

OPEN MEETING LAW 101

Arizona's Open Meeting Law in a Nutshell

Two core concepts

“All meetings of any public body shall be public meetings and all persons so desiring shall be permitted to attend and listen to the deliberations and proceedings.” A.R.S § 38-431.01(A).

“It is the public policy of this state that meetings of public bodies be conducted openly and that notices and agendas be provided for such meetings which contain such information as is reasonable necessary to inform the public of the matters to be discussed or decided.” A.R.S. § 38-431.09.

Why do we have an Open Meeting Law?

1. To protect the public.
 - a. To avoid decision-making in secret.
 - b. To promote accountability by encouraging public officials to act responsively and responsibly.
2. To protect public officials.
 - a. To avoid being excluded (notice).
 - b. To prepare and avoid being blind sided (agenda).
 - c. To accurately memorialize what happened (minutes).
3. Maintain Integrity of government.
4. Better informed citizenry.
5. Build trust between government and citizenry.

What constitutes a meeting?

A meeting is a gathering, in person or through technological devices of a quorum of a public body at which they discuss, propose or take legal action, including deliberations. A.R.S. § 38-431(4). This includes telephone and e-mail communications.

Who must comply with Open Meeting Law?

Public bodies. "Public body" means the legislature, all boards and commissions of this state or political subdivisions, all multimember governing bodies of departments, agencies, institutions and instrumentalities of the state or political subdivisions, including without limitation all corporations and other instrumentalities whose boards of directors are appointed or elected by the state or political subdivision. Public body includes all quasi-judicial bodies and all standing, special or advisory committees or subcommittees of, or appointed by, the public body. A.R.S. §38-431(6).

"Advisory committee" or "subcommittee" means any entity, however designated, that is officially established, on motion and order of a public body or by the presiding officer of the public body, and whose members have been appointed for the specific purpose of making a recommendation concerning a decision to be made or considered or a course of conduct to be taken or considered by the public body. A.R.S. § 38-431(1).

What is Required under the Open Meeting Law?

1. Notice

The open meeting law requires at least 24 hours notice to the members of the public body and the general public. A.R.S. §38-431.02(C).

Notice must be posted in the public place identified in the disclosure statement and by giving additional notice as is reasonable and practicable. A.R.S. §38-431.02(A).

2. Agenda

Agendas must contain information reasonably necessary to inform the public of the matters to be discussed or decided. A.R.S. §38-431.09.

Agendas must be available at least 24 hours before the meeting. A.R.S. §38- 431.02(G).

3. Public's Rights

The public has a right to:

- Attend
- Listen
- Tape record
- Videotape

Public has no right to:

- Speak
- Disrupt

4. Calls to the Public

An open call to the public is an agenda item that allows the public to address the public body on topics of concern within the public body's jurisdiction, even though the topic is not specifically included on the agenda. Ariz. Att'y Gen. Op. I99-006.

Although the Open Meeting Law permits the public to attend public meetings, it does not require public participation in the public body's discussions and deliberations and does not require a public body to include an open call to the public on the agenda. *See* Ariz. Att'y Gen. Op. No. I78-001.

An individual public officer may respond to criticism, ask staff to review an item or ask that an item be placed on a future agenda, but he or she may *not* dialogue with the presenter or collectively discuss, consider, or decide an item that is not listed on the agenda. A.R.S. § 38-431.01(G); Ariz. Att'y Gen. Op. I99-006. Note that individual members of the public body may respond to criticism by individuals who addressed the public body during the call to the

public, but the public body may not collectively discuss or take action on the complaint unless the matter is specifically listed on the agenda. A.R.S. § 38-431.01(G).

Public bodies may impose reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions on speakers. Restrictions must be narrowly tailored to affect a compelling state interest and may not be content based. Ariz. Att’y Gen. Op. I99-006.

A member of the public body may not knowingly direct a staff member to communicate in violation of the Open Meeting Law. A.R.S. 38-431.01(H).

In sum:

- *Calls to the public are permitted, but not required.*
- *Should be added as an agenda item.*
- *Public body may limit speaker’s time.*
- *Public body may require speakers on the same side with no new comments to select spokesperson*
- *Public body may set ground rules:*
 - *civility*
 - *language*
 - *treat everyone the same*

5. Minutes (A.R.S. § 38-431.01(B))

Public bodies must take meeting minutes of all meetings, including executive sessions.

May be recorded or written.

Must include:

- Date, time and place of meeting;
- Names of members of the public body present or absent;
- A general description of matters considered; and
- An accurate description of all legal actions proposed, discussed or taken, and the names of members who propose each motion. The minutes shall also include the names of the persons, as given, making statements or presenting material to the public body and a reference to the legal action about which they made statements or presented material.

The minutes or a recording must be open for public inspection no later than three working days after the meeting, except as otherwise provided in the statute. A.R.S. § 38-431.01(D).

How long meeting minutes are maintained is determined by the public body’s record retention and destruction schedule authorized by Arizona Library and Archives.

Persons in attendance may record any portion of a public meeting, as long as the recording does not actively interfere with the meeting. Acceptable recording equipment includes tape recorders, cameras, or other means of reproduction. A.R.S. § 38-431.01(E).

6. Executive Sessions

Public bodies may hold private executive sessions under a few limited circumstances. In executive sessions, the public is not allowed to attend or listen to the discussions, and the public body is not permitted to take final action. A.R.S. § 38-431.03(D).

Members of the public body may not vote or take a poll in executive sessions. A.R.S. § 38-431.03(D).

There are seven authorized topics for executive sessions:

1. Personnel (must provide 24 hours written notice to employee).
2. Discussion or consideration of records exempt by law from public inspection.
3. Legal advice – with public body’s own lawyer(s).
4. Discussion or consultation with public body’s lawyer(s) to consider pending or contemplated litigation, settlement discussions, negotiated contracts.
5. Discuss and instruct its representative regarding labor negotiations.
6. Discuss international, interstate, and tribal negotiations.
7. Purchase, sale, or lease of real property.

Notice and Agenda: Agendas for executive sessions may describe the matters to be discussed more generally than agendas for public meetings in order to preserve confidentiality or to prevent compromising the attorney-client privilege, if it is necessary. A.R.S. § 38-431.02(I). Nonetheless, the agenda must provide more than a recital of the statute that authorizes the executive session.

Minutes: Minutes taken in an executive session must include the items listed above in addition to any other matters found to be appropriate by the public body. A.R.S. § 38-431.01(C).

7. Where to turn for help

Self-help resources available:

The Arizona Ombudsman – Citizens’ Aide handbook – The Arizona Open Meeting Law (available on line at www.azoca.gov under open meetings/publication)

The Arizona Ombudsman’s website, www.azoca.gov

Arizona Agency Handbook, Chapter 7, www.azag.gov – Quick Links

Attorney General Opinions – www.azag.gov – Quick Links

Questions/File a complaint:

Arizona Ombudsman-Citizen’s Aide (602) 277-7292

File a complaint/Enforcement authority

County Attorney’s Office

Attorney General’s Open Meeting Law Enforcement Team (602) 542-5025 (complaints must be in writing and signed)