Commonwealth Calendar](#), which is maintained by the Virginia Information Technologies Agency.

The Town Hall allows state agencies to:

- manage their regulatory information and associated meetings,
- submit and track a regulatory action throughout the review process,
- communicate with the public and other interested parties, and
- submit regulations to the Registrar's Office for publication in the *Virginia Register of Regulations*.

The Town Hall provides the public with:

- convenient access to [view regulatory activity underway](#),
- [flowcharts](#) about regulatory processes,
- the ability to [sign up](#) for automated notifications about specific events and meetings, and
- the ability to participate in the process via [public comment forums](#).

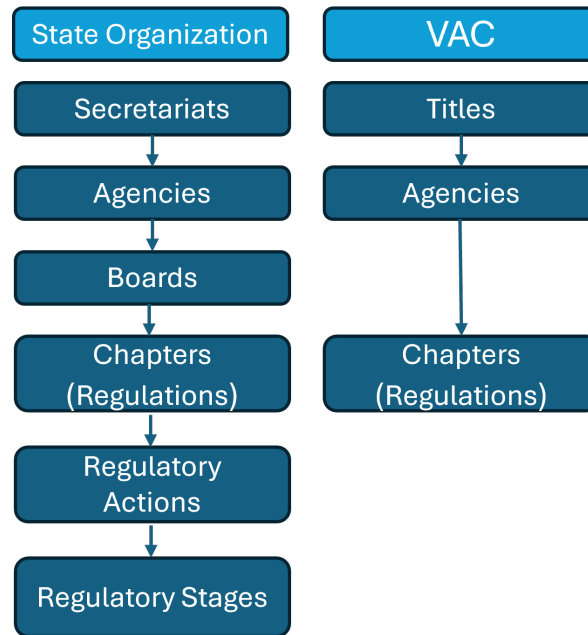
The Town Hall enables and encourages public participation

The Town Hall encourages and supports public participation in many ways.

- **Increasing Transparency and Participation:** In the spirit of making government more transparent to citizens, the Town Hall makes the regulatory process open to Virginians. Anyone with access to the Internet can view all aspects of the process and participate in a variety of ways.
- **Automatic Email Notification:** Any member of the public can register on the Town Hall and request automated e-mail notifications about regulatory actions and meetings related to their "preferences" (that is, any agencies, boards, and regulations in which they are interested). Based on their preferences, a "Meetings" email and a "Regulatory Actions" email are sent nightly by the Town Hall to those people whose preferences match the activities for that day.
- **Agency Mailing Lists:** In addition to the automated emails from the Town Hall, state agencies can use a mailing list function on Town Hall to email those users whose preferences indicate an interest in a specific agency, board, or regulation.
- **Public comment forums, petitions for rulemaking, meetings and public hearings** are all available on the Town Hall website and are described in more detail below.

How is the Town Hall organized?

Information on the Town Hall is designed around the organization of state government and the structure of the [Virginia Administrative Code](#) (VAC), the official legal source for regulations in Virginia. The following chart illustrates the basic organizational structure of the website.



As can be seen by the left side of the chart, the organization of the Town Hall is generally based upon the organization of state government. At the highest level are the secretariats, which correspond to the individual members of the Governor’s cabinet. Within each secretariat are agencies, and the boards that they support. (On the Town Hall, for organizational purposes a “board” refers to any entity with rulemaking authority; this can include a regulatory board or an agency.) For example:

- Within the Health and Human Resources secretariat is the Department of Health Professions, which supports 15 regulatory boards. One of those boards is the Department of Health Professions itself, which has its own regulations. As this example shows, for organizational purposes on Town Hall an agency, through the agency’s director, may act as a board if the agency has its own regulations.
- Some agencies do not report to a member of the cabinet, because they either report directly to the Governor or they are in another branch of government (legislative, judicial). For organizational purposes on Town Hall, these agencies are located in a placeholder secretariat called “Other Agencies.”

The organization of the Town Hall also corresponds to the manner in which regulations themselves are organized in the VAC. On the Town Hall, a “regulation” is a “chapter” within the VAC. All of the chapters for a board (including agencies with their own regulations) are grouped within an “Agency.” In turn, each agency is located in a “Title” which corresponds to a topic. For example:

- The Department of Health Professions (DHP) and each of its 15 boards have their own Agency number, and each DHP agency is located in Title 18, which contains regulations about Professional and Occupational Licensing.
- One of DHP's boards is the Board of Dentistry, which regulates the practice and teaching of dentistry and dental hygiene. To accomplish this, the board promulgated the *Regulations Governing the Practice of Dentistry*. For organizational purposes, the Registrar of Regulations assigned agency code 60 to the board, and chapter code 21 to this regulation. Because this board falls within Title 18, the VAC citation for this regulation is 18 VAC 60-21.

What information is available on the Town Hall?

This website includes the following types of information about the regulatory process including:

- Past and current changes to regulations (known as “regulatory actions”), including the following documents that pertain to a particular regulatory action:
 - Proposed text changes to the regulation,
 - An agency background document prepared by the relevant agency explaining the action,
 - DPB's economic impact analysis (EIA) of certain regulatory changes, and
 - The Attorney General's memo certifying the rulemaking entity has legal authority for the regulatory action.

For more information, see Chapter 2.

The rest of this chapter provides more information about other types of information that are also available.

- State Agency Users and Regulatory Coordinators.
- Past and future meetings, and associated agendas and minutes.
- Petitions for rulemaking, where the public can request new regulations or amendments to existing regulations.
- General notices, which are any announcement that an agency wishes to make about a regulatory change or topic.
- Periodic reviews of regulations, the formal process where at least once every four years an agency conducts a comprehensive review of a regulation to determine if it should be amended or repealed.
- Agency guidance documents, which provide additional information about regulations.
- Public comment forums, used for regulatory changes, petitions for rulemaking, general notices, and guidance document changes.

Other chapters in this manual provide more detailed instructions intended for the state agencies that use the Town Hall. Because this manual is about the Town Hall, it focuses on information posted by agencies that use the Town Hall.

State Agency Users and Regulatory Coordinators

DPB staff act as administrators for the Town Hall website and also have a role in the regulatory review process.

State regulations require that every state agency assign a single person to be the agency regulatory coordinator if the agency has its own rulemaking authority or if it has regulatory boards ([1VAC7-10-80](#)).

You can locate contact information for the coordinator at any agency by following these steps:

1. Type the name of the agency into the search box in the upper right-hand corner of the Town Hall homepage;
2. Click on the link that says AGENCIES;
3. Click on the name of the agency;
4. On the next screen, click on the AGENCY INFORMATION tab to see the agency coordinator information.

Meetings and Public Hearings

All meetings regarding regulations are required to be posted on the Town Hall website. Other meetings may also be posted, such as meetings of technical advisory groups. Anyone can search for meetings posted on the Town Hall, including past or future meetings. For past meetings, minutes of the meeting are required to be posted on the Town Hall.

For each meeting on the Town Hall, the agency is asked to specify whether the nature of the meeting is:

- General business of the board,
- To discuss particular regulations / chapters, or
- A public hearing to discuss a proposed change. A public hearing is a special type of meeting convened for the sole purpose of receiving public comment on a proposed regulation.

Pursuant to the Executive Order on Rulemaking, all agencies are required to post the notice of, and an agenda for, a public regulatory meeting on the Town Hall at least seven days prior to the date of the meeting. In addition, pursuant to [§ 2.2-3707.1](#), agencies are also required to post:

- Draft minutes of meetings as soon as possible but no later than ten working days after the conclusion of the meeting, and
- Final minutes within three working days of final approval of the minutes.

When they are posted, you will find the links to the minutes and agenda documents on the main [meetings](#) page of the Town Hall.

Petitions for Rulemaking

A petition for rulemaking is a request made by any individual to an agency or board asking that a new regulation be developed or that an existing regulation be amended. Petitions are to be sent directly to the agency or board and are not submitted using the Town Hall. The Executive Order on Rulemaking requires agencies to post a petition for rulemaking, and decisions to grant or deny the petition, on the Town Hall.

The steps for submitting a petition for rulemaking to an agency are set out in [§ 2.2-4007 \(A\)](#) of the Code of Virginia. In addition, in order to qualify as a "petition for rulemaking," the communication must (1)

state the substance and purpose of the regulatory action that is requested (including references to any applicable [Virginia Administrative Code](#) sections), and (2) reference the legal authority of the agency to take the action requested.

General Notices

A general notice is any announcement that an agency wishes to make about a regulatory matter. General notices are posted on the Town Hall, and a notification is sent to registered public users of the Town Hall; General notices may also be published in the *Virginia Register of Regulations*.

Examples of general notices include (1) a request for additional public comment on a regulatory proposal or guidance document, or (2) advising the public about a regulatory topic for which notice is not required by statute.

Periodic Review of Regulations

The Administrative Process Act (APA) requires that all regulations be reviewed at least once every four years. (This does not apply to agencies or regulations that are exempt from the APA.) The Executive Order on Rulemaking requires an agency to post a notice of a periodic review on the Town Hall, and a notification is then sent to registered public users of the Town Hall; the notice is also published in the *Virginia Register of Regulations*. After the close of the public comment period, the agency shall post the report of findings on the Town Hall and publish the report in the *Virginia Register of Regulations*.

Guidance Documents

The Code of Virginia defines a “guidance document” as “any document developed by a state agency or staff that provides information or guidance of general applicability to the staff or public to interpret or implement statutes or the agency’s rules and regulations...” ([§ 2.2-4101](#)). The definition excludes “agency minutes or documents that pertain only to the internal management of agencies.” State law requires that changes to a guidance document shall be subject to a 30-day public comment period, to include public comment through the Town Hall, after publication in the *Virginia Register of Regulations* and prior to the document’s effective date.

Public Comment Forums

Anyone may submit a comment for any open public comment forum and view the comments made by others. Public comment forums are held for different events: regulatory stages (NOIRA, Proposed, and some Final), Petitions for Rulemaking, Periodic Reviews, and changes to Guidance Documents. Forums open automatically upon the date the event is published in the [Virginia Register of Regulations](#). The length of a forum varies depending on the event. NOTE: comments cannot be modified or deleted after they are posted. For more information, see the [user comment policy](#).

Updated May 20, 2026

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