

OHIO SEA GRANT AND STONE LABORATORY

Conducting Effective Public Meetings 2016

Ohio Auditor of State Training

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Learning Objectives:

- Public Meetings: What are they and how do I prepare for them?
- Meeting guidelines
- Types of Meetings and audiences
- Meeting Preparation
- Expectations and sunshine law



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Types of Public Meetings and Legal Requirements

- Regular meetings
- Special meetings
- Emergency meetings
- Work sessions
- Public hearings
- Committee hearings
- Joint meetings
- Executive sessions



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Regardless of the type of meeting, there are six guidelines for conducting meetings.



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I. Effective meetings begin with good planning

- “Well begun is half done”, was used by the ICMA to describe the importance of carefully planning a meeting.
- Paying attention to details while preparing for a meeting and paying attention to the process and flow of meetings are important if we want our meetings to be effective.
- Why are you meeting and what is the purpose? – Don’t meet to meet.



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II. The Agenda

- A good meeting begins with a well thought-out agenda.
- Advance distribution of the agenda and supporting material - the five day rule.
- Do your homework - research issues.
- It is obvious to others if you are not prepared.



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III. Time Limits

Establish time limits for the full meeting and for each item on the agenda.

Stick to the time limits.



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IV. Effective Chairs

- The key to maintaining a smooth and timely flow of agenda items.
- The Chair must balance the time expectations of all members with the need for individual members to have an opportunity to speak.



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V. Facilitative procedures

- Make sure that the procedures used to conduct the meeting are appropriate.
- A strict application of Roberts Rules of Order or other parliamentary procedures can stifle the decision making process.



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VI. Good atmosphere/facilities

- **Make everyone feel welcome.**
- **Encourage participation, but within the framework of the agenda.**
- **The meeting place should be easily accessible.**



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As a Public Official, there are Two Dimensions of Decision making

- **Making the right decision- do your homework and research the issue.**
- **Making the decision the right way - formal procedure.**



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Public Meetings

Have you ever walked away from a meeting thinking:

- **What a great meeting?**
- **What a waste of time?**
- **Or feeling ho hum?**
- **Or wondered, what just happened?**
- **Or, how did we get into this mess?**



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Most likely, you have experienced these types of reactions to the meetings in which you have been a participant or observer.



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Evaluate your meetings

- How often do you evaluate your meetings?
- Do you take the time to systematically and carefully evaluate the way you conduct business?
- Do you ever watch reruns of your own meetings?



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You Should Evaluate Your Meetings on an Annual Basis

- Evaluate Board/ Council meetings
- Individual Board/ Council members (Self Evaluation)
- OSU Extension role in board evaluation.



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Public Policy and Procedure

- What are your policies?
- Following the same policies as previous boards may lead to problems down the line.
- Review and edit your own rules if necessary.



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Rule to Remember:

Good procedures and established processes that are understood and supported by the board are the best assurances for meeting the expectations of others.



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Every Public Body Should Have:

- A Written Code of Ethics
- Written Standards of Conduct
- Written Rules of Procedure



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Meeting Preparation

- In preparation for a meeting it is important to reflect upon the purposes of the meeting and the audiences for that meeting.
- In the public sector, meetings of governing bodies have at least four primary audiences.



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They are:

- The public
- The media
- The employees
- Other members of the governing body



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Public expectations include:

- Meeting environment to be friendly and inviting-- feel welcome.
- Feel as though they are treated with respect and courtesy.
- Presence is recognized and appreciated.
- A meeting that runs smoothly, with clearly understood and explained rules.
- Rules that are fair and evenly applied.



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Public Expectations

- A process that has a reasonable amount of dignity, decorum and professionalism from the governing body.

- Members will have done their homework, know the issues and can discuss them in a rational rather than an emotional way.



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Why does the public attend?

- Learn about “what is happening”.
- Interested in participating or joining boards .
- “the retirees” . . .
- Speak to a recent legislative decision .
 - Positive
 - Negative
- Administration cannot resolve an issue.
 - What are you going to do about it . . .
- I heard a rumor . . .



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Citizen Participation: Rules of Procedure

- Public has right to attend public meetings.
- The public has NO right to participate; this is a privilege granted by the legislative body.
- Responding to public: Establish “response to public comment rules”.
 - I can only speak for myself . . . I am not speaking for the entire body.
 - Think very carefully about responding.



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Remember

- Public has no right to disrupt meeting
- Privilege granted by the legislative body
- Be aware of your non-verbal communication



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Representatives of the media are another audience

- What do they expect?



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Media Expectations

- Information in advance including agendas and supporting material .
- A table or workspace, often with a telephone or modem connection, so they can prepare their stories as the meeting progresses.
- Wireless availability.
- A process that is open, fair, and accessible.



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Remember

- **Negative comments during the meetings about media coverage will create a strained working relationship.**
- **The unguarded comment, the wise crack, or the cutting remark in the heat of the battle are likely to be tomorrow's headlines. Any comment, once made, cannot be retracted with complete success.**



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Clear, direct, thoughtful, and accurate statements during a meeting are a "must" to project a positive image.



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Remember, the overwhelming majority of residents will develop their image and their evaluation of the governing body from the media.



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If the words and actions create a circus environment or create an image of personal conflict, the media might develop an interesting story.



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Remember

- Anything that is said in public can be tomorrow's headline.



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3rd Audience: Government Employees

- They expect courtesy, recognition, fairness and perhaps praise.
- Comments that criticize work ethic, quality of work or general attitude are not appropriate.
- Offer positive comments that will keep workforce morale and productivity at a higher level.



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4th Audience: Other Governing members

- They have expectations that focus upon the words and conduct of their colleagues.
- Reasoned and rational statements--statements that reflect a good command of the issue.
- The comments of each member to be well informed.
- To be treated with courtesy and respect.
- To not be harassed, to have their integrity or their motives questioned.



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They Expect:

- An equal opportunity to talk and they expect that one or more of the other members will not try to dominate and control the dialogue.



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Ineffective meetings are the ones that fail to satisfy fundamental criteria in one of five categories—preparation, environment, procedures, outcome (results), and leadership.



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The Sunshine Law



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Executive Sessions

- Ohio Revised Code 121.22 requires “all meetings of the public body shall be open to the public at all times”.
- Public is council, trustees, planning commission, committees– follow the money.
- Meeting is “predefined discussion of the public business of the public body by a majority..of its members” .



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I am no attorney.....



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Executive Sessions

- Must be held during a public meeting
- Motion is made in public; reason with stated purpose



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Executive Sessions: 7 reasons

- Consider appointment, employment, dismissal, discipline, promotion...of a public employee or official.
- To consider the purchase of property.
- To consider the sale of property by competitive bidding.
- Pending or imminent court action with your attorney.



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Executive Sessions: 7 reasons

- Negotiations or bargaining sessions.
- Matters required to be kept confidential by federal or state law.
- Specialized details of security arrangements.



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What if we violate the sunshine law?

- Any action taken outside the meeting is invalid and void.
- Any action taken in a public meeting, but deliberated on outside of a public meeting, is invalid.
- Civil forfeiture \$\$\$
- Pay all court fees and attorney fees.



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As a public official:

- You have been given a responsibility...now you have to earn the confidence of the public.
- The public's perception of your decisions is what matters... make sure it is accurate.



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As a Public Official

- You are viewed as a leader.
- You have the inherent responsibility to be prepared to make decisions based on the future of the community.
- Quality leadership is never easy, very demanding, and often quite frustrating.



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Thank you and good luck.

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