



Best Practices for an Elected Governing Commission
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The following guidelines are based on many years of experience with city councils, county commissions, and other elected governing bodies. However, every commission is unique, and each should discuss and adopt its own guidelines. Most questions have no “right” or “wrong” answers, but it is important that commissioners have the same expectations. It is helpful to review and revise guidelines at least annually.

Expectations and Courtesies

- Make every effort to attend every meeting, to arrive on time, and to be prepared.
- Do not criticize any commissioner, staff member, or citizen in public.
- No surprises: Whenever possible, inform others before they learn important news in public.
- Speak only when recognized by the chair. Don't interrupt or engage in side conversations when another commissioner is speaking.
- Be brief and to the point.
- Say what you mean and mean what you say: Limit political speeches and don't posture or grandstand.
- Clearly explain how you got to your position and how it serves the public interest. This is especially important when you disagree with a staff or committee recommendation.
- Share credit generously. Spread opportunities to get positive recognition and spread responsibilities to do things that will evoke criticism.
- Support the legitimacy of Commission decisions, even those you didn't vote for. When a decision is made, move on.

Good Process and Procedure
Meetings

- The Commission's goal is to adjourn by a fixed time unless extended by majority consent of members present. Any member may call for a point of order at or around 30 minutes before this fixed time to review remaining agenda items. The Commission may reset or reschedule items that may not be reached prior to the regular time of adjournment.
- Commission packets will be available a set number of days time prior to business meetings. Commissioners are encouraged to submit questions and comments at least 2 business days preceding the business meeting.
- Any member can pull an item from the consent agenda to discuss separately at the meeting.

- ◆ Contact the City Manager in advance and explain your reason for pulling the item.
- ◆ If you thought about pulling an item but got further information that changed your mind, inform others so they have the same information.
- Pulling an item from the agenda to defer consideration is a Commission decision.
- The allocation of meeting time should reflect the priority among issues.
- The purpose of the question and answer period during a public hearing is to elicit information. Commissioners should not use it as a forum to express their own positions. This should be reserved for the discussion period.
- At a study session, any commissioner may call for a point of order to propose that it would be more appropriate to discuss the matter during a business meeting. The Commission will decide whether the discussion should continue or be held during a business meeting.

Issues for Discussion and Decision

- Decisions with major financial implications should be considered in the context of citywide priorities, as part of the regular budget process. Cuts or increases should not be made piecemeal.
- Commission agreement is required to start, slow down, or stop a project.
- Process for emerging ideas:
 - ◆ Don't bring an issue to the Commission until it is ready.
 - ◆ Consult with the City Manager to help frame issues before introducing new directions or amendments.
 - ◆ Have individual conversations with other commissioners, but be careful to give them consistent messages so all have the same information.
 - ◆ When the idea is ripe, schedule a study session for general discussion and to identify next steps.

Internal Communication

- Limit use of email to other commissioners:
 - ◆ To transmit information.
 - ◆ To express your own individual opinion.
 - ◆ To suggest that a matter should be discussed by the full Commission.
 - ◆ Reply only to comment on whether a matter should be discussed by the full Commission.
- Occasionally, there may be special reasons for individual briefings rather than a work session for the full Commission. When commissioners are individually briefed, it is important for all to get the same information.

External Communication

General

- The City Manager or Mayor responds to communications directed to the full Commission.

- If a communication is directed to an individual commissioner, you may choose to respond as an individual or refer to the City Manager.
- The City must speak with one voice on labor issues. Commissioners who are contacted individually should make no comment and should report the contact to the City Manager.

Communication with Partners and Allies

- In general, the Mayor or City Manager speaks for the City.
- In public settings, members must be crystal-clear whether they are speaking as an individual or for the Commission.

Communication with Boards, Commissions, and Committees

- No commissioner should try to influence the deliberation or outcomes of board proceedings.
- The Liaison's role is to facilitate two-way communication, helping the board to understand the Commission and the Commission to understand the board.
- Liaison assignments should be equitably allocated among Commission members based on their interests, availability, tenure on the Commission, and other factors.

Working Relationship between Commission and Staff

Commission and staff are partners in serving the public. As members of the City team, they play different roles, but they should be working toward the same goals. Mutual trust, confidence, and respect are the keys to effective working relationships.

Communication between Commissioners, City Manager, and Staff

- In general, commissioners should communicate only with the City Manager or department heads. Department heads will inform the City Manager when they have significant conversations with commissioners. There are several exceptions:
 - ◆ You may communicate directly with staff members working with you on an ongoing assignment to a particular project.
 - ◆ You may communicate directly with seasoned staff members with whom you have a long-term working relationship.
 - ◆ Discuss personnel issues only with the City Manager.
 - ◆ Commissioners are encouraged to attend staff occasions, celebrations, and recognition events.
- Only the full Commission may give direction to employees, and only through the City Manager. As a rule of thumb, this applies to any activity that takes more than one hour of staff time.
- Commissioners are encouraged to take issues to the City Manager first, giving as much information as possible to ensure a thorough response.
- The City Manager shares information equally with all commissioners.
- Staff should understand that different Commission members prefer to communicate in different modes – telephone, email, in person.

Staff Reports

- Staff's role is to gather facts, present objective analysis, and make recommendations based on their best professional judgment.
- Written reports should be succinct and prepared in a style agreed to by the Commission.
- Presentations in public settings should be brief, in plain language, and supported with appropriate visuals.
- Commissioners are encouraged to pose questions and concerns to staff members in advance of public meetings. This allows staff to respond thoroughly and accurately. It is especially important not to surprise staff in public.
- If substantive information is provided to one commissioner, staff will provide the same information to all.
- Commission decisions may take into consideration many other factors in addition to the staff recommendation.
- Regular and honest feedback helps everyone to work together more effectively.

Tips for Effective Commissioners

- Respect the different styles of fellow commissioners.
- Be open to changing your mind based on new information.
- Take personal responsibility for encouraging respectful behavior among your fellow commissioners.
- Strive for consensus, but don't settle for the lowest common denominator.
- If you have a concern with another member, speak directly to that person.
- Be open with sharing information. Give unto others information you would want them to give unto you.
- Spend some casual time together. Invite fellow commissioners to get together informally, particularly those of opposing views.
- Pick your spots. Try hard to win on matters important to you, and let others win on matters important to them and not so important to you.
- Recognize that you are seen as a commissioner at all times, no matter how you may see yourself.
- Whenever you put anything in writing, assume that everyone in the city is looking over your shoulder.
- Be welcoming to speakers and treat them with respect. Remember that for many citizens, speaking in front of the Commission is an unfamiliar and difficult experience.
- Learn the various businesses of the City. Schedule visits, walk-throughs, and ride-alongs to better understand the day-to-day picture as a basis for making policy decisions.
- Everyone does not have to weigh in on every question. Sometimes it's OK to just vote.
- When a discussion grinds, you might suggest taking a break.
- Praise people in public, criticize in private.