

Tennessee Open Meetings Act

TCA §8-44-101

8-44-101. Policy -- Construction.

(a) The general assembly hereby declares it to be the policy of this state that the formation of public policy and decisions is public business and shall not be conducted in secret.

(b) This part shall not be construed to limit any of the rights and privileges contained in article I, § 19 of the Constitution of Tennessee.

HISTORY: Acts 1974, ch. 442, §§ 1, 8; T.C.A., § 8-4401.

8-44-102. Open meetings -- "Governing body" defined -- "Meeting" defined.

(a) All meetings of any governing body are declared to be public meetings open to the public at all times, except as provided by the Constitution of Tennessee.

(b)(1) "Governing body" means:

(A) The members of any public body which consists of two (2) or more members, with the authority to make decisions for or recommendations to a public body on policy or administration and also means a community action agency which administers community action programs under the provisions of 42 U.S.C. § 2790 [repealed]. Any governing body so defined by this section shall remain so defined, notwithstanding the fact that such governing body may have designated itself as a negotiation committee for collective bargaining purposes, and strategy sessions of a governing body under such circumstances shall be open to the public at all times;

(B) The board of directors of any nonprofit corporation which contracts with a state agency to receive community grant funds in consideration for rendering specified services to the public; provided, that community grant funds comprise at least thirty percent (30%) of the total annual income of such corporation. Except such meetings of the board of directors of such nonprofit corporation that are called solely to discuss matters involving confidential doctor-patient relationships, personnel matters or matters required to be kept confidential by federal or state law or by federal or state regulation shall not be covered under the provisions of this chapter, and no other matter shall be discussed at such meetings;

(C) The board of directors of any not-for-profit corporation authorized by the laws of Tennessee to act for the benefit or on behalf of any one (1) or more counties, cities, towns and local governments pursuant to the provisions of title 7, chapter 54 or 58. The provisions of this subdivision (b)(1)(C) shall not apply to any county with a metropolitan form of government and having a population of four hundred thousand (400,000) or more, according to the 1980 federal census or any subsequent federal census;

(D) The board of directors of any nonprofit corporation which through contract or otherwise provides a metropolitan form of government having a population in excess of five hundred thousand (500,000), according to the 1990 federal census or any subsequent federal census, with heat, steam or incineration of refuse;

(E)(i) The board of directors of any association or nonprofit corporation authorized by the laws of Tennessee that:

(a) Was established for the benefit of local government officials or counties, cities, towns or other local governments or as a municipal bond financing pool;

(b) Receives dues, service fees or any other income from local government officials or such local governments that constitute at least thirty percent (30%) of its total annual income; and

(c) Was authorized as of January 1, 1998, under state law to obtain coverage for its employees in the Tennessee consolidated retirement system.

(ii) The provisions of this subdivision (b)(1)(E) shall not be construed to require the disclosure of a trade secret or proprietary information held or used by an association or nonprofit corporation to which this chapter applies. In the event a trade secret or proprietary information is required to be discussed in an open meeting, the association or nonprofit corporation may conduct an executive session to discuss such trade secret or proprietary information; provided, that a notice of the executive session is included in the agenda for such meeting.

(iii) As used in this subdivision (b) (1) (E):

(a) "Proprietary information" means rating information, plans, or proposals; actuarial information; specifications for specific services provided; and any other similar commercial or financial information used in making or deliberating toward a decision by employees, agents or the board of directors of such association or corporation; and which if known to a person or entity outside the association or corporation would give such person or entity an advantage or an opportunity to gain an advantage over the association or corporation when providing or bidding to provide the same or similar services to local governments; and

(b) "Trade secret" means the whole or any portion or phrase of any scientific or technical information, design, process, procedure, formula or improvement which is secret and of value. The trier of fact may infer a trade secret to be secret when the owner thereof takes measures to prevent it from becoming available to persons other than those selected by the owner to have access thereto for limited purposes.

(2) "Meeting" means the convening of a governing body of a public body for which a quorum is required in order to make a decision or to deliberate toward a decision on any matter. "Meeting" does not include any on-site inspection of any project or program.

(c) Nothing in this section shall be construed as to require a chance meeting of two (2) or more members of a public body to be considered a public meeting. No such chance meetings, informal assemblages, or electronic communication shall be used to decide or deliberate public business in circumvention of the spirit or requirements of this part.

HISTORY: Acts 1974, ch. 442, § 2; 1979, ch. 411, §§ 1, 2; T.C.A., § 8-4402; Acts 1985, ch. 290, § 1, 2; 1986, ch. 594, § 1; 1988, ch. 908, §§ 3, 5; 1997, ch. 346, § 1; 1998, ch. 1102, §§ 1, 3.

8-44-103. Notice of public meetings.

(a) **Notice of Regular Meetings.** Any such governmental body which holds a meeting previously scheduled by statute, ordinance, or resolution shall give adequate public notice of such meeting.

(b) **Notice of Special Meetings.** Any such governmental body which holds a meeting not previously scheduled by statute, ordinance, or resolution, or for which notice is not already provided by law, shall give adequate public notice of such meeting.

(c)The notice requirements of this part are in addition to, and not in substitution of, any other notice required by law.

HISTORY: Acts 1974, ch. 442, § 3; T.C.A., § 8-4403.

8-44-104.Minutes recorded and open to public -- Secret votes prohibited. (a)The minutes of a meeting of any such governmental body shall be promptly and fully recorded, shall be open to public inspection, and shall include, but not be limited to, a record of persons present, all motions, proposals and resolutions offered, the results of any votes taken, and a record of individual votes in the event of roll call.

(b)All votes of any such governmental body shall be by public vote or public ballot or public roll call. No secret votes, or secret ballots, or secret roll calls shall be allowed. As used in this chapter, "public vote" means a vote in which the "aye" faction vocally expresses its will in unison and in which the "nay" faction, subsequently, vocally expresses its will in unison.

HISTORY: Acts 1974, ch. 442, § 4; T.C.A., § 8-4404; Acts 1980, ch. 800, § 1.

8-44-105.Action nullified -- Exception.

Any action taken at a meeting in violation of this part shall be void and of no effect; provided, that this nullification of actions taken at such meetings shall not apply to any commitment, otherwise legal, affecting the public debt of the entity concerned.

HISTORY: Acts 1974, ch. 442, § 5; T.C.A., § 8-4405.

8-44-106.Enforcement -- Jurisdiction.

(a)The circuit courts, chancery courts, and other courts which have equity jurisdiction, have jurisdiction to issue injunctions, impose penalties, and otherwise enforce the purposes of this part upon application of any citizen of this state.

(b)In each suit brought under this part, the court shall file written findings of fact and conclusions of law and final judgments, which shall also be recorded in the minutes of the body involved.

(c)The court shall permanently enjoin any person adjudged by it in violation of this part from further violation of this part. Each separate occurrence of such meetings not held in accordance with this part constitutes a separate violation.

(d)The final judgment or decree in each suit shall state that the court retains jurisdiction over the parties and subject matter for a period of one (1) year from date of entry, and the court shall order the defendants to report in writing semiannually to the court of their compliance with this part.

HISTORY: Acts 1974, ch. 442, § 6; T.C.A., § 8-4406.

8-44-107.Board of directors of Performing Arts Center Management Corporation.

The board of directors of the Tennessee Performing Arts Center Management Corporation shall be subject to, and shall in all respects comply with, all of the provisions made applicable to governing bodies by this chapter.

HISTORY: Acts 1981, ch. 375, § 1.

8-44-108.Participation by electronic or other means.

(a)As used in this section, unless the context otherwise requires:

(1)"Governing body" refers to boards, agencies and commissions of state government, including state debt issuers as defined in this section and municipal governing bodies. For the purpose of this section only, "municipal governing bodies" means only those municipal governing bodies organized under title 6, chapter 18, and having a city commission of three (3) members, and having a population of more than two thousand five hundred (2,500), according to the 2000 federal census or any subsequent federal census;

(2)"Meeting" has the same definition as defined in § 8-44-102;

(3)"Necessity" means that the matters to be considered by the governing body at that meeting require timely action by the body, that physical presence by a quorum of the members is not practical within the period of time requiring action, and that participation by a quorum of the members by electronic or other means of communication is necessary; and

(4)"State debt issuers" means the Tennessee state funding board, Tennessee local development authority, Tennessee housing development agency, and Tennessee state school bond authority, and any of their committees.

(b)(1)A governing body may, but is not required to, allow participation by electronic or other means of communication for the benefit of the public and the governing body in connection with any meeting authorized by law; provided, that a physical quorum is present at the location specified in the notice of the meeting as the location of the meeting.

(2)If a physical quorum is not present at the location of a meeting of a governing body, then in order for a quorum of members to participate by electronic or other means of communication, the governing body must make a determination that a necessity exists. Such determination, and a recitation of the facts and circumstances on which it was based, must be included in the minutes of the meeting.

(3)If a physical quorum is not present at the location of a meeting of a governing body other than a state debt issuer, the governing body other than a state debt issuer must file such determination of necessity, including the recitation of the facts and circumstances on which it was based, with the office of secretary of state no later than two (2) working days after the meeting. The secretary of state shall report, no less than annually, to the general assembly as to the filings of the determinations of necessity. This subdivision (b) (3) shall not apply to the board of regents, to the board of trustees of the University of Tennessee or to the Tennessee higher education commission.

(4)Nothing in this section shall prohibit a governing body from complying with § 8-44-109.

(c)(1)Any meeting held pursuant to the terms of this section shall comply with the requirements of the Open Meetings Law, codified in this part, and shall not circumvent the spirit or requirements of that law.

(2)Notices required by the Open Meetings Law, or any other notice required by law, shall state that the meeting will be conducted permitting participation by electronic or other means of communication.

(3)Each part of a meeting required to be open to the public shall be audible to the public at the location specified in the notice of the meeting as the location of the meeting. Each member participating electronically or otherwise must be able to simultaneously hear each other and speak to each other during the meeting. Any member participating in such fashion shall identify the persons present in the location from which the member is participating.

(4) Any member of a governing body not physically present at a meeting shall be provided, before the meeting, with any documents that will be discussed at the meeting, with substantially the same content as those documents actually presented.

(5) All votes taken during a meeting held pursuant to the terms of this section shall be by roll call vote.

(6) A member participating in a meeting by this means is deemed to be present in person at the meeting for purposes of voting, but not for purposes of determining per diem eligibility. However, a member may be reimbursed expenses of such electronic communication or other means of participation.

HISTORY: Acts 1990, ch. 815, § 1; 1999, ch. 490, § 1; 2005, ch. 82, § 1; 2008, ch. 923, § 1; 2012, ch. 1054, § 3.

8-44-109. Electronic communication

(a) A governing body may, but is not required to, allow electronic communication between members by means of a forum over the Internet only if the governing body:

(1) Ensures that the forum through which the electronic communications are conducted is available to the public at all times other than that necessary for technical maintenance or unforeseen technical limitations;

(2) Provides adequate public notice of the governing body's intended use of the electronic communication forum;

(3) Controls who may communicate through the forum;

(4) Controls the archiving of the electronic communications to ensure that the electronic communications are publicly available for at least one (1) year after the date of the communication; provided, that access to the archived electronic communications is user-friendly for the public; and

(5) Provides reasonable access for members of the public to view the forum at the local public library, the building where the governing body meets or other public building.

(b) Electronic communications posted to a forum shall not substitute for decision making by the governing body in a meeting held in accordance with this part. Communications between members of a governing body posted to a forum complying with this section shall be deemed to be in compliance with the open meetings laws compiled in this part.

(c) Prior to a governing body initially utilizing a forum to allow electronic communications by its members that meets the requirements of this section, including the public notice required in subsection (a), the governing body shall file a plan with the office of open records counsel. The plan shall describe how the governing body will ensure compliance with subsection (a). Within thirty (30) days of receipt of the plan, the office of open records counsel shall acknowledge receipt of the plan and shall report whether or not the plan and the proposed actions comply with subsection (a). If the office determines that compliance with subsection (a) has not been met, the office shall provide written comments regarding the plan to the governing body. Until such time as the governing body complies with the written comments provided by the office and the office issues a report of compliance, the governing body shall not be allowed to establish or utilize such forum. This subsection (c) shall not apply to any governing body that had established a forum pursuant to this section prior to May 7, 2009.

(d)No member participating in an electronic communication pursuant to this section is deemed to be eligible for per diem for such participation.

(e)As used in this section, "governing body" means the elected governing body of a county, city, metropolitan form of government or school board.

HISTORY: Acts 2008, ch. 923, § 2; 2009, ch. 175, § 2.

8-44-110. [Repealed.]

8-44-111. Open meetings -- Development of educational program required -- Materials.

(a)The municipal technical advisory service (MTAS) for municipalities and the county technical assistance service (CTAS) for counties, in order to provide guidance and direction, shall develop a program for educating their respective public officials about the open meetings laws codified in this chapter, and how to remain in compliance with such laws.

(b)The Tennessee school board association shall develop a program for educating elected school board members about the open meetings laws and how to remain in compliance with such laws.

(c)The utility management review board shall develop a program for board members of water, wastewater and gas authorities created by private act or under the general law and of utility districts, in order to educate the board members about the open meetings laws and how to remain in compliance with such laws.

(d)The state emergency communications board created by § 7-86-302 shall develop a program for educating emergency communications district board members about the open meetings laws and how to remain in compliance with such laws.

(e) The office of open records counsel established in chapter 4, part 6 of this title shall establish educational programs and materials regarding open meetings laws in this state, to be made available to the public and to public officials.

HISTORY: Acts 2008, ch. 1179, § 5.

UT Guidance Regarding Open Meetings Act Compliance

Guidance from UT- County Technical Assistance Service Compliance with Open Meetings Act
(<http://ctas-eli.ctas.tennessee.edu>) 02/15/13 Reference Number: CTAS-889

In order to meet the requirements of the Sunshine Law, "adequate public notice" must be given before all meetings to which the act applies. T.C.A. § 8-44-103. The statute does not elaborate on the requirements for this notice. The Tennessee Supreme Court considered the phrase "adequate public notice" as contained in the statute and observed, "We think it is impossible to formulate a general rule in regard to what the phrase 'adequate public notice' means. However, adequate public notice means adequate public notice under the circumstances, or such notice based on the totality of the circumstances as would fairly inform the public." *Memphis Publishing Co. v. City of Memphis*, 513 S.W.2d 511 (Tenn. 1974).

If the meeting is one that would not be expected to be of interest to the general public, the notice requirements may not be as stringent as if the issue is one that is expected to be of great public concern. For example, adequate public notice was found to have been given for a special meeting of a city council to hear the appeal of a police officer who had been dismissed, where the meeting had been advertised by posting notice inside city hall where water bills were paid and over the entrance to the police department and council room and on the bulletin board at the post office because this was a personnel matter involving one individual. *Kinser v. Town of Oliver Springs*, 80 S.W.2d 681 (Tenn. Ct. App. 1994). On the other hand, in *Neese v. Paris Special School District*, 813 S.W.2d 432 (Tenn. Ct. App. 1990), the court found that the issue of clustering students in the same grade at one school was of "pervasive importance" and "arguably the most important action taken by the Board in many years." The notice was held to have been inadequate under the circumstances because the public was not notified that clustering would be discussed. Even though Tennessee law does not require that notice of a regularly scheduled meeting include an agenda of the meeting, the court found that the importance of the clustering issue required that the public be advised that it would be discussed at the meeting.

When faced with determining whether notice of a special meeting fairly informed the public under the totality of the circumstances, the Tennessee Court of Appeals outlined a three-prong test for "adequate public notice" of special meetings under the Sunshine Law, which includes the following: (1) Notice must be posted in a location where a member of the community could become aware of the notice, (2) the contents of the notice must reasonably describe the purpose of the meeting or the action to be taken, and (3) the notice must be posted at a time sufficiently in advance of the meeting to give citizens an opportunity to become aware of the meeting and to attend. *Englewood Citizens for Alternate B v. Town of Englewood*, 1999 WL 419710 (Tenn. Ct. App. 1999). In *Englewood*, the court noted that the town could provide adequate public notice by simply choosing reasonable public locations and posting notices at these locations on a consistent basis.

The notice requirements of the Sunshine Law are in addition to, and not in substitution for, any other notice that may be required by law. T.C.A. § 8-44-103(c). Meetings of county legislative bodies, for example, are also governed by the provisions of T.C.A. §§ 5-5-104 and -105, under which regular meetings must be set by resolution of the county legislative body, and special called meetings require newspaper notice at least five days prior to the meeting that contains the agenda for the meeting.