City of San Marcos

COMMISSIONER'S HANDBOOK

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WELCOME

Thank you for your willingness to serve as a member of a City of San Marcos commission, committee or board. Advisory bodies play an important role in City governance and serve as a primary conduit between citizens, City staff, and the City Council. As a member, you will serve in an advisory capacity to the City Council, performing a valuable service by addressing community needs. The Mayor and City Councilmembers look forward to your contributions as we work together providing efficient municipal services that are responsive to local needs and expectations.

This handbook is designed to provide the basic protocols that apply generally to all long-standing City commissions and committees, such as the open meeting laws commonly known as the "Brown Act." Orientation is an active process and can include initial meetings with staff who will provide you with general knowledge and understanding of public affairs and goals of the commission. Staff will also assist you in identifying the scope and parameters of your duties and responsibilities, brief you on current business items, and provide you with foundational documentation to help you quickly adapt to your new role. Learning your role and developing an effective voice takes time and familiarity. We hope this handbook will assist you towards a satisfying and productive public service experience.

Your willingness to participate and offer professional expertise is deeply appreciated by the City Council, City department staff, and your community. The vitality and strength of our community is found in people like you who are willing to serve. For more information about the City of San Marcos and the numerous programs, events and services it offers, please visit the web site at www.san-marcos.net.

Rebecca Jones, Mayor

Sharon Jenkins, Mayor Pro Tem

Ed Musgrove, Councilmember

Maria Nuñez, Councilmember

Mike Sannella, Councilmember

San Marcos Mission Statement

The mission of the City of San Marcos is to improve the quality of life of those who live, work or visit San Marcos by providing a safe family atmosphere that is rich and diverse in cultural and natural resources and promotes economic and educational opportunities.

San Marcos Vision Statement

We the people of San Marcos imagine a vibrant community, rich in its ethnic and cultural diversity, working cooperatively to build a center for commerce, economic development and job growth built upon a broad foundation of high-quality educational institutions. We imagine an ecologically balanced, well-planned community that promotes the interest of all its citizens young and old, rich and poor, newcomers and old timers. We imagine a community that values its quality of life, which is preserved by its citizen-oriented government committed to opportunity, while preserving the community's small-town suburban atmosphere and maintaining a safe and secure environment.

San Marcos Core Values

The City of San Marcos employees, in striving to provide community service through responsive government, adopt the following Core Values:

- Provide a safe community with a high quality of life.
- Deliver consistent and responsive service.
- Ensure ethical, professional conduct by City employees.
- Provide quality service to residents.
- Provide for housing opportunities to all income groups.
- Strive to be proactive, innovative and solution orientation.
- Plan and build for the future.
- Be business friendly but citizen-oriented government.
- Protect the financial health of the City and promote the economic viability of the City and region.
- Protect the environment.
- Offer open, inclusive government.
- Operate the City as an efficient business entity.

San Marcos Motto

Valley of Discovery

About the City of San Marcos

In 1950, the first dirt was turned for the construction of Highway 78. San Marcos' first high school was then completed in June of 1961 and the City became incorporated on January 28, 1963. Through the 1960s, the city slowly gained new residents but by the 1970s, San Marcos became the third fastest-growing city in the state with a population of 17,479. During the 1980s, San Marcos almost doubled its population to 33,800. Growth has continued to boom in San Marcos bringing the city's present population to 83,781.

The City of San Marcos became a Charter City July 4, 1994. The City operates under a City Council/City Manager form of government. The City Manager is appointed by the City Council to function as the chief administrator of the City. The City Council sets the policy directions for the City, and the City Manager is charged with implementing those directions. Additionally, the City Manager keeps the City Council informed of City operations, prepares the annual budget, oversees special programs, and coordinates the various department activities.

Along with a population influx, came the need for more education. San Marcos took this realization seriously and the city now has 11 elementary schools, an English-learner Academy, three middle schools, and four high schools. Home to Palomar Community College, California State University San Marcos (CSUSM), and hosting several technical schools featuring higher education in the computer and medical fields, higher education has also become a benchmark for the City of San Marcos.

San Marcos continues to become a North County destination for many families and businesses. Here are a few more reasons why.

1. **Strong Local and Regional Economy**
   San Marcos enjoys a low unemployment rate and is one of the fastest growing cities in San Diego County. Its low crime rate and strong commitment to promote economic development also add to the community's value.
2. **Excellent Transportation Network**
   Located along the SPRINTER commuter rail line with excellent bus service, San Marcos has a solid transportation network. The City is located along Highway 78 and has six interchanges along that route, with easy access to Interstates 5 and 15. Several airports are also close by, including Carlsbad/Palomar Airport (6 miles), San Diego Airport (35 miles) and Orange County Airport (60 miles).
3. **Availability of Land for Development**
   Approximately 72 percent of the City is built-out.
4. **Central North County Location**
   San Marcos has an excellent urban (rural) interface setting with small town informality plus easy access to San Diego and southern Riverside and Orange County markets via Interstates 5 and 15.
5. **Exceptional Educational Opportunities**
   San Marcos is quickly becoming known as the educational hub of San Diego North with its award-winning school district, Palomar Community College and California State University San Marcos. Easy commutes are also available to other nearby colleges/universities as well as several employee skills training opportunities.

6. **Diversified Housing Market**
   Home to award-winning San Elijo Hills and other master planned communities, San Marcos is the leader in providing quality housing with a wide range of prices and designs.
7. **Quality Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Programs**
   A master parks and trails program, exceptional community recreation programs, City/school district cooperative programs, access to lakes, beaches and cultural programs enhance the quality of life that residents enjoy in San Marcos.
8. **Hospitable Climate**
   It's hard to beat the mild, year-round climate that San Marcos enjoys. An average of nine to 11 inches of rain falls annually and average summer temperature hover around 72 degrees.
9. **Environmental Awareness**
   San Marcos takes environmental awareness to heart, and is working hard to preserve the San Marcos Creek, ridgelines and sensitive habitat. It actively participates in state, federal and regional conservation programs as well as progressive local air and water quality programs.
10. **Quality Medical Care**
    Local and regional hospitals and clinics, community outreach programs, expanding private and community hospital facilities ensure that residents have quick and quality access to medical care.

Chapter One –General Information

Purpose of Commissions and Committees

The City of San Marcos values public involvement in the City's decision-making process. City commissions, committees, and boards are one vital component to bringing new ideas to the City Council and representing the diverse community. Members of these commissions, committees, and boards are a valuable resource for city government by assisting the City Council make the most informed decision for the benefit of the entire community.

The public each year has the opportunity to apply for vacant and expired positions. As part of the annual City Council review of appointments process; citizens of the City, pursuant to the Maddy Act (Act), have equal access to specific and current information about the many local regulating and advisory commissions, committees, and boards. The Act provides all qualified applicants the equal opportunity to be informed of vacancies and opportunities to participate in the operations of local government by serving on such commissions, committees, and boards.

Commission/Committee/Board Appointments

Each commission, committee, and board is comprised of citizens who are interviewed and appointed by the Mayor and approved by the City Council. Qualifications to serve include: residence within the City of San Marcos and is a qualified elector of the City. For more detailed information and qualification requirements, please see the commission, committee or board information on the City website. Terms of office vary according to commission, but most are either two or four years. Boardmembers serve at the will of the City Council or until a qualified successor has been appointed. Residents wishing to be considered for an appointment should complete an application form available online or contact the City Clerk's office at (760) 744-1050, ext. 3145 to request a copy.

Compensation

Some commissions, committees, and boards receive a meeting stipend for the work that is done in relationship to their duties as a member. Additional information can be found on the individual commission, committee, board information page.

Reporting & Training Requirements

All public officials, including commissions, committees, and board members, must file annual Conflict of Interest form with the City Clerk's office as required by State law. These forms are public records and are available to the public upon request. The forms require information concerning income, business ownership, property interest in the community, gifts received, that ensure that no financial benefits are made decisions relating to one's service on a board or commission.

Legislation also requires elected officials and appointees to have two hours of ethics training every two years. The City offers this training to all commission, committee, and board members in compliance with the law.

A list of San Marcos City commissions, committees, and boards can be found below.

Budget Review Committee
Community Services Commission
Planning Commission
San Marcos Community Foundation
San Marcos Creek Specific Plan Oversight Committee
San Marcos Economic Development Corporation
Student and Neighborhood Relations Commission
Traffic Commission
Youth Commission

Authorizing Documents

The City Council approves the formation, composition, and responsibilities of all advisory bodies. Some advisory bodies, such as the Planning Commission, have responsibilities under State law. All advisory bodies operate under City Council auspices and are responsible to the City Council for compliance with their respective bylaws, the City Charter, City Council policies, the Municipal Code, the Zoning Code and the Brown Act (Open Meeting Law), among other regulations.

Bylaws or Resolutions

Generally, commission and committee operations, procedures, and duties are established in adopted bylaws or resolutions. In most cases, bylaws should be reviewed and approved by the City Attorney and City Council. Bylaws or policies for each commission and committee whose members include public appointees are available in the City Clerk's office.

Meeting Times

City commissions and committees meet on a regular basis, usually monthly or bimonthly. Meetings are open to the public. The calling of a special meeting, or the cancellation of any regular meeting, must be coordinated between the Chair and staff, and shall be subject to notice under the Brown Act. Commission and committee members must also be notified in advance of the canceling or scheduling of meetings. Refer to Chapter Three for information regarding noticing requirements and meeting protocol.

Meetings

A majority of the members of a commission or committee constitutes a quorum. No business may be transacted without a quorum. A member who is unable to attend a meeting is responsible for notifying the Chair or staff at the earliest possible time.

Chair and Vice Chair Election

Generally, each commission and committee selects a Chair and Vice Chair annually, according to the respective bylaws or governing resolutions.

Attendance

For advisory bodies to function effectively and accomplish their goals, all members must be active participants, and are encouraged to attend all meetings. Any member who is absent more than the number of excused or unexcused absences allowed by the applicable bylaws shall forfeit commission or committee membership. Attendance is also considered when seeking reappointment.

Chapter Two –Commission/Committee Role and Relationships

Council–Commission/Committee Relationship

The primary purpose of all advisory bodies is to provide judicious advice to the City Council. The role of a commission/committee can include hearing public testimony on the City Council's behalf, building community consensus for proposals or projects, reviewing written materials, facilitating study of critical issues, guiding the implementation of new or regulating established programs, assessing the alternatives regarding issues of community concern, and ultimately forwarding recommendations to the City Council for consideration. There are times when a commission/committee recommendation will not be sustained or will be modified by the City Council. It is important not to recognize this as a rejection of the integrity of the recommendation, but rather, as an inevitable part of the process of community decision-making.

Throughout this process, the form and formality of the relationship between commission/committee members and Councilmembers will vary. Some commission/committee members will have regular contact with individual Councilmembers, while others may serve solely in the group context. There are times when the Chair may address the City Council formally on behalf of the commission/committee, and other times when a commission/committee member may meet with a Councilmember individually. It is important to aim for clarity and mutual respect for the different responsibilities and roles at all times.

Staff–Commission/Committee Relationship

The relationship between the commission/committee and staff is an active, continuous, and nuanced one. Both commission/committee and staff are motivated by the shared goal of furthering the City's best interests; yet, while the goal is shared, there are times when the approach and responsibility toward implementing the goal may be interpreted differently. In addition, statutes, City policies and codes, and budgetary constraints must be considered as recommendations are being formulated. The interaction between commission/committee members and staff need never be adversarial, but rather, an opportunity for different perspectives and appreciation for each other's strengths.

In order to recognize the range of roles and responsibilities, below are some issues to consider and to discuss with your staff liaison:

1. What are the reporting relationships? Does the staff liaison report directly to the commission/committee, to the department director, or both?
2. How is direction given? Can a study be directed to staff from a commission/committee or must it be given through an administrator or elected body?
3. How are staff proposals and recommendations handled?
4. Can a commission/committee member arrange for 1:1 briefings with staff?

Staff Responsibilities

Important staff responsibilities include:

- Being informed about the latest developments in their field.
- Providing background and expressing views to the commission/committee on important issues.

- Providing administrative support, including agenda and report preparation and recording of minutes at meetings.
- Maintaining a professional position on all topics.
- Assisting the commission/committee to stay on track and focused.
- Interpreting relevant City, State, and Federal laws and policies.
- Developing a rapport with the Chair and commission/committee members.
- Alerting commission/committee members of possible detrimental actions.
- Presenting commission/committee recommendations to the City Council.
- Act as an advisor to the commission/committee.

City Clerk

The City Clerk's Office accepts and maintains commission/committee applications, updates membership rosters, and maintains a library of bylaws for the various advisory bodies. The office is also a resource to the various City departments with respect to the Brown Act, agenda processing, and meeting procedural questions. The City Clerk is the filing officer for FPPC Form 700 Statements of Economic Interests and Campaign Statements as required by City and State laws.

City Attorney

The City Attorney is appointed by the City Council and under their direction, provides them legal advice based on what is best for the City. They are the primary resource for understanding compliance with City, State and Federal laws, including but not limited to the Brown Act and conflict of interest regulations.

Chapter Three – Meeting Protocol

Agenda Preparation and Posting

Agendas and staff reports for commission and committee meetings are prepared by staff in accordance with the City's agenda preparation guidelines and the Ralph M. Brown Act ("Brown Act"), also sometimes referred to as the open meeting law. The Brown Act is explained in detail in Chapter Four. Agendas for regular meetings must be posted no later than 72 hours prior to the meeting date/time. Agendas for special meetings must be posted no later than 24 hours prior to the meeting date/time. Your staff liaison will ensure that you are provided an agenda packet in a timely fashion prior to each commission or committee meeting. The agenda packet will include the posted meeting agenda notice, staff reports and recommended actions, and general information. Once the agenda is posted and distributed to a majority of the commission/committee members, it becomes a public record.

Meeting agendas, staff reports, notices, and minutes of each advisory body are maintained by the City in accordance with the City's records retention schedule. Following the meeting, staff will prepare the minutes and place them on the subsequent agenda for approval.

Preparation for Meetings

Be prepared. Thoroughly review the agenda packet, including agenda reports and recommended actions, and any other materials *before* the meeting. The issues that come before commissions/committees are important to the community as a whole and demand your consistent attention.

Some questions to ask yourself may include:

- What is the history behind the item?
- What are some public concerns and what are the long-term interests of the community?
- What are we trying to accomplish and what are the benefits/drawbacks?
- What guidance can be found in our foundational documents?

If you have additional questions regarding the agenda or agenda report, contact your staff liaison before the meeting for clarification or additional information.

Keep an open mind. An objective, balanced, and receptive approach will help you assess the facets of a given issue, and evaluate new ideas. When receiving written and oral public testimony, it will be necessary to discern between fact and opinion, as well as between those concerns that are relevant and those that are secondary to the issue at hand. Keeping an open mind will make it easier for you to understand all sides of an issue before you make a judgment or take a position.

Strive to appreciate differences in approach and points of view. Diversity of ideas sustains a thoughtful dialogue and a vibrant community. Likewise, take care to articulate your own ideas. Remember that your individual voice is a critical part of the whole dialogue. Again, furthering common goals takes cooperation, flexibility, and a broad-based view of the public interest. If in doubt, return to the foundational documents to guide your understanding of the complexities of an issue.

Ask for clarification if you are unsure about something *during* the meeting. Your understanding of issues is important. Each commission and committee has a City staff liaison to provide information to assist the members throughout the decision-making process.

Rules of Debate
Unless otherwise provided by law, Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised, governs the general conduct of committee or commission meetings.

The Chair (presiding officer) may move or second a motion, and debate as Chair. The Chair is subject to the limitations of debate that are imposed on all members and shall not be deprived of any of the rights and privileges of a member.

Every commission or committee member desiring to speak shall address the Chair, and upon recognition by the Chair, shall limit comments to the question under debate, avoiding all indecorous language and references to personalities. A member, once recognized, shall not be interrupted except in accordance with rules of parliamentary procedure (for example, point of order, parliamentary inquiry, question of privilege, or appeal of Chair's procedural ruling).

Securing Permission to Speak
A member of the public desiring to address a commission or committee shall first secure permission from the Chair. Any commission or committee member may also request of the Chair that a member of the public be recognized to speak. Remarks should be directed to the matter being considered.

Individuals
So that their identities are accurately reported in the record, persons addressing the commission or committee are requested to give their name in an audible tone of voice and fill out a speaker's card provided for that purpose. However, persons shall not be denied the opportunity to address the commission or committee because they decline to identify themselves or to fill out a speaker's card. The time limit for public testimony shall be as stated in the agenda, or at the discretion of the Chair.

All remarks shall be addressed to the commission or committee as a whole and not to any individual member or to members of the audience. No person, other than a member of the commission or committee, and the person having the floor, shall be permitted to enter into any discussion without the permission of the Chair. While commission or committee members may ask questions of a speaker, they should not debate matters with a speaker. All remarks shall be delivered in a respectful manner.

Group Speakers (See City Council Resolution 2013-7748)
A speaker qualified under the rules set forth in this section as representing members of a group may receive a maximum of fifteen (15) minutes to address the Council. This policy also applies to commissions and committees. Groups are encouraged to designate one (1) spokesperson to speak on behalf of the group. For those groups that do not designate a spokesperson, the Mayor may request that one be chosen.

To receive the maximum allotted fifteen (15) minutes, all group members present at the Council meeting must cede their individual speaking time in favor of the group spokesperson, unless an individual group member desires to speak on a non-related issue or an element of the agenda item that will not be addressed by the group.

Groups are designated as either a formal or informal organization. The following documentation and information, which shall be retained by the group, must be presented to the City Clerk for review and verification purposes at least one (1) business day prior to the Council meeting at which the group desires to speak. The group is required to update all information annually; previous submissions will not suffice whether or not changes have been made to the applicable documents.

a) Formal Organization:
   i. current bylaws, including a statement of the organization's purpose and requirements for membership; and
   ii. a newly-adopted resolution designating those individuals authorized to speak on behalf of the organization.

b) Informal Organization:
   i. organization's name;
   ii. organization's position; and
   iii. newly-adopted resolution designating those individual(s) authorized to speak on behalf of the organization.

The Mayor, at his/her discretion, may limit the presentation of redundant information by individual or group speakers.

Upon conclusion of speaker presentations the Council, at its discretion, will determine whether Council questions and/or any Council and staff responses should be immediate or made at a later time in a more comprehensive approach. Speakers will not be allowed to engage Council or staff in a debate and/or question/answer period while at the podium.

If the agenda item appears to be controversial or complex, the Council may establish additional rules and regulations regarding presentations which could include, but are not limited to, allotted times for presentation by each group or each side of an issue.

Decorum in Meetings

- Arrive promptly to ensure the meeting is called to order on time.
- Be fair, impartial, and respectful of the public, staff, and each other. Give your full attention when others speak.
- Conclude public testimony before commission or committee members begin serious deliberation on an issue.
- Balance multiple views, neither favoring nor ignoring one individual or group over another. Your obligation is to represent a broad-based view of the community's long-range interests.
- Remember that your commission or committee exists to take actions and/or develop recommendations to the City Council in the interest of advancing City Council policies and addressing community issues. It is not simply a discussion group.

Role of Chair

The Chair shall preserve order and decorum at all meetings of the commission/committee, announces the decisions taken, and decides questions of order. The Chair is responsible for ensuring the effectiveness of the group process. A good Chair balances moving the discussion forward with involving all of the commission/committee members and allowing for adequate public participation.

The Chair will also endeavor to end meetings at a reasonable hour. In the absence of the Chair, the Vice Chair shall act as presiding officer.

The Chair will:

- Start meetings on time and keep the agenda in mind in order to give each item sufficient time for consideration.
- Announce at the start of a meeting if the order of agenda items is to be rearranged for convenience, for response to those attending only for certain items, or for better pacing of the agenda.
- Ensure that the public understands the nature of the issue being discussed (for example, reason for discussion, process to be followed, opportunities for public input, timeline for decision).
- Keep discussion focused on the issue at hand.
- Solicit opinions from commission/committee members and encourage evaluation of new, tentative, or incomplete ideas.
- If the body's bylaws or policies impose time limits upon board members or the public, the rule may be enforced at the discretion of the Chair.
- Protect commission/committee members, staff, and the public from personal attacks.
- Provide structure for addressing complicated issues.
- Refer to staff or legal counsel when technical guidance is required.
- Attempt to reach decisions expeditiously on action items. At those times when action would be premature and additional analysis is needed, the Chair will guide discussion toward a timeline or framework for responsible action.

Preparing Motions

Commission/committee meetings are conducted according to parliamentary procedure. As the presiding officer, the Chair's rulings must be followed unless he/she is overruled by a majority vote of the body upon an appeal of a ruling.

When a commission/committee member wishes to propose an action on a particular item on the posted agenda for the commission/committee to consider, the member makes a motion.
Examples of Common Motions:

- **Delay consideration:** "*I move to continue the item until…"* (date specific or date uncertain).
- **Lay on the Table:** "*I move to lay the question on the table."* A motion to lay a pending question aside temporarily in order to take up something else of immediate urgency. The motion requires a 2/3 vote for adoption.
- **Limit or Extend Debate:** "*I move that debate be limited to one speech of three minutes for each member."* The motion requires a 2/3 vote for adoption.
- **Close Debate: "***I move (or call) the previous question."* This ends debate immediately in order to call for a motion for the previous question. The motion requires a 2/3 vote for adoption.
- **Request More Study:** "*I move to refer this to staff or (committee) for further study."*
- **Request Information:** *"Point of information…."*
- **Amend a Motion**: "*I move to amend the motion by…"* If the amendment is accepted by the maker and a second is made, then it's considered a "friendly amendment" and no separate vote is required. If it is not accepted, then a separate vote to amend the main motion is required. The amendment must be voted on before the main motion.
- **Adopt a Staff Recommendation**: "*I move to adopt staff recommendation to…"*

- **Deny Staff Recommendation**: "*I move to deny staff recommendation to…"*
- **Modify Staff Recommendation**: "*I move to adopt the recommendation with the following modifications…"*

Properly phrasing a motion can be difficult and corrections may be necessary before it is acted upon. Until the Chair states the motion, the member making the motion may rephrase or withdraw it.
Members may wish to write out difficult motions. If a motion gets too complicated, call a recess and have staff assist with the wording.

It is best to avoid including more than one proposal in the same motion. This is especially important when commission/committee members are likely to disagree.

Any member may make a motion to bifurcate or divide a motion in order to treat each proposal as a separate motion.

A motion goes through the following steps:

1. The member asks to be recognized by the Chair.
2. The member makes the motion: *"I move that we…"*
3. Another member seconds the motion: *"I second the motion."*
4. The Chair restates the motion, or asks the recording secretary to do so, and asks for discussion on the motion.
5. When the Chair determines that there has been enough discussion, the debate may be closed with: *"I call the question."* or *"Is there any further discussion?"*
6. If no one asks for permission to speak, the Chair then puts the motion to a vote: *"All those in favor say aye. All those opposed say nay."* If voting lights are used, the Chair will state, "Please vote."
7. The Chair should restate the motion prior to the vote to ensure the motion is clearly understood by all. Any member may request a roll call vote on a motion.
8. After the vote, the Chair or the recording secretary announces one of the following:
    a. *"The motion carries unanimously."*
    b. *"The motion carries ___ to ___ (identifying the number of aye and nay votes, and listing individually if requested)."*
    c. *"The motion has failed."*

Chapter Four – Legal Matters

The Ralph M. Brown Act

Most City of San Marcos advisory bodies are subject to State law governing open meetings related to proceedings of local agencies. The California law governing open meetings, formally entitled the Ralph M. Brown Act and commonly referred to simply as the Brown Act, is found in California Government Code Section 54950 et seq.

The Brown Act was enacted by the Legislature to ensure that local public agencies deliberate and take action on governmental matters at meetings open to the public and in which the public may participate. To further this goal, the Brown Act generally requires that all items proposed to be discussed or voted at a local agency meeting on be noticed on a posted agenda. Agendas must include a brief description of each such item.

Agenda Materials
With limited exception, the public must also have access to all staff reports and writings in connection with an agenda item once they are disseminated to a majority or all of the members of an advisory body. This includes writings distributed by staff, a board member or the public after the posting of the agenda or during a meeting.

Public Comments
The posted agenda also shall indicate when members of the public have the opportunity to address the commission/committee. Members of the public may testify to any agenda item before action is taken. The public may also testify to non-agenda matters that fall within the jurisdiction of the advisory body. Although the commission or committee is prohibited from engaging in discussions or acting on matters not on the agenda, a member of the advisory body may briefly respond to statements or questions posed by the public; ask questions for clarification; refer the matter to staff; or direct staff to place a matter of business on a future agenda. Commission or committee members may also make brief announcements or report on his/her own activities within the purview of the advisory body.

Non-Agendized Items
Discussion or action on items that are not included in the posted agenda may only occur in limited circumstances. To discuss or act on an item *not* included in the posted agenda, a commission/committee must:

- Determine that the need to take action arose after the agenda was posted, and that the action is required prior to the next meeting, with a brief explanation of the circumstances constituting the need for action and the reason the need arose after posting the agenda. This explanation should be included in the meeting minutes.
- Approve the above determinations by a vote of at least two-thirds of the members of the body, or by a unanimous vote if less than two-thirds of the members are present.
- Discuss and take action on the item if the determinations are approved.
- Include that action in the meeting's minutes.

Informational items placed on an agenda may not be acted upon at the meeting. Any member may, however, request that the informational item be placed on a future agenda for consideration.

The Legislature amends provisions of the Brown Act periodically, rendering the law increasingly complicated. It is recommended you familiarize yourself with the provisions of the Brown Act by reviewing "Open & Public IV: A "Guide to the Ralph M. Brown Act," a publication of the League of California Cities, which is included in Appendix C. The full text of the Brown Act can be accessed on the Web at: www.leginfo.ca.gov, by selecting "California Law," "Government Code," and entering Section "54950."

Meeting Types

The Brown Act regulates a legislative body's regular meetings, adjourned meetings, special meetings, and emergency meetings.

- "Regular meetings" occur at the dates, times, and locations set by resolution, ordinance, bylaws or other formal action of the legislative body and are subject to 72-hour posting requirements.
- "Adjourned meetings" are regular or special meetings that have been adjourned to a time and place specified in the order of adjournment, usually to a date prior to the next Regular Meeting.
- "Special meetings" are called by the chair or a majority of the legislative body to discuss specific items on the agenda, and are subject to 24-hour posting requirements.
- "Emergency meetings" are a limited class of meetings held when prompt action is needed due to actual or threatened disruption of public facilities, and require a one-hour notice prior to holding the meeting.

Commission/committee staff is responsible for identifying the type of meeting and posting all notices, including the agenda and any notice of adjournment, and will make available to the public copies of agendas, notices, any supplemental documentation, and minutes in accordance with the Brown Act, the Public Records Act and the City's records retention schedule.

Regular Meetings

The Brown Act requires each legislative body to set the time for regular meetings by ordinance, resolution, bylaws, or whatever specifies the conduct of that body's business. Traditionally, this has been the bylaws of the legislative body. City Council should review and approve changes in bylaws, including the change of scheduled meeting dates and times.

Under City Council policy, regular meetings are generally held at City Hall or at other City facilities. Meetings may be held outside City facilities when City space is not available. Neighborhood meetings may be held outside City facilities.

The Brown Act generally requires boards, commissions and committees to conduct public meetings. A "meeting" is considered to take place any time that a quorum of the advisory body gathers to discuss that body's business or to take action. Further, the Brown Act prohibits a quorum from meeting privately. (A "task force" may or may not be subject to the Brown Act depending upon its composition and purpose.) To this end, the Brown Act specifically prohibits "any use of direct communication, personal intermediaries or technological devices that is employed by a majority of the members of the legislative body to develop a collective concurrence as to action to be taken on an item by the members

of the legislative body." Hence the prohibition extends not only to personal contacts of the commission or committee members among themselves outside a public meeting, but also prohibits "serial" meetings whereby information is ultimately exchanged among a quorum of the members via in-person discussions, by phone or by e-mail. The preferred course of action for members needing information should be through contact with City staff.

E-mail Communications between Commission Members

Because e-mail communications can ultimately lead to the exchange of information intended to, or which may, create collective concurrence among a quorum of commission/committee members, e-mail communications between commission/committee members relative to commission/committee business should be avoided. While two members of a five-member board, for example, may appropriately communicate with one another by way of e-mail, the "forwarding" of such an e-mail message to a third member could result in a Brown Act violation.

Communications with the Public Outside Meetings

The Brown Act does not limit a commission or committee member acting on his or her own outside public meetings. This exception recognizes the right to confer with constituents, advocates, consultants, the media, or City staff. However, members of commissions and committee should exercise care and good judgment with respect to information learned as a result of such contacts. Decisions at public meetings should be based on a consideration only of the information, testimony and documents that has been presented to all members at or in connection with the meeting, and not on private discussions or transmittals (which are sometimes referred to as ex parte communications).

Adjournment or Continuance

A legislative body may adjourn or continue any regular, adjourned regular, special or adjourned special meeting to a time and place specified in the adjournment or continuance notice. A copy of the adjournment or continuance notice shall be conspicuously posted on or near the door where the meeting was held within twenty-four (24) hours after the time of adjournment or continuance. If the matter is continued to a time less than twenty-four (24) hours after the adjournment, a copy of the continuance notice shall be posted immediately following the meeting that was continued.

Conflict of Interest/Statements of Economic Interests Form 700

The Political Reform Act (PRA) was adopted by the voters of California as an initiative (Proposition 9) in 1974. The Fair Political Practices Commission (FPPC) is the enforcement agency for the Political Reform Act. One of the PRA's main purposes is to prevent financial conflicts of interest on the part of public officials.

The Act requires public officials to disclose all financial interests, such as investments, interests in real estate or sources of income, which the official may possibly affect by the exercise of his or her official duties. If a public official has a conflict of interest, the PRA may require the official to disqualify himself or herself from making or participating in a government decision, or using his or her official position to influence a government decision.

<u>What is a Conflict of Interest?</u>

The Political Reform Act of 1974, which is codified as Government Code Section 87100 et seq., provides that no public official at any level of State or local government shall make, participate in making, or in any way attempt to use his/her official position to influence a governmental decision in which he/she knows or has reason to know he/she has a financial interest.

An official has a financial interest in a decision within the meaning of Section 87100 of the PRA if it is reasonably foreseeable that the decision will have a material financial effect, distinguishable from its effect on the public generally, on the official or a member of his or her immediate family or on:

1) Any business entity in which the public official has a direct or indirect investment worth two thousand dollars ($2,000.00) or more.
2) Any real property in which the public official has a direct or indirect investment worth two thousand dollars ($2,000.00) or more.
3) Any source of income, other than gifts and other loans by a commercial lending institution in the regular course of business on terms available to the public without regard to official status aggregating five hundred dollars ($500) or more in value provided to, received by or promised to the public official within twelve months prior to the time when the decision is made.
4) Any business entity in which the public official is a director, officer, partner, trustee, employee, or holds any position of management.
5) Any donor, or any intermediary or agent for a donor of, a gift or gifts aggregating one hundred dollars ($100) or more in value provided to, received by, or promised to the public official within twelve months prior to the time when the decision is made.

For purposes of Section 87100, indirect investment or interest means any investment or interest owned by the spouse or dependent child of a public official, by an agent on behalf of a public official, or by a business entity or trust in which the official, the official's agents, spouse, and dependent children own (directly, indirectly, or beneficially) a ten percent interest or greater.

How does the Political Reform Act prevent Conflicts of Interest?

1) By Disclosure: The Political Reform Act requires every public official to disclose all financial interests, such as investments, interests in real estate (real property), or sources of income, which the official may possibly affect by the exercise of his or her official duties. "Gifts" as defined by the PRA that you receive or accept may also be subject to disclosure. Gifts aggregating $50 or more in a calendar year generally must be disclosed. No public official may accept gifts aggregating $440 or more in a calendar year from the same source. (This amount is adjusted every two years.) In addition, you may be subject to qualification as a result of accepting gifts over that amount from the same source within the twelve month period before the proposed decision. Disclosure is made on a form called a "Statement of Economic Interests Form (Form 700).

The City of San Marcos has adopted a Conflict of Interest Code which requires certain designated employees, consultants and members of specified City boards, commissions and committees who engage in governmental decisions to declare personal financial information by filing a Form 700. Form 700 must be filed upon assuming office and annually thereafter. Upon appointment, the City Clerk will provide each commission or committee member who is required to file Form 700 the necessary documents for filing. Form 700 filings are retained on file by the City Clerk and are deemed a public record.

2) By Disqualification: If a public official has a conflict of interest, the Political Reform Act requires the official to disqualify himself or herself from making or participating in a governmental decision, or using his or her official position to influence a governmental decision.

How can a public official determine if he or she has a Conflict of Interest?
Having a conflict of interest is not necessarily forbidden or illegal. It is the failure to disclose and/or the participation through voting or attempting to influence on issues where one has a conflict that contributes to the illegal action, subjecting the individual to possible criminal and civil penalties, and nullifying the action of the City.

When a commission or committee member suspects that he or she may have a conflict of interest, the City Attorney may be consulted. The official may be referred to the FPPC for guidance or an opinion because the advice of the City Attorney cannot be relied on to excuse a violation of the PRA.

"Your Duty to File" and "Can I Vote?" are resources provided by the FPPC and are included in Appendices A and B for reference. These resources provide a general overview of the laws regarding potential financial conflicts of interest of public officials as well as reporting requirements. The applicability of the conflict of interest laws depends on the unique facts of each particular case. Questions regarding specific situations may be directed to the City Attorney or the FPPC.

Staff will provide maps to Planning Commissioners for the purpose of determining whether a conflict of interest exists in any particular matter coming before the Planning Commission as a direct result of the proximity of the individual's property to a proposed project.

Real property in which the public official has an economic interest will be deemed "directly involved" where the real property is either the subject of the government action, or is located within 500 feet of the real property that is the subject of the governmental action. Real property is the "subject of government action" in any of the following contexts (FPPC § 18704.2):

- Zoning
- Rezoning
- Annexation
- De-annexation
- Land use entitlement
- License
- Permit
- Taxes
- Fees
- Public improvements (e.g., streets, water, sewer, etc.).

Ethics Training – AB 1234

Assembly Bill 1234 (Government Code Section 53235) which became effective in 2005, requires the City to provide ethics training for all members of a legislative body that receive compensation, salary or stipend, or reimbursement of expenses related to his/her official duties. The term "legislative body " includes not only the City Council, but also certain commissions, committees or boards. The following legislative bodies are required to receive training: Budget Review Committee, Community Services Commission, Planning Commission, City Council, San Marcos Community Foundation, Traffic

Commission. Applicable officials must receive two hours of ethics training within one year of the first day of service, and subsequently at least once every two years. For those of you who are subject to this requirement, the City's Human Resources Office will contact you to arrange for the required training.

Campaign Contributions by Appointees and Commissioners

California state law (Government Code 84308) prohibits any "officer" (which includes the governing board or commission) of a public agency who is running or has run for elective office from participating in decisions affecting his or her campaign contributors. The City of San Marcos has provided further discretion for voting and the receipt of funds in Municipal Code 2.16. It is the intent of the City of San Marcos in enacting this provision to prevent potential improper or undue influence over elected officials by campaign contributions, and to insure against election victories based primarily on the amount expended on campaigns.

San Marcos Municipal Code (SMMC) 2.16.070 disqualifies the officer from participating in certain proceedings, if the official has received campaign contributions of $100 or more from a party, participant or their agents within the 12 months preceding the decision. In addition, this section prohibits solicitation or receipt of campaign contributions in excess of $100 or more for twelve months after the decision, from parties, participants or their agents. It also requires disclosure on the record of the proceeding of all campaign contributions received from these persons during that period. Please review SMMC 2.16 "Controls on Campaign Contributions" for additional information concerning limitations, reporting requirements and violations.

The San Marcos Municipal Code can be viewed online or in the City Clerk's office. Additional information about conflicts created by campaign contributions can be found on the FPPC web site at www.fppc.ca.gov.

Chapter Five – Structure of Government

City Council/City Manager Form of Government

The City of San Marcos is a Charter City. As a Charter City, there is a differentiation between the policy-making function and the administrative function of government. The City of San Marcos operates under a City Council/City Manager form of government, which provides clear lines of authority and responsibility with the City Manager serving as chief administrator in charge of day-to-day operations of the City. The voters elect the Mayor and the City Council to formulate municipal policy. When the City Council makes a decision on an ordinance, law, or policy, the City Manager is responsible for implementing those policies.

The Mayor and City Councilmembers interact with the various City departments and City staff through the City Manager. All requests from City Councilmembers for information and staff assistance flow directly to the City Manager, who facilitates the request.

City Organization

City Clerk Department

The city clerk department maintains and protects all vital, permanent and historic records of the City through a Citywide records management program; accurately records City Council proceedings and actions; maintains its legislative history; coordinates the annual commissions recruitment process; updates and maintains the City's municipal code; administers all general, municipal and special elections; administers regulations relating to the Fair Political Practices Commission; and maintains business licenses and various other regulatory licenses and permits.

City Manager's Department

The mission of the city manager's office is to provide leadership, guidance and support to the City organization in the efficient and effective management of human, financial and material resources and to implement policies, annual goals and objectives as established by the City Council.

The goal of the city manager's office is to create and maintain a vibrant community environment and enhance the quality of life for San Marcos residents, businesses, customers and partners. This is accomplished by providing exceptional facilities, programs and services in a fiscally responsible manner.
The city manager serves as the chief executive officer of the City and is appointed by the City Council. Responsibilities provided in the city manager's office include preparation and submission of the annual city budget, capital improvement program, and directing the provision of police, public works/engineering, planning, building, housing, economic development, redevelopment, finance, human resources, and parks and recreation of the City. The department also provides staff support to the City Council, completes special projects, handles communication and outreach, analyzes state and federal legislation, coordinates risk management services and coordinates the cable television franchises.

Community Services Department

The Community Services Department provides recreational and community benefiting programs and supports services at City parks and recreational facilities. Specific elements of the department's functions are providing activities for preschoolers and day camp programming; holiday celebrations and

special city events; special interest classes; club programs; senior citizen services; family programs; youth and adult sports; cultural and performing arts; aquatics; liaison work with community groups; trail and nature center activities; and park and trail planning.

Planning Department
This division analyzes, plans, and recommends measures to protect existing resources and to ensure the orderly development of the community in a manner that will maintain a balance between the quality of life and the environment and the economic stability of the City. The Division administers the City's General Plan and various zoning and environmental regulations and provides primary staff assistance to the Planning Commission. The Division utilizes both staff and contract planning firms to process land use applications.

Buidling & Engineering Department
Our mission is to provide plan review, permit issuance, and building inspection to the citizens and business owners of the City of San Marcos in a courteous, professional, and ethical manner consistent with customer service goals. It is our sincere desire to preserve and strengthen our standard of living and protect life, health, property, and public welfare through an effective administration and regulation of the building codes.

Finance Department
The finance department is responsible for managing the City's financial operations in accordance with fiscal and accounting policies. Primary responsibilities include cash and investments management under the direction of the City Treasurer, financial reporting, coordination of the annual financial audit, preparation of the annual operating and capital improvement budget, payroll, accounts payable, accounts receivable, central cashiering and administration of all City funds and accounts. Additionally, the department administers all of the City's assessment and community facilities districts and related bond issues.

Fire Department
The San Marcos Fire Department is a full-service department. The fire department provides service to the City of San Marcos and the San Marcos Fire Protection District, which covers an area of 33 square miles and a population of approximately 95,000 residents. The department protects an extremely diverse community consisting of large areas of residential development, commercial/retail centers, office buildings, industrial parks and educational centers such as California State University San Marcos and Palomar Community College. In addition, the San Marcos Fire Department protects and manages several thousand acres of wildland and wildand urban interface lands.

Housing & Neighborhood Department
The housing and neighborhood services division manages the City's housing programs, crime prevention, solid waste disposal and recycling programs. Housing also receives and administers federal Community Development Block Grant funds to conduct activities that assist low- to moderate-income residents, households and communities.

Human Resources Department
The Human Resources and Risk Department is a collaborative team of professionals dedicated to supporting all City programs and departments.
Support is provided by:

- Recruiting qualified individuals;

- Ongoing employee relations;
- Employee training, development, and education;
- Providing a safe and healthy work environment; and
- Administering benefits, policies and procedures.

It is the objective of the Human Resources and Risk Department to assist employees, applicants and community members in a caring, trustworthy and timely manner.

Public Works Department

The public works department is comprised of the engineering division and the operations division. The engineering division of public works administers all aspects of engineering and activities relating to development permits and reviews, traffic operations and management, stormwater regulations and permit compliance, and all capital improvement programs (CIP). The operations division of public works department oversees capital improvement programs (CIP) construction inspection and maintenance of City parks, landscape, streets, drainage, traffic signals, the City vehicle/equipment fleet and outdoor lighting.

Real Property Services Department

The real property services division has as its mission to effectively manage the City's extensive real property and leasing interests through professional property management and facilities maintenance practices. Real property services assists with the community's short and long-term needs by providing significant non-tax revenue to the City's general fund. The City's leasing portfolio currently represents the second largest source of income for the City and the largest source of non-tax revenue. Real property services staff is dedicated to providing the highest level of customer service to the public, tenants of city-owned properties and City staff.

Chapter Six – Public Records / Media Relations

Public Records

Public records are maintained by the City Clerk as directed by the Government Code and managed through the adopted Records Retention Schedule. Each City Department also houses and manages active public records in their respective work areas.

All actions of the City Council are recorded and maintained as part of the official public record. While there are some specific exceptions, the general rule is that the information is public. City Council actions come in several forms. Formal actions are captured in the minutes of the meeting. Resolutions establish policy and provide direction. Ordinances set the code or laws under which the City is operated.
All agenda related materials, minutes and resolutions of City commissions and committees are also considered public records. These documents are prepared by the respective City Departments supporting a particular City commission or committee. The City Clerk's Office maintains these records for the long term according to retention schedules in the City's Electronic Records Management Program.

Electronic Mail (E-Mail)

Electronic mail communication generally constitutes "preliminary drafts, notes, or interagency or intra-agency memoranda that are not retained by the public agency in the ordinary course of business" within the meaning of Government Code Section 6254(a), unless the e-mail communication is printed and retained in official City files. Further, the disposition of the types of records (e-mail) generated or received by the City of San Marcos, is authorized for disposition as outlined in accordance with Government Code Section 34090 et seq. The City's current retention period for e-mail communications residing on City computers is 30 days. This means that any e-mail sent or received will be deleted from the City's server after that time.

The general rule for public officials and staff is to always be cautious and consider what you say, write or e-mail because it may become part of the public record. It is very common to receive a request under the California Public Records Act or a subpoena asking for specific public records, including e-mail on a variety of topics. E-mail, voice-mail, correspondence, other forms of communication and casual conversations are powerful tools and necessary in the work place; however, it is important to be aware that in the public work environment e-mail communications may be subject to public disclosure.

Media

Press Releases

The communications office for the City of San Marcos is responsible for informing residents about city-related programs, projects and services; disseminating information through the media; managing communications in an emergency response; coordinating special events and meetings; creating and maintaining a clear identity for San Marcos; and providing photography, graphic design and video production services.

San Marcos Community Television (SMTV)

San Marcos Community Television (SMTV) airs live cablecasts of City Council meetings on Cox Communications Channel 19, Time Warner Cable Channel 24 and AT&T U-verse Channel 99 along with original San Marcos programming like "Spotlight: San Marcos," the city's magazine-style television program. Palomar College airs community programming on SMTV from 4 to 10 pm, except during live and re-broadcast City Council meetings.

Web Site

The City of San Marco's web site is coordinated through the Communication's Office and can be accessed at www.san-marcos.net. The web site includes general information about the City, access to SMTV, current press releases, archived agendas and videos of past and present City Council meetings, and a myriad of information on City programs, projects and special events.

Community Magazine

San Marcos 360º is the award-winning city magazine that comes out three times a year in April, August and November. The magazine is filled with timely information on city programs, projects and services and also contains a complete guide to the city's recreational offerings. The magazine is mailed to 35,000 residences and businesses in the city limits.

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Appendices

Your Duty To File

A Basic Overview of State Economic Disclosure Law And Reporting Requirements For Public Officials

Fair Political Practices Commission
428 J Street, Suite 620
Sacramento, CA 95814
Toll-free advice line: 1 (866) ASK-FPPC
Web site: *www.fppc.ca.gov*

A Basic Overview of State Economic Disclosure Law And Reporting Requirements

Introduction

The Political Reform Act of 1974 (Gov. Code sections 81000-91014) requires many state and local public officials and employees to disclose certain personal financial holdings. The Act, which frequently has been amended, began as a ballot initiative approved by over 70 percent of California voters in the wake of the Watergate political scandals.

One of the Act's stated purposes declares:

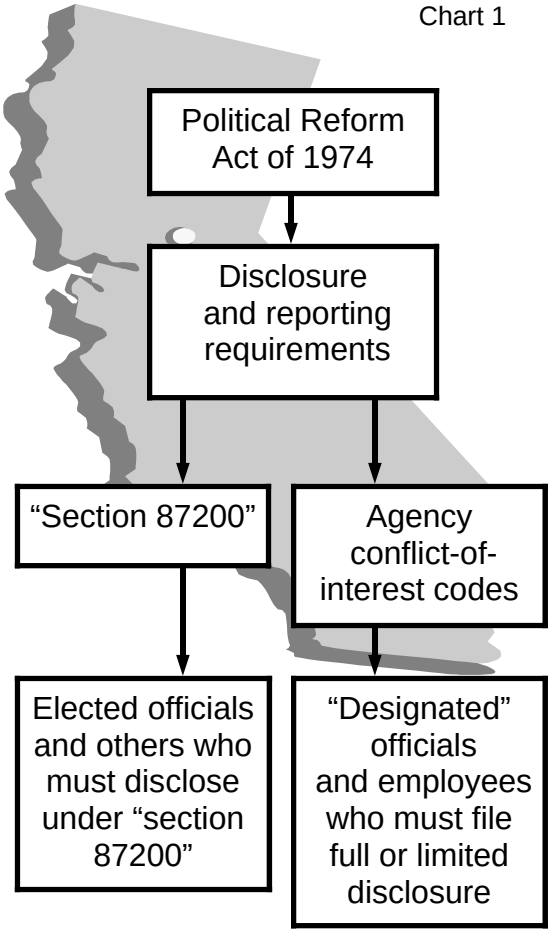
> *Assets and income of public officials which may be materially affected by their official actions should be disclosed and in appropriate circumstances the officials should be disqualified from acting in order that conflicts of interest may be avoided. (Cal. Gov't. Code section 81002(c).)*

In its findings and declarations, the Act adds:

> *Public officials, whether elected or appointed, should perform their duties in an impartial manner, free from bias caused by their own financial interests or the financial interests of persons who have supported them. (Cal. Gov't. Code section 81001(b).)*

The Act and its practical implementation have a broad reach across California

Chart 1



government. Many tens of thousands of public workers, ranging from the governor to local department heads to board and commission members, are required to file public, personal financial disclosure reports known as "statements of economic interests."

The Act establishes a complex, *decentralized* system of managing this disclosure in which each state and local government agency is required to adopt and implement a separate conflict-of-interest code. The administration of this decentralized system is divided between the Fair Political Practices Commission and re-

sponsible officials at more than 7,000 state and local agencies.

Employees and officeholders at virtually all state and local agencies, as well as candidates for public office, use the Fair Political Practices Commission's *form 700* to file their statements of economic interests. The statements are sometimes informally referred to as "SEIs," "700s" or "conflict-of-interest statements." The form is available from your agency or in an interactive version on the FPPC web site. Form 700 amendment schedules, also available from your agency and the web site, are used to file amendments to a previously filed statement.

Most of these forms are not filed directly with the FPPC. Rather, they are filed with the agency's filing officer or filing official, or, in the case of candidates, with election offices or local clerk offices. In some cases, the agency will forward the original form to the FPPC while retaining a copy.

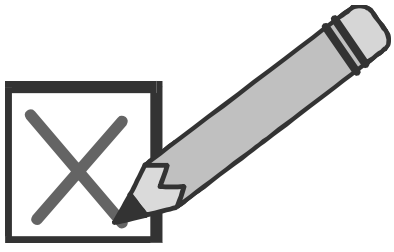
Filers must sign the form 700 under penalty of perjury (see section 81004 of the Act). Once filed, the form is a public document and must be made available to the public on request (section 81008). Public officials are generally not required to list their home addresses or home telephone numbers on the form.

The forms alert public officials about their own economic interests and potential areas of conflict in relation to their duties, and provide information to members of the public who may monitor official actions for any conflicts.

While sometimes popularly called "conflict-of-interest statements," the forms list only personal financial interests and don't in themselves disclose any conflicts of interests. Any conflict of interest under the Political Reform Act can only come about if a public official makes or participates in making a government decision that has a reasonably foreseeable material financial effect on the official's personal financial interests. Also, the law does not require all relevant personal financial interests (such as ownership of a personal residence in most cases) to be disclosed on the statement of economic interests.

The form 700 includes extensive instructions on how to fill it out. Your agency or the FPPC can provide individual help if you have further questions about the form, or where and when to file it.

The FPPC and agencies have the authority to levy penalties when a statement of economic interests is not filed on time. The FPPC also has the authority to levy administrative fines of up to $5,000 per violation of the Political Reform Act, or to seek civil penalties in the courts. The FPPC does not have the power to bring criminal charges but may refer cases to another law enforcement authority such as a district attorney.



Who must disclose?

The Act establishes two categories of public officials and employees who must disclose their personal financial interests. See Chart 1 on Page 1 for a basic diagram of how the law works.

I. Officials required to disclose under section 87200 of the Government Code

Section 87200 contains a specific list of officials, including high-ranking elected officeholders, who are subject to the most extensive disclosure requirements under the Act. These officials are listed in Chart 2, found in the right column of this page.

Officials specified in section 87200, and candidates for the elective offices specified in section 87200, must file form 700 periodically to disclose certain investments, interests in real property, sources of income, gifts, loans and business positions. These officials are sometimes informally referred to as "87200 filers."

II. Officials and employees required to disclose under section 87300

Every state and local government agency is required to adopt a "conflict-of-interest code" under the Act (see Cal. Gov't. Code section 87300). The Act lists the provisions required for such codes (section 87302) and requires that each code be approved by a "code reviewing body" (section 87303).

Chart 2 — Officials required to file disclosure statements under section 87200 of the Cal. Gov't. Code

State Offices:
Governor
Lieutenant governor
Attorney general
Controller
Insurance commissioner
Secretary of state
Treasurer
Members of the state legislature
Superintendent of public instruction
State Board of Equalization members
Public utilities commissioners
State energy resources conservation and development commissioners
State coastal commissioners
Elected CalPERS board members
Fair Political Practices Commission members
State public officials who manage public investments

Judicial Offices:
Supreme, appellate and superior court judges
Court commissioners
Retired and pro-tem judges, part-time court commissioners

County and city offices:
Members of boards of supervisors
Mayors and members of city councils
Chief administrative officers
District attorneys
County counsels
City attorneys
City managers
Planning commissioners
County and city treasurers
County and city public officials who manage public investments

The law requires this decentralized system. Section 87301 states:

> *It is the policy of this act that Conflict of Interest Codes shall be formulated at the most decentralized level possible, but without precluding intra-departmental review. Any question of the level of a department which should be deemed an "agency" for purposes of Section 87300 shall be resolved by the code reviewing body.*

When an agency adopts or amends its conflict-of-interest code, how does it determine which agency positions are covered under the code and which are not?

Each agency conflict-of-interest code must designate, or include, the employee positions within that agency *"which involve the making or participation in the making of decisions which may foreseeably have a material effect on any financial interest" of the employee (section 87302(a)).*

These officials and employees must file form 700 periodically and disclose certain investments, interests in real property, sources of income, gifts, loans and business positions. These filers are sometimes informally referred to as "designated employees" or "code filers."

In some cases, consultants to government agencies are required to file statements of economic interests under agency conflict-of-interest codes. Generally speaking, consultants who perform the duties of a government employee over a significant period of time, or who make or participate — without significant intervening review — in the making of government decisions, may be required to file (See FPPC Regulation 18701).

Every state and local government official, employee and consultant must refrain from making or participating in a government decision that has a reasonably foreseeable material financial effect on his or her personal financial interests, regardless of whether the individual is required to file a statement of economic interests.

Unlike the officials who must disclose under section 87200 of the Act, certain employees designated under agency conflict-of-interest codes may have to make only limited disclosures of their financial interests. The amount of disclosure will depend upon their duties. In general, those employees in positions with broader decision-making authority will have to provide broader disclosure of their personal financial interests.

Agencies must amend their conflict-of-interest codes when necessary to add or delete designated positions and disclosure categories. Conflict-of-interest codes are reviewed every two years. If an employee believes the amount of disclosure required for his or her position should be revised, those concerns can be addressed by the agency, including during the review process.

The FPPC reviews conflict-of-interest codes for all state agencies and all multi-

county agencies – approximately 1,000 codes. Codes adopted by other local agencies are reviewed by the appropriate county board of supervisors or city council, depending upon the jurisdiction of the agency (see section 82011).

The FPPC has adopted regulations to assist agencies in adopting conflict-of-interest codes. All state agencies and most local agencies now use a regulation (FPPC Regulation 18730) as the body of their individual conflict-of-interest codes, with each agency adding its individual list of designated employees and the types of disclosure required of different employee positions. This regulation can be found on the FPPC web site, *www.fppc.ca.gov.* FPPC staff members also provide assistance or training on conflict-of-interest codes to local and state agencies and code-reviewing bodies. Check the FPPC web site or call 1-866-ASK-FPPC for a schedule of upcoming training seminars.

Chart 3 — Examples of where form 700 is filed:

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- City Councilperson Rodriguez must disclose under section 87200 of the Political Reform Act. She files her form 700 with the city clerk (filing *official*), who retains a copy and forwards the original to the FPPC (filing *officer*). The city clerk also receives and retains forms filed by employees of city agencies who have been designated in the city's conflict-of-interest code. For the employees' forms, the city clerk is the filing *officer*.

- State Senator Smith is an official specified in Gov. Code section 87200. She files her form 700 with the secretary of the senate (filing official), who retains a copy and forwards the original to the FPPC (filing officer).

- The Department of Social Services is a state agency and has adopted a conflict-of-interest code designating those positions within the agency that must file form 700. The code requires the forms to be filed with the agency. However, the code also states that the personnel division will retain a copy of the form filed by the agency director and forward the original to the FPPC. The personnel division is the filing *officer* for forms filed by the employees and is the filing *official* for the director. The FPPC is the filing *officer* for the director.

- Chief Jones occupies a position designated by the conflict-of-interest code adopted by the Siskiyou County Fire Services District, a local government agency. The form 700s from Jones and the district's elected board members are filed with and retained by the county. As set out in the conflict-of-interest code, forms filed by all other designated employees are filed with and retained by the district.

An outline of the disclosure process — Chart 4

1. Two types of filers:

— "87200 filers" whose positions are listed in Gov. code section 87200

— "Designated officials" — state and local government agencies are required to adopt a conflict-of-interest code and designate decision makers who file disclosure statements

2. Types of statements filed on form 700:

— Assuming office/initial

— Annual

— Leaving Office

— Candidate

— Amended statements

3. Places to file the form:

— Section 87200 filers file with their state, city or county agency, which in most cases retains a copy and forwards the original to the FPPC

— "Designated officials" file their forms with their agency

1) Most of these originals retained by agency
2) Some originals forwarded to the FPPC (such as state department heads, board and commission members, selected multi-county agencies) with copies retained by the agency
3) Senate and Assembly staff members file directly with the FPPC

— Candidate statements are filed with the appropriate election official, such as the local registrar of voters or clerk

4. Filing officers and filing officials

— Filing *officer* retains original statements

1) Supplies forms, notifies filers
2) Logs statements, notifies non-filers
3) Reviews statements and requests amendments
4) Imposes late filing penalties
5) Provides public access

— Filing *official* retains copy and forwards original to filing officer

1) Supplies forms, notifies filers
2) Sends names of filers to filing officers
3) Logs forms sent to filing officer
4) Provides public access to copies of forms

Where do I file my form 700?

The Act mandates a decentralized system for filing, reviewing and retaining the form 700 statements of economic interests. This system is specified in section 87500 of the Government Code. Examples can be found in Chart 3 on Page 5, and the process is outlined in Chart 4 on Page 6.

Candidates file their statements of economic interests with their election official, such as their registrar of voters or city clerk.

The vast majority of public officials and employees file their form 700 with a filing *officer* at their own agency. This person reviews, logs and files the statement, provides public access to the form and performs other duties.

In most other cases, public officials and employees file their statement with a filing *official* at their agency, who acts as an intermediary and, after making a copy, forwards the original statement to the FPPC or to a county filing officer.

The FPPC receives – and is the filing officer for – approximately 20,000 statements of economic interest filed on an intermediary basis with other agencies. These statements include the officials specified in section 87200 as well as the following:

- designated employees of the state senate and state assembly
- members appointed to state boards and commissions
- state department heads (agency secretaries, directors and chief deputy directors of state agencies)
- employees of certain multi-county agencies

Regulation 18115 explains the respective roles of filing officers and filing officials. Briefly, filing officers assess fines for late-filed statements, review all statements for facial compliance, perform an in-depth review of some statements, and refer problems to the FPPC for potential enforcement actions. The FPPC now has an expedited and streamlined enforcement program for late-filed statements of economic interests.

Deadlines for filing statements of economic interests (form 700)

Candidates for certain elected positions must file a candidate statement prior to their election. Each type of statement has a specified "reporting period" (such as a calendar year) and is filed on the form 700 statement of economic interests.

Upon assuming his or her public office or job, an official first files an "assuming office" or "initial" statement of economic interests. After that, the official or employee files an annual statement each year until he or she leaves office, at which time a leaving office statement must be filed.

Candidate statements: Candidates for elective offices specified in section 87200 must file form 700 no later than the deadline for filing a declaration of candidacy to appear on a ballot. State and local elec-

tions occur throughout the year, and filing times vary. Some local conflict-of-interest codes may require candidates for other elective offices (such as school board or city clerk) to file candidate statements. Most do not have this requirement.

Assuming Office Statements:

- *elected officials:* file 30 days after assuming office.
- *appointed officials under section 87200:* file 30 days after assuming office or 10 days after appointment or nomination if subject to state Senate or judicial confirmation.
- *other appointed officials:* file 30 days after assuming office or 30 days after appointment or nomination if subject to state Senate confirmation.

Initial statements (officials whose positions are added to a new or amended conflict of interest code): file 30 days after the effective date of the conflict-of-interest code or amendment to an existing code.

Annual Statements:

- *elected state officers; judges and court commissioners; members of state boards and commissions specified in section 87200:* file on March 1.
- elected CalPERS board members: file on April 1.
- *all others:* file on April 1. (Some local agency conflict-of-interest codes may specify a different date.)

Leaving office statements: file within 30 days of leaving office.

Amendments: an amendment to a form 700 may be filed at any time—there is no deadline. A filer may submit more than one amendment.

Expanded Statements: many officials hold more than one position covered under the Act and may combine all of their filing obligations on one form, with a copy containing an original signature filed with each agency.

Exceptions:

There are several exceptions to the filing deadlines:

- Elected state officers (newly elected) may not be required to file assuming office statements. They file a candidate

statement, then the next annual statement.

- An official who completes a term of office and, within 30 days, begins a new term in the same office is not required to file a leaving or assuming office statement (such as when an elected official is reelected to the same office).

- An official who leaves an office and, within 30 days, assumes another position with the same agency, or in the same jurisdiction (such as when a city planning commissioner is elected mayor) is not required to file a leaving or assuming office statement.

- An official who assumes office between October 1 and December 31, and who properly files an assuming office statement, is not required to file the next annual statement, but will wait until the following year.

- A candidate who has filed an assuming office or an annual statement within 60 days prior to filing a declaration of candidacy is not required to file a candidate statement.

- Certain statements may be combined. For example, if an official who normally files an annual statement on March 1 leaves office between January 1 and February 28, he or she can combine the annual and leaving office statements, as long as the statement is filed by March 1.

- Retired judges who serve part-time, *pro tempore* judges, and part-time court commissioners are required to file form 700 only if they serve 30 days or more in a calendar year.

- Any deadline that falls on a Saturday, Sunday or official state holiday is automatically moved to the next business day.

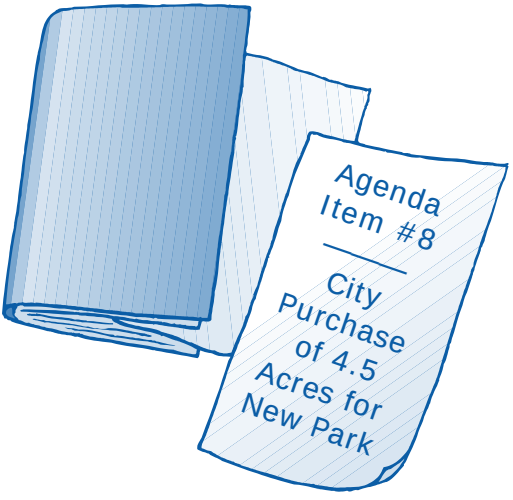
Important note

This Fair Political Practices Commission fact sheet discusses provisions of California's Political Reform Act relating to economic disclosure and reporting requirements for public officials. While we hope you find the information helpful, ***you should not rely on the fact sheet alone to ensure compliance with the Act.*** If you have any questions, consult the Act and FPPC regulations, your agency's filing official or legal counsel, or call the FPPC's toll-free help line at 1-866-ASK-FPPC (1-866-275-3772). This fact sheet, the Act, regulations and other important information are on our web site, *www.fppc.ca.gov.*

A good idea -
Call for toll-free advice at:
1-866-ASK-FPPC
(1-866-275-3772)

Can I vote?

A Basic Overview Of Public Officials' Obligations Under the Political Reform Act's Conflict-of-Interest Rules



California Fair Political Practices Commission

"My home is near the proposed new shopping mall. Can I vote on the issue at next month's Planning Commission meeting?"

Many of you may have been confronted with such questions. This booklet is offered by the FPPC as a general overview of your obligations under the Political Reform Act's conflict-of-interest rules. Using non-technical terms, the booklet is aimed at helping you understand your obligations at the "big picture" level and to help guide you to more detailed resources.

Stripped of legal jargon:

➢You have a conflict of interest with regard to a particular government decision if it is sufficiently likely that

Fair Political Practices Commission

Toll-free Advice Line: 1-866-ASK-FPPC

the outcome of the decision will have an important impact on your economic interests, **and**

➢a significant portion of your jurisdiction does not also feel the important impact on their economic interests.

The voters who enacted the Political Reform Act by ballot measure in 1974 judged such circumstances to be enough to influence, or to appear to others to influence, your judgment with regard to that decision.

The most important thing you can do to comply with this law is to learn to recognize the economic interests from which a conflict of interest can arise. No one ever has a conflict of interest under the Act "on general principles" or because of personal bias regarding a person or subject. A conflict of interest can only arise from particular kinds of economic interests, which are explained in non-technical terms later in this booklet.

An important note…

You should not rely solely on this booklet to ensure compliance with the Political Reform Act, but should also consult the Act and Commission regulations. The Political Reform Act is set forth at Cal. Gov. Code §§81000-91014, and the Fair Political Practices Commission regulations are contained in Title 2, Division 6 of the California Code of Regulations. Both the Act and regulations are available on the FPPC's web site, http://www.fppc.ca.gov. Persons with obligations under the Act or their authorized representatives are also encouraged to call the FPPC toll-free advice line — **1-866-ASK-FPPC** — as far in advance as possible.

If you learn to understand these interests and to spot potential problems, the battle is mostly won because you can then seek help on the more technical details of the law from your agency's legal counsel or from the California Fair Political Practices Commission. **The Commission's toll-free advice line is 1-866-ASK-FPPC (1-866-275-3772).**

Under rules adopted by the FPPC, deciding whether you have a financial conflict of interest under the Political Reform Act is an eight-step process. If you methodically think through the steps whenever there may be a problem, you can avoid most — if not all — mistakes. These steps are spelled out and explained in general terms in this booklet.

If you learn nothing else from this booklet, remember these things:

- **This law applies only to financial conflicts of interest; that is, conflicts of interest arising from economic interests.**
- **Whether you have a conflict of interest that disqualifies you depends heavily on the facts of each governmental decision.**
- **The most important proactive step you can take to avoid conflict of interest problems is learning to recognize the economic interests from which conflicts of interest can arise.**

On the next page are the eight steps:

Eight steps to help you decide

Step One: Are you a "public official" within the meaning of the rules?

Step Two: Are you making, participating in making, or influencing a governmental decision?

Step Three: What are your economic interests? That is, what are the possible sources of a financial conflict of interest?

Step Four: Are your economic interests directly or indirectly involved in the governmental decision?

Step Five: What kinds of financial impacts on your economic interests are considered important enough to trigger a conflict of interest?

Step Six: The important question: Is it substantially likely that the governmental decision will result in one or more of the materiality standards being met for one or more of your economic interests?

Step Seven: If you have a conflict of interest, does the "public generally" exception apply?

Step Eight: Even if you have a disqualifying conflict of interest, is your participation legally required?

Next, here is a non-technical explanation of each:

Public Official

Step One — Are you a "public official," within the meaning of the rules?

The Act's conflict-of-interest rules apply to "public officials" as defined in the law. This first step in the analysis is usually a formality — you are probably a public official covered by the rules. If you are an elected official or an employee of a state or local government agency who is designated in your agency's conflict-of-interest code, you are a "public official." If you file a Statement of Economic Interests (Form 700) each year, you are a "public official" under the Act (even if you are not required to file a Form 700, in some cases you may still be considered a public official because the definition covers more than specifically designated employees). The cases that are tougher to determine typically involve consultants, investment managers and advisers, and public-private partnerships. If you have any doubts, contact your agency's legal counsel or the FPPC.

Governmental Decision

Step Two — Are you making, participating in making, or influencing a governmental decision?

The second step in the process is deciding if you are engaging in the kind of conduct regulated by the

conflict-of-interest rules. The Act's conflict-of-interest rules apply when you:

- ***Make*** a governmental decision (for example, by voting or making an appointment).

- ***Participate*** in making a governmental decision (for example, by giving advice or making recommendations to the decision-maker).

- ***Influence*** a governmental decision (for example, by communicating with the decision-maker).

A good rule of thumb for deciding whether your actions constitute making, participating in making, or influencing a governmental decision is to ask yourself if you are exercising *discretion* or *judgment* with regard to the decision. If the answer is "yes," then your conduct with regard to the decision is very probably covered.

When you have a conflict — Regulation 18702.5 (special rule for section 87200 public officials)

Government Code section 87105 and regulation 18702.5 outline a procedure that public officials specified in section 87200 must follow for disclosure of economic interests when they have a conflict of interest at a public meeting. The full text of this law and regulation may be viewed in the Library and Publications section of the FPPC's website at http://www.fppc.ca.gov.

Public officials specified in section 87200 of the Government Code, such as council members, planning commissioners, and boards of supervisors, must pub-

licly identify in detail the economic interest that creates the conflict, step down from the dais **and must then leave the room**. This identification must be following the announcement of the agenda item to be discussed or voted upon, but before either the discussion or vote commences.

Additionally, the disqualified official may not be counted toward achieving a quorum while the item is being discussed.

The identification of the conflict and economic interest must be made orally and shall be made part of the public record.

Exceptions:

- If the decision is to take place during a closed session, the identification of the economic interest must be made during the public meeting prior to the closed session but is limited to a declaration that the official has a conflict of interest. The economic interest that is the basis for the conflict need not be disclosed. The official may not be present during consideration of the closed session item and may not obtain or review any nonpublic information regarding the decision.

- A public official is not required to leave the room for an agenda item on the consent calendar provided that the official recuses himself or herself and publicly discloses the economic interest as described above.

- A public official may speak as a member of the general public only when the economic interest that is the basis for the conflict is a personal economic interest, for example, his or her personal residence or wholly owned business. The official must leave the dais to speak from the same area as the members of the public and may listen to the public discussion of the matter.

Examples:

— The Arroyo City Council is considering widening the street in front of council member Smith's personal residence, which he solely owns. Council member Smith must disclose on the record that his home creates a conflict of interest preventing him from participating in the vote. He must leave the dais but can sit in the public area, speak on the matter as it applies to him and listen to the public discussion.

— Planning Commissioner Garcia is a greater than 10% partner in an engineering firm. The firm represents a client who is an applicant on a project pending before the planning commission. Commissioner Garcia must publicly disclose that the applicant is a source of income to her requiring her recusal. Commissioner Garcia must step down from the dais and leave the room. Since this is not a personal interest that is the basis for the conflict, she ***may not*** *sit in the public area and listen to the discussion.*

— Supervisor Robertson rents a home to a county employee. The county employee is the sub-

ject of a disciplinary matter in a closed session of the Board of Supervisors. During the open session prior to adjourning to closed session, Supervisor Robertson announces that he must recuse himself from participating in the closed session ***but does not disclose that the reason for his recusal is a source of income nor does he name the county employee that is the source of income to him.*** *He may not attend the closed session or obtain any non-public information from the closed session.*

Economic Interests

Step Three — What are your economic interests? That is, what are the possible sources of a financial conflict of interest?

From a practical point of view, this third step is the most important part of the law for you. The Act's conflict-of-interest provisions apply only to conflicts of interest arising from economic interests. There are six kinds of such economic interests from which conflicts of interest can arise:

- **Business Investment**. You have an economic interest in a business entity in which you, your spouse, your registered domestic partner, or your dependent children or anyone acting on your behalf has invested $2,000 or more.

- **Business Employment or Management.** You have an economic interest in a business entity for which you are a director, officer, partner, trustee, employee, or hold any position of management.

- **Real Property.** You have an economic interest in real property in which you, your spouse, your registered domestic partner, or your dependent children or anyone acting on your behalf has invested $2,000 or more, and also in certain leasehold interests.

"The most important thing you can do to comply with this law is to learn to recognize the economic interests from which a conflict of interest can arise."

- **Sources of Income.** You have an economic interest in anyone, whether an individual or an organization, from whom you have received (or from whom you have been promised) $500 or more in income within 12 months prior to the decision about which you are concerned. When thinking about sources of income, keep in mind that you have a community property interest in your spouse's or registered domestic partner's income — a person from whom your spouse or registered domestic partner receives income may also be a source of a conflict of interest to you. Also keep in mind that if you, your spouse, your registered domestic partner or your dependent children own 10 percent of more of a business, you are considered to be receiving "pass-through" income from the business's clients. In other words, the business's clients may be considered sources of income to you.

- **Gifts.** You have an economic interest in anyone, whether an individual or an organization, who has

given you gifts which total $390 or more within 12 months prior to the decision about which you are concerned.

- **Personal Financial Effect.** You have an economic interest in your personal expenses, income, assets, or liabilities, as well as those of your immediate family. This is known as the "personal financial effects" rule. If these expenses, income, assets or liabilities are likely to go up or down by $250 or more in a 12-month period as a result of the governmental decision, then the decision has a "personal financial effect" on you.

On the Statement of Economic Interests (Form 700) you file each year, you disclose many of the economic interests that could cause a conflict of interest for you. However, be aware that not all of the economic interests that may cause a conflict of interest are listed on the Form 700. A good example is your home. It is common for a personal residence to be the economic interest that triggers a conflict of interest even though you are not required to disclose your home on the Form 700.

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Directly or Indirectly Involved?

Step Four — Are your economic interests directly or indirectly involved in the governmental decision?

An economic interest which is directly involved in — and therefore directly affected by — a governmental decision creates a bigger risk of a conflict of interest than does an economic interest which is only indirectly involved in the decision. As a result, the FPPC's conflict-of-interest regulations distinguish between economic interests that are directly involved and interests that are indirectly involved.

Once you have identified your economic interests, you must next decide if they are directly involved in the governmental decision about which you are concerned. The FPPC has established specific rules for determining whether each kind of economic interest is directly or indirectly involved in a governmental decision.

The details of these rules are beyond the scope of this guide. In general, however, an economic interest is directly involved if it is the subject of the governmental decision. For example, if the interest is real property, and the decision is about building a donut shop down the block from the property, then the interest is directly involved. If the interest is a business, and the decision is whether to grant a license for which the business has applied, the interest is directly involved.

These are just examples; you should contact your agency counsel, the FPPC and the specific regulations

if you have questions as each case arises. Note also that the next step in the analysis — applying the right standard to determine whether an impact is material — depends in part on whether the interest is directly or indirectly involved. The regulations — Sections 18704 through 18704.5 — and other helpful information can be found on the FPPC's web site, http://www.fppc.ca.gov.

Materiality (Importance)

Step Five — What kinds of financial impacts on your economic interests are considered important enough to trigger a conflict of interest?

At the heart of deciding whether you have a conflict of interest is a prediction: Is it sufficiently likely that the governmental decision will have a material financial effect on your economic interests? As used here, the word "material" is akin to the term "important." You will have a conflict of interest only if it is reasonably foreseeable that the governmental decision will have an important impact on your economic interests.

The FPPC has adopted rules for deciding what kinds of financial effects are important enough to trigger a conflict of interest. These rules are called "materiality standards," that is, they are the standards that should be used for judging what kinds of financial impacts resulting from governmental decisions are considered material or important.

There are too many of these rules to review in detail in this booklet. Again, you can seek advice for your

"Public officials, whether elected or appointed, should perform their duties in an impartial manner, free from bias caused by their own financial interests or the financial interests of persons who have supported them."

-- California Political Reform Act of 1974

agency counsel or the FPPC. However, to understand the rules at a "big picture" level, remember these facts:

- If the economic interest is directly involved in the governmental decision, the standard or threshold for deeming a financial impact to be material is stricter (i.e. lower). This is because an economic interest that is directly involved in a governmental decision presents a bigger conflict-of-interest risk for the public official who holds the interest.

- On the other hand, if the economic interest is not directly involved, the materiality standard is more lenient because the indirectly involved interest presents a lesser danger of a conflict of interest.

- There are different sets of standards for the different types of economic interests. That is, there is one set of materiality standards for business entities, another set for real property interests, and so on.

- The rules vary by the size and situation of the economic interest. For example, a moment's thought will tell you that a $20,000 impact resulting from a governmental decision may be crucial to a small business, but may be a drop in the bucket for a big corporation. For example, the materiality standards

distinguish between large and small businesses, between real property which is close or far from property which is the subject of the decision.

Does a Conflict of Interest Result?

Step Six — Is it substantially likely that the governmental decision will result in one or more of the materiality standards being met for one or more of your economic interests?

As already mentioned in the introduction, the heart of the matter is deciding whether it is sufficiently likely that the outcome of the decision will have an important impact on your economic interests.

What does "sufficiently likely" mean? Put another way, how "likely" is "likely enough?" The Political Reform Act uses the words "reasonably foreseeable." The FPPC has interpreted these words to mean "substantially likely." Generally speaking, the likelihood need not be a certainty, but it must be more than merely possible.

A concrete way to think about this is to ask yourself the following question: Is it substantially likely that one of the materiality standards I identified in step five will be met as a result of the government decision? Step six calls for a factual determination, not necessarily a legal one. Also, an agency may sometimes segment (break down into separate decisions) a decision to allow participation by an official if certain conditions are

met. Therefore, you should always look at your economic interest and how it fits into the entire factual picture surrounding the decision.

"Public Generally" Exception

Step Seven — If you have a conflict of interest, does the "public generally" exception apply?

Now that you have determined that you will have a conflict of interest for a particular decision, you should see if the exceptions in Step 7 and Step 8 permit you to participate anyway. Not all conflicts of interest prevent you from lawfully taking part in the government decision at hand. Even if you otherwise have a conflict of interest, you are not disqualified from the decision if the "public generally" exception applies.

This exception exists because you are less likely to be biased by a financial impact when a significant part of the community has economic interests that are substantially likely to feel essentially the same impact from a governmental decision that your economic interests are likely to feel. If you can show that a significant segment of your jurisdiction has an economic interest that feels a financial impact which is substantially similar to the impact on your economic interest, then the exception applies.

The "public generally" exception must be considered with care. You may not just assume that it applies. There are specific rules for identifying the specific seg-

ments of the general population with which you may compare your economic interest, and specific rules for deciding whether the financial impact is substantially similar. Again, contact your agency counsel, the FPPC and the specific rules for advice and details. The regulations outlining the steps to apply the "public generally" exception can be found on the FPPC website at http://www.fppc.ca.gov under regulations 18707-18707.9.

Are you required to participate?

Step Eight — Even if you have a disqualifying conflict of interest, is your participation legally required?

In certain rare circumstances, you may be called upon to take part in a decision despite the fact that you have a disqualifying conflict of interest. This "legally required participation" rule applies only in certain very specific circumstances in which your government agency would be paralyzed, unable to act. You are most strongly encouraged to seek advice from your agency legal counsel or the FPPC before you act under this rule.

Conclusion

Generally speaking, here are the keys to meeting your obligations under the Political Reform Act's conflict-of-interest laws:

- Know the purpose of the law, which is to prevent biases, actual and apparent, which result from the financial interests of the decision-makers.

- Learn to spot potential trouble early. Understand which of your economic interests could give rise to a conflict of interest.

- Understand the "big picture" of the rules. For example, know why the rules distinguish between directly and indirectly involved interests, and why the public generally exception exists.

- Realize the importance of the facts. Deciding whether you have a disqualifying conflict of interest depends just as much — if not more — on the facts of your particular situation as it does on the law.

- Don't try to memorize all of the specific conflict-of-interest rules. The rules are complex, and the penalties for violating them are significant. Learn to understand the "big picture." You'll then be able to look up or ask about the particular rules you need to apply to any given case.

- Don't be afraid to ask for advice. It is available from your agency's legal counsel and from the FPPC.

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1-800-561-1861

Fair Political Practices Commission

OPEN & PUBLIC IV:

A Guide to the Ralph M. Brown Act

—2ND EDITION, REVISED JULY 2010—

LEAGUE OF CALIFORNIA CITIES

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CHAPTER 1:
IT IS THE PEOPLE'S BUSINESS

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A GUIDE TO THE RALPH M. BROWN ACT

OPEN & PUBLIC IV:

A GUIDE TO THE RALPH M. BROWN ACT, 2ND EDITION

Revised July 2010

FOREWORD

The goal of this publication is to explain the requirements of the Ralph M. Brown Act, California's open meeting law, in lay language so that it can be readily understood by local government officials and employees, the public and the news media. We offer practical advice—especially in areas where the Brown Act is unclear or has been the subject of controversy—to assist local agencies in complying with the requirements of the law.

A number of organizations representing diverse views and constituencies have contributed to this publication in an effort to make it reflect as broad a consensus as possible among those who daily interpret and implement the Brown Act. The League thanks the following organizations for their contributions:

Association of California Healthcare Districts
Association of California Water Agencies
California Association of Sanitation Agencies (CASA)
California Attorney General—Department of Justice
City Clerks Association of California
California Municipal Utilities Association
California Redevelopment Association
California School Boards Association
California Special Districts Association
California State Association of Counties
Community College League of California
California First Amendment Project
California Newspaper Publishers Association
Common Cause
League of Women Voters of California

This publication is current as of June 2010. Updates to the publication responding to changes in the Brown Act or new court interpretations are available at www.cacities.org/opengovernment.

This publication is not intended to provide legal advice. A public agency's legal counsel is responsible for advising its governing body and staff and should always be consulted when legal issues arise.

To improve the readability of this publication:

- Most text will look like this;
- Practice tips are in the margins;
- Hypothetical examples are printed in blue; and
- Frequently asked questions, along with our answers, are in shaded text.

Additional copies of this publication may be purchased by visiting CityBooks online at www.cacities.org/store.

CHAPTER 1:
IT IS THE PEOPLE'S BUSINESS

THE RIGHT OF ACCESS

Two key parts of the Brown Act have not changed since its adoption in 1953. One is the Brown Act's initial section, declaring the Legislature's intent:

> *"In enacting this chapter, the Legislature finds and declares that the public commissions, boards, and councils and the other public agencies in this State exist to aid in the conduct of the people's business. It is the intent of the law that their actions be taken openly and that their deliberations be conducted openly."*
>
> *"The people of this State do not yield their sovereignty to the agencies which serve them. The people, in delegating authority, do not give their public servants the right to decide what is good for the people to know and what is not good for them to know. The people insist on remaining informed so that they may retain control over the instruments they have created."*[1]

Practice Tip:

The key to the Brown Act is a single sentence. In summary, all meetings shall be **open and public** except when the Brown Act authorizes otherwise.

The people reconfirmed that intent 50 years later in the November 2004 election by adopting Proposition 59, amending the California Constitution to include a public right of access to government information:

> *"The people have the right of access to information concerning the conduct of the people's business, and, therefore, the meetings of public bodies and the writings of public officials and agencies shall be open to public scrutiny."*[2]

The Brown Act's other unchanged provision is a single sentence:

> *"All meetings of the legislative body of a local agency shall be open and public, and all persons shall be permitted to attend any meeting of the legislative body of a local agency, except as otherwise provided in this chapter."*[3]

That one sentence is by far the most important of the entire Brown Act. If the opening is the soul, that sentence is the heart of the Brown Act.

BROAD COVERAGE

The Brown Act covers members of virtually every type of local government body, elected or appointed, decision-making or advisory. Some types of private organizations are covered, as are newly-elected members of a legislative body, even before they take office.

Similarly, meetings subject to the Brown Act are not limited to face-to-face gatherings. They also include any communication medium or device through which a majority of a legislative body discusses, deliberates or takes action on an item of business outside of a noticed meeting. They include meetings held from remote locations by teleconference.

New communication technologies present new Brown Act challenges. For example, common e-mail practices of forwarding or replying to messages can easily lead to a serial meeting prohibited by the Brown Act, as can participation by members of a legislative body in an Internet chatroom or blog dialogue. Communicating during meetings using electronic technology (such as laptop computers, personal digital assistants, or cellular telephones) may create the perception that private communications are influencing the outcome of decisions; some state legislatures have banned the practice. On the other hand, widespread cablecasting and web streaming of meetings has greatly expanded public access to the decision-making process.

Practice Tip:

Think of the government's house as being made of glass. The curtains may be drawn only to further the public's interest.

NARROW EXEMPTIONS

The express purpose of the Brown Act is to assure that local government agencies conduct the public's business openly and publicly. Courts and the California Attorney General usually broadly construe the Brown Act in favor of greater public access and narrowly construe exemptions to its general rules.[4]

Generally, public officials should think of themselves as living in glass houses, and that they may only draw the curtains when it is in the public interest to preserve confidentiality. Closed sessions may be held only as specifically authorized by the provisions of the Brown Act itself.

The Brown Act, however, is limited to meetings among a majority of the members of multi-member government bodies when the subject relates to local agency business. It does not apply to independent conduct of individual decision-makers. It does not apply to social, ceremonial, educational, and other gatherings as long as a majority of the members of a body don't discuss issues related to their local agency's business. Meetings of temporary advisory committees—as distinguished from standing committees—made up solely of less than a quorum of a legislative body are not subject to the Brown Act.

The law does not apply to local agency staff or employees, but they may facilitate a violation by acting as a conduit for discussion, deliberation, or action by the legislative body.[5]

The law, on the one hand, recognizes the need of individual local officials to meet and discuss matters with their constituents. On the other hand, it requires—with certain specific exceptions to protect the community and preserve individual rights—that the decision-making process be public. Sometimes the boundary between the two is not easy to draw.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN MEETINGS

In addition to requiring the public's business to be conducted in open, noticed meetings, the Brown Act also extends to the public the right to participate in meetings. Individuals, lobbyists, and members of the news media possess the right to attend, record, broadcast, and participate in public meetings. The public's participation is further enhanced by the Brown Act's requirement that a meaningful agenda be posted in advance of meetings, by limiting discussion and action to matters listed on the agenda, and by requiring that meeting materials be made available.

Legislative bodies may, however, adopt reasonable regulations on public testimony and the conduct of public meetings, including measures to address disruptive conduct and irrelevant speech.

CONTROVERSY

Not surprisingly, the Brown Act has been a source of confusion and controversy since its inception. News media and government watchdogs often argue the law is toothless, pointing out that there has never been a single criminal conviction for a violation. They often suspect that closed sessions are being misused.

Public officials complain that the Brown Act makes it difficult to respond to constituents and requires public discussions of items better discussed privately—such as why a particular person should not be appointed to a board or commission. Many elected officials find the Brown Act inconsistent with their private business experiences. Closed meetings can be more efficient; they eliminate grandstanding and promote candor. The techniques that serve well in business—the working lunch, the sharing of information through a series of phone calls or emails, the backroom conversations and compromises—are often not possible under the Brown Act.

As a matter of public policy, California (along with many other states) has concluded that there is more to be gained than lost by conducting public business in the open. Government behind closed doors may well be efficient and business-like, but it may be perceived as unresponsive and untrustworthy.

Practice Tip:

Transparency is a foundational value for ethical government practices. The Brown Act is a floor, not a ceiling, for conduct.

BEYOND THE LAW—GOOD BUSINESS PRACTICES

Violations of the Brown Act can lead to invalidation of an agency's action, payment of a challenger's attorney's fees, public embarrassment, even criminal prosecution. But the Brown Act is a floor, not a ceiling for conduct of public officials. This guide is focused not only on the Brown Act as a minimum standard, but also on meeting practices or activities that, legal or not, are likely to create controversy. Problems may crop up, for example, when agenda descriptions are too brief or vague, when an informal get-together takes on the appearance of a meeting, when an agency conducts too much of its business in closed session or discusses matters in closed session that are beyond the authorized scope, or when controversial issues arise that are not on the agenda.

The Brown Act allows a legislative body to adopt practices and requirements for greater access to meetings for itself and its subordinate committees and bodies that are more stringent than the law itself requires.[6] Rather than simply restate the basic requirements of the Brown Act, local open meeting policies should strive to anticipate and prevent problems in areas where the Brown Act doesn't provide full guidance. As with the adoption of any other significant policy, public comment should be solicited.

A local policy could build on these basic Brown Act goals:

- A legislative body's need to get its business done smoothly;
- The public's right to participate meaningfully in meetings, and to review documents used in decision-making at a relevant point in time;
- A local agency's right to confidentially address certain negotiations, personnel matters, claims and litigation; and
- The right of the press to fully understand and communicate public agency decision-making.

An explicit and comprehensive public meeting and information policy, especially if reviewed periodically, can be an important element in maintaining or improving public relations. Such a policy exceeds the absolute requirements of the law—but if the law were enough this guide would be unnecessary. A narrow legalistic approach will not avoid or resolve potential controversies. An agency should consider going beyond the law, and look at its unique circumstances and determine if there is a better way to prevent potential problems and promote public trust. At the very least, local agencies need to think about how their agendas are structured in order to make Brown Act compliance easier. They need to plan carefully to make sure public participation fits smoothly into the process.

Practice Tip:

The Brown Act should be viewed as a tool to facilitate the business of local government agencies. Local policies that go beyond the minimum requirements of law may help instill public confidence and avoid problems.

■ ACHIEVING BALANCE

The Brown Act should be neither an excuse for hiding the ball nor a mechanism for hindering efficient and orderly meetings. The Brown Act represents a balance among the interests of constituencies whose interests do not always coincide. It calls for openness in local government, yet should allow government to function responsively and productively.

There must be both adequate notice of what discussion and action is to occur during a meeting as well as a normal degree of spontaneity in the dialogue between elected officials and their constituents.

The ability of an elected official to confer with constituents or colleagues must be balanced against the important public policy prohibiting decision-making outside of public meetings.

In the end, implementation of the Brown Act must ensure full participation of the public and preserve the integrity of the decision-making process, yet not stifle government officials and impede the effective and natural operation of government.

■ HISTORICAL NOTE

In late 1951, *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter Mike Harris spent six weeks looking into the way local agencies conducted meetings. State law had long required that business be done in public, but Harris discovered secret meetings or caucuses were common. He wrote a 10-part series on "Your Secret Government" that ran in May and June 1952.

Out of the series came a decision to push for a new state open meeting law. Harris and Richard (Bud) Carpenter, legal counsel for the League of California Cities, drafted such a bill and Assembly Member Ralph M. Brown agreed to carry it. The Legislature passed the bill and Gov. Earl Warren signed it into law in 1953.

The Ralph M. Brown Act, known as the "Brown Act", has evolved under a series of amendments and court decisions, and has been the model for other open meeting laws—such as the Bagley-Keene Act, enacted in 1967 to cover state agencies.

Assembly Member Brown is best known for the open meeting law that carries his name. He was elected to the Legislature in 1942 and served 19 years, including the last three years as Speaker. He then became an appellate court justice.

Endnotes

1 California Government Code section 54950

2 California Constitution, Art. 1, section 3 (b)(1)

3 California Government Code section 54953 (a)

4 This principle of broad construction when it furthers public access and narrow construction if a provision limits public access is also stated in the amendment to the state's Constitution adopted by Proposition 59 in 2004. California Constitution, Art. 1, section 3(b)(2)

5 California Government Code section 54952.2 (c); *Wolfe v. City of Fremont* (2006) 144 Cal.App.4th 533

6 California Government Code section 54953.7

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CHAPTER 2:
LEGISLATIVE BODIES

WHAT IS A "LEGISLATIVE BODY" OF A LOCAL AGENCY?

WHAT IS NOT A "LEGISLATIVE BODY" FOR PURPOSES OF THE BROWN ACT?

CHAPTER 2:
LEGISLATIVE BODIES

The Brown Act applies to the legislative bodies of local agencies. It defines "legislative body" broadly to include just about every type of decision-making body of a local agency.[1]

WHAT IS A "LEGISLATIVE BODY" OF A LOCAL AGENCY?

A "legislative body" includes:

- **The "governing body** of a local agency or any other local body created by state or federal statute."[2] This includes city councils, boards of supervisors, school boards and boards of trustees of special districts. A "local agency" is any city, county, school district, municipal corporation, redevelopment agency, district, political subdivision, or other public agency.[3] A housing authority is a local agency under the Brown Act even though it is created by and is an agent of the state.[4] The California Attorney General has opined that air pollution control districts and regional open space districts are also covered.[5] Entities created pursuant to joint powers agreements are local agencies within the meaning of the Brown Act.[6]
- **Newly-elected members** of a legislative body who have not yet assumed office must conform to the requirements of the Brown Act as if already in office.[7] Thus, meetings between incumbents and newly-elected members of a legislative body, such as a meeting between two outgoing members and a member-elect of a five-member body, could violate the Brown Act.

Q. On the morning following the election to a five-member legislative body of a local agency, two successful candidates, neither an incumbent, meet with an incumbent member of the legislative body for a celebratory breakfast. Does this violate the Brown Act?

A. *It might, and absolutely would if the conversation turns to agency business. Even though the candidates-elect have not officially been sworn in, the Brown Act applies. If purely a social event, there is no violation but it would be preferable if others were invited to attend to avoid the appearance of impropriety.*

Practice Tip:

The prudent presumption is that an advisory committee or task force is subject to the Brown Act. Even if one clearly is not, it may want to comply with the Brown Act. Public meetings may reduce the possibility of misunderstandings and controversy.

- **Appointed bodies**—whether permanent or temporary, decision-making or advisory—including planning commissions, civil service commissions and other subsidiary committees, boards, and bodies. Volunteer groups, executive search committees, task forces, and "blue ribbon committees" created by formal action of the governing body are legislative bodies. When the members of two or more legislative bodies are appointed to serve on an entirely separate advisory group, the resulting body may be subject to the Brown Act. In one reported case, a city council created a committee of two members of the city council and two members of the city planning commission to review qualifications of prospective planning commissioners and make recommendations to the council. The court held that their joint mission made them a legislative body subject to the Brown Act. Had the two committees remained separate and met only to exchange information, they would have been exempt from the Brown Act.[8]
- **Standing committees** of a legislative body, irrespective of their composition, which have either: (1) a continuing subject matter jurisdiction, or (2) a meeting schedule fixed by charter, ordinance, resolution, or formal action of a legislative body.[9] Even if comprised of less than a quorum of the governing body, a standing committee is subject to the Brown Act. For example, if a governing body creates long-term committees on budget and finance or on public safety, those are standing committees subject to the Brown Act. Further, function over form controls. For example, a statement by the legislative body that "the advisory committee shall not exercise continuing subject matter jurisdiction" or the fact that the committee does not have a fixed meeting schedule is not determinative.[10] "Formal action" by a legislative body includes authorization given to the agency's executive officer to appoint an advisory committee pursuant to agency-adopted policy.[11]
- The governing body of any **private organization** either: (1) created by the legislative body in order to exercise authority that may lawfully be delegated by such body to a private corporation, limited liability company or other entity or (2) that receives agency funding and whose governing board includes a member of the legislative body of the local agency appointed by the legislative body as a full voting member of the private entity's governing board.[12] These include some nonprofit corporations created by local agencies.[13] If a local agency contracts with a private firm for a service (for example, payroll, janitorial, or food services), the private firm is not covered by the Brown Act.[14] When a member of a legislative body sits on a board of a private organization as a private person and is not appointed by the legislative body, the board will not be subject to the Brown Act. Similarly, when the legislative body appoints someone other than one of its own members to such boards, the Brown Act does not apply. Nor does it apply when a private organization merely receives agency funding.[15]

Q: The local chamber of commerce is funded in part by the city. The mayor sits on the chamber's board of directors. Is the chamber board a legislative body subject to the Brown Act?

A: *Maybe. If the chamber's governing documents require the mayor to be on the board and the city council appoints the mayor to that position, the board is a legislative body. If, however, the chamber board independently appoints the mayor to its board, or the mayor attends chamber board meetings in a purely advisory capacity, it is not.*

Q: If a community college district board creates an auxiliary organization to operate a campus bookstore or cafeteria, is the board of the organization a legislative body?

A: *Yes. But, if the district instead contracts with a private firm to operate the bookstore or cafeteria, the Brown Act would not apply to the private firm.*

Practice Tip:

It can be difficult to determine whether a subcommittee of a body falls into the category of a standing committee or an exempt temporary committee. Suppose a committee is created to explore the renewal of a franchise or a topic of similarly limited scope and duration. Is it an exempt temporary committee or a non-exempt standing committee? The answer may depend on factors such as how meeting schedules are determined, the scope of the committee's charge, or whether the committee exists long enough to have "continuing jurisdiction."

- **Certain kinds of hospital operators**. A lessee of a hospital (or portion of a hospital) first leased under Health and Safety Code subsection 32121(p) after Jan. 1, 1994, which exercises "material authority" delegated to it by a local agency, whether or not such lessee is organized and operated by the agency or by a delegated authority.[16]

WHAT IS NOT A "LEGISLATIVE BODY" FOR PURPOSES OF THE BROWN ACT?

- A temporary advisory committee **composed solely of less than a quorum** of the legislative body that serves a limited or single purpose, that is not perpetual, and that will be dissolved once its specific task is completed is not subject to the Brown Act.[17] Temporary committees are sometimes called *ad hoc* committees, a term not used in the Brown Act. Examples include an advisory committee composed of less than a quorum created to interview candidates for a vacant position or to meet with representatives of other entities to exchange information on a matter of concern to the agency, such as traffic congestion.[18]
- Groups advisory to a single decision-maker or appointed by staff are not covered. The Brown Act applies only to committees created by formal action of the legislative body and not to committees created by others. A committee advising a superintendent of schools would not be covered by the Brown Act. However, the same committee, if created by formal action of the school board, would be covered.[19]

Q. A member of the legislative body of a local agency informally establishes an advisory committee of five residents to advise her on issues as they arise. Does the Brown Act apply to this committee?

A. *No, because the committee has not been established by formal action of the legislative body.*

Q. During a meeting of the city council, the council directs the city manager to form an advisory committee of residents to develop recommendations for a new ordinance. The city manager forms the committee and appoints its members; the committee is instructed to direct its recommendations to the city manager. Does the Brown Act apply to this committee?

A. *Possibly, because the direction from the city council might be regarded as a formal action of the body notwithstanding that the city manager controls the committee.*

- Individual decision makers who are not elected or appointed members of a legislative body are not covered by the Brown Act. For example, a disciplinary hearing presided over by a department head or a meeting of agency department heads are not subject to the Brown Act since such assemblies are not those of a legislative body.[20]
- County central committees of political parties are also not Brown Act bodies.[21]

Endnotes

1 *Taxpayers for Livable Communities v. City of Malibu* (2005) 126 Cal.App.4th 1123

2 California Government Code section 54952(a)

3 California Government Code section 54951. *But see:* Education Code section 35147, which exempts certain school councils and school site advisory committees from the Brown Act and imposes upon them a separate set of rules.

4 *Torres v. Board of Commissioners* (1979) 89 Cal.App.3d 545

5 71 Ops.Cal.Atty.Gen. 96 (1988); 73 Ops.Cal.Atty.Gen. 1 (1990)

6 *McKee v. Los Angeles Interagency Metropolitan Police Apprehension Crime Task Force* (2005) 134 Cal.App.4th 354

7 California Government Code section 54952.1

8 *Joiner v. City of Sebastopol* (1981) 125 Cal.App.3d 799

9 California Government Code section 54952(b)

10 79 Ops. Cal.Atty.Gen. 69 (1996)

11 *Frazer v. Dixon Unified School District* (1993) 18 Cal.App.4th 781

12 California Government Code section 54952(c)(1)(B). The same rule applies to a full voting member appointed prior to February 9, 1996 who, after that date, is made a non-voting board member by the legislative body. California Government Code section 54952(c)(2)

13 California Government Code section 54952(c)(1)(A); *International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union v. Los Angeles Export Terminal* (1999) 69 Cal.App.4th 287; *Epstein v. Hollywood Entertainment Dist. II Business Improvement District* (2001) 87 Cal.App.4th 862; *see also:* 81 Ops.Cal.Atty.Gen. 281 (1998); 85 Ops.Cal.Atty.Gen. 55

14 *International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union v. Los Angeles Export Terminal* (1999) 69 Cal.App.4th 287, 300 fn. 5

15 "The Brown Act," California Attorney General (2003), p. 7

16 California Government Code section 54952(d)

17 California Government Code section 54952(b); *see also: Freedom Newspapers, Inc. v. Orange County Employees Retirement System Board of Directors* (1993) 6 Cal.4th 821

18 *Taxpayers for Livable Communities v. City of Malibu* (2005) 126 Cal.App.4th 1123

19 56 Ops.Cal.Atty.Gen. 14 (1973)

20 *Wilson v. San Francisco Municipal Railway* (1973) 29 Cal.App.3d 870

21 59 Ops.Cal.Atty.Gen. 162 (1976)

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CHAPTER 3:
MEETINGS

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The Brown Act only applies to meetings of local legislative bodies. The Brown Act defines a meeting as: "… any congregation of a majority of the members of a legislative body at the same time and place to hear, discuss, or deliberate upon any item that is within the subject matter jurisdiction of the legislative body or the local agency to which it pertains."[1] Under the Brown Act, the term "meeting" is not limited to gatherings at which action is taken but includes deliberative gatherings as well.

BROWN ACT MEETINGS

Brown Act gatherings include a legislative body's regular meetings, special meetings, emergency meetings and adjourned meetings.

- "Regular meetings" are meetings occurring at the dates, times, and location set by resolution, ordinance, or other formal action by the legislative body and are subject to 72-hour posting requirements.[2]
- "Special meetings" are meetings called by the presiding officer or majority of the legislative body to discuss only discrete items on the agenda under the Brown Act's notice requirements for special meetings.[3]
- "Emergency meetings" are a limited class of meetings held when prompt action is needed due to actual or threatened disruption of public facilities and are held on little notice.[4]
- "Adjourned meetings" are regular or special meetings that have been adjourned or re-adjourned to a time and place specified in the order of adjournment, with no agenda required for regular meetings adjourned for less than five calendar days as long as no additional business is transacted.[5]

SIX EXCEPTIONS TO THE MEETING DEFINITION

The Brown Act creates six exceptions to the meeting definition: [6]

Individual Contacts

The first exception involves individual contacts between a member of the legislative body and any other person. The Brown Act does not limit a legislative body member acting on his or her own. This exception recognizes the right to confer with constituents, advocates, consultants, news reporters, local agency staff or a colleague.

Individual contacts, however, cannot be used to do in stages what would be prohibited in one step. For example, a series of individual contacts that leads to discussion, deliberation or action among a majority of the members of a legislative body is prohibited. Such serial meetings are discussed below.

Conferences

The second exception allows a legislative body majority to attend a conference or similar gathering open to the public that addresses issues of general interest to the public or to public agencies of the type represented by the legislative body.

Among other things, this exception permits legislative body members to attend annual association conferences of city, county, school, community college, and other local agency officials, so long as those meetings are open to the public. However, a majority of members cannot discuss among themselves, other than as part of the scheduled program, business of a specific nature that is within their local agency's subject matter jurisdiction.

Community Meetings

The third exception allows a legislative body majority to attend an open and publicized meeting held by another organization to address a topic of local community concern. Again, a majority cannot discuss among themselves, other than as part of the scheduled program, business of a specific nature that is within their local agency's subject matter jurisdiction. Under this exception, a legislative body majority may attend a local service club meeting or a local candidates' night if the meetings are open to the public.

> "I see we have four distinguished members of the city council at our meeting tonight," said the chair of the Environmental Action Coalition.
>
> "I wonder if they have anything to say about the controversy over enacting a slow growth ordinance?"
>
> *The Brown Act permits a majority of a legislative body to attend and speak at an open and publicized meeting conducted by another organization. The Brown Act may nevertheless be violated if a majority discusses, deliberates, or takes action on an item during the meeting of the other organization. There is a fine line between what is permitted and what is not; hence, members should exercise caution when participating in these types of events.*

Q. The local chamber of commerce sponsors an open and public candidate debate during an election campaign. Three of the five agency members are up for re-election and all three participate. All of the candidates are asked their views of a controversial project scheduled for a meeting to occur just after the election. May the three incumbents answer the question?

A. *Yes, because the Brown Act does not constrain the incumbents from expressing their views regarding important matters facing the local agency as part of the political process the same as any other candidates.*

Other Legislative Bodies

The fourth exception allows a majority of a legislative body to attend an open and publicized meeting of: (1) another body of the local agency and (2) a legislative body of another local agency.[7] Again, the majority cannot discuss among themselves, other than as part of the scheduled meeting, business of a specific nature that is within their local agency's subject matter jurisdiction. This exception allows, for example, a city council or a majority of a board of supervisors to attend a controversial meeting of the planning commission.

Nothing in the Brown Act prevents the majority of a legislative body from sitting together at such a meeting. They may choose not to, however, to preclude any possibility of improperly discussing local agency business and to avoid the appearance of a Brown Act violation. Further, aside from the Brown Act, there may be other reasons, such as due process considerations, why the members should avoid giving public testimony or trying to influence the outcome of proceedings before a subordinate body.

Q. The entire legislative body intends to testify against a bill before the Senate Local Government Committee in Sacramento. Must this activity be noticed as a meeting of the body?

A. *No, because the members are attending and participating in an open meeting of another governmental body which the public may attend.*

Q. The members then proceed upstairs to the office of their local Assembly member to discuss issues of local interest. Must this session be noticed as a meeting and be open to the public?

A. *Yes, because the entire body may not meet behind closed doors except for proper closed sessions. The same answer applies to a private lunch or dinner with the Assembly member.*

Standing Committees

The fifth exception authorizes the attendance of a majority at an open and noticed meeting of a standing committee of the legislative body, provided that the legislative body members who are not members of the standing committee attend only as observers (meaning that they cannot speak or otherwise participate in the meeting).[8]

Q. The legislative body establishes a standing committee of two of its five members, which meets monthly. A third member of the legislative body wants to attend these meetings and participate. May she?

A. *She may attend, but only as an observer; she may not participate.*

Social or Ceremonial Events

The sixth and final exception permits a majority of a legislative body to attend a purely social or ceremonial occasion. Once again, a majority cannot discuss business among themselves of a specific nature that is within the subject matter jurisdiction of the local agency.

Nothing in the Brown Act prevents a majority of members from attending the same football game, party, wedding, funeral, reception, or farewell. The test is not whether a majority of a legislative body attends the function, but whether business of a specific nature within the subject matter jurisdiction of the local agency is discussed. So long as no local agency business is discussed, there is no violation of the Brown Act.

COLLECTIVE BRIEFINGS

None of these six exceptions permits a majority of a legislative body to meet together with staff in advance of a meeting for a collective briefing. Any such briefings that involve a majority of the body in the same place and time must be open to the public and satisfy Brown Act meeting notice and agenda requirements.

RETREATS OR WORKSHOPS OF LEGISLATIVE BODIES

There is consensus among local agency attorneys that gatherings by a majority of legislative body members at the legislative body's retreats, study sessions, or workshops are covered under the Brown Act. This is the case whether the retreat, study session, or workshop focuses on long-range agency planning, discussion of critical local issues, or on team building and group dynamics.[9]

Q. The legislative body wants to hold a team-building session to improve relations among its members. May such a session be conducted behind closed doors?

A. *No, this is not a proper subject for a closed session, and there is no other basis to exclude the public. Council relations are a matter of public business.*

SERIAL MEETINGS

One of the most frequently asked questions about the Brown Act involves serial meetings. At any one time, such meetings involve only a portion of a legislative body, but eventually involve a majority.

The problem with serial meetings is the process, which deprives the public of an opportunity for meaningful participation in legislative body decision-making. The Brown Act provides that "[a] majority of the members of a legislative body shall not, outside a meeting…use a series of communications of any kind, directly or through intermediaries, to discuss, deliberate, or take action on any item of business that is within the subject matter jurisdiction of the legislative body."[10]

The serial meeting may occur by either a "daisy-chain" or a "hub-and-spoke" sequence. In the daisy-chain scenario, Member A contacts Member B, Member B contacts Member C, Member C contacts Member D and so on, until a quorum has discussed, deliberated or taken action on an item within the legislative body's subject matter jurisdiction. The hub-and-spoke process involves, for example, a staff member (the hub) communicating with members of a legislative body (the spokes) one-by-one for a decision on a proposed action,[11] or a chief executive officer briefing a majority of redevelopment agency members prior to a formal meeting and, in the process, information about the members' respective views is revealed. Each of these scenarios violates the Brown Act.

A legislative body member has the right, if not the duty, to meet with constituents to address their concerns. That member also has the right to confer with a colleague or appropriate staff about local agency business. An employee or official of a local agency may engage in separate conversations or communications outside of an open and noticed meeting "with members of a legislative body in order to answer questions or provide information regarding a matter that is within the subject matter jurisdiction of the local agency if that person does not communicate to members of the legislative body the comments or position of any other member or members of the legislative body."[12]

The Brown Act has been violated however, if several one-on-one meetings or conferences leads to a discussion, deliberation or action by a majority. In one case, a violation occurred when a quorum of a city council directed staff by letter on an eminent domain action.[13]

A unilateral written communication to the legislative body, such as an informational or advisory memorandum, does not violate the Brown Act.[14] Such a memo, however, may be a public record.[15]

The phone call was from a lobbyist. "Say, I need your vote for that project in the south area. How about it?"

"Well, I don't know," replied Board Member Aletto. "That's kind of a sticky proposition. You sure you need my vote?"

"Well, I've got Bradley and Cohen lined up and another vote leaning. With you I'd be over the top."

Moments later, the phone rings again. "Hey, I've been hearing some rumbles on that south area project," said the newspaper reporter. "I'm counting noses. How are you voting on it?"

Neither the lobbyist nor the reporter has violated the Brown Act, but they are facilitating a violation. The board member may have violated the Brown Act by hearing about the positions of other board members and indeed coaxing the lobbyist to reveal the other board members' positions by asking "You sure you need my vote?" The prudent course is to avoid such leading conversations and to caution lobbyists, staff and news media against revealing such positions of others.

Practice Tip:

When briefing legislative body members, staff must exercise care not to disclose other members' views and positions.

The mayor sat down across from the city manager. "From now on," he declared, "I want you to provide individual briefings on upcoming agenda items. Some of this material is very technical, and the council members don't want to sound like idiots asking about it in public. Besides that, briefings will speed up the meeting."

Agency employees or officials may have separate conversations or communications outside of an open and noticed meeting "with members of a legislative body in order to answer questions or provide information regarding a matter that is within the subject matter jurisdiction of the local agency if that person does not communicate to members of the legislative body the comments or position of any other member or members of the legislative body."[16] Members should always be vigilant when discussing local agency business with anyone to avoid conversations that could lead to a discussion, deliberation or action taken among the majority of the legislative body.

"Thanks for the information," said Council Member Kim. "These zoning changes can be tricky, and now I think I'm better equipped to make the right decision."

"Glad to be of assistance," replied the planning director. "Any idea what the other council members think of the problem?"

The planning director should not ask, and the member should not answer. A one-on-one meeting that involves communicating the comments or position of other members violates the Brown Act.

Q. The agency's Web site includes a chat room where agency employees and officials participate anonymously and often discuss issues of local agency business. Members of the legislative body participate regularly. Does this scenario present a potential for violation of the Brown Act?

A. *Yes, because it is a technological device that may serve to allow for a majority of members to discuss, deliberate or take action on matters of agency business.*

Q. A member of a legislative body contacts two other members on a five-member body relative to scheduling a special meeting. Is this an illegal serial meeting?

A. *No, the Brown Act expressly allows this kind of communication, though the members should avoid discussing the merits of what is to be taken up at the meeting.*

Particular care should be exercised when staff briefings of legislative body members occur by email because of the ease of using the "reply to all" button that may inadvertently result in a Brown Act violation.

INFORMAL GATHERINGS

Often members are tempted to mix business with pleasure—for example, by holding a post meeting gathering. Informal gatherings at which local agency business is discussed or transacted violate the law if they are not conducted in conformance with the Brown Act.[17] A luncheon gathering in a crowded dining room violates the Brown Act if the public does not have an adequate opportunity to hear or participate in the deliberations of members.

> Thursday at 11:30 a.m., as they did every week, the board of directors of the Dry Gulch Irrigation District trooped into Pop's Donut Shoppe for an hour of talk and fellowship. They sat at the corner window, fronting on Main and Broadway, to show they had nothing to hide. Whenever he could, the managing editor of the weekly newspaper down the street hurried over to join the board.
>
> *A gathering like this would not violate the Brown Act if board members scrupulously avoided talking about irrigation district issues. But it is the kind of situation that should be avoided. The public is unlikely to believe the board members could meet regularly without discussing public business. A newspaper executive's presence in no way lessens the potential for a violation of the Brown Act.*

Q. The agency has won a major victory in the Supreme Court on an issue of importance. The presiding officer decides to hold an impromptu press conference in order to make a statement to the print and broadcast media. All the other members show up in order to make statements of their own and be seen by the media. Is this gathering illegal?

A. *Technically there is no exception for this sort of gathering, but as long as members do not state their intentions as to future action to be taken and the press conference is open to the public, it seems harmless.*

TECHNOLOGICAL CONFERENCING

In an effort to keep up with information age technologies, the Brown Act now specifically allows a legislative body to use any type of teleconferencing to meet, receive public comment and testimony, deliberate, or conduct a closed session.[18] While the Brown Act contains specific requirements for conducting a teleconference, the decision to use teleconferencing is entirely discretionary within the body.

"Teleconference" is defined as "a meeting of a legislative body, the members of which are in different locations, connected by electronic means, through either audio or video, or both."[19] In addition to the specific requirements relating to teleconferencing, the meeting must comply with all provisions of the Brown Act otherwise applicable. The Brown Act contains the following specific requirements:[20]

- Teleconferencing may be used for all purposes during any meeting;
- At least a quorum of the legislative body must participate from locations within the local agency's jurisdiction;
- Additional teleconference locations may be made available for the public;

Practice Tip:

Legal counsel for the local agency should be consulted before teleconferencing a meeting.

- Each teleconference location must be specifically identified in the notice and agenda of the meeting, including a full address and room number, as may be applicable;
- Agendas must be posted at each teleconference location, even if a hotel room or a residence;
- Each teleconference location must be accessible to the public and have technology, such as a speakerphone, to enable the public to participate;
- The agenda must provide the opportunity for the public to address the legislative body directly at each teleconference location; and
- All votes must be by roll call.

Q. A member on vacation wants to participate in a meeting of the legislative body and vote by cellular phone from her car while driving from Washington, D.C. to New York. May she?

A. *She may not participate or vote because she is not in a noticed and posted teleconference location.*

The use of teleconferencing to conduct a legislative body meeting presents a variety of new issues beyond the scope of this guide to discuss in detail. Therefore, before teleconferencing a meeting, legal counsel for the local agency should be consulted.

LOCATION OF MEETINGS

The Brown Act generally requires all regular and special meetings of a legislative body, including retreats and workshops, to be held within the boundaries of the territory over which the local agency exercises jurisdiction.[21]

An open and publicized meeting of a legislative body may be held outside of agency boundaries if the purpose of the meeting is one of the following:

- Comply with state or federal law or a court order, or for a judicial conference or administrative proceeding in which the local agency is a party;
- Inspect real or personal property, which cannot be conveniently brought into the local agency's territory, provided the meeting is limited to items relating to that real or personal property;

Q. The agency is considering approving a major retail mall. The developer has built other similar malls, and invites the entire legislative body to visit a mall outside the jurisdiction. May the entire body go?

A. *Yes, the Brown Act permits meetings outside the boundaries of the agency for specified reasons and inspection of property is one such reason. The field trip must be treated as a meeting and the public must be able to attend.*

- Participate in multiagency meetings or discussions, however, such meetings must be held within the boundaries of one of the participating agencies, and all involved agencies must give proper notice;
- Meet in the closest meeting facility if the local agency has no meeting facility within its boundaries or at its principal office if that office is located outside the territory over which the agency has jurisdiction;

- Meet with elected or appointed federal or California officials when a local meeting would be impractical, solely to discuss a legislative or regulatory issue affecting the local agency and over which the federal or state officials have jurisdiction;
- Meet in or nearby a facility owned by the agency, provided that the topic of the meeting is limited to items directly related to the facility; or
- Visit the office of its legal counsel for a closed session on pending litigation, when to do so would reduce legal fees or costs.[22]

In addition, the governing board of a school or community college district may hold meetings outside of its boundaries to attend a conference on nonadversarial collective bargaining techniques, interview candidates for school district superintendent, or interview a potential employee from another district.[23] A school board may also interview members of the public residing in another district if the board is considering employing that district's superintendent.

Similarly, meetings of a joint powers authority can occur within the territory of at least one of its member agencies, and a joint powers authority with members throughout the state may meet anywhere in the state.[24]

Finally, if a fire, flood, earthquake, or other emergency makes the usual meeting place unsafe, the presiding officer can designate another meeting place for the duration of the emergency. News media that have requested notice of meetings must be notified of the designation by the most rapid means of communication available.[25]

Endnotes:

1 California Government Code section 54952.2(a)
2 California Government Code section 54954(a)
3 California Government Code section 54956
4 California Government Code section 54956.5
5 California Government Code section 54955
6 California Government Code section 54952.2(c)
7 California Government Code section 54952.2(c)(4)
8 California Government Code section 54952.2(c)(6)
9 "The Brown Act," California Attorney General (2003), p. 10
10 California Government Code section 54952.2(b)(1)
11 *Stockton Newspaper Inc. v. Redevelopment Agency* (1985) 171 Cal.App.3d 95
12 California Government Code section 54952.2(b)(2)
13 *Common Cause v. Stirling* (1983) 147 Cal.App.3d 518
14 *Roberts v. City of Palmdale* (1993) 5 Cal.4th 363
15 California Government Code section 54957.5(a)
16 California Government Code section 54952.2(b)(2)
17 California Government Code section 54952.2; 43 Ops.Cal.Atty.Gen. 36 (1964)
18 California Government Code section 54953(b)(1)
19 California Government Code section 54953(b)(4)
20 California Government Code section 54953
21 California Government Code section 54954(b)
22 California Government Code section 54954(b)(1)-(7)
23 California Government Code section 54954(c)
24 California Government Code section 54954(d)
25 California Government Code section 54954(e)

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CHAPTER 4:
AGENDAS, NOTICES, AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

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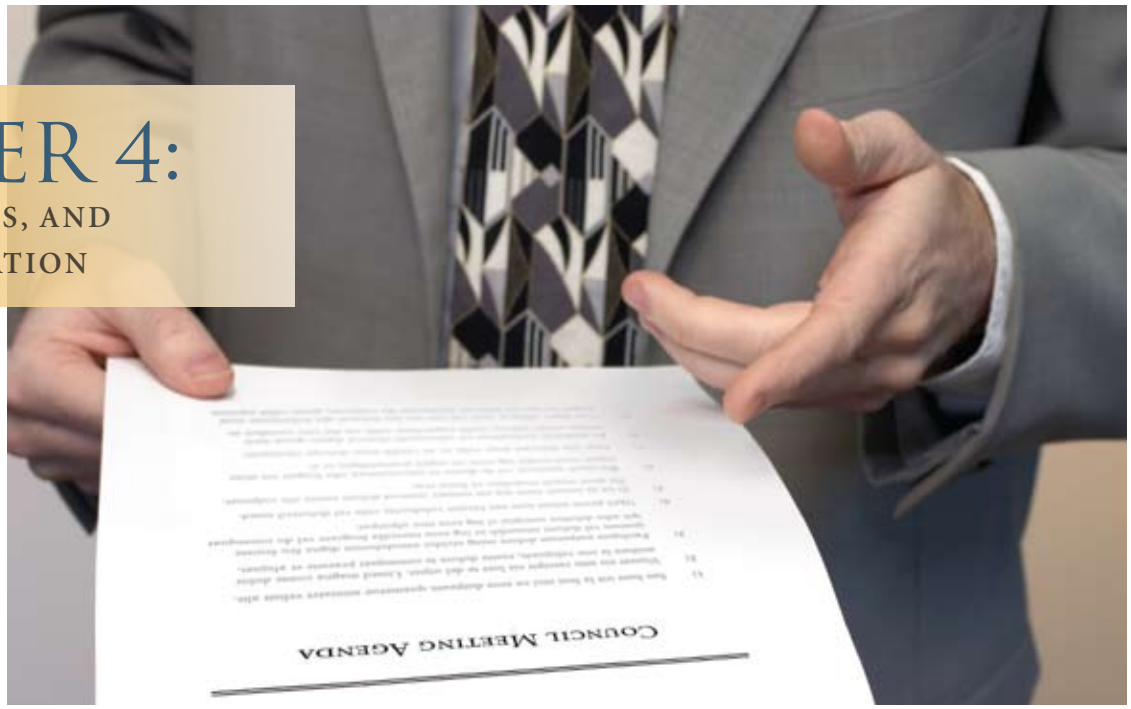

Effective notice is essential for an open and public meeting. Whether a meeting is open or how the public may participate in that meeting is academic if nobody knows about the meeting.

AGENDAS FOR REGULAR MEETINGS

Every regular meeting of a legislative body of a local agency—including advisory committees, commissions, or boards, as well as standing committees of legislative bodies—must be preceded by a posted agenda that advises the public of the meeting and the matters to be transacted or discussed.

Practice Tip:
Putting together a meeting agenda requires careful thought.

The agenda must be posted at least 72 hours before the regular meeting in a location "freely accessible to members of the public."[1] The courts have not definitively interpreted the "freely accessible" requirement. The California Attorney General has interpreted this provision to require posting in locations accessible to the public 24 hours a day during the 72-hour period, but any of the 72 hours may fall on a weekend.[2] Posting may also be made on a touch screen electronic kiosk accessible without charge to the public 24 hours a day during the 72-hour period.[3] However, only posting an agenda on an agency's Web site is inadequate since there is no universal access to the internet. The agenda must state the meeting time and place and must contain "a brief general description of each item of business to be transacted or discussed at the meeting, including items to be discussed in closed session."[4]

Q. The agenda for a regular meeting contains the following items of business:

- "Consideration of a report regarding traffic on Eighth Street"
- "Consideration of contract with ABC Consulting"

Are these descriptions adequate?

A. *If the first is, it is barely adequate. A better description would provide the reader with some idea of what the report is about and what is being recommended. The second is not adequate. A better description might read "consideration of a contract with ABC Consulting in the amount of $50,000 for traffic engineering services regarding traffic on Eighth Street."*

Q. The agenda includes an item entitled "City Manager's Report," during which time the city manager provides a brief report on notable topics of interest, none of which are listed on the agenda.

Is this permissible?

A. *Yes, so long as it does not result in extended discussion or action by the body.*

A brief general description may not be sufficient for closed session agenda items. The Brown Act provides safe harbor language for the various types of permissible closed sessions. Substantial compliance with the safe harbor language is recommended to protect legislative bodies and elected officials from legal challenges.

MAILED AGENDA UPON WRITTEN REQUEST

The legislative body, or its designee, must mail a copy of the agenda or, if requested, the entire agenda packet, to any person who has filed a written request for such materials. These copies shall be mailed at the time the agenda is posted. If requested, these materials must be made available in appropriate alternative formats to persons with disabilities.

A request for notice is valid for one calendar year and renewal requests must be filed Jan. 1 of each year. The legislative body may establish a fee to recover the cost of providing the service. Failure of the requesting person to receive the agenda does not constitute grounds for invalidation of actions taken at the meeting.[5]

NOTICE REQUIREMENTS FOR SPECIAL MEETINGS

There is no express agenda requirement for special meetings, but the notice of the special meeting effectively serves as the agenda and limits the business that may be transacted or discussed. Written notice must be sent to each member of the legislative body (unless waived in writing by that member) and to each local newspaper of general circulation, and radio or television station that has requested such notice in writing. This notice must be delivered by personal delivery or any other means that ensures receipt, at least 24 hours before the time of the meeting.

The notice must state the time and place of the meeting, as well as all business to be transacted or discussed. It is recommended that the business to be transacted or discussed be described in the same manner that an item for a regular meeting would be described on the agenda—with a brief general description. As noted above, closed session items should be described in accordance with the Brown Act's safe harbor provisions to protect legislative bodies and elected officials from challenges of noncompliance with notice requirements. The special meeting notice must also be posted at least 24 hours prior to the special meeting in a site freely accessible to the public. The body cannot consider business not in the notice.[6]

NOTICES AND AGENDAS FOR ADJOURNED AND CONTINUED MEETINGS AND HEARINGS

A regular or special meeting can be adjourned and re-adjourned to a time and place specified in the order of adjournment.[7] If no time is stated, the meeting is continued to the hour for regular meetings. Whoever is present (even if they are less than a quorum) may so adjourn a meeting; if no member of the legislative body is present, the clerk or secretary may adjourn the meeting. If a meeting is adjourned for less than five calendar days, no new agenda need be posted so long as a new item of business is not introduced.[8] A copy of the order of adjournment must be posted within 24 hours after the adjournment, at or near the door of the place where the meeting was held.

A hearing can be continued to a subsequent meeting. The process is the same as for continuing adjourned meetings, except that if the hearing is continued to a time less than 24 hours away, a copy of the order or notice of continuance must be posted immediately following the meeting.[9]

NOTICE REQUIREMENTS FOR EMERGENCY MEETINGS

The special meeting notice provisions apply to emergency meetings, except for the 24-hour notice.[10] News media that have requested written notice of special meetings must be notified by telephone at least one hour in advance of an emergency meeting, and all telephone numbers provided in that written request must be tried. If telephones are not working, the notice requirements are deemed waived. However, the news media must be notified as soon as possible of the meeting and any action taken.

News media may make a practice of having written requests on file for notification of special or emergency meetings. Absent such a request, a local agency has no legal obligation to notify news media of special or emergency meetings—although notification may be advisable in any event to avoid controversy.

EDUCATIONAL AGENCY MEETINGS

The Education Code contains some special agenda and special meeting provisions,[11] however, they are generally consistent with the Brown Act. An item is probably void if not posted.[12] A school district board must also adopt regulations to make sure the public can place matters affecting district's business on meeting agendas and to address the board on those items.[13]

NOTICE REQUIREMENTS FOR TAX OR ASSESSMENT MEETINGS AND HEARINGS

The Brown Act prescribes specific procedures for adoption by a city, county, special district, or joint powers authority of any new or increased general tax or assessment.[14] At least one public meeting must be held to allow public testimony on the tax or assessment. In addition, there must also be at least 45 days notice of a public hearing at which public testimony may be given before the legislative body proposes to act on the tax or assessment. The agency may recover the reasonable costs of the public meetings, hearings, and notice.[15]

The Brown Act exempts certain fees, standby or availability charges, recurring assessments, and new or increased assessments that are subject to the notice and hearing requirements of the Constitution.[16] As a practical matter, the Constitution's notice requirements have preempted this section of the Brown Act.

NON-AGENDA ITEMS

The Brown Act generally prohibits any action or discussion of items not on the posted agenda. However, there are three specific situations in which a legislative body can act on an item not on the agenda:[17]

- When a majority decides there is an "emergency situation" (as defined for emergency meetings);
- When two-thirds of the members present (or all members if less than two-thirds are present) determine there is a need for immediate action and the need to take action "came to the attention of the local agency subsequent to the agenda being posted." This exception requires a degree of urgency. Further, an item cannot be considered under this provision if the legislative body or the staff knew about the need to take immediate action before the agenda was posted. A new need does not arise because staff forgot to put an item on the agenda or because an applicant missed a deadline; or
- When an item appeared on the agenda of, and was continued from, a meeting held not more than five days earlier.

Practice Tip:

Subject to very limited exceptions, the Brown Act prohibits any action or discussion of an item not on the posted agenda.

The exceptions are narrow, as indicated by this list. The first two require a specific determination by the legislative body. That determination can be challenged in court and, if unsubstantiated, can lead to invalidation of an action.

"I'd like a two-thirds vote of the board, so we can go ahead and authorize commencement of phase two of the East Area Project," said Chair Lopez.

"It's not on the agenda. But we learned two days ago that we finished phase one ahead of schedule—believe it or not—and I'd like to keep it that way. Do I hear a motion?"

The desire to stay ahead of schedule generally would not satisfy "a need for immediate action." Too casual an action could invite a court challenge by a disgruntled resident. The prudent course is to place an item on the agenda for the next meeting and not risk invalidation.

"We learned this morning of an opportunity for a state grant," said the chief engineer at the regular board meeting, "but our application has to be submitted in two days. We'd like the board to give us the go ahead tonight, even though it's not on the agenda."

A legitimate immediate need can be acted upon even though not on the posted agenda by following a two-step process:

- First, make two determinations: (a) that there is an immediate need to take action and (b) that the need arose after the posting of the agenda. The matter is then placed on the agenda.
- Second, discuss and act on the added agenda item.

RESPONDING TO THE PUBLIC

The public can talk about anything within the jurisdiction of the legislative body, but the legislative body generally cannot act on or discuss an item not on the agenda. What happens when a member of the public raises a subject not on the agenda?

While the Brown Act does not allow discussion or action on items not on the agenda, it does allow members of the legislative body, or its staff, to "briefly respond" to comments or questions from members of the public, provide a reference to staff or other resources for factual information, or direct staff to place the issue on a future agenda. In addition, even without a comment from the public, a legislative body member or a staff member may ask for information, request a report back, request to place a matter on the agenda for a subsequent meeting (subject to the body's rules or procedures), ask a question for clarification, make a brief announcement, or briefly report on his or her own activities.[18] However, caution should be used to avoid any discussion or action on such items.

Council Member A: I would like staff to respond to Resident Joe's complaints during public comment about the repaving project on Elm Street—are there problems with this project?

City Manager: The public works director has prepared a 45-minute power point presentation for you on the status of this project and will give it right now.

Council Member B: Take all the time you need; we need to get to the bottom of this. Our residents are unhappy.

It is clear from this dialogue that the Elm Street project was not on the council's agenda, but was raised during the public comment period for items not on the agenda. Council Member A properly asked staff to respond; the city manager should have given at most a brief response. If a lengthy report from the public works director was warranted, the city manager should have stated that it would be placed on the agenda for the next meeting. Otherwise, both the long report and the likely discussion afterward will improperly embroil the council in a matter that is not listed on the agenda.

THE RIGHT TO ATTEND AND OBSERVE MEETINGS

A number of other Brown Act provisions protect the public's right to attend, observe, and participate in meetings.

Members of the public cannot be required to register their names, provide other information, complete a questionnaire, or otherwise "fulfill any condition precedent" to attending a meeting. Any attendance list, questionnaire, or similar document posted at or near the entrance to the meeting room or circulated at a meeting must clearly state that its completion is voluntary and that all persons may attend whether or not they fill it out.[19]

No meeting can be held in a facility that prohibits attendance based on race, religion color, national origin, ethnic group identification, age, sex, sexual orientation, or disability, or that is inaccessible to the disabled. Nor can a meeting be held where the public must make a payment or purchase in order to be present.[20] This does not mean however that the public is entitled to free entry to a conference attended by a majority of the legislative body.[21]

While a legislative body may use teleconferencing in connection with a meeting, the public must be given notice of and access to the teleconference location. Members of the public must be able to address the legislative body from the teleconference location.[22]

Action by secret ballot, whether preliminary or final, is flatly prohibited.[23]

Q: The agenda calls for election of the legislative body's officers. Members of the legislative body want to cast unsigned written ballots that would be tallied by the clerk, who would announce the results. Is this voting process permissible?

A: *No. The possibility that a public vote might cause hurt feelings among members of the legislative body or might be awkward—or even counterproductive—does not justify a secret ballot.*

There can be no semi-closed meetings, in which some members of the public are permitted to attend as spectators while others are not; meetings are either open or closed.[24]

The legislative body may remove persons from a meeting who willfully interrupt proceedings. If order still cannot be restored, the meeting room may be cleared. Members of the news media who have not participated in the disturbance must be allowed to continue to attend the meeting. The legislative body may establish a procedure to re-admit an individual or individuals not responsible for the disturbance.[25]

RECORDS AND RECORDINGS

The public has the right to review agendas and other writings distributed by any person to a majority of the legislative body in connection with a matter subject to discussion or consideration at a meeting. Except for privileged documents, those materials are public records and must be made available upon request without delay.[26] A fee or deposit as permitted by the California Public Records Act may be charged for a copy of a public record.[27]

Q: In connection with an upcoming hearing on a discretionary use permit, counsel for the legislative body transmits a memorandum to all members of the body outlining the litigation risks in granting or denying the permit. Must this memorandum be included in the packet of agenda materials available to the public?

A: *No. The memorandum is a privileged attorney-client communication.*

Q: In connection with an agenda item calling for the legislative body to approve a contract, staff submits to all members of the body a financial analysis explaining why the terms of the contract favor the local agency. Must this memorandum be included in the packet of agenda materials available to the public?

A. *Yes. The memorandum has been distributed to the majority of the legislative body, relates to the subject matter of a meeting, and is not a privileged communication.*

A legislative body may discuss or act on some matters without considering written materials. But if writings are distributed to a majority of a legislative body in connection with an agenda item, they must also be available to the public. A writing distributed to a majority of the legislative body less than 72 hours before the meeting must be made available for inspection at the time of distribution at a public office or location designated for that purpose; and the agendas for all meetings of the legislative body must include the address of this office or location.[28] A writing distributed during a meeting must be made public:

- At the meeting if prepared by the local agency or a member of its legislative body; or
- After the meeting if prepared by some other person.[29]

Any tape or film record of an open and public meeting made for whatever purpose by or at the direction of the local agency is subject to the Public Records Act; however, it may be erased or destroyed 30 days after the taping or recording. Any inspection of a video or tape recording is to be provided without charge on a video or tape player made available by the local agency.[30] The agency may impose its ordinary charge for copies.[31]

In addition, the public is specifically allowed to use audio or video tape recorders or still or motion picture cameras at a meeting to record the proceedings, absent a reasonable finding by the legislative body that noise, illumination, or obstruction of view caused by recorders or cameras would persistently disrupt the proceedings.[32]

Similarly, a legislative body cannot prohibit or restrict the public broadcast of its open and public meetings without making a reasonable finding that the noise, illumination, or obstruction of view would persistently disrupt the proceedings.[33]

THE PUBLIC'S PLACE ON THE AGENDA

Every agenda for a regular meeting must allow members of the public to speak on any item of interest, so long as the item is within the subject matter jurisdiction of the legislative body. Further, the public must be allowed to speak on a specific item of business before or during the legislative body's consideration of it.[34]

Q. Must the legislative body allow members of the public to show videos or make a power point presentation during the public comment part of the agenda, as long as the subject matter is relevant to the agency and is within the established time limit?

A. *Probably, although the agency is under no obligation to provide equipment.*

Practice Tip:

Public speakers cannot be compelled to give their name or address as a condition of speaking. The clerk or presiding officer may request speakers to complete a speaker card or identify themselves for the record, but must respect a speaker's desire for anonymity.

Moreover, the legislative body cannot prohibit public criticism of policies, procedures, programs, or services of the agency or the acts or omissions of the legislative body itself. But, the Brown Act provides no immunity for defamatory statements.[35]

Q. May the presiding officer prohibit a member of the audience from publicly criticizing an agency employee by name during public comments?

A. *No, as long as the criticism pertains to job performance.*

Q. During the public comment period of a regular meeting of the legislative body, a resident urges the public to support and vote for a candidate vying for election to the body. May the presiding officer gavel the speaker out of order for engaging in political campaign speech?

A. *There is no case law on this subject. Some would argue that campaign issues are outside the subject matter jurisdiction of the body within the meaning of Section 54954.3(a). Others take the view that the speech must be allowed under paragraph (c) of that section because it is relevant to the governing of the agency and an implicit criticism of the incumbents.*

The legislative body may adopt reasonable regulations, including time limits, on public comments. Such regulations should be enforced fairly and without regard to speakers' viewpoints. The legislative body has discretion to modify its regulations regarding time limits on public comment if necessary. For example, the time limit could be shortened to accommodate a lengthy agenda or lengthened to allow additional time for discussion on a complicated matter.[36]

The public does not need to be given an opportunity to speak on an item that has already been considered by a committee made up exclusively of members of the legislative body at a public meeting, if all interested members of the public had the opportunity to speak on the item before or during its consideration, and if the item has not been substantially changed.[37]

Notices and agendas for special meetings must also give members of the public the opportunity to speak before or during consideration of an item on the agenda but need not allow members of the public an opportunity to speak on other matters within the jurisdiction of the legislative body.[38]

Endnotes

1 California Government Code section 54954.2(a)(1)
2 78 Ops.Cal.Atty.Gen. 327 (1995)
3 88 Ops.Cal.Atty.Gen. 218 (2005)
4 California Government Code section 54954.2(a)(1)
5 California Government Code section 54954.1
6 California Government Code section 54956
7 California Government Code section 54955
8 California Government Code section 54954.2(b)(3)
9 California Government Code section 54955.1
10 California Government Code section 54956.5
11 Education Code sections 35144, 35145 and 72129
12 *Carlson v. Paradise Unified School District* (1971) 18 Cal.App.3d 196
13 California Education Code section 35145.5
14 California Government Code section 54954.6
15 California Government Code section 54954.6(g)
16 See: Cal.Const.Art.XIIIC, XIIID and California Government Code section 54954.6(h)
17 California Government Code section 54954.2(b)
18 California Government Code section 54954.2(a)(2)
19 California Government Code section 54953.3
20 California Government Code section 54961(a); California Government Code section 11135(a)
21 California Government Code section 54952.2(c)(2)
22 California Government Code section 54953(b)
23 California Government Code section 54953(c)
24 46 Ops.Cal.Atty.Gen. 34 (1965)
25 California Government Code section 54957.9
26 California Government Code section 54957.5
27 California Government Code section 54957.5(d)
28 California Government Code section 54957.5(b)
29 California Government Code section 54957.5(c)
30 California Government Code section 54953.5(b)
31 California Government Code section 54957.5(d)
32 California Government Code section 54953.5(a)
33 California Government Code section 54953.6
34 California Government Code section 54954.3(a)
35 California Government Code section 54954.3(c)
36 California Government Code section 54954.3(b); *Chaffee v. San Francisco Public Library Com.* (2005) 134 Cal. App.4th 109; 75 Ops.Cal.Atty.Gen. 89 (1992)
37 California Government Code section 54954.3(a)
38 California Government Code section 54954.3(a)

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CHAPTER 5:
CLOSED SESSIONS

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The Brown Act begins with a strong statement in favor of open meetings; private discussions among a majority of a legislative body are prohibited, unless expressly authorized under the Brown Act. It is not enough that a subject is sensitive, embarrassing, or controversial. Without specific authority in the Brown Act for a closed session, a matter must be discussed in public. As an example, a board of police commissioners cannot generally meet in closed session, even though some matters are sensitive and the commission considers their disclosure contrary to the public interest.[1]

Practice Tip:

Meetings are either open or closed. There is no "in between."

Meetings of a legislative body are either fully open or fully closed; there is nothing in between. Closed sessions may involve only the members of the legislative body and only agency counsel, management and support staff, and consultants necessary for consideration of the matter that is the subject of closed session. Individuals who do not have an official role in advising the legislative body on closed session subject matters must be excluded from closed session discussions.[2]

Q. May the lawyer for someone suing the agency attend a closed session in order to explain to the legislative body why it should accept a settlement offer?

A. *No, attendance in closed sessions is reserved exclusively for the agency's advisors.*

In general, the most common purpose of a closed session is to avoid revealing confidential information that may, in specified circumstances, prejudice the legal or negotiating position of the agency or compromise the privacy interests of employees. Closed sessions should be conducted keeping those narrow purposes in mind.

In this chapter, the grounds for convening a closed session are called "exceptions" because they are exceptions to the general rule that meetings must be conducted openly. In some circumstances, none of the closed session exceptions apply to an issue or information the legislative body wishes to discuss privately. In these cases, it is not proper to convene a closed session, even to protect confidential information. For example, the Brown Act does not authorize closed sessions for general contract negotiations.

AGENDAS AND REPORTS

Closed session items must be briefly described on the posted agenda and the description must state the specific statutory exemption. An item that appears on the open meeting portion of the agenda may not be taken into closed session until it has been properly agendized as a closed session or unless it is properly added as a closed session item by a two-thirds vote of the body after making the appropriate urgency findings.

The Brown Act supplies a series of fill-in-the-blank sample, agenda descriptions for various types of authorized closed sessions, which provide a "safe harbor" from legal attacks. These sample agenda descriptions cover license and permit determinations, real property negotiations, existing or anticipated litigation, liability claims, threats to security, public employee appointments, evaluations and discipline, labor negotiations, multi-jurisdictional drug cases, hospital boards of directors, and medical quality assurance committees.[3]

If the legislative body intends to convene in closed session, it must include the section of the Brown Act authorizing the closed session in advance on the agenda and it must make a public announcement prior to the closed session discussion. In most cases, the announcement may simply be a reference to the agenda item.[4]

Following a closed session the legislative body must provide an oral or written report on certain actions taken and the vote of every elected member present. The timing and content of the report varies according to the reason for the closed session.[5] The announcements may be made at the site of the closed session, so long as the public is allowed to be present to hear them.

If there is a standing or written request for documentation, any copies of contracts, settlement agreements, or other documents finally approved or adopted in closed session must be provided to the requestor(s) after the closed session, if final approval of such documents does not rest with any other party to the contract or settlement. If substantive amendments to a contract or settlement agreement approved by all parties requires retyping, such documents may be held until retyping is completed during normal business hours, but the substance of the changes must be summarized for any person inquiring about them.[6]

The Brown Act does not require minutes, including minutes of closed session. A confidential "minute book" may be kept to record actions taken at closed sessions.[7] If one is kept, it must be made available to members of the legislative body, provided that the member asking to review minutes of a particular meeting was not disqualified from attending the meeting due to a conflict of interest.[8] A court may order the disclosure of minute books for the court's review if a lawsuit makes sufficient claims of an open meeting violation.

Practice Tip:

Some problems over closed sessions arise because secrecy itself breeds distrust. The Brown Act does not require closed sessions and legislative bodies may do well to resist the tendency to call a closed session simply because it may be permitted. A better practice is to go into closed session only when necessary.

Practice Tip:

Pay close attention to closed session agenda descriptions. Using the wrong label can lead to invalidation of an action taken in closed session.

LITIGATION

There is an attorney/client relationship, and legal counsel may use it for privileged written and verbal communications—outside of meetings—to members of the legislative body. But protection of the attorney/client privilege cannot by itself be the reason for a closed session.[9]

The Brown Act expressly authorizes closed sessions to discuss what is considered litigation. The rules that apply to holding a litigation closed session involve complex, technical definitions and procedures. The essential thing to know is that a closed session can be held by the body to confer with, or receive advice from, its legal counsel when open discussion would prejudice the position of the local agency in litigation in which the agency is a party.[10] The litigation exception under the Brown Act is narrowly construed and does not permit activities beyond a legislative body's conferring with its own legal counsel. For example, it is not permissible to hold a closed session in which settlement negotiations take place between a legislative body and an adverse party or to hold a closed session for the purpose of participation in a mediation.[11]

The California Attorney General believes that if the agency's attorney is not a participant, a litigation closed session cannot be held.[12] In any event, local agency officials should always consult the agency's attorney before placing this type of closed session on the agenda, in order to be certain that it is being done properly.

Litigation that may be discussed in closed session includes the following three types of matters:

Existing litigation

Q. May the legislative body agree to settle a lawsuit in a properly-noticed closed session, without placing the settlement agreement on an open session agenda for public approval?

A. *Yes, but the settlement agreement is a public document and must be disclosed on request. Furthermore, a settlement agreement cannot commit the agency to matters that are required to have public hearings.*

In general, the most common purpose of a closed session is to avoid revealing confidential information that may, in specified circumstances, prejudice the legal or negotiating position of the agency or compromise the privacy interests of employees. Closed sessions should be conducted keeping those narrow purposes in mind.

Grounds for convening a closed session in this chapter are called "exceptions" because they are exceptions to the general rule that meetings must be conducted openly. In some circumstances, none of the closed session exceptions apply to an issue or information the legislative body wishes to discuss privately. It is improper in these cases, to convene a closed session, even to protect confidential information. For example, the Brown Act does not authorize closed sessions for general contract negotiations.

Existing litigation includes any adjudicatory proceedings before a court, administrative body exercising its adjudicatory authority, hearing officer, or arbitrator. The clearest situation in which a closed session is authorized is when the local agency meets with its legal counsel to discuss a pending matter that has been filed in a court or with an administrative agency and names the local agency as a party. The legislative body may meet under these circumstances to receive updates on the case from attorneys, participate in developing strategy as the case develops, or to consider alternatives for resolution of the case. Generally, an agreement to settle litigation may be approved in closed session. However, an agreement to settle litigation that requires actions that are subject to public hearings cannot be approved in closed session.[13]

Threatened litigation against the local agency

Closed sessions are authorized for legal counsel to inform the legislative body of specific facts and circumstances that suggest that the local agency has significant exposure to litigation. The Brown Act lists six separate categories of such facts and circumstances.[14] The legislative body may also meet under this exception to determine whether a closed session is authorized based on information provided by legal counsel or staff.

Initiation of litigation by the local agency

A closed session may be held under the pending litigation exception when the legislative body seeks legal advice on whether to protect the agency's rights and interests by initiating litigation.

In certain cases, the circumstances and facts justifying the closed session must be publicly noticed on the agenda or announced at an open meeting. Before holding a closed session under the pending litigation exception, the legislative body must publicly state which of the three basic situations apply. It may do so simply by making a reference to the posted agenda.

Certain actions must be reported in open session at the same meeting following the closed session. Other actions, as where final approval rests with another party or the court, may be announced when they become final and upon inquiry of any person. Each agency attorney should be aware of and should make other disclosures that may be required in specific instances.

■ REAL ESTATE NEGOTIATIONS

A legislative body may meet in closed session with its negotiator to discuss the purchase, sale, exchange, or lease of real property by or for the local agency. A "lease" includes a lease renewal or renegotiation. The purpose is to grant authority to the legislative body's negotiator on price and terms of payment.[15] Caution should be exercised to limit discussion to price and terms of payment without straying to other related issues such as site design, architecture, or other aspects of the project for which the transaction is contemplated.[16]

Q. May other terms of a real estate transaction, aside from price and terms of payment, be addressed in closed session?

A. *No. However, there are differing opinions over the scope of the phrase "price and terms of payment" in connection with real estate closed sessions. Many agency attorneys believe that any term that directly affects the economic value of the transaction falls within the ambit of "price and terms of payment." Others take a narrower, more literal view of the phrase.*

The agency's negotiator may be a member of the legislative body itself. Prior to the closed session, or on the agenda, the legislative body must identify its negotiator, the real property that the negotiations may concern and the names of the persons with whom its negotiator may negotiate.[17]

After real estate negotiations are concluded, the approval and substance of the agreement must be reported. If its own approval makes the agreement final, the body must report in open session at the public meeting during which the closed session is held. If final approval rests with another party, the local agency must report the approval as soon as informed of it. Once final, the substance of the agreement must be disclosed to anyone who inquires.

"Our population is exploding, and we have to think about new school sites," said Board Member Jefferson.

"Not only that," interjected Board Member Tanaka, "we need to get rid of a couple of our older facilities."

"Well, obviously the place to do that is in a closed session," said Board Member O'Reilly. "Otherwise we're going to set off land speculation. And if we even mention closing a school, parents are going to be in an uproar."

A closed session to discuss potential sites is not authorized by the Brown Act. The exception is limited to meeting with its negotiator over specific sites—which must be identified at an open and public meeting.

PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT

The Brown Act authorizes a closed session "to consider the appointment, employment, evaluation of performance, discipline, or dismissal of a public employee or to hear complaints or charges brought against the employee."[18] The purpose of this exception—commonly referred to as the "personnel exception"—is to avoid undue publicity or embarrassment for an employee or applicant for employment and to allow full and candid discussion by the legislative body; thus, it is restricted to discussing individuals, not general personnel policies.[19] The body must possess the power to appoint, evaluate, or dismiss the employee to hold a closed session under this exception.[20] That authority may be delegated to a subsidiary appointed body.[21]

An employee must be given at least 24 hours notice of any closed session convened to hear specific complaints or charges against him or her. This occurs when the legislative body is reviewing evidence, which could include live testimony, and adjudicating conflicting testimony offered as evidence. The employee has the right to have the specific complaints and charges discussed in a public session rather than closed session.[22] If the employee is not given notice, any disciplinary action is null and void.[23]

Practice Tip:

Discussions of who to appoint to an advisory body and whether or not to censure a fellow member of the legislative body must be held in the open.

Q. Must 24 hours notice be given to an employee whose negative performance evaluation is to be considered by the legislative body in closed session?

A. *No, the notice is reserved for situations where the body is to hear complaints and charges from witnesses.*

However, an employee is not entitled to notice and a hearing where the purpose of the closed session is to consider a performance evaluation. The Attorney General and the courts have determined that personnel performance evaluations do not constitute complaints and charges, which are more akin to accusations made against a person.[24]

Correct labeling of the closed session on the agenda is critical. A closed session agenda that identified discussion of an employment contract was not sufficient to allow dismissal of an employee.[25] An incorrect agenda description can result in invalidation of an action and much embarrassment.

For purposes of the personnel exception, "employee" specifically includes an officer or an independent contractor who functions as an officer or an employee. Examples of the former include a city manager, district general manager or superintendent. An example of the latter is a legal counsel or engineer hired on contract to act as local agency attorney or chief engineer.

Elected officials, appointees to the governing body or subsidiary bodies, and independent contractors other than those discussed above are not employees for purposes of the personnel exception.[26] Action on individuals who are not "employees" must also be public—including discussing and voting on appointees to committees, or debating the merits of independent contractors, or considering a complaint against a member of the legislative body itself.

The personnel exception specifically prohibits discussion or action on proposed compensation in closed session, except for a disciplinary reduction in pay. Among other things, that means there can be no personnel closed sessions on a salary change (other than a disciplinary reduction) between any unrepresented individual and the legislative body. However, a legislative body may address the compensation of an unrepresented individual, such as a city manager, in a closed session as part of a labor negotiation (discussed later in this chapter), yet another example of the importance of using correct agenda descriptions.

Practice Tip:

The personnel exception specifically prohibits discussion or action on proposed compensation in closed session except for a disciplinary reduction in pay.

Reclassification of a job must be public, but an employee's ability to fill that job may be considered in closed session. Any closed session action to appoint, employ, dismiss, accept the resignation of, or otherwise affect the employment status of a public employee must be reported at the public meeting during which the closed session is held. That report must identify the title of the position, but not the names of all persons considered for an employment position.[27] However, a report on a dismissal or non-renewal of an employment contract must be deferred until administrative remedies, if any, are exhausted.[28]

> "I have some important news to announce," said Mayor Garcia. "We've decided to terminate the contract of the city manager, effective immediately. The council has met in closed session and we've negotiated six months severance pay."
>
> "Unfortunately, that has some serious budget consequences, so we've had to delay phase two of the East Area Project."
>
> *This may be an improper use of the personnel closed session if the council agenda described the item as the city manager's evaluation. In addition, other than labor negotiations, any action on individual compensation must be taken in open session. Caution should be exercised to not discuss in closed session issues, such as budget impacts in this hypothetical, beyond the scope of the posted closed session notice.*

Q. The school board is meeting in closed session to evaluate the superintendent and to consider giving her a pay raise. May the superintendent attend the closed session?

A. *The superintendent may attend the portion of the closed session devoted to her evaluation, but may not be present during discussion of her pay raise. Discussion of the superintendent's compensation in closed session is limited to giving direction to the school board's negotiator. Also, the clerk should be careful to notice the closed session on the agenda as both an evaluation and a labor negotiation.*

LABOR NEGOTIATIONS

The Brown Act allows closed sessions for some aspects of labor negotiations. Different provisions (discussed below) apply to school and community college districts.

Practice Tip:

Prior to the closed session, the legislative body must hold an open and public session in which it identifies its designated representatives.

A legislative body may meet in closed session to instruct its bargaining representatives, which may be one or more of its members,[29] on employee salaries and fringe benefits for both union and non-union employees. For represented employees, it may also consider working conditions that by law require negotiation. These sessions may take place before or during negotiations with employee representatives. Prior to the closed session, the legislative body must hold an open and public session in which it identifies its designated representatives.

During its discussions with representatives on salaries and fringe benefits, the legislative body may also discuss available funds and funding priorities, but only to instruct its representative. The body may also meet in closed session with a conciliator who has intervened in negotiations.[30]

The approval of an agreement concluding labor negotiations with represented employees must be reported after the agreement is final and has been accepted or ratified by the other party. The report must identify the item approved and the other party or parties to the negotiation.[31] The labor sessions specifically cannot include final action on proposed compensation of one or more unrepresented employees. For purposes of this prohibition, an "employee" includes an officer or an independent contractor who functions as an officer or an employee. Independent contractors who do not serve in the capacity of an officer or employee are not covered by this closed session exception.

LABOR NEGOTIATIONS—SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICTS

Employee relations for school districts and community college districts are governed by the Rodda Act, where different meeting and special notice provisions apply. The entire board, for example, may negotiate in closed sessions.

Four types of meetings are exempted from compliance with the Rodda Act:

(1) A negotiating session with a recognized or certified employee organization;

(2) A meeting of a mediator with either side;

(3) A hearing or meeting held by a fact finder or arbitrator; and

(4) A session between the board and its bargaining agent, or the board alone, to discuss its position regarding employee working conditions and instruct its agent.[32]

Public participation under the Rodda Act also takes another form.[33] All initial proposals of both sides must be presented at public meetings and are public records. The public must be given reasonable time to inform itself and to express its views before the district may adopt its initial proposal. In addition, new topics of negotiations must be made public within 24 hours. Any votes on such a topic must be followed within 24 hours by public disclosure of the vote of each member.[34] The final vote must be in public.

OTHER EDUCATION CODE EXCEPTIONS

The Education Code governs student disciplinary meetings by boards of school districts and community college districts. District boards may hold a closed session to consider the suspension or discipline of a student, if a public hearing would reveal personal, disciplinary, or academic information about the student contrary to state and federal pupil privacy law. The student's parent or guardian may request an open meeting.[35]

Community college districts may also hold closed sessions to discuss some student disciplinary matters, awarding of honorary degrees, or gifts from donors who prefer to remain anonymous.[36] Kindergarten through 12th grade districts may also meet in closed session to review the contents of the statewide assessment instrument.[37]

GRAND JURY TESTIMONY

A legislative body, including its members as individuals, may testify in private before a grand jury, either individually or as a group.[38] Attendance by the entire legislative body before a grand jury would not constitute a closed session meeting under the Brown Act, since the body would not be meeting to make decisions or reach a consensus on issues within the body's subject matter jurisdiction.

Practice Tip:

Attendance by the entire legislative body before a grand jury would not constitute a closed session meeting under the Brown Act.

LICENSE APPLICANTS WITH CRIMINAL RECORDS

A closed session is permitted when an applicant, who has a criminal record, applies for a license or license renewal and the legislative body wishes to discuss whether the applicant is sufficiently rehabilitated to receive the license. If the body decides to deny the license, the applicant may withdraw the application. If the applicant does not withdraw, the body must deny the license in public, immediately or at its next meeting. No information from the closed session can be revealed without consent of the applicant, unless the applicant takes action to challenge the denial.[39]

PUBLIC SECURITY

Legislative bodies may meet in closed session to discuss matters posing a threat to the security of public buildings, essential public services, including water, sewer, gas, or electric service, or to the public's right of access to public services or facilities over which the legislative body has jurisdiction. Closed session meetings for these purposes must be held with designated security or law enforcement officials including the Attorney General, district attorney, agency attorney, sheriff or chief of police, or their deputies or agency security consultant or security operations manager.[40] Action taken in closed session with respect to such public security issues is not reportable action.

MULTIJURISDICTIONAL DRUG LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCY

A joint powers agency formed to provide drug law enforcement services to multiple jurisdictions may hold closed sessions to discuss case records of an on-going criminal investigation, to hear testimony from persons involved in the investigation, and to discuss courses of action in particular cases.[41]

The exception applies to the legislative body of the joint powers agency and to any body advisory to it. The purpose is to prevent impairment of investigations, to protect witnesses and informants, and to permit discussion of effective courses of action.[42]

HOSPITAL PEER REVIEW AND TRADE SECRETS

Two specific kinds of closed sessions are allowed for district hospitals and municipal hospitals, under other provisions of law.[43]

1. A meeting to hear reports of hospital medical audit or quality assurance committees, or for related deliberations. However, an applicant or medical staff member whose staff privileges are the direct subject of a hearing may request a public hearing.
2. A meeting to discuss "reports involving trade secrets"—provided no action is taken.

A "trade secret" is defined as information which is not generally known to the public or competitors and which: (1) "derives independent economic value, actual or potential" by virtue of its restricted knowledge; (2) is necessary to initiate a new hospital service or program or facility; and (3) would, if prematurely disclosed, create a substantial probability of depriving the hospital of a substantial economic benefit.

The provision prohibits use of closed sessions to discuss transitions in ownership or management, or the district's dissolution.[44]

THE CONFIDENTIALITY OF CLOSED SESSION DISCUSSIONS

It is not uncommon for agency officials to complain that confidential information is being leaked from closed sessions. The Brown Act prohibits the disclosure of confidential information acquired in a closed session by any person present and offers various remedies to address willful breaches of confidentiality.[45] It is incumbent upon all those attending lawful closed sessions to protect the confidentiality of those discussions. One court has held that members of a legislative body cannot be compelled to divulge the content of closed session discussions through the discovery process.[46] Only the legislative body acting as a body may agree to divulge confidential closed session information; regarding attorney/client privileged communications, the entire body is the holder of the privilege and only the entire body can decide to waive the privilege.[47]

Practice Tip:

There is a strong interest in protecting the confidentiality of proper and lawful closed sessions.

Before adoption of the Brown Act provision specifically prohibiting disclosure of closed session communications, agency attorneys and the Attorney General long believed that officials have a fiduciary duty to protect the confidentiality of closed session discussions. The Attorney General issued an opinion that it is "improper" for officials to disclose information received during a closed session regarding pending litigation,[48] though the Attorney General has also concluded that a local agency may not go so far as to adopt an ordinance criminalizing public disclosure of closed session discussions.[49] In any event, the Brown Act now prescribes remedies for breaches of confidentiality. These include injunctive relief, disciplinary action against an employee, and referral of a member of the legislative body to the grand jury.[50]

The duty of maintaining confidentiality, of course, must give way to the obligation to disclose improper matters or discussions that may come up in closed sessions. In recognition of this public policy, the Brown Act exempts from its prohibition against disclosure of closed session communications disclosure of closed session information to the district attorney or the grand jury due to a perceived violation of law, expressions of opinion concerning the propriety or legality of actions taken in closed session, including disclosure of the nature and extent of the illegal action, and disclosing information that is not confidential.[51]

The interplay between these possible sanctions and an official's first amendment rights is complex and beyond the scope of this guide. Suffice it to say that this is a matter of great sensitivity and controversy.

> "I want the press to know that I voted in closed session against filing the eminent domain action," said Council Member Chang.
>
> "Don't settle too soon," reveals Council Member Watson to the property owner, over coffee. "The city's offer coming your way is not our bottom line."
>
> *The first comment to the press is appropriate—the Brown Act requires that certain final votes taken in closed session be reported publicly.[52] The second comment to the property owner is not—disclosure of confidential information acquired in closed session is expressly prohibited and harmful to the agency.*

Endnotes

1 61 Ops.Cal.Atty.Gen. 220 (1978)
2 82 Ops.Cal.Atty.Gen. 29 (1999)
3 California Government Code section 54954.5
4 California Government Code sections 54956.9 and 54957.7
5 California Government Code section 54957.1(a)
6 California Government Code section 54957.1(b)
7 California Government Code section 54957.2
8 *Hamilton v. Town of Los Gatos* (1989) 213 Cal.App.3d 1050; 2 Cal.Code Regs. section 18702.1(c)
9 *Roberts v. City of Palmdale* (1993) 5 Cal.4th 363
10 California Government Code section 54956.9; *Shapiro v. Board of Directors of Center City Development Corp.* (2005) 134 Cal.App.4th 170 (agency must be a party to the litigation).
11 *Page v. Miracosta Community College District* (2009) 180 Cal.App.4th 471
12 "*The Brown Act,*" California Attorney General (2003), p. 40
13 *Trancas Property Owners Association v. City of Malibu* (2006) 138 Cal.App.4th 172
14 Government Code section 54956.9(b)
15 California Government Code section 54956.8
16 *Shapiro v. San Diego City Council* (2002) 96 Cal.App.4th 172; see also __ Ops.Cal.Atty.Gen.__ (May 21, 2010) (2010 WL 2150433) (concluding it is impermissible for a redevelopment agency to meet in closed session to discuss the terms of a rehabilitation loan to a business that was leasing property from the agency when the terms and conditions of the lease itself were not also a matter of discussion.)
17 California Government Code section 54956.8
18 California Government Code section 54957(b)
19 63 Ops.Cal.Atty.Gen. 215 (1980); but see: *Duvall v. Board of Trustees* (2000) 93 Cal.App.4th 902 (board may discuss personnel evaluation criteria, process and other preliminary matters in closed session).
20 *Gillespie v. San Francisco Public Library Commission* (1998) 67 Cal.App.4th 1165; 85 Ops.Cal.Atty.Gen. 77 (2002)
21 *Gillespie v. San Francisco Public Library Commission* (1998) 67 Cal.App.4th 1165; 80 Ops.Cal.Atty.Gen. 308 (1997). Interviews of candidates to fill a vacant staff position conducted by a temporary committee appointed by the governing body may be done in closed session.
22 *Morrison v. Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles* (2003) 107 Cal.App.4th 860
23 California Government Code section 54957
24 78 Ops.Cal.Atty.Gen. 218 (1995); Bell v. Vista Unified School District (2000) 82 Cal.App.4th 672; *Furtado v. Sierra Community College* (1998) 68 Cal.App.4th 876; *Fischer v. Los Angeles Unified School District* (1999) 70 Cal.App.4th 87
25 *Moreno v. City of King* (2005) 127 Cal.App.4th 17
26 California Government Code section 54957
27 *Gillespie v. San Francisco Public Library Commission* (1998) 67 Cal.App.4th 1165
28 California Government Code section 54957.1(a)(5)

29 California Government Code section 54957.6
30 57 Ops.Cal.Atty.Gen. 209 (1974)
31 California Government Code section 54957.1(a)(6)
32 California Government Code section 3549.1
33 California Government Code section 3540
34 California Government Code section 3547
35 California Education Code section 48918, but see *Rim of the World Unified School District v. Superior Court* (2003) 104 Cal.App.4th 1393 (Section 48918 preempted by the Federal Family Educational Right and Privacy Act in regard to expulsion proceedings.)
36 California Education Code section 72122
37 California Education Code section 60617
38 California Government Code section 54953.1
39 California Government Code section 54956.7
40 California Government Code section 54957
41 *McKee v. Los Angeles Interagency Metropolitan Police Apprehension Crime Task Force* (2005) 134 Cal.App.4th 354
42 California Government Code section 54957.8
43 California Government Code section 54962
44 California Health and Safety Code section 32106
45 Government Code section 54963
46 *Kleitman v. Superior Court* (1999) 74 Cal.App.4th 324, 327; *see also:* California Government Code section 54963
47 *Roberts v. City of Palmdale* (1993) 5 Cal.4th 363
48 80 Ops.Cal.Atty.Gen. 231 (1997)
49 76 Ops.Cal.Atty.Gen. 289 (1993)
50 California Government Code section 54963
51 California Government Code section 54963
52 California Government Code section 54957.1

Updates to this publication responding to changes in the Brown Act or new court interpretations are available at www.cacities.org/opengovernment. A current version of the Brown Act may be found at www.leginfo.ca.gov.

CHAPTER 6:
REMEDIES

INVALIDATION

CIVIL ACTION TO PREVENT FUTURE VIOLATIONS

COSTS AND ATTORNEY'S FEES

CRIMINAL COMPLAINTS

VOLUNTARY RESOLUTION

CHAPTER 6:
REMEDIES

Certain violations of the Brown Act are designated as misdemeanors, although by far the most commonly used enforcement provisions are those that authorize civil actions to invalidate specified actions taken in violation of the Brown Act and to stop or prevent future violations. Still, despite all the safeguards and remedies to enforce them, it is ultimately impossible for the public to monitor every aspect of public officials' interactions. Compliance ultimately results from regular training and a good measure of self-regulation on the part of public officials. This chapter discusses the remedies available to the public when that self-regulation is ineffective.

INVALIDATION

Any interested person, including the district attorney, may seek to invalidate certain actions of a legislative body on the ground that they violate the BrownAct.[1] Violations of the Brown Act, however, cannot be invalidated if they involve the following types of actions:

- Those taken in substantial compliance with the law;
- Those involving the sale or issuance of notes, bonds or other indebtedness, or any related contracts or agreements;
- Those creating a contractual obligation, including a contract awarded by competitive bid for other than compensation for professional services, upon which a party has in good faith relied to its detriment;
- Those connected with the collection of any tax; or
- Those in which the complaining party had actual notice at least 72 hours prior to the meeting at which the action is taken.

Before filing a court action seeking invalidation, a person who believes that a violation has occurred must send a written "cure or correct" demand to the legislative body. This demand must clearly describe the challenged action, the nature of the claimed violation, and the "cure" sought. This demand must be sent within 90 days of the alleged violation or 30 days if the action was taken in open session but in violation of Section 54954.2, which requires (subject to specific exceptions) that only properly agendized items are acted on by the governing body during a meeting.[2] The legislative body then has up to 30 days to cure and correct its action. If it does not act, any lawsuit must be filed within the next 15 days.

The purpose of this requirement is to offer the body an opportunity to consider whether a violation has occurred and to weigh its options before litigation is filed. The Brown Act does not specify how to cure or correct a violation; the best method is to rescind the action being complained of and to start over.

Although just about anyone has standing to bring an action for invalidation,[3] the challenger must show prejudice as a result of the alleged violation.[4] An action to invalidate fails to state a cause of action against the agency if the body deliberated but did not take an action.[5]

Practice Tip:

A lawsuit to invalidate must be preceded by a demand to cure and correct the challenged action in order to give the legislative body an opportunity to consider its options.

CIVIL ACTION TO PREVENT FUTURE VIOLATIONS

The district attorney or any interested person can file a civil action asking the court to:

- Stop or prevent violations or threatened violations of the Brown Act by members of the legislative body of a local agency;
- Determine the applicability of the Brown Act to actions or threatened future action of the legislative body;
- Determine whether any rule or action by the legislative body to penalize or otherwise discourage the expression of one or more of its members is valid under state or federal law; or
- Compel the legislative body to tape record its closed sessions.

It is not necessary for a challenger to prove a past pattern or practice of violations by the local agency in order to obtain injunctive relief. A court may presume when issuing an injunction that a single violation will continue in the future where the public agency refuses to admit to the alleged violation or to renounce or curtail the practice.[6] Note, however, that a court may not compel elected officials to disclose their recollections of what transpired in a closed session.[7]

Upon finding a violation of the Brown Act pertaining to closed sessions, a court may compel the legislative body to tape record its future closed sessions. In a subsequent lawsuit to enforce the Brown Act alleging a violation occurring in closed session, a court may upon motion of the plaintiff review the tapes if there is good cause to think the Brown Act has been violated, and make public the relevant portion of the closed session recording.

COSTS AND ATTORNEY'S FEES

Someone who successfully invalidates an action taken in violation of the Brown Act or who successfully enforces one of the Brown Act's civil remedies may seek court costs and reasonable attorney's fees. Courts have held that attorney's fees must be awarded to a successful plaintiff unless special circumstances exist that would make a fee award against the public agency unjust.[8] When evaluating how to respond to assertions that the Brown Act has been violated, elected officials and their lawyers should assume that attorneys fees will be awarded against the agency if a violation of the Act is proven.

An attorney fee award may only be directed against the local agency and not the individual members of the legislative body. If the local agency prevails, it may be awarded court costs and attorney's fees if the court finds the lawsuit was clearly frivolous and lacking in merit.[9]

Practice Tip:

Attorney's fees will likely be awarded if a violation of the Brown Act is proven.

CRIMINAL COMPLAINTS

A violation of the Brown Act by a member of the legislative body who acts with the improper intent described below is punishable as a misdemeanor.[10]

A criminal violation has two components. The first is that there must be an overt act—a member of a legislative body must attend a meeting at which action is taken in violation of the Brown Act.[11]

"Action taken" is not only an actual vote, but also a collective decision, commitment or promise by a

majority of the legislative body to make a positive or negative decision.[12] If the meeting involves mere deliberation without the taking of action, there can be no misdemeanor penalty.

A violation occurs for a tentative as well as final decision.[13] In fact, criminal liability is triggered by a member's participation in a meeting in violation of the Brown Act—not whether that member has voted with the majority or minority, or has voted at all.

The second component of a criminal violation is that action is taken with the intent of a member "to deprive the public of information to which the member knows or has reason to know the public is entitled" by the Brown Act.[14]

As with other misdemeanors, the filing of a complaint is up to the district attorney. Although criminal prosecutions of the Brown Act are uncommon, district attorneys in some counties aggressively monitor public agencies' adherence to the requirements of the law.

Practice Tip:

Training and exercising good judgment can help avoid Brown Act conflicts. If an arguably meritorious procedural challenge is raised, it may be more prudent to voluntarily re-notice and reconsider the action subject to the challenge.

VOLUNTARY RESOLUTION

Arguments over Brown Act issues often become emotional on all sides. Newspapers trumpet relatively minor violations, unhappy residents fume over an action, and legislative bodies clam up about information better discussed in public. Hard lines are drawn and rational discussion breaks down. The district attorney or even the grand jury occasionally becomes involved. Publicity surrounding alleged violations of the Brown Act can result in a loss of confidence by constituents in the legislative body. There are times when it may be preferable to consider re-noticing and rehearing, rather than litigating, an item of significant public interest, particularly when there is any doubt about whether the open meeting requirements were satisfied.

At bottom, agencies that regularly train their officials and pay close attention to the requirements of the Brown Act will have little reason to worry about enforcement.

Endnotes

1 California Government Code section 54960.1. Invalidation is limited to actions that violate the following sections of the Brown Act: section 54953 (the basic open meeting provision); sections 54954.2 and 54954.5 (notice and agenda requirements for regular meetings and closed sessions); 54954.6 (tax hearings); and 54956 (special meetings). Violations of sections not listed above cannot give rise to invalidation actions, but are subject to the other remedies listed in section 5490.1.

2 California Government Code section 54960.1 (b) and (c)(1)

3 *McKee v. Orange Unified School District* (2003) 110 Cal.App.4th 1310

4 *Cohan v. City of Thousand Oaks* (1994) 30 Cal.App.4th 547, 556, 571

5 *Boyle v. City of Redondo Beach* (1999) 70 Cal.App.4th 1109, 1117-18

6 *California Alliance for Utility Safety and Education (CAUSE) v. City of San Diego* (1997) 56 Cal.App.4th 1024; *Common Cause v. Stirling* (1983) 147 Cal.App.3d 518, 524. *Accord Shapiro v. San Diego City Council* (2002) 96 Cal. App. 4th 904, 916 & fn.6

7 *Kleitman v. Superior Court* (1999) 74 Cal.App.4th 324, 334-36

8 *Los Angeles Times Communications, LLC v. Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors* (2003) 112 Cal.App.4th 1313, 1324-27 and cases cited therein.

9 California Government Code section 54960.5

10 California Government Code section 54959. A misdemeanor is punishable by a fine of up to $1,000 or up to six months in county jail, or both. California Penal Code section 19. Employees of the agency who participate in violations of the Brown Act cannot be punished criminally under section 54959. However, at least one district attorney instituted criminal action against employees based on the theory that they criminally conspired with the members of the legislative body to commit a crime under section 54949.

11 California Government Code section 54959

12 California Government Code section 54952.6

13 61 Ops.Cal.Atty.Gen.283 (1978)

14 California Government Code section 54959

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