

# National Campaign for Transit Justice

A project of Alliance for a Just Society

## A Guide to Congressional Town Halls



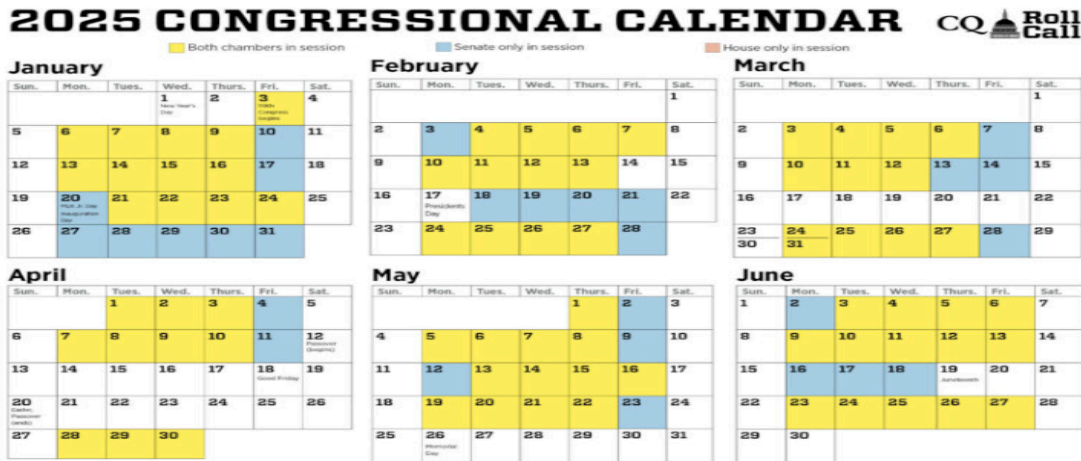
Congressional Town Hall meetings are public events where community members are invited to share their views on issues with their Senators and Representatives. These meetings allow elected representatives to hear directly from their constituents and to explain their positions on the issues.

Participating in a town hall is important. **The fight in Congress is never won in Congress—it's won in the districts when groups like yours organize constituents to challenge their Representatives and make it clear that access to frequent, reliable transit and safe streets and roads are an investment in family mobility and building a strong local economy.**

Town halls are typically held after big events, when a significant piece of legislation passes, when there is important news/impacts to the community, or **during a recess.**

# Finding an Upcoming Town Hall Meeting

This starts with knowing where your Senator or Representative is holding a town hall meeting, which is getting more challenging. Review the [Congressional Calendar](#) to learn when they are in town.



## Ways to Determine Where and When Your Senator or Representative Will Hold a Town Hall Meeting

Members of Congress are hosting fewer town halls now than they have historically, partly because they know that this is a space where the public can raise issues they may not want to address. Below are a few ways to be notified in the event of a town hall. It's important to plan ahead so that you're prepared for a rapid response once a town hall is announced.

First, [identify your U.S. Senators and Representatives](#).

- **Add your name to their mailing list** by going to their website to get their newsletter. Sometimes, they post an events calendar on their website (this is becoming rarer).
- **Email or call their office** to see when and where they will hold a Town Hall during the upcoming recess. To speak to staff directly, use [www.contactingcongress.org](http://www.contactingcongress.org). It is important to be courteous and friendly. "Hi, I'm [your name] and I live at [your address]. I'd like to know when [your MoC's name]'s next town hall forum will be." If they don't know, ask to be added to the email list they use to announce events.
- **Check their social media** (e.g. Facebook, X, Bluesky, Instagram, Threads)
- **Check official government websites** - check out press releases, events and media alerts
- **Check local papers and news outlets** for announcements.
- If they are not holding a town hall, think about doing visibility at a public event that they are planning on attending, giving a speech at etc.

# Building Issue Visibility at a Town Hall

You may be competing for time with other constituents, raising separate issues, or you may not always get the opportunity to speak. To get the most awareness for your issue, follow the best practices laid out below:

## Create and practice your messaging.

- **Craft a concise message:** You should have a clear, short message that you are working to communicate.
  - **Examples:**
    - “Transit cuts hurt working families”
    - “Better buses = better business”
    - “Stop cuts to public transit”
    - “Safe Streets for All”
    - “Students rely on transit”
    - “Transit gets me to school/work”
    - “Save our transit jobs”

- **Tell a story:** The story should illustrate how policies impact you, your family, and/or local businesses in their district.

*“My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and they have cut back on the frequency of the bus route that I take. This means that I have a 45 minute wait at 11 pm when I get off work. My bus stop is at 17th and Steven’s street. There is no lighting, no sidewalk, and no bench or seat to rest while I wait.”*

*“My name is \_\_\_\_\_ I own Joe’s Pizzeria on 32nd street. All of my workers rely on transit to get to work. Cutting service will not only impact my employees but it will impact my business.”*

- **Back up the story with data:** Show that it is a systemic issue—that your story isn’t an individualized story that can be pushed off. Don’t forget to illustrate how many people are affected and the reach that your group has.
  - You can leverage [this map](#) from Transportation for America to determine how much funding is at risk in your congressional district. E.g. *“In CD-# alone, there are \$xxx,xxx,xxx at risk due to the federal funding cuts. It’s unacceptable that my bus schedule is being cut to deliver on tax cuts for billionaires.”*
  - Check your local transit agency’s ridership reports to see how many people will be affected in your region.
  - Emphasize the cost of car ownership to working households - according to the [Bureau of Transportation statistics](#), “transportation was the second largest household expenditure behind housing [in 2022], accounting for 15% of average household spending.”

## Ask questions.

- **Determine key questions to raise or ask:** One effective strategy is to ask a pointed question to get the elected official to go on record.
- **Examples:**
  - “Working people are being stranded—do you support these funding cuts?”
  - “What are you currently doing or going to do to fight for people like me in your district?”
  - “If we lose this funding from the federal government, what is your plan to offset those funds so that the residents of your district won’t lose access to service?”

## Bring visuals that tell a story.

When town halls are packed with people, you may not be picked to speak. Visuals can be another strategy to move the organization's message forward. Visuals can also attract the press.

- **Message:** The visual should communicate your main point. Do not try to communicate all of your ideas in one visual.
- **Keep it simple:** A person needs to be able to see the visual from across the room and understand the message.
- **Identify your organization:** When your organization uses consistent colors, fonts, and logos, it maintains a professional look and reinforces your brand identity.
- **Examples:** [Use these printable graphics as a resource](#)



## Involve members of your organization:

- **Recruit local members from your group and be visible.** This demonstrates that it is a public issue rather than an individual concern. Make the team identifiable. You can wear your organizational t-shirts, or shirts all of the same color, or you can use organizational signs, buttons etc.
- **Explain to members that one goal is to get members of Congress to go on record.**
- **Get everyone ready to raise their hands.** It is typical that the member of Congress will start the event by making some comments, framing the moment, and sharing their insights. Typically, they will open the floor for comments. **You want to get there early in case there is a sign-up list to speak.** If not, prepare to have everyone in your group raise their hands, be persistent and have a shared message and question. Remember, personal stories are an effective way to take on “alternative facts.”
- **Don’t hand off the microphone before you get your question answered.** Politicians are trained to pivot from your question to their talking point. Be prepared to say, “*You didn’t answer the question; maybe I wasn’t clear,*” and repeat the question. If you make it a clear yes or no question, it is possible to pin them down. Be polite and persistent and demand a real answer.
- **Have another group member be ready to step in** if your question still hasn’t been answered.
- **The group should show support or disapproval for the answer.** For example, chanting “Yes or No” makes it harder for them to get away with not answering a question.
- **Have a member(s) set to record video of the event on their phone.** Be sure to capture the questions and the congressperson's response.

## Connect with staff and leave information:

Introduce yourself to the congressional member’s staff. They have the ability to educate and influence their member of Congress. Reinforce your communication by leaving factsheets and information with the staff. Keep this information to a single page and highlight your most important points first.

- [Use this factsheet template to get started.](#)

## Adapting to Online Settings

The chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee [recently advised G.O.P. lawmakers to stop holding in-person town hall meetings](#) and consider online town hall options. You can adapt the resources above to fit the online context:

- Use graphics as virtual backgrounds if the meeting is being held on Zoom (though you may not have the opportunity to do so if the meeting is held as a webinar or Facebook Live)
- Coordinate another visual—like color coordinated shirts, buttons, or participant names.
- Use chat and Q&A functions to share your story, ask questions, and elevate your issue.

- Connect with members of the local media to make them aware of the online town hall and raise your issue with them in advance. They may be able to ask questions or get follow up from the member of Congress' office.
- Follow up with the member of Congress' office to have your concerns addressed. Let them know that you attended the online town hall and you're seeking answers about what the federal funding cuts mean for your community.

## Organizing Your Own Town Hall Meeting

A key to success is bringing large numbers of people into the conversation and showing decision makers that there is overwhelming public interest and support for your issue.

- **Build an organizing committee:** Building a sponsoring committee for your event enables you to communicate across different networks to bring the most people into the conversation.
- **Pick a date and time and secure a location**
- **Build an outreach plan:**
  - Identify the networks represented by the organizations on the sponsoring committee (member activists, online lists, board members, etc)
  - Build materials, including flyers, online announcements, social media posts, emails
  - Have an online portal for people to sign up for the event - remember it is only 50% of the people who sign up that will show
  - Do reminder calls and emails to the people who sign up
  - Assign roles to key activists: greeters, someone to hand off the microphone, someone to hand out an information sheet, set up, clean up, etc.
- **Recruit a strong MC/moderator**
- **Have a media and communications plan**
  - Create a press announcement
  - Do a press release
  - Have a participant write an op-ed
  - Have a local transit blogger attend
  - Create graphics and language to share on social media and have your members post them
- **Work with the Organizing Committee to build an agenda.** Here is a model agenda:
  - MC - Welcome and Introduction of the Host Committee
  - Welcome the elected officials attending and notice those not present
  - Opening remarks about the issue from members of the host committee
  - Open microphone: Have a time limit of 2 minutes and let people ask questions - give electeds, if present, an opportunity to respond
  - Elected Officials get 5 minutes to respond to the issues raised
  - Closing remarks