



KEN PAXTON  
ATTORNEY GENERAL *of* TEXAS

# OPEN MEETINGS ACT *Handbook* 2022









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ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

Dear Fellow Texans:

Founding Father James Madison once wrote that democracy without information was “but prologue to a farce or a tragedy,” and he regarded the diffusion of knowledge as “the only guardian of true liberty.” Texas law has long agreed the inherent right of Texans to govern themselves depends on their ability to observe how public officials are conducting the people’s business. That is why the Texas Open Meetings Act was enacted, to ensure that Texas government is transparent, open, and accountable to all Texans.

At its core, the Texas Open Meetings Act simply requires government entities to keep public business, well, open to the public. This *Open Meetings Act Handbook* is intended to help public officials comply with the various provisions of the Texas Open Meetings Act and to familiarize the public with using the Open Meetings Act as a resource for obtaining information about their government. The handbook is available online and as a printable document at [www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/openmeetings\\_hb.pdf](http://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/openmeetings_hb.pdf).

As attorney general, I am proud of my office’s efforts to promote open government. We’ve established an Open Government Hotline for anyone seeking a better understanding of their rights and responsibilities under the law. The toll-free number is 877-OPEN TEX (877-673-6839).

Public access to the proceedings and decision-making processes of government is essential to a properly functioning and free state. It is my sincere hope that this handbook will make it easier for public officials and citizens to understand and comply with the Texas Open Meetings Act.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ken Paxton".

Ken Paxton  
Attorney General of Texas



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## I. Introduction

### A. Open Meetings Act

The Open Meetings Act (the “Act”) was adopted to help make governmental decision-making accessible to the public. It requires meetings of governmental bodies to be open to the public, except for expressly authorized closed sessions,<sup>1</sup> and to be preceded by public notice of the time, place, and subject matter of the meeting. “The provisions of [the Act] are mandatory and are to be liberally construed in favor of open government.”<sup>2</sup>

The Act was adopted in 1967<sup>3</sup> as article 6252-17 of the Revised Civil Statutes, substantially revised in 1973,<sup>4</sup> and codified without substantive change in 1993 as Government Code chapter 551.<sup>5</sup> It has been amended many times since its enactment.

Before addressing the Act itself, we will briefly mention certain other issues relevant to conducting public meetings.

### B. A Governmental Body Must Hold a Meeting to Exercise its Powers

Predating the Act is the common-law rule that decisions entrusted to governmental bodies must be made by the body as a whole at a properly called meeting.<sup>6</sup> This requirement gives each member of the body an opportunity to state his or her views to other board members and to give them the benefit of his or her judgment, so that the decision “may be the composite judgment of the body as a whole.”<sup>7</sup> This rule may be changed by the Legislature.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The term “executive session” is often used to mean “closed meeting,” even though the Act uses the latter term. See TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.101; *Cox Enters., Inc. v. Bd. of Trs.*, 706 S.W.2d 956, 957 (Tex. 1986) (stating that an executive session is a meeting or part of a meeting that is closed to the public).

<sup>2</sup> See *City of Laredo v. Escamilla*, 219 S.W.3d 14, 19 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 2006, pet. denied); *Willmann v. City of San Antonio*, 123 S.W.3d 469, 473 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 2003, pet. denied); *Toyah Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Pecos-Barstow Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 466 S.W.2d 377, 380 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 1971, no writ).

<sup>3</sup> Act of May 8, 1967, 60th Leg., R.S., ch. 271, § 1, 1967 Tex. Gen. Laws 597, 597–98.

<sup>4</sup> Act of Mar. 28, 1973, 63d Leg., R.S., ch. 31, § 1, 1973 Tex. Gen. Laws 45, 45–48.

<sup>5</sup> Act of May 4, 1993, 73d Leg., R.S., ch. 268, § 1, 1993 Tex. Gen. Laws 583, 583–89.

<sup>6</sup> See *Webster v. Tex. & Pac. Motor Transp. Co.*, 166 S.W.2d 75, 76–77 (Tex. 1942); *Fielding v. Anderson*, 911 S.W.2d 858, 864 (Tex. App.—Eastland 1995, writ denied).

<sup>7</sup> *Webster*, 166 S.W.2d at 76–77.

<sup>8</sup> See *Faulder v. Tex. Bd. of Pardons & Paroles*, 990 S.W.2d 944, 946 (Tex. App.—Austin 1999, pet. ref’d) (concluding that board was authorized by statute to perform duties in clemency matters without meeting face-to-face as a body).



## C. Quorum and Majority Vote

The authority vested in a governmental body may generally be exercised only at a meeting of a quorum of its members.<sup>9</sup> The Code Construction Act<sup>10</sup> states as follows:

- (a) A grant of authority to three or more persons as a public body confers the authority on a majority of the number of members fixed by statute.<sup>11</sup>
- (b) A quorum of a public body is a majority of the number of members fixed by statute.<sup>12</sup>

The Act defines “quorum” as a majority of the governing body, unless otherwise defined by applicable law or the governing body’s charter.<sup>13</sup> For example, three members of the five-member commissioners court constitute a quorum for conducting county business, except for levying a county tax, which requires the presence of at least four members of the court.<sup>14</sup> Ex officio, nonvoting members of a governmental body are counted for purposes of determining the presence of a quorum.<sup>15</sup> A person who has been elected to serve as a member of a governmental body but whose election has not been certified and who has not yet taken the oath of office is not yet a member of the governmental body.<sup>16</sup> Thus, a meeting between two newly elected persons who have not yet taken the oath of office and two serving directors is not subject to the Act because no quorum is present.<sup>17</sup> A board member may not delegate his or her authority to deliberate or vote to another person, absent express statutory authority to do so.<sup>18</sup>

Absent an express provision to the contrary, a proposition is carried in a deliberative body by a majority of the legal votes cast, a quorum being present.<sup>19</sup> Thus, if a body is “composed of twelve members, a quorum of seven could act, and a majority of that quorum, four, could bind the body.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *But see* TEX. GOV’T CODE § 418.1102(b) (providing that a quorum is not required of local governmental entities if the entity’s “jurisdiction is wholly or partly located in the area of a disaster declared by the president . . . or governor; and . . . a majority of the members of the governing body are unable to be present at a meeting of the governing body as a result of the disaster”).

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* §§ 311.001–.034 (chapter 311).

<sup>11</sup> A statute may expressly provide a different rule. *See* TEX. LOC. GOV’T CODE § 363.105 (providing that two-thirds majority vote required of a board of crime control and prevention district to reject application for funding).

<sup>12</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 311.013; *see id.* § 312.004 (“A joint authority given to any number of officers or other persons may be executed by a majority of them unless expressly provided otherwise.”); *see also Tex. State Bd. of Dental Exam’rs v. Silagi*, 766 S.W.2d 280, 284 (Tex. App.—El Paso 1989, writ denied) (stating that absent a statutory provision, the common-law rule that a majority of all members of a board constitutes a quorum applies).

<sup>13</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.001(6).

<sup>14</sup> TEX. LOC. GOV’T CODE § 81.006.

<sup>15</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. JC-0580 (2002) at 2–3 (overruling Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. DM-160 (1992) in part).

<sup>16</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. GA-0355 (2005) at 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 4.

<sup>18</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. JM-903 (1988) at 4–5.

<sup>19</sup> *Comm’rs Ct. of Limestone Cnty. v. Garrett*, 236 S.W. 970, 973 (Tex. [Comm’n Op.] 1922); Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. Nos. GA-0554 (2007) at 2, GA-0412 (2006) at 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Webster*, 166 S.W.2d at 77.

## D. Other Procedures

### 1. In General

Governmental bodies should consult their governing statutes for procedures applicable to their meetings. Home-rule cities should also consult their charter provisions.<sup>21</sup>

Governmental bodies may draw on a treatise such as *Robert's Rules of Order* to assist them in conducting their meetings, as long as the provisions they adopt are consistent with the Texas Constitution, statutes, and common law.<sup>22</sup> A governmental body subject to the Act may not conduct its meetings according to procedures inconsistent with the Act.<sup>23</sup>

### 2. Preparing the Agenda

An agenda is “[a] list of things to be done, as items to be considered at a meeting.”<sup>24</sup> The terms “agenda” and “notice” are often used interchangeably in discussing the Act because of the practice of posting the agenda as the notice of a meeting or as an appendix to the notice.<sup>25</sup>

Some governmental entities are subject to statutes that expressly address agenda preparation.<sup>26</sup> Other entities may adopt their own procedures for preparing the agenda of a meeting.<sup>27</sup> Officers and employees of the governmental body must avoid deliberations subject to the Act while preparing the agenda.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See *Shackelford v. City of Abilene*, 585 S.W.2d 665, 667 (Tex. 1979) (considering home-rule city charter that required all city meetings to be open to the public).

<sup>22</sup> See Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. GA-0412 (2006) at 2; see also generally Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. GA-0554 (2007).

<sup>23</sup> See Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. Nos. GA-0412 (2006) at 2; DM-228 (1993) at 3 (addressing governmental body’s adoption of provisions of *Robert’s Rules of Order* to govern conduct of meetings).

<sup>24</sup> BLACK’S LAW DICTIONARY 72 (9th ed. 2009).

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., *City of San Antonio v. Fourth Court of Appeals*, 820 S.W.2d 762, 764 (Tex. 1991).

<sup>26</sup> See TEX. TRANSP. CODE § 201.054 (providing that Chair of Transportation Commission shall oversee the preparation of an agenda for each meeting).

<sup>27</sup> See Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. DM-473 (1998) at 3 (discussing home-rule city’s procedure for agenda preparation).

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

## II. Recent Amendments

Though comprehensive discussions of these amendments are also included throughout the relevant parts of this Handbook, below is a brief discussion of the amendments to the Act adopted by the 87th Legislature:

### A. Section 551.091. Commissioners Courts: Deliberation Regarding Disaster or Emergency

Added by Senate Bill 1343, section 551.091 authorizes certain commissioners courts to hold an open or closed meeting, including a telephone conference call, “solely to deliberate about disaster or emergency conditions and related public safety matters” requiring an immediate response “without complying with the requirements of [the Act], including the requirement to provide notice before the meeting or to first convene in an open meeting.”<sup>29</sup> However, the new section requires the commissioners court to provide reasonable public notice “[t]o the extent practicable under the circumstances” and to allow members of the public and press to observe the meeting “if the meeting is an open meeting.”<sup>30</sup> Section 551.091 states that the commissioners court may not vote or take final action in the meeting and requires the commissioners court to prepare and keep minutes or a recording and make the minutes or recording available to the public as soon as practicable.<sup>31</sup> New section 551.091 only applies to a county “for which the governor has issued an executive order or proclamation declaring a state of disaster or a state of emergency” and “in which transportation to the meeting location is dangerous or difficult as a result of the disaster or emergency.”<sup>32</sup> The section expires on September 1, 2027.<sup>33</sup> Senate Bill 1343 takes effect on September 1, 2021.<sup>34</sup>

### B. Section 551.001. Governmental Body

Senate Bill 244 amends the Act’s definition of governmental body to include “a board of directors of a reinvestment zone created under Chapter 311, Tax Code.”<sup>35</sup> Senate Bill 244 takes effect on September 1, 2021.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See Act of May 8, 2021, 87th Leg., R.S., ch. 104, § 1, 2021 Tex. Sess. Law Serv. 193, 193–194 (to be codified at TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.091(b)).

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* (to be codified at TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.091(c)).

<sup>31</sup> *Id.* (to be codified at TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.091(d)).

<sup>32</sup> *Id.* (to be codified at TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.091(a)(1)–(2)).

<sup>33</sup> See *id.* (to be codified at TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.091(e)).

<sup>34</sup> See *id.* § 2.

<sup>35</sup> See Act of May 23, 2021, 87th Leg., R.S., ch. 361, § 1, 2021 Tex. Sess. Law Serv. 743, 744 (to be codified at TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.001(3)(M)).

<sup>36</sup> See *id.* § 2.

### **C. Section 551.1283. Governing Body of Certain Water Districts: Internet Posting of Meeting Materials; Recording of Certain Hearings**

House Bill 1154 amends section 551.1283 to add additional Internet posting requirements to certain special purpose districts.<sup>37</sup> Section 551.1283 contains recording and posting requirements for certain meetings of special purpose districts subject to Water Code chapters 51, 53, 54, or 55 and that have a population of 500 or more.<sup>38</sup> House Bill 1154 adds a requirement that such districts must post on an Internet website the district maintains “links to any other Internet website or websites the district uses to comply with Section 2051.202 of this code and Section 26.18, Tax Code.”<sup>39</sup>

House Bill 1154 also adds section 551.1283(e), which provides that “[n]othing in this chapter shall prohibit a district from allowing a person to watch or listen to a board meeting by video or telephone conference call.”<sup>40</sup>

House Bill 1154 takes effect on September 1, 2021.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> See Act of May 26, 2021, 87th Leg., R.S., ch. 647, § 2, 2021 Tex. Sess. Law Serv. 1310, 1310–1311 (to be codified at TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.1283(d)–(e)).

<sup>38</sup> See TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.1283(a)–(c).

<sup>39</sup> See Act of May 26, 2021, 87th Leg., R.S., ch. 647, § 2, 2021 Tex. Sess. Law Serv. 1310, 1310–1311 (to be codified at TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.1283(d)). Section 2051.202(d) of the Government Code requires a district to post on its website, among other items, the location and schedule for meetings, as well as meeting notices, minutes, and instructions for requesting certain meeting locations. See *id.* § 3, 2021 Tex. Sess. Law Serv. 1311 (to be codified at TEX. GOV’T CODE § 2051.202(d)(11), (13), (14)). Generally, section 26.18 of the Tax Code requires taxing units to post information relating to their tax rate and budget information on a website. See TEX. TAX CODE § 26.18.

<sup>40</sup> See Act of May 26, 2021, 87th Leg., R.S., ch. 647, § 2, 2021 Tex. Sess. Law Serv. 1310, 1310–1311 (to be codified at TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.1283(e)).

<sup>41</sup> See *id.* § 8, 2021 Tex. Sess. Law Serv. 1313.



### **III. Noteworthy Orders and Decisions Since 2020 Handbook**

#### **A. Governor Abbott Suspends Certain Provisions of the Open Meetings Act**

In March of 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic was recognized in the United States and Texas, Governor Abbott declared a statewide disaster and then suspended certain provisions of the Act via a letter to the Attorney General.<sup>42</sup> In his letter, Governor Abbott indicated the purpose of the suspension was to provide flexibility to governmental bodies to conduct business while working to slow the spread of COVID-19 and at the same time maintaining transparency and public access to open government.<sup>43</sup> Governor Abbott divided the suspensions into four distinct categories: those pertaining to the requirement of physical presence of a quorum at a location to conduct a meeting by telephone or videoconference; those pertaining to the physical posting of a notice; those pertaining to the requirement that the telephone or videoconference meeting be audible to the members of the public; and those pertaining to face-to-face interaction between members of the public and public officials. Governor Abbott's letter stated that the suspensions would remain in effect until they were terminated by his office or until the state's disaster declaration was lifted or expired. Each month thereafter Governor Abbott extended the disaster declaration thereby keeping the suspensions in place.

For the following year and a half, many governmental bodies conducted meetings by Zoom and other electronic meeting platforms. The Office of the Attorney General created a dedicated telephone hotline and email address to answer governmental bodies' questions regarding the operation of the Act under the suspensions. In 2021, the 87th Legislature convened and considered many bills that incorporated aspects of the suspension letter into the Act's telephone and videoconference provisions but adopted none of the considered bills.<sup>44</sup>

On June 30, 2021, Governor Abbott's office communicated to the Attorney General's Office that the Governor would be lifting the suspensions effective September 1, 2021, thereby reinstating all provisions of the Act as written.<sup>45</sup>

#### **B. Judicial Decisions**

The 2020 OMA Handbook included a discussion about the conflict between two courts of appeals on the issue of the viability of an action brought by plaintiffs seeking declarations of violations of the Act under the Uniform Declaratory Judgment Act against a governmental body's assertion of governmental immunity. The Texas Supreme Court has since resolved that conflict.

As background, the Austin Court of Appeals, in *City of New Braunfels v. Carowest Land, Ltd.*, determined that section 551.142 of the Act, which authorizes any interested person to bring an action by mandamus or injunction, limited the Act's waiver of governmental immunity to only

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<sup>42</sup> See <https://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/sites/default/files/files/divisions/open-government/COVID-19-OMA-Suspension-Letter.pdf>. Though the suspensions have been lifted, the text of the Governor's letter is reproduced in Appendix C for reference. As of September 1, 2021, the Act is applicable in its entirety.

<sup>43</sup> *Id.*

<sup>44</sup> See e.g., Tex. S.B. 861, 87th Leg., R.S. (2021) and Tex. H.B. 2683, 87th Leg., R.S. (2021).

<sup>45</sup> See <https://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/open-government/open-meetings-act-suspension-updates>.

injunctive and mandamus relief but not declaratory.<sup>46</sup> The Fort Worth Court of Appeals, in *Town of Shady Shores v. Swanson*, disagreed with the Austin Court of Appeals.<sup>47</sup> While it agreed that section 551.142 contained a limited waiver involving only mandamus or injunction, it raised section 551.141, which provides that an action taken in violation of the Act is voidable, and said that the section’s purpose “is to allow courts to declare void actions taken in violation of [the Act].”<sup>48</sup> The court stated that “although [the Act] does not broadly waive immunity for all declaratory judgment actions, it does waive immunity for a declaration that an action taken in violation of [the Act] is void.”<sup>49</sup>

The Texas Supreme Court, in *Town of Shady Shores v. Swanson*, agreed with the Austin Court of Appeals and resolved the issue by holding that section 551.142 set the boundaries of a governmental body’s immunity waiver to the express relief provided therein—that of an injunction or mandamus.<sup>50</sup> The court acknowledged the Act provides that an action taken in violation of the Act is voidable, but the court pointed out that the Act “goes on to state very clearly the authorized mechanism to obtain that result” was a suit by mandamus or injunction.<sup>51</sup> It held the Act’s “clear and unambiguous waiver of immunity does not extend to suits for declaratory relief.”<sup>52</sup>

In *Stratta v. Roe*, the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit gave some meaning to the phrase “member of the public” as it appears in the Act.<sup>53</sup> Stratta was a member of the Brazos Valley Groundwater Conservation District but attended a meeting as a member of the public and signed up to speak as such during the period reserved for public comment on a matter not included on the agenda.<sup>54</sup> The District prohibited him from speaking on the matter claiming that because he was a director he could not discuss subjects that were not on the agenda even though the agenda included a public comment section on non-agenda items.<sup>55</sup> Stratta sued the District alleging that it deprived him of his First Amendment rights by preventing him from speaking.<sup>56</sup>

The Fifth Circuit considered section 551.042, which allows a governmental body to address in a limited manner a subject raised by a member of the public that was not included on the meeting notice.<sup>57</sup> In addressing Stratta’s contention that he had a right to address the board of directors as a member of the public during a period reserved for public comment on open agenda items, the court recognized that the Act does not define “member of the public.”<sup>58</sup> Looking to its common

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<sup>46</sup> See *City of New Braunfels v. Carowest Land, Ltd.*, 549 S.W.3d 163, 173 (Tex. App.—Austin 2017, pet. granted, judgment vacated w.r.m.).

<sup>47</sup> See *Town of Shady Shores v. Swanson*, 544 S.W.3d 426, 437 n.1 (Tex. App.—Fort Worth 2018), *rev’d in part*, 590 S.W.3d 544 (2019).

<sup>48</sup> *Id.* at 437.

<sup>49</sup> *Id.* at 437 n.4.

<sup>50</sup> See *Town of Shady Shores v. Swanson*, 590 S.W.3d 544, 554 (Tex. 2019).

<sup>51</sup> See *id.*

<sup>52</sup> See *id.* The court acknowledged that prior of its cases affirmed or rendered declaratory judgments premised on violations of the Act, but then stated that “in those cases we simply were not presented with, and did not address, the specific question of whether the Act waives immunity from suit for such relief.” *Id.* at 555.

<sup>53</sup> *Stratta v. Roe*, 961 F.3d 340, 363 (5th Cir. 2020) .

<sup>54</sup> *Id.* at 348–49.

<sup>55</sup> *Id.* at 349.

<sup>56</sup> *Id.* at 346.

<sup>57</sup> See *id.* at 361–62.

<sup>58</sup> See *id.* at 363.

meaning, the court stated that “[w]hen ‘member of the public’ is used in conjunction with an identified or identifiable group—as it is here with ‘governmental body’—its meaning is contextually modified to mean a person who does not belong to the identified group.”<sup>59</sup> The court determined that Stratta could not bypass the Act’s notice requirement by attending a meeting as a member of the public.<sup>60</sup> It concluded that “whatever Stratta’s rights otherwise may be, they were overcome by his status as a Board member, and the Board correctly prevented Stratta from speaking at the meeting.”<sup>61</sup>

In *Mares v. Texas Webb County*, a federal district court considered the adequacy of a meeting notice.<sup>62</sup> The agenda item at issue stated:

Discussion and possible action to adopt the county budget for fiscal year 2016–2017 . . . The Court may make any modifications to the proposed budget that it considers warranted by law.<sup>63</sup>

The commissioners court used the agenda item to deal with performance issues of Plaintiff Mares in her role as the county’s Director of Administrative Services.<sup>64</sup> Though having been placed on and removed from probation, Mares continued to have performance issues.<sup>65</sup> During the commissioners court action under the budget agenda item, the county judge moved “to split Administrative Services into two departments: Human Resources and Risk Management,” change Mares’ position and reduce her salary.<sup>66</sup> Mares challenged the action as violating the Open Meetings Act.<sup>67</sup>

The opinion states that a court evaluates a notice by comparing its content with the actions taken at the meeting.<sup>68</sup> Thus, the court framed the question as “whether the content of that budgetary provision is sufficiently specific to alert the public that the County may split its Administrative Services Department or change Plaintiff’s position and salary.”<sup>69</sup> The court recognized that the notice item was “devoid of any language that could alert the public that the County might make employment or personnel decisions, much less that it might split Administrative Services—a then decade-old department—and reduce Plaintiff’s salary by approximately \$30,000.”<sup>70</sup> The court observed that the county’s burden to provide adequate notice was light noting that a reference to “personnel” might have been adequate, but it disapproved of the County’s split of a department and reduction in salary under the guise of the word “budget.”<sup>71</sup> It noted that “almost any change in County administration will have some effect on the budget. If a local government could simply

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<sup>59</sup> *Id.* (quotation marks and citation omitted).

<sup>60</sup> *See id.*

<sup>61</sup> *See id.* at 363–64.

<sup>62</sup> *Mares v. Tex. Webb. Cnty.*, 5:18-CV-121, 2020 WL 619902, at \*4 (S.D. Tex. Feb. 10, 2020).

<sup>63</sup> *See id.* at \*4.

<sup>64</sup> *See id.* at \*1.

<sup>65</sup> *See id.*

<sup>66</sup> *Id.* at \*2.

<sup>67</sup> *See id.*

<sup>68</sup> *See id.*

<sup>69</sup> *See id.* at \*4.

<sup>70</sup> *See id.*

<sup>71</sup> *See id.* at \*6.

provide notice of ‘any modifications to the proposed budget,’ the [Act] would become a dead letter.’<sup>72</sup> The court found the notice was not sufficiently specific to apprise the public of the County’s actions.<sup>73</sup>

The court also took the opportunity to comment on the County’s history of providing adequate notice.<sup>74</sup> It looked at prior notice items regarding the performance and discipline of Mares and all were specific in describing what the County would be discussing.<sup>75</sup> The court said the “County’s ability to provide adequate notice is therefore apparent, and its retreat from that custom further undercuts the adequacy of its notice here.”<sup>76</sup>

In *City of Brownsville v. Brownsville GMS*, the Corpus Christi Court of Appeals interpreted sections 551.141 and 551.142 of the Act to address what remedies are permissible under the Act.<sup>77</sup> Brownsville GMS was a commercial and industrial waste service provider, which served the City of Brownsville on a month-to-month basis.<sup>78</sup> Alleging that the City rejected a fully negotiated long-term agreement with Brownsville GMS as a result of a discussion that violated the Act, Brownsville GMS sought and received a temporary injunction from the trial court.<sup>79</sup> That injunction was designed to prevent the City of Brownsville from terminating its contract with Brownsville GMS or executing or performing a new contract with a third party for the same services.<sup>80</sup> But the City never actually did any of these things.<sup>81</sup> The Court of Appeals determined that the Act permits courts to void only actions which were approved in violation of the Act.<sup>82</sup> Thus, section 551.141 would not permit a court to restrain an entity subject to the Act from engaging in an action which has never been approved in violation of the Act.<sup>83</sup> Because section 551.141 only refers to “[a]n action taken” as “voidable,” and no action had been taken by the City in this case, the court found that the temporary injunction granted by the trial court was improper.<sup>84</sup>

In *Leftwich v. City of Harlingen*, Plaintiff Leftwich sued the City of Harlingen, alleging that a violation of the Act occurred during a city council meeting on September 4, when the city council voted to approve the first reading of two tax ordinances.<sup>85</sup> Mr. Leftwich claimed the City did not permit public comment under section 551.007 prior to the agenda item.<sup>86</sup> While the recording of the meeting showed the mayor as having asked for discussion, there was no response and the court

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<sup>72</sup> *See id.*

<sup>73</sup> *See id.*

<sup>74</sup> *See id.* at \*4–5.

<sup>75</sup> *See id.*

<sup>76</sup> *See id.* at 5.

<sup>77</sup> *City of Brownsville v. Brownsville GMS, Ltd.*, No. 13-19-00311-CV, 2021 WL 1804388, at \*8 (Tex. App.—Corpus Christi May 6, 2021, no pet.).

<sup>78</sup> *Id.* at 1.

<sup>79</sup> *Id.*

<sup>80</sup> *Id.* at \*8.

<sup>81</sup> *Id.*

<sup>82</sup> *Id.*

<sup>83</sup> *Id.*

<sup>84</sup> *Id.*

<sup>85</sup> *Leftwich v. City of Harlingen*, No. 13-20-00110-CV, 2021 WL 4096148, at \*1 (Tex. App.—Corpus Christi-Edinburg Sept. 9, 2021, no pet.h.).

<sup>86</sup> *See id.*



assumed the call for discussion was not clearly directed to the public.<sup>87</sup> The court noted that even if the call for discussion was an invitation for public comment, Mr. Leftwich would lose nonetheless because the ordinances were not adopted at that September 4 meeting.<sup>88</sup> Instead, the ordinances were adopted at a subsequent meeting on September 17.<sup>89</sup> The court noted the September 17th meeting was not one alleged to be in violation of the Act.<sup>90</sup> Thus, there was no action taken in violation of the Act, and Mr. Leftwich was not entitled to an injunction against the collection of taxes pursuant to the ordinances.<sup>91</sup>

### **C. Attorney General Opinions**

Attorney General Opinion No. KP-0300 (2020) examined section 551.007, added in 2019, regarding the right of the public to address the governmental body at an open meeting.<sup>92</sup> Subsection 551.007(b) requires a governmental body to “allow each member of the public who desires to address the body regarding an item on the agenda . . . to address the body regarding the item at the meeting before or during the body’s consideration of the item.”<sup>93</sup> Attorney General Opinion KP-0300 considered a governmental body’s practice of holding one public comment period at the beginning of the open meeting versus holding separate public comment periods immediately before each agenda item.<sup>94</sup> The opinion concluded that the plain language of subsection 551.007(b) gave a governmental body discretion to allow the public comment at either time, provided the comment opportunity occurred prior to the governmental body’s consideration of the agenda item.<sup>95</sup> The opinion also considered a governmental body’s rule capping the total amount of time a speaker has to address all agenda items and concluded that such a rule is permissible only if it is reasonable.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> *See id.* at \*6.

<sup>88</sup> *See id.*

<sup>89</sup> *See id.*

<sup>90</sup> *See id.*

<sup>91</sup> *See id.*

<sup>92</sup> *See* Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. KP-0300 (2020).

<sup>93</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.007(b).

<sup>94</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. KP-0300 (2020) at 1–2.

<sup>95</sup> *See id.* at 2.

<sup>96</sup> *See id.*

## **IV. Training for Members of Governmental Bodies**

Section 551.005 requires each elected or appointed public official who is a member of a governmental body subject to the Act to complete a course of training addressing the member's responsibilities under the Act. The public official must complete the training not later than the 90th day after taking the oath of office, if required to take an oath to assume duties as a member of the governmental body, or after the public official otherwise assumes these duties if the oath is not required.

Completing training as a member of the governmental body satisfies the training requirements for the member's service on a committee or subcommittee of the governmental body and ex officio service on any other governmental body. The training may also be used to satisfy any corresponding training requirements concerning the Act that another law requires members of a governmental body to complete. The failure of one or more members of a governmental body to complete the training does not affect the validity of an action taken by the governmental body.

The attorney general is required to ensure that the training is made available, and the attorney general's office may provide the training and may approve any acceptable training course offered by a governmental body or other entity. The attorney general must also ensure that at least one course approved or provided by the attorney general's office is available at no cost on videotape, DVD, or a similar and widely available medium.<sup>97</sup>

The training course must be at least one and no more than two hours long and must include instruction on the following subjects:

- (1) the general background of the legal requirements for open meetings;
- (2) the applicability of this chapter to governmental bodies;
- (3) procedures and requirements regarding quorums, notice and recordkeeping under this chapter;
- (4) procedures and requirements for holding an open meeting and for holding a closed meeting under this chapter;
- (5) penalties and other consequences for failure to comply with this chapter.<sup>98</sup>

The entity providing the training shall provide a certificate of completion to public officials who complete the training course. A governmental body shall maintain and make available for public inspection the record of its members' completion of training. A certificate of course completion is

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<sup>97</sup> An Open Meetings Act training video is available online at <https://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/open-government/open-meetings-act-training>.

<sup>98</sup> In its review of Open Meetings Act training materials submitted for approval, the Office of the Attorney General considers whether the written materials demonstrate that each subject is accurately and sufficiently covered. Materials may be submitted for review at <https://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/open-government/online-training-application-approval>.

*Training for Members of Governmental Bodies*

admissible as evidence in a criminal prosecution under the Act, but evidence that a defendant completed a training course under this section is not *prima facie* evidence that the defendant knowingly violated the Act.

## **V. Governmental Bodies**

### **A. Definition**

Section 551.002 of the Government Code provides that “[e]very regular, special, or called meeting of a governmental body shall be open to the public, except as provided by this chapter.”<sup>99</sup> “Governmental body” is defined by section 551.001(3) as follows:

“Governmental body” means:

- (A) a board, commission, department, committee, or agency within the executive or legislative branch of state government that is directed by one or more elected or appointed members;
- (B) a county commissioners court in the state;
- (C) a municipal governing body in the state;
- (D) a deliberative body that has rulemaking or quasi-judicial power and that is classified as a department, agency, or political subdivision of a county or municipality;
- (E) a school district board of trustees;
- (F) a county board of school trustees;
- (G) a county board of education;
- (H) the governing board of a special district created by law;
- (I) a local workforce development board created under Section 2308.253;
- (J) a nonprofit corporation that is eligible to receive funds under the federal community services block grant program and that is authorized by this state to serve a geographic area of the state;<sup>100</sup> and
- (K) a nonprofit corporation organized under Chapter 67, Water Code, that provides a water supply or wastewater service, or both, and is exempt from ad valorem taxation under Section 11.30, Tax Code;
- (L) a joint board created under Section 22.074, Transportation Code; and

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<sup>99</sup> An agency financed entirely by federal money is not required by the Act to conduct an open meeting. TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.077.

<sup>100</sup> See 42 U.S.C.A. §§ 9901–9926 (Community Services Block Grant Program).



- (M) a board of directors of a reinvestment zone created under Chapter 311, Tax Code.

Section 551.0015 provides that certain property owners' associations in a defined geographic area in a county with a population of 2.8 million or more or in a county adjacent to a county with a population of 2.8 million or more are subject to the Act in the same manner as a governmental body.<sup>101</sup>

## B. State-Level Governmental Bodies

Section 551.001(3)(A), the definition of “governmental body” applicable to state-level entities, does not name specific entities but instead sets out a general description of such entities. Thus, a state-level entity will be a governmental body within the Act if it is “within the executive or legislative branch of state government” and under the direction of “one or more elected or appointed members.”<sup>102</sup> Moreover, it must have supervision or control over public business or policy.<sup>103</sup> A university auxiliary enterprise was a governmental body under the Act because (1) as an auxiliary enterprise of a state university, it was part of the executive branch of state government; (2) a board of directors elected by its membership controlled the entity, formulated policy, and operated the organization; (3) the board acted by vote of a quorum; (4) the board's business concerned public education and involved spending public funds; and (5) the university exerted little control over the auxiliary enterprise.<sup>104</sup> In contrast, an advisory committee without control or supervision over public business or policy is not subject to the Act, even though its membership includes some members, but less than a quorum, of a governmental body.<sup>105</sup> *See Handbook Part V.E.*

The section 551.001(3)(A) definition of “governmental body” includes only entities within the executive and legislative departments of the State. It therefore excludes the judiciary from the Act.<sup>106</sup>

Other entities are excluded from the Act or from some parts of the Act by statutes other than chapter 551. For instance, the Texas HIV Medication Advisory Committee is expressly excluded from the

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<sup>101</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.0015; *but see* TEX. PROP. CODE § 209.0051(c) (requiring that regular and special board meetings of property owner associations not otherwise subject to chapter 551 be open to the owners), *id.* § 209.0051(b)(1) (defining “board meeting” as “a deliberation between a quorum of the voting board of the property owners' association, or between a quorum of the voting board and another person, during which property owners' association business is considered and the board takes formal action”).

<sup>102</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.001(3)(A); *see id.* § 551.003.

<sup>103</sup> *Id.* § 551.001(4) (definition of “meeting”); *Beasley v. Molett*, 95 S.W.3d 590, 606 (Tex. App.—Beaumont 2002, pet. denied); Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. GA-0019 (2003) at 5.

<sup>104</sup> *Gulf Reg'l Educ. Television Affiliates v. Univ. of Houston*, 746 S.W.2d 803, 809 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1988, writ denied); Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. H-438 (1974) at 4 (concluding that Athletic Council of The University of Texas, as governmental body that supervises public business, must comply with the Act).

<sup>105</sup> Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. Nos. JM-331 (1985) at 3 (concluding that citizens advisory panel of Office of Public Utility Counsel, with no power to supervise or control public business, is not governmental body); H-994 (1977) at 2–3 (concluding that committee appointed to study process of choosing university president and make recommendations to Board of Regents not subject to the Act).

<sup>106</sup> *See* Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. JM-740 (1987) at 4 (concluding that meetings of district judges to choose county auditor is not subject to the Act).

definition of “governmental body” but still must hold its open meetings in compliance with chapter 551, “except that the provisions allowing executive sessions do not apply to the committee.”<sup>107</sup>

### C. Local Governmental Bodies

Subsection 551.001(3)(B) through (M) lists a number of specific types of local governmental bodies. These include a county commissioners court, a municipal governing body and the board of trustees of a school district.

Subsection 551.001(3)(D) describes another kind of local governmental body: “a deliberative body that has rulemaking or quasi-judicial power and that is classified as a department, agency, or political subdivision of a county or municipality.”<sup>108</sup> An inquiry into a local entity’s powers and relationship to the city or county government is necessary to determine whether it is a governmental body under subsection 551.001(3)(D).

A judicial decision guides us in applying subsection 551.001(3)(D) to particular entities. The court in *City of Austin v. Evans*<sup>109</sup> analyzed the powers of a city grievance committee and determined it was not a governmental body within this provision. The court stated that the committee had no authority to make rules governing personnel disciplinary standards or actions or to change the rules on disciplinary actions or complaints.<sup>110</sup> It could only make recommendations and could not adjudicate cases. The committee did not possess quasi-judicial power, described as including the following:

- (1) the power to exercise judgment and discretion;
- (2) the power to hear and determine or to ascertain facts and decide;
- (3) the power to make binding orders and judgments;
- (4) the power to affect the personal or property rights of private persons;
- (5) the power to examine witnesses, to compel the attendance of witnesses, and to hear the litigation of issues on a hearing; and
- (6) the power to enforce decisions or impose penalties.<sup>111</sup>

An entity did not need all of these powers to be considered quasi-judicial, but the more of those powers it had, the more clearly it was quasi-judicial in the exercise of its powers.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> TEX. HEALTH & SAFETY CODE § 85.276(d).

<sup>108</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.001(3)(D).

<sup>109</sup> *City of Austin v. Evans*, 794 S.W.2d 78, 83 (Tex. App.—Austin 1990, no writ).

<sup>110</sup> *Id.*

<sup>111</sup> *Id.* (emphasis omitted); see also *Blankenship v. Brazos Higher Educ. Auth., Inc.*, 975 S.W.2d 353, 360 (Tex. App.—Waco 1998, pet. denied).

<sup>112</sup> *City of Austin*, 794 S.W.2d at 83.

## Governmental Bodies

The court in *Fiske v. City of Dallas*<sup>113</sup> concluded that a citizens group set up to advise the city council as to persons qualified to serve as municipal judges was not a governmental body within the Act because it was not part of the city council or a committee of the city council, and it had no rulemaking power or quasi-judicial power.<sup>114</sup>

In contrast, Attorney General Opinion DM-426 (1996) concluded that a municipal housing authority created under chapter 392 of the Local Government Code was a governmental body subject to the Act.<sup>115</sup> It was “a department, agency, or political subdivision of a . . . municipality” as well as “a deliberative body that has rule-making or quasi-judicial power” within section 551.001(3)(D) of the Act.<sup>116</sup> Attorney General Opinion DM-426 concluded on similar grounds that a county housing authority was a governmental body.<sup>117</sup>

Subsection 551.001(3)(H) provides “the governing board of a special district created by law”<sup>118</sup> is a governmental body. This office has concluded that a hospital district<sup>119</sup> and the Dallas Area Rapid Transit Authority<sup>120</sup> are special districts.

*Sierra Club v. Austin Transportation Study Policy Advisory Committee*<sup>121</sup> is the only judicial decision that has addressed the meaning of “special district” in the Act. The court in *Sierra Club* decided that the Austin Transportation Study Policy Advisory Committee (ATSPAC) was a “special district” within the Act. The committee, a metropolitan planning organization that engaged in transportation planning under federal law, consisted of state, county, regional and municipal public officials. Its decisions as to transportation planning within a five-county area were used by federal agencies to determine funding for local highway projects. Although such committees did not exist when the Act was adopted in 1967, the court compared ATSPAC’s functions to those of a “governmental body” and concluded that the committee was the kind of body that the Act should govern.<sup>122</sup> The court relied on the following definition of special district:

a limited governmental structure created to bypass normal borrowing limitations, to insulate certain activities from traditional political influence, to allocate functions to entities reflecting particular expertise, to provide services in otherwise

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<sup>113</sup> *Fiske v. City of Dallas*, 220 S.W.3d 547, 551 (Tex. App.—Texarkana 2007, no pet.).

<sup>114</sup> *See id.*; *see also* Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. GA-0361 (2005) at 5–7 (concluding that a county election commission is not a deliberative body with rulemaking or quasi-judicial powers).

<sup>115</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. DM-426 (1996) at 2.

<sup>116</sup> *Id.* at 2.

<sup>117</sup> *Id.*; *see also* Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. Nos. JC-0327 (2001) at 2 (concluding that board of the Bryan-College Station Economic Development Corporation did not act in a quasi-judicial capacity or have rulemaking power); H-467 (1974) at 3 (concluding that city library board, a department of the city, did not act in a quasi-judicial capacity or have rulemaking power).

<sup>118</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.001(3)(H).

<sup>119</sup> *See* Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. H-238 (1974) at 2.

<sup>120</sup> *See* Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. JM-595 (1986) at 2.

<sup>121</sup> *Sierra Club v. Austin Transp. Study Pol’y Advisory Comm.*, 746 S.W.2d 298, 301 (Tex. App.—Austin 1988, writ denied).

<sup>122</sup> *Id.* at 300–301.

unincorporated areas, or to accomplish a primarily local benefit or improvement, e.g., parks and planning mosquito control, sewage removal.<sup>123</sup>

Relying on the *Sierra Club* case, this office has concluded that a committee of judges meeting to participate in managing a community supervision and corrections department is a “special district” subject to the Act.<sup>124</sup> It also relied on *Sierra Club* to decide that the Act applied to the Border Health Institute, a consortium of public and private entities established to assist the work of health-related institutions in the Texas-Mexico border region.<sup>125</sup> It determined that other governmental entities, such as a county committee on aging created under the Non-Profit Corporation Act, were not “special districts.”<sup>126</sup>

#### D. Committees and Subcommittees of Governmental Bodies

Generally, meetings of less than a quorum of a governmental body are not subject to the Act.<sup>127</sup> However, when a governmental body appoints a committee that includes less than a quorum of the parent body and grants it authority to supervise or control public business or public policy, the committee may itself be a “governmental body” subject to the Act.<sup>128</sup> In *Willmann v. City of San Antonio*,<sup>129</sup> the city council established a subcommittee consisting of less than a quorum of council members and charged it with recommending the appointment and reappointment of municipal judges.<sup>130</sup> The appellate court, reviewing the conclusion on summary judgment that the committee was not subject to the Act, stated that a “governmental body does not always insulate itself from . . . [the Act’s] application simply because less than a quorum of the parent body is present.”<sup>131</sup> Because the evidence indicated that the subcommittee actually made final decisions and the city council merely “rubber stamped” them, the appellate court reversed the summary judgment as to the Open Meetings Act issue.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> *Id.* at 301 (quoting BLACK’S LAW DICTIONARY 1253 (5th ed. 1986)).

<sup>124</sup> See Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. DM-395 (1996) at 3–4. *But see* Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. GA-0504 (2007) at 2 n.4 (observing that Texas Supreme Court Order No. 97-9141, 1997 WL 583726 (per curiam), had raised questions about the premises underlying the conclusion of Attorney General Opinion DM-395).

<sup>125</sup> See Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. GA-0280 (2004) at 8–9; *see also* Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. DM-426 (1996) at 4 (concluding that regional housing authority created under chapter 392 of the Local Government Code is special district within the Act).

<sup>126</sup> See Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. DM-7 (1991) at 2–3; *see also* Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. JC-0160 (1999) at 3 (concluding that *ad hoc* intergovernmental working group of employees is not a “special district” within the Act).

<sup>127</sup> See *Hays Cnty. v. Hays Cnty. Water Plan. P’ship*, 106 S.W.3d 349, 356 (Tex. App.—Austin 2003, no pet.); Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. JC-0407 (2001) at 9.

<sup>128</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. Nos. JC-0060 (1999) at 2, JC-0053 (1999) at 3; Tex. Att’y Gen. LO-97-058, at 2–5; LO-97-017, at 5.

<sup>129</sup> *Willmann v. City of San Antonio*, 123 S.W.3d 469 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 2003, pet. denied).

<sup>130</sup> See *id.* at 471–72.

<sup>131</sup> *Id.* at 478.

<sup>132</sup> See *id.* at 480; *see also* *Finlan v. City of Dallas*, 888 F. Supp. 779, 785 (N.D. Tex. 1995) (noting concern that danger exists that full council is merely a “rubber stamp” of committee); Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. Nos. JC-0060 (1999) at 3, H-823 (1976) at 2, H-438 (1974) at 3 (discussing “rubber stamping” of committee and subcommittee decisions).



Attorney General Opinion GA-0957 recently concluded that if a quorum of a governmental body attends a meeting of a committee of the governmental body at which a deliberation as defined by the Act takes place, the committee meeting will constitute a meeting of the governmental body.<sup>133</sup> Yet, in at least one statute, the Legislature has expressly provided that a committee of a board “where less than a quorum of any one board is present is not subject to the provisions of the open meetings law.”<sup>134</sup>

## E. Advisory Bodies

An advisory committee that does not control or supervise public business or policy is not subject to the Act,<sup>135</sup> even though its membership includes some members, but less than a quorum, of a governmental body.<sup>136</sup> For example, the multidisciplinary team established to review offenders’ records under the Commitment of Sexually Violent Predators Act was not subject to the Act.<sup>137</sup> The team made an initial assessment of certain offenders to determine whether they should be subject to further evaluation for civil commitment. Subsequent assessments by other persons determined whether commitment proceedings should be filed. Thus, the team lacked ultimate supervision or control over public business or policy.<sup>138</sup>

However, if a governmental body that has established an advisory committee routinely adopts or “rubber stamps” the advisory committee’s recommendations, the committee probably will be considered to be a governmental body subject to the Act.<sup>139</sup> Thus, the fact that a committee is called an advisory committee does not necessarily mean it is excepted from the Act.

The Legislature has adopted statutes providing that particular advisory committees are subject to the Act, including a board or commission established by a municipality to assist it in developing a zoning plan or zoning regulations,<sup>140</sup> the nursing advisory committee established by the statewide health coordinating council,<sup>141</sup> advisory committees for existing Boll Weevil Eradication zones appointed by the commissioner of the Official Cotton Growers’ Boll Weevil Eradication Foundation,<sup>142</sup> and an education research center advisory board.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> See Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. GA-0957 (2012) at 2–3.

<sup>134</sup> TEX. WATER CODE § 49.064 (applicable to general law water districts); see also *Tarrant Reg’l Water Dist. v. Bennett*, 453 S.W.3d 51, 58 (Tex. App.—Fort Worth 2014, pet. denied) (discussing Water Code section 49.064 in relation to the Act and questioning previous attorney general opinions’ conclusions that an advisory committee could be subject to the Act as a governmental body).

<sup>135</sup> See Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. GA-0232 (2004) at 3–5 (concluding that student fee advisory committee established under Education Code section 54.5031 is not subject to the Act).

<sup>136</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. Nos. JM-331 (1985) at 3 (concluding that citizens advisory panel of Office of Public Utility Counsel, with no power to supervise or control public business, is not governmental body), H-994 (1977) at 3 (discussing fact question as to whether committee appointed to study process of choosing university president and make recommendations to Board of Regents is subject to the Act).

<sup>137</sup> See *Beasley*, 95 S.W.3d at 606.

<sup>138</sup> *Id.*

<sup>139</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. Nos. H-467 (1974) at 3–4, H-438 (1974) at 3.

<sup>140</sup> TEX. LOC. GOV’T CODE § 211.0075.

<sup>141</sup> TEX. HEALTH & SAFETY CODE § 104.0155(e).

<sup>142</sup> TEX. AGRIC. CODE § 74.1041(e).

<sup>143</sup> TEX. EDUC. CODE § 1.006(b).

## F. Public and Private Entities That Are Not Governmental Bodies

Nonprofit corporations established to carry out governmental business generally are not subject to the Act because they are not within the Act’s definition of “governmental body.”<sup>144</sup> A nonprofit created under the Texas Nonprofit Corporation Act to provide services to a county’s senior citizens was not a governmental body because it was not a governmental structure, and it had no power to supervise or control public business.<sup>145</sup>

However, the Act itself provides that certain nonprofit corporations are governmental bodies.<sup>146</sup> Other statutes provide that specific kinds of nonprofit corporations are subject to the Act, such as development corporations created under the Development Corporation Act of 1979<sup>147</sup> and the governing body of an open-enrollment charter school, which may be a private school or a nonprofit entity.<sup>148</sup> If a nonprofit corporation provides in its articles of incorporation or bylaws that its board of directors will conduct meetings in accord with the Act, then the board must do so.<sup>149</sup>

A private entity does not become a governmental body within the Act merely because it receives public funds.<sup>150</sup> A city chamber of commerce, a private entity, is not a governmental body within the Act although it receives public funds.<sup>151</sup>

## G. Legislature

There is very little authority on section 551.003. A 1974 attorney general letter advisory discussed its connection with Texas Constitution article III, section 11, which provides in part that “[e]ach House may determine the rules of its own proceedings.”<sup>152</sup> The letter advisory raised the possibility that the predecessor of section 551.003 is unconstitutional to the extent of conflict with Texas Constitution article III, section 11, stating that “neither House may infringe upon or limit the present or future right of the other to adopt its own rules.”<sup>153</sup> However, it did not address the constitutional issue, describing the predecessor to Government Code section 551.003 as an exercise of rulemaking power for the 1973–74 legislative sessions.<sup>154</sup>

The Texas Supreme Court addressed Government Code section 551.003 in a 2000 case challenging the Senate’s election by secret ballot of a senator to perform the duties of lieutenant governor.<sup>155</sup> Members of the media contended that the Act prohibited the Senate from voting by secret ballot.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.001(3). *Cf. id.* § 552.003(1)(A)(xi) (including certain nonprofit corporations in definition of “governmental body” for purposes of the Public Information Act).

<sup>145</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. DM-7 (1991) at 3.

<sup>146</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.001(3)(J)–(K).

<sup>147</sup> TEX. LOC. GOV’T CODE § 501.072.

<sup>148</sup> TEX. EDUC. CODE § 12.1051.

<sup>149</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. LO-96-146, at 5.

<sup>150</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. LO-98-040, at 2.

<sup>151</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. LO-93-055, at 3.

<sup>152</sup> *See* Tex. Att’y Gen. LA-84 (1974) at 2.

<sup>153</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. LA-84 (1974) at 2.

<sup>154</sup> *See id.*

<sup>155</sup> *In re The Tex. Senate*, 36 S.W.3d 119 (Tex. 2000).

<sup>156</sup> *See id.* at 119.

## *Governmental Bodies*

The Supreme Court stated that section 551.003 “clearly covers the Committee of the Whole Senate. Thus, its meetings and votes cannot be kept secret ‘except as specifically provided’ by the Texas Constitution.”<sup>157</sup> The court then determined that Texas Constitution article III, section 41, which authorizes the Senate to elect its officers by secret ballot, provided an exception to section 551.003.<sup>158</sup>

More recently, the Attorney General recognized in Opinion KP-0347 that pursuant to article III, section 11, “House and Senate rules supersede any contradictory procedural requirements for the Legislature found in the Texas Open Meetings Act or other state law.”<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> *Id.* at 120.

<sup>158</sup> *See id.*

<sup>159</sup> *See* Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. KP-0347 (2021) at 2; TEX. CONST. art. III, § 11.

## VI. Meetings

### A. Definitions

The Act applies to a governmental body, as defined by section 551.001(3), when it engages in a “regular, special, or called meeting.”<sup>160</sup> Informal meetings of a quorum of members of a governmental body are also subject to the Act.<sup>161</sup>

“Deliberation,” a key term for understanding the Act, is defined as follows:

“Deliberation” means a verbal or written exchange between a quorum of a governmental body, or between a quorum of a governmental body and another person, concerning an issue within the jurisdiction of the governmental body.<sup>162</sup>

“Deliberation” and “discussion” are synonymous for purposes of the Act.<sup>163</sup> And since 2019, the definition of “deliberation” includes written materials.<sup>164</sup>

The Act includes two definitions of “meeting.”<sup>165</sup> Section 551.001(4)(A) uses the term “deliberation” to define “meeting”:

(A) a deliberation between a quorum of a governmental body, or between a quorum of a governmental body and another person, during which public business or public policy over which the governmental body has supervision or control is discussed or considered or during which the governmental body takes formal action . . . .<sup>166</sup>

### B. Deliberations Among a Quorum of a Governmental Body or Between a Quorum and a Third Party

The following test has been applied to determine when a discussion among members of a statewide governmental entity is a “meeting” as defined by section 551.001(4)(A):

- (1) The body must be an entity within the executive or legislative department of the state.
- (2) The entity must be under the control of one or more elected or appointed members.

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<sup>160</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.002.

<sup>161</sup> *Acker v. Tex. Water Comm'n*, 790 S.W.2d 299, 300 (Tex. 1990) (considering meeting in restroom of two members of three-person board); *Bexar Medina Atascosa Water Dist. v. Bexar Medina Atascosa Landowners' Ass'n*, 2 S.W.3d 459, 460–61 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 1999, pet. denied) (considering “informational gathering” of water district board with landowners in board member’s barn).

<sup>162</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.001(2).

<sup>163</sup> *Bexar Medina Atascosa Water Dist.*, 2 S.W.3d at 461.

<sup>164</sup> See TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.001(2).

<sup>165</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. Nos. GA-0896 (2011) at 2, JC-0307 (2000) at 5, DM-95 (1992) at 5.

<sup>166</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.001(4)(A).

## Meetings

- (3) The meeting must involve formal action or deliberation between a quorum of members.<sup>167</sup>
- (4) The discussion or action must involve public business or public policy.
- (5) The entity must have supervision or control over that public business or policy.<sup>168</sup>

Statewide governmental bodies that have supervision or control over public business or policy are subject to the Act, and so are the local governmental bodies expressly named in the definition of “governmental body.”<sup>169</sup> In contrast, a group of public officers and employees in a county who met to share information about jail conditions did not supervise or control public business or public policy and thus was not subject to the Act.<sup>170</sup> A purely advisory body, which has no authority over public business or policy, is not subject to the Act,<sup>171</sup> unless a governmental body routinely adopts or “rubber stamps” the recommendations of the advisory body.<sup>172</sup> *See* Part V.E.

### C. Gathering at Which a Quorum Receives Information from or Provides Information to a Third Party

Section 551.001(4)(B) defines “meeting” as follows:

- (B) except as otherwise provided by this subdivision, a gathering:
- (i) that is conducted by the governmental body or for which the governmental body is responsible;
  - (ii) at which a quorum of members of the governmental body is present;
  - (iii) that has been called by the governmental body; and
  - (iv) at which the members receive information from, give information to, ask questions of, or receive questions from any third person, including an employee of the governmental body, about the public business or public policy over which the governmental body has supervision or control.

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<sup>167</sup> Deliberation between a quorum and a third party now satisfies this part of the test. *See id.* § 551.001(2).

<sup>168</sup> *Gulf Reg'l Educ. Television Affiliates v. Univ. of Houston*, 746 S.W.2d 803, 809 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1988, writ denied) (citing Attorney General Opinion H-772 (1976)); *see also* Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. GA-0232 (2004) at 3–5 (relying on quoted test to determine that student fee advisory committee established under Education Code section 54.5031 is not subject to the Act).

<sup>169</sup> *See* TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.001(3).

<sup>170</sup> *See* Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. GA-0504 (2007) at 3.

<sup>171</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. Nos. H-994 (1977) at 2 (concluding that committee appointed to study process of choosing university president and to make recommendations to Board of Regents likely is not subject to the Act), H-772 (1976) at 6 (concluding that meeting of group of employees, such as general faculty of university, is not subject to the Act), H-467 (1974) at 3 (concluding that city library board, which is advisory only, is not subject to the Act).

<sup>172</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. Nos. H-467 (1974) at 4, H-438 (1974) at 3–4.

## Meetings

The term does not include the gathering of a quorum of a governmental body at a social function unrelated to the public business that is conducted by the body, or the attendance by a quorum of a governmental body at a regional, state, or national convention or workshop, ceremonial event, press conference, or the attendance by a quorum of a governmental body at a candidate forum, appearance, or debate to inform the electorate, if formal action is not taken and any discussion of public business is incidental to the social function, convention, workshop, ceremonial event, press conference, forum, appearance, or debate.

The term includes a session of a governmental body.<sup>173</sup>

Section 551.001(4)(A) applies when a quorum of a governmental body engages in deliberations, either among the members of the quorum or between the quorum and a third party.<sup>174</sup> Section 551.001(4)(B) reaches gatherings of a quorum of a governmental body even when the members of the quorum do not participate in deliberations among themselves or with third parties.<sup>175</sup> Under the circumstances described by section 551.001(4)(B), the governmental body may be subject to the Act when it merely listens to a third party speak at a gathering the governmental body conducts or for which the governmental body is responsible.<sup>176</sup>

### D. Informal or Social Meetings

When a quorum of the members of a governmental body assembles in an informal setting, such as a social occasion, it will be subject to the requirements of the Act if the members engage in a verbal exchange about public business or policy. The Act's definition of a meeting expressly excludes gatherings of a "quorum of a governmental body at a social function unrelated to the public business that is conducted by the body."<sup>177</sup> The definition also excludes from its reach the attendance by a quorum at certain other events such as a regional, state or national convention or workshop, ceremonial events, press conferences, and a candidate forum, appearance, or debate to inform the electorate.<sup>178</sup> In both instances, there is no "meeting" under the Act "if formal action is not taken and any discussion of public business is *incidental* to the social function, convention, workshop, ceremonial event, or press conference."<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.001(4)(B).

<sup>174</sup> *Id.* § 551.001(4)(A). *But see* Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. GA-0989 (2013) at 2 (concluding that a private consultation between a member of a governmental body and an employee that does not take place within the hearing of a quorum of other members does not constitute a meeting under section 551.001(4)).

<sup>175</sup> *Cf.* Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. Nos. JC-0248 (2000) at 2 (concluding that quorum of state agency board may testify at public hearing conducted by another agency), JC-0203 (2000) at 4 (concluding that quorum of members of standing committee of hospital district may attend public speech and comment on matters of hospital district business within supervision of committee).

<sup>176</sup> Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. JC-2000 at 3–4 (discussing the Act's application when quorum of governmental body listens to members of the public in a session commonly known as a "public comment" session, "public forum" or "open mike" session).

<sup>177</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.001(4)(B).

<sup>178</sup> *See id.*

<sup>179</sup> *Id.* (emphasis added).

## E. Discussions Among a Quorum through a Series of Communications

On occasion, a governmental body has tried to avoid complying with the Act by deliberating about public business without a quorum being physically present in one place and claiming that this was not a “meeting” within the Act.<sup>180</sup> Conducting secret deliberations and voting over the telephone, when no statute authorized this, was one such method.<sup>181</sup>

Section 551.143 as originally written prohibited machinations to avoid complying with the Act by criminalizing multiple meetings in numbers less than a quorum to “conspire to circumvent the Act.” One example of such a so-called walking quorum was described by *Esperanza Peace and Justice Center v. City of San Antonio*.<sup>182</sup>

Amended section 551.143 now prohibits discussion about an item of public business among a quorum of a governmental body through a series of communications. Section 551.143 provides that it is a criminal offense for a member of a governmental body to knowingly engage “in at least one communication among a series of communications that each occur outside of a meeting . . . and that concern an issue within the jurisdiction of the governmental body in which members engaging in the individual communications constitute fewer than a quorum of members but the members engaging in the series of communications constitute a quorum of the members.”<sup>183</sup> The member must know at the time he or she engaged in the communication that the series of communications “involved or would involve a quorum” and would “constitute a deliberation once a quorum of members engaged in the series of communications.”<sup>184</sup>

Section 551.006 authorizes members of a governmental body to communicate through an online message board or similar Internet application.<sup>185</sup> A governmental body utilizing an electronic message board may have only one such board and it can be used by only members of the governmental body and their authorized staff.<sup>186</sup> The online message board must be prominently displayed on the governmental body’s primary Internet web page and no more than one click away from that page.<sup>187</sup> A governmental body that removes a communication from the online message board that has been posted for at least 30 days must maintain the posting for a period of six years, and the communication is public information under the Public Information Act.<sup>188</sup> Most importantly, a governmental body may not vote or take any action by communication on an online message board.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> One court of appeals stated that “[o]ne board member asking another board member her opinion on a matter does not constitute a deliberation of public business.” *Foreman v. Whitty*, 392 S.W.3d 265, 277 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 2012, no pet.).

<sup>181</sup> See *Hitt v. Mabry*, 687 S.W.2d 791, 793, 796 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 1985, no writ).

<sup>182</sup> *Esperanza Peace & Just. Ctr. v. City of San Antonio*, 316 F. Supp. 2d. 433 (W.D. Tex. 2001).

<sup>183</sup> See TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.143(a), (a)(1).

<sup>184</sup> *Id.* § 551.143(a)(2).

<sup>185</sup> *Id.* § 551.006.

<sup>186</sup> *Id.* § 551.006(b), (c) (providing that a posting by a staff member must include the staff member’s name and title).

<sup>187</sup> *Id.* § 551.006(b).

<sup>188</sup> *Id.* § 551.006(d).

<sup>189</sup> *Id.* § 551.006(e).



## F. Meetings Using Telephone, Videoconference, and the Internet

A governmental body may not conduct meetings subject to the Act by telephone or videoconference unless a statute expressly authorizes it to do so.<sup>190</sup>

### 1. Telephone Meetings

The Act authorizes governmental bodies to conduct meetings by telephone conference call under limited circumstances and subject to procedures that may include special requirements for notice, record-keeping and two-way communication between meeting locations.<sup>191</sup>

A governmental body may hold an open or closed meeting by telephone conference call if:

- (1) an emergency or public necessity exists within the meaning of Section 551.045 of this chapter; and
- (2) the convening at one location of a quorum of the governmental body is difficult or impossible; or
- (3) the meeting is held by an advisory board.<sup>192</sup>

The emergency telephone meeting is subject to the notice requirements applicable to other meetings held under the Act. The open portions of the meeting are required to be audible to the public at the location specified in the notice and must be recorded. The provision also requires the location of the meeting to be set up to provide two-way communication during the entire conference call and the identity of each party to the conference call to be clearly stated prior to speaking.<sup>193</sup>

The Act authorizes the governing board of an institution of higher education, water districts whose territory includes land in three or more counties, the Board for Lease of University Lands, or the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to meet by telephone conference call if the meeting is a special called meeting, immediate action is required, and it is difficult or impossible to convene a quorum at one location.<sup>194</sup> The Texas Board of Criminal Justice may hold an emergency meeting by telephone conference call,<sup>195</sup> and, at the call of its presiding officer, the Board of Pardons and Paroles may hold a hearing on clemency matters by telephone conference call.<sup>196</sup> The Act permits

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<sup>190</sup> See generally *Hitt*, 687 S.W.2d at 796; *Elizondo v. Williams*, 643 S.W.2d 765, 766–67 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 1982, no writ) (telephone meetings); Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. DM-207 (1993) at 3 (videoconference meeting). But see *Harris Cnty. Emergency Serv. Dist. No. 1 v. Harris Cnty. Emergency Corps.*, 999 S.W.2d 163, 169 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1999, no pet.) (concluding that telephone discussion by fewer than a quorum of board members about placing items on the agenda, without evidence of intent, did not violate the Act).

<sup>191</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE §§ 551.121–.126, .129–.131 (authorizing meetings by telephone conference call under specified circumstances).

<sup>192</sup> *Id.* § 551.125(b). See Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. GA-0379 (2005) at 2–3 (addressing Government Code section 551.125(b)(3)).

<sup>193</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.125(b)–(f).

<sup>194</sup> *Id.* § 551.121(c).

<sup>195</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.123.

<sup>196</sup> *Id.* § 551.124.

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the board of trustees of the Teacher Retirement System to hold an open or closed meeting by telephone conference call if a quorum of the board is present at one location and other requirements of the Act are followed.<sup>197</sup>

Section 551.091 authorizes certain county commissioners courts to hold an “open or closed meeting, including a telephone conference call, solely to deliberate about disaster or emergency conditions and related public safety matters that require an immediate response without complying with the requirements” of chapter 551.<sup>198</sup> The commissioners court must be in a county “for which the governor has issued an executive order or proclamation declaring a state of disaster or emergency” and “in which transportation to the meeting location is dangerous or difficult as a result of the disaster or emergency.”<sup>199</sup>

Statutes other than the Act authorize some governing bodies to meet by telephone conference call under limited circumstances. For example, if the joint chairs of the Legislative Budget Board are physically present at a meeting, and the meeting is held in Austin, any number of the other board members may attend by use of telephone conference call, videoconference call, or other similar telecommunication device.<sup>200</sup>

A governmental body may consult with its attorney by telephone conference call, videoconference call or communications over the Internet, unless the attorney is an employee of the governmental body.<sup>201</sup> If the governmental body deducts employment taxes from the attorney’s compensation, the attorney is an employee of the governmental body.<sup>202</sup> The restriction against remote communications with an employee attorney does not apply to the governing board of an institution of higher education or the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.<sup>203</sup>

## 2. Videoconference Call Meetings

The Act also authorizes governmental bodies to conduct meetings by videoconference call and, unlike with telephone meetings, does not limit that authority to emergency circumstances.<sup>204</sup> Section 551.127 authorizes a member or employee of a governmental body to participate remotely in a meeting of the governmental body through a videoconference call if there is live video and

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<sup>197</sup> *Id.* § 551.130.

<sup>198</sup> *Id.* § 551.091(b). Section 551.091 expires on September 1, 2027. *See id.* § 551.091(e).

<sup>199</sup> *Id.* § 551.091(a).

<sup>200</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 322.003(d); *see also* TEX. AGRIC. CODE §§ 41.205(b) (Texas Grain Producer Indemnity Board), 62.0021(a) (State Seed and Plant Board); TEX. FIN. CODE § 11.106(c) (Finance Commission); TEX. GOV’T CODE §§ 501.139(b) (Correctional Managed Health Care Committee), 436.054 (Texas Military Preparedness Commission).

<sup>201</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.129(a), (d).

<sup>202</sup> *Id.* § 551.129(e).

<sup>203</sup> *Id.* § 551.129(f).

<sup>204</sup> *Id.* § 551.127.

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audio feed of the remote participant that is broadcast live at the meeting and the feed complies with the other provisions of section 551.127.<sup>205</sup>

As a preliminary matter, a meeting held by videoconference call must meet the regular notice requirements of the Act.<sup>206</sup> In addition, section 551.127 authorizes two logistical scenarios depending on the territorial jurisdiction of the governmental body and requires that the notice specify a particular location of the meeting and who will be physically present there, as follows:

A state governmental body or a governmental body that extends into three or more counties may meet by videoconference call only if the member of the governmental body presiding over the meeting is physically present at one location of the meeting.<sup>207</sup> The notice must specify that location, which must be open to the public during the open portions of the meeting, as well as state the intent to have the member of the governmental body presiding over the meeting present there.<sup>208</sup>

For all other governmental bodies, the Act authorizes a meeting by videoconference call only if a full quorum of the governmental body is physically present at one location of the meeting.<sup>209</sup> In that instance, the notice must specify that location, as well as the intent to have a quorum present there.<sup>210</sup>

The location where the presiding member is physically present must be open to the public during the open portions of the meeting.<sup>211</sup>

Beyond notice and location, the Act specifies certain technical requirements. The meeting location where the quorum or presiding member is present as well as each remote location from which a member participates “shall have two-way audio and video communication with each other location during the entire meeting.”<sup>212</sup> The Act requires that, while speaking, each participant’s face must be clearly visible and the voice audible to each other participant and to the members of the public in attendance at the location where the quorum or presiding member is present and any other location of the meeting that is open to the public.<sup>213</sup> The Act additionally requires that each open portion of the meeting is to be visible and audible to the public at the meeting location where the

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<sup>205</sup> *Id.* § 551.127(a-1); *see id.* § 551.127(a) (“[T]his chapter does not prohibit a governmental body from holding an open or closed meeting by videoconference call.”). Subsection 81.001(b) of the Local Government Code, which provides that the county judge, if present, is the presiding officer of the county commissioners court, does not apply to a meeting held by videoconference. *See* TEX. LOC. GOV’T CODE § 81.001(b). The subsection ensures that a county judge may remotely participate in a videoconference meeting while another member of the commissioners court presides over the meeting at the physical location accessible to the public.

<sup>206</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.127(d).

<sup>207</sup> *Id.* § 551.127(c).

<sup>208</sup> *Id.* § 551.127(e).

<sup>209</sup> *Id.* § 551.127(b).

<sup>210</sup> *Id.* § 551.127(e).

<sup>211</sup> *Id.*

<sup>212</sup> *Id.* § 551.127(h). “The audio and video signals perceptible by members of the public at each location of the meeting described by Subsection (h) must be of sufficient quality so that members of the public at each location can observe the demeanor and hear the voice of each participant in the open portion of the meeting.” *Id.* § 551.127(j).

<sup>213</sup> *Id.* § 551.127(h).

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quorum or presiding member is present and that at any time that the meeting is no longer visible and audible to the public, the meeting must be recessed until the problem is resolved.<sup>214</sup> The meeting must be adjourned if the problem is not resolved in six hours.<sup>215</sup> The Act tasks the Department of Information Resources to specify minimum standards for the audio and video signals required at a videoconference meeting and the quality of the signals at each location of the meeting must meet or exceed those standards.<sup>216</sup>

Generally speaking, a remote participant “shall be counted as present at the meeting for all purposes.”<sup>217</sup> However, if the audio or video communication is lost for any portion of the meeting, the remote participant is considered absent during that time.<sup>218</sup> Should this occur, the governmental body may continue the meeting only as follows: (1) If the meeting is being held by a statewide body or one that extends into three or more counties, there must continue to be a quorum participating in the meeting. (2) If the meeting is held by another governmental body, a full quorum must remain physically present at the meeting location.<sup>219</sup>

Section 551.127 also requires the governmental body to “make at least an audio recording of the meeting” and to make the recording available to the public.<sup>220</sup> And section 551.127 expressly permits a governmental body to allow a member of the public to testify at a meeting from a remote location by videoconference call.<sup>221</sup>

Relating to certain special districts subject to specific chapters of the Water Code and with a population of 500 or more, subsection 551.1283(e) provides that “[n]othing in this chapter shall prohibit a district from allowing a person to watch or listen to a board meeting by video or telephone conference call.”<sup>222</sup>

### 3. Meetings Broadcast over the Internet

Section 551.128 of the Act provides that with certain exceptions a governmental body has discretion to broadcast an open meeting over the Internet and sets out the requirements for a broadcast.<sup>223</sup> The exceptions referred to in section 551.128(b-1) make the broadcast of open meetings over the Internet mandatory for a transit authority or department, an elected school district board of trustees for a school district with a student enrollment of 10,000 or more, an elected governing body of a home-rule municipality that has a population of 50,000 or more, and a county commissioners court in a county with a population of 125,000 or more.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> See *id.* § 551.127(f).

<sup>215</sup> *Id.*

<sup>216</sup> *Id.* § 551.127(i); see 1 TEX. ADMIN. CODE §§ 209.1–.33 (Tex. Dept. of Info. Res., Minimum Standards for Meetings Held by Videoconference). The Department of Information Resources has published guidelines at <https://pubext.dir.texas.gov/portal/internal/resources/DocumentLibrary/Videoconferencing%20Guidelines.pdf>.

<sup>217</sup> See TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.127(a-2).

<sup>218</sup> See *id.* § 551.127(a-3).

<sup>219</sup> See *id.*

<sup>220</sup> *Id.* § 551.127(g).

<sup>221</sup> See *id.* § 551.127(k).

<sup>222</sup> See *id.* § 551.1283(e).

<sup>223</sup> *Id.* § 551.128(b).

<sup>224</sup> *Id.* § 551.128(b-1).

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A governmental body required to broadcast its open meetings over the Internet under section 551.128(b-1) must make a video and audio recording of “each regularly scheduled open meeting that is not a work session or a special called meeting” and must make the recording available not later than seven days after the date of the meeting.<sup>225</sup> And the governmental body must maintain an archived recording of the meeting on the Internet “for not less than two years after the date the recording was first made available.”<sup>226</sup> Subsection 551.128(b-1) further requires an elected school district board of trustees of a school district with an enrollment of 10,000 or more to make an audio or video recording of any work session or special called meeting at which the board of trustees “votes on any matter or allows public comment or testimony.”<sup>227</sup> Subsection 551.128(b-2) provides that a governmental body is not required to establish a separate Internet site but may make the archived recording available “on an existing Internet site, including a publicly accessible video-sharing or social networking site.”<sup>228</sup> Similarly, section 472.036 of the Transportation Code requires a metropolitan planning organization that serves one or more counties with a population of 350,000 to broadcast over the Internet each open meeting held by the policy board of the metropolitan planning organization.<sup>229</sup>

Certain junior college districts and general academic teaching institutions are required under sections 551.1281 and 551.1282 to broadcast their open meetings in the manner provided by section 551.128.<sup>230</sup> An Internet broadcast does not substitute for conducting an in-person meeting but provides an additional way of disseminating the meeting.

Outside of the Act, certain entities may have specific provisions imposing broadcasting requirements.<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> *Id.* § 551.128(b-1)(1), (b-4)(1).

<sup>226</sup> *Id.* § 551.128(b-4)(2).

<sup>227</sup> *See id.* § 551.128(b-1)(B).

<sup>228</sup> *See id.* § 551.128(b-2).

<sup>229</sup> *See* TEX. TRANSP. CODE § 472.036.

<sup>230</sup> *See* TEX. GOV'T CODE §§ 551.1281–1282.

<sup>231</sup> *See id.* § 531.0165 (imposing broadcasting and recording requirements on the Health and Human Services Commission and related entities).

## VII. Notice Requirements

### A. Content

The Act requires written notice of all meetings. Section 551.041 of the Act provides:

A governmental body shall give written notice of the date, hour, place, and subject of each meeting held by the governmental body.<sup>232</sup>

A governmental body must give the public advance notice of the subjects it will consider in an open meeting or a closed executive session.<sup>233</sup> The Act does not require the notice of a closed meeting to cite the section or subsection numbers of provisions authorizing the closed meeting.<sup>234</sup> No judicial decision or attorney general opinion states that a governmental body must indicate in the notice whether a subject will be discussed in open or closed session,<sup>235</sup> but some governmental bodies do include this information. If the notices posted for a governmental body's meetings consistently distinguish between subjects for public deliberation and subjects for executive session deliberation, an abrupt departure from this practice may raise a question as to the adequacy of the notice.<sup>236</sup>

Governmental actions taken in violation of the notice requirements of the Act are voidable.<sup>237</sup> If some actions taken at a meeting do not violate the notice requirements while others do, only the actions in violation of the Act are voidable.<sup>238</sup> (For a discussion of the voidability of the governmental body's actions, refer to Part XI.C. of this *Handbook*).

### B. Sufficiency

The notice must be sufficient to apprise the general public of the subjects to be considered during the meeting. In *City of San Antonio v. Fourth Court of Appeals*,<sup>239</sup> the Texas Supreme Court considered whether the following item in the notice posted for a city council meeting gave sufficient notice of the subject to be discussed:

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<sup>232</sup> *Id.* § 551.041.

<sup>233</sup> *Cox Enters., Inc. v. Bd. of Trs.*, 706 S.W.2d 956, 958 (Tex. 1986); *Porth v. Morgan*, 622 S.W.2d 470, 475–76 (Tex. App.—Tyler 1981, writ ref'd n.r.e.); *but see* TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.091(b), (c) (authorizing county commissioners court in limited circumstances involving a governor-declared disaster or emergency to hold a meeting “without complying with the requirements” of chapter 551 but requiring such county to post “reasonable public notice” to the “extent practicable under the circumstances.”).

<sup>234</sup> *See Rettberg v. Tex. Dep't of Health*, 873 S.W.2d 408, 411–12 (Tex. App.—Austin 1994, no writ); Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. GA-0511 (2007) at 4.

<sup>235</sup> Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. JC-0057 (1999) at 5; Tex. Att'y Gen. LO-90-27, at 1.

<sup>236</sup> Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. JC-0057 (1999) at 5; *see also Mares v. Tex. Webb Cnty.*, No. 5:18-CV-121, 2020 WL 619902 at \*4–5 (S.D. Tex. Feb. 10, 2020) (discussing a county's retreat from its custom of providing adequate notice).

<sup>237</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.141.

<sup>238</sup> *Point Isabel Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Hinojosa*, 797 S.W.2d 176, 182–83 (Tex. App.—Corpus Christi 1990, writ denied).

<sup>239</sup> *City of San Antonio v. Fourth Court of Appeals*, 820 S.W.2d 762 (Tex. 1991).

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An Ordinance determining the necessity for and authorizing the condemnation of certain property in County Blocks 4180, 4181, 4188, and 4297 in Southwest Bexar County for the construction of the Applewhite Water Supply Project.<sup>240</sup>

A property owner argued that this notice item violated the subject requirement of the statutory predecessor to section 551.041 because it did “not describe the condemnation ordinance, and in particular the land to be condemned by that ordinance, in sufficient detail” to notify an owner reading the description that the city was considering condemning the owner’s land.<sup>241</sup> The Texas Supreme Court rejected the argument that the notice be sufficiently detailed to notify specific owners that their tracts might be condemned. The Court explained that the “Open Meetings Act is not a legislative scheme for service of process; it has no due process implications.”<sup>242</sup> Its purpose was to provide public access to and increase public knowledge of the governmental decision-making process.<sup>243</sup>

The Court held that the condemnation notice complied with the Act because the notice apprised the public at large in general terms that the city would consider the condemnation of certain property in a specific area for purposes of the Applewhite project. The Court also noted that the description would notify a landowner of property in the four listed blocks that the property might be condemned, even though it was insufficient to notify an owner that his or her tracts in particular were proposed for condemnation.<sup>244</sup>

In *City of San Antonio v. Fourth Court of Appeals*, the Texas Supreme Court reviewed its earlier decisions on notice.<sup>245</sup> In *Texas Turnpike Authority v. City of Fort Worth*,<sup>246</sup> the Court had addressed the sufficiency of the following notice for a meeting at which the turnpike authority board adopted a resolution approving the expansion of a turnpike: “Consider request . . . to determine feasibility of a bond issue to expand and enlarge [the turnpike].”<sup>247</sup> Prior resolutions of the board had reflected the board’s intent to make the turnpike a free road once existing bonds were paid. The Court found the notice sufficient, refuting the arguments that the notice should have included a copy of the proposed resolution, that the notice should have indicated the board’s proposed action was at variance with its prior intent, or that the notice should have stated all the consequences that might result from the proposed action.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> *Id.* at 764.

<sup>241</sup> *Id.*

<sup>242</sup> *Id.* at 765 (quoting *Acker v. Tex. Water Comm’n*, 790 S.W.2d 299, 300 (Tex. 1990)); see *Retzberg*, 873 S.W.2d at 413 (holding that the Act does not entitle the executive secretary of a state agency to special notice of a meeting where his employment was terminated); *Stockdale v. Meno*, 867 S.W.2d 123, 125 (Tex. App.—Austin 1993, writ denied) (holding that Act does not entitle a teacher whose contract was terminated to more specific notice than notice that would inform the public at large).

<sup>243</sup> *Fourth Court of Appeals*, 820 S.W.2d at 765.

<sup>244</sup> *Id.* at 765–66.

<sup>245</sup> *Id.* at 765.

<sup>246</sup> *Tex. Tpk. Auth. v. City of Fort Worth*, 554 S.W.2d 675 (Tex. 1977).

<sup>247</sup> *Id.* at 676.

<sup>248</sup> *Id.*; see also *Charlie Thomas Ford, Inc., v. A.C. Collins Ford, Inc.*, 912 S.W.2d 271, 274 (Tex. App.—Austin 1995, writ dismissed) (holding that notice stating “Proposals for Decision and Other Actions—License and Other Cases” was sufficient to apprise the public that Motor Vehicle Commission would consider proposals for decision in dealer-licensing cases); *Washington v. Burley*, 930 F. Supp. 2d 790, 807 (S.D. Tex. 2013)



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In *Lower Colorado River Authority v. City of San Marcos*,<sup>249</sup> the Texas Supreme Court found sufficient a Lower Colorado River Authority Board notice providing “ratification of the prior action of the Board taken on October 19, 1972, in response to changes in electric power rates for electric power sold within the boundaries of the City of San Marcos, Texas.”<sup>250</sup> “Although conceding that the notice was ‘not as clear as it might be,’” the Court held that it complied with the Act “because ‘it would alert a reader to the fact that some action would be considered with respect to charges for electric power sold in San Marcos.’”<sup>251</sup>

The Texas Supreme Court noted that in *Cox Enterprises, Inc. v. Board of Trustees*<sup>252</sup> “we finally held a notice inadequate.”<sup>253</sup> In the *Cox Enterprises* case, the Court held insufficient the notice of a school board’s executive session that listed only general topics such as “litigation” and “personnel.”<sup>254</sup> One of the items considered at the closed session was the appointment of a new school superintendent. The Court noted that the selection of a new superintendent was not in the same category as ordinary personnel matters, because it is a matter of special interest to the public; thus, the use of the term “personnel” was not sufficient to apprise the general public of the board’s proposed selection of a new superintendent. The Court also noted that “litigation” would not sufficiently describe a major desegregation suit that had occupied the district’s time for a number of years.<sup>255</sup>

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(determining that notice indicating that school board would “[c]onsider recommendation to propose the termination of the . . . employment of the . . . Chief of Police” was sufficient to inform the public that the board would actually be terminating police chief’s employment and that “the notice need not state all of the possible consequences resulting from consideration of the topic”); *City of San Angelo v. Tex. Nat. Res. Conservation Comm’n*, 92 S.W.3d 624, 630 (Tex. App.—Austin 2002, no pet.) (recognizing that “consideration” necessarily encompasses action and stating that the word “consideration alone was sufficient to put the general public on notice that the Commission might act during the meeting”). *But see Save Our Springs All., Inc. v. City of Dripping Springs*, 304 S.W.3d 871, 890 (Tex. App.—Austin 2010, pet. denied) (considering sufficiency of notice about development agreements and recognizing that a notice listing all possible consequences could overwhelm, rather than inform, the reader).

<sup>249</sup> *Lower Colo. River Auth. v. City of San Marcos*, 523 S.W.2d 641 (Tex. 1975).

<sup>250</sup> *Id.* at 646.

<sup>251</sup> *Fourth Court of Appeals*, 820 S.W.2d at 765 (quoting *Lower Colo. River Auth.*, 523 S.W.2d at 646).

<sup>252</sup> *Cox Enters. Inc. v. Bd. of Trs.*, 706 S.W.2d 956 (Tex. 1986).

<sup>253</sup> *Fourth Court of Appeals*, 820 S.W.2d at 765 (describing its opinion in *Cox Enterprises*); *see also Lugo v. Donna Indep. Sch. Dist. Bd. of Trs.*, 557 S.W.3d 93, 98 (Tex. App.—Corpus Christi 2017, no pet.) (holding that an agenda item notifying the public that the board would discuss a special election to fill board vacancies by a special election did not give notice that the board would appoint replacement trustees to the board vacancies).

<sup>254</sup> *Cox Enters. Inc.*, 706 S.W.2d at 959.

<sup>255</sup> *Id.*; *see also Mayes v. City of De Leon*, 922 S.W.2d 200, 203 (Tex. App.—Eastland 1996, writ denied) (determining that “personnel” was not sufficient notice of termination of police chief); *Stockdale*, 867 S.W.2d at 124–25 (holding that “discussion of personnel” and “proposed nonrenewal of teaching contract” provided sufficient notice of nonrenewal of band director’s contract); *Lone Star Greyhound Park, Inc. v. Tex. Racing Comm’n*, 863 S.W.2d 742, 747 (Tex. App.—Austin 1993, writ denied) (indicating that notice need not list “the particulars of litigation discussions,” which would defeat purpose of statutory predecessor to section 551.071 of the Government Code); *Point Isabel Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 797 S.W.2d at 182 (holding that “employment of personnel” is insufficient to describe hiring of principals, but is sufficient for hiring school librarian, part-time counselor, band director, or school teacher); Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. H-1045 (1977) at 5 (holding “discussion of personnel changes” insufficient to describe selection of university system chancellor or university president).

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“If the facts as to the content of a notice are undisputed, the adequacy of the notice is a question of law.”<sup>256</sup> The courts examine the facts to determine whether a particular subject or personnel matter is sufficiently described or requires more specific treatment because it is of special interest to the community.<sup>257</sup> Consequently, counsel for the governing body should be consulted if any doubt exists concerning the specificity of notice required for a particular matter.

In *City of Donna v. Ramirez*, a court of appeals considered a meeting notice indicating a cancelled meeting.<sup>258</sup> The meeting notice of the Donna city council posted outside city hall had the word “cancelled” written on it, but the notices posted online and inside the city hall did not.<sup>259</sup> The meeting occurred and the notice was challenged.<sup>260</sup> The court held the notice violated section 551.041’s requirement that a governmental body give written notice of the date, hour, place, and subject of each meeting and section 551.043’s requirement that the notice be posted at least 72 hours before the meeting.

### C. Generalized Terms

Generalized terms such as “old business,” “new business,” “regular or routine business,” and “other business” are not proper terms to give notice of a meeting because they do not inform the public of its subject matter.<sup>261</sup> The term “public comment,” however, provides sufficient notice of a “public comment” session, where the general public addresses the governmental body about its concerns and the governmental body does not comment or deliberate, except as authorized by section 551.042 of the Government Code.<sup>262</sup> “Public comment” will not provide adequate notice if the governmental body is, prior to the meeting, aware, or reasonably should have been aware, of specific topics to be raised.<sup>263</sup> When a governmental body is responsible for a presentation, it can easily give notice of its subject matter, but it usually cannot predict the subject matter of public comment sessions.<sup>264</sup> Thus, a meeting notice stating “Presentation by [County] Commissioner” did not provide adequate notice of the presentation, which covered the commissioner’s views on development and substantive policy issues of importance to the county.<sup>265</sup> The term “presentation” was vague; moreover, it was noticed for the “Proclamations & Presentations” portion of the meeting, which otherwise consisted of formalities.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> *Burks v. Yarbrough*, 157 S.W.3d 876, 883 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2005, no pet.); *see also Friends of Canyon Lake, Inc. v. Guadalupe-Blanco River Auth.*, 96 S.W.3d 519, 529 (Tex. App.—Austin 2002, pet. denied).

<sup>257</sup> *River Rd. Neighborhood Ass’n v. S. Tex. Sports*, 720 S.W.2d 551, 557 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 1986, writ dismissed) (concluding that notice stating only “discussion” is insufficient to indicate board action is intended, given prior history of stating “discussion/action” in agenda when action is intended).

<sup>258</sup> *City of Donna v. Ramirez*, 548 S.W.3d 26, 35–36 (Tex. App.—Corpus Christi 2017, pet. denied)

<sup>259</sup> *See id.* at 33.

<sup>260</sup> *See id.*

<sup>261</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. H-662 (1975) at 3.

<sup>262</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. JC-0169 (2000) at 4; *see* TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.042 (providing that governmental body may respond to inquiry about subject not on posted notice by stating factual information, reciting existing policy or placing subject of inquiry on agenda of future meeting).

<sup>263</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. JC-0169 (2000) at 4.

<sup>264</sup> *Id.*

<sup>265</sup> *Hays Cnty. Water Plan. P’ship v. Hays Cnty.*, 41 S.W.3d 174, 180 (Tex. App.—Austin 2001, pet. denied).

<sup>266</sup> *Id.* at 180 (citing Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. JC-0169 (2000)).

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Attorney General Opinion GA-0668 (2008) had previously determined that notice such as “City Manager’s Report” was not adequate notice for items similar to those included in section 551.0415 and that the subject of a report by a member of the city staff or governing body must be included in the notice in a manner that informs a reader about the subjects to be addressed. Section 551.0415, modifying Attorney General Opinion GA-0668, authorizes a quorum of the governing body of a municipality or county to receive reports about items of community interest during a meeting without having given notice of the subject of the report if no action is taken.<sup>267</sup> Section 551.0415 defines an “item of community interest” to include:

- (1) expressions of thanks, congratulations, or condolence;
- (2) information regarding holiday schedules;
- (3) an honorary or salutary recognition of a public official, public employee, or other citizen, except that a discussion regarding a change in status of a person’s public office or public employment is not an honorary or salutary recognition for purposes of this subdivision;
- (4) a reminder about an upcoming event organized or sponsored by the governing body;
- (5) information regarding a social, ceremonial, or community event organized or sponsored by an entity other than the governing body that was attended or is scheduled to be attended by a member of the governing body or an official or employee of the political subdivision; and
- (6) announcements involving an imminent threat to the public health and safety of people in the political subdivision that has arisen after the posting of the agenda.<sup>268</sup>

### D. Time of Posting

Notice must be posted for a minimum length of time before each meeting. Section 551.043(a) states the general time requirement as follows:

The notice of a meeting of a governmental body must be posted in a place readily accessible to the general public at all times for at least 72 hours before the scheduled time of the meeting, except as provided by Sections 551.044–551.046.<sup>269</sup>

Section 551.043(b) relates to posting notice on the Internet. Where the Act allows or requires a governmental body to post notice on the Internet, the following provisions apply to the posting:

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<sup>267</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.0415(a).

<sup>268</sup> *Id.* § 551.0415(b).

<sup>269</sup> *Id.* § 551.043(a).

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- (1) the governmental body satisfies the requirement that the notice be posted in a place readily accessible to the general public at all times by making a good-faith attempt to continuously post the notice on the Internet during the prescribed period;
- (2) the governmental body must still comply with any duty imposed by this chapter to physically post the notice at a particular location; and
- (3) if the governmental body makes a good-faith attempt to continuously post the notice on the Internet during the prescribed period, the notice physically posted at the location prescribed by this chapter must be readily accessible to the general public during normal business hours.<sup>270</sup>

Section 551.044, which excepts from the general rule governmental bodies with statewide jurisdiction, provides as follows:

- (a) The secretary of state must post notice on the Internet of a meeting of a state board, commission, department, or officer having statewide jurisdiction for at least seven days before the day of the meeting. The secretary of state shall provide during regular office hours a computer terminal at a place convenient to the public in the office of the secretary of state that members of the public may use to view notices of meetings posted by the secretary of state.
- (b) Subsection (a) does not apply to:
  - (1) the Texas Department of Insurance, as regards proceedings and activities under Title 5, Labor Code, of the department, the commissioner of insurance, or the commissioner of workers' compensation; or
  - (2) the governing board of an institution of higher education.<sup>271</sup>

Section 551.046 excepts a committee of the legislature from the general rule:

The notice of a legislative committee meeting shall be as provided by the rules of the house of representatives or of the senate.<sup>272</sup>

The interplay between the 72-hour rule applicable to local governmental bodies and the requirement that the posting be in a place convenient to the general public in a particular location, such as the city hall or the county courthouse, at one time created legal and practical difficulties for local entities, because the required locations are not usually accessible during the night or on weekends. Section 551.043(b) solves this problem in part, providing that “if the governmental body makes a good faith attempt to continuously post the notice on the Internet during the

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<sup>270</sup> *Id.* § 551.043(b).

<sup>271</sup> *Id.* § 551.044.

<sup>272</sup> *Id.* § 551.046.

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prescribed period, the notice physically posted at the location prescribed by this chapter must be readily accessible to the general public *during normal business hours*.”<sup>273</sup>

The Texas Supreme Court had previously addressed this matter in *City of San Antonio v. Fourth Court of Appeals*.<sup>274</sup> The city had posted notice of its February 15, 1990, meeting in two different locations. One notice was posted on a bulletin board inside the city hall, and the other notice was posted on a kiosk outside the main entrance to the city hall. This was done because the city hall was locked at night, thereby preventing continuous access during the 72-hour period to the notice posted inside. The court held that the double posting satisfied the requirements of the statutory predecessors to sections 551.043 and 551.050.<sup>275</sup>

State agencies have generally had little difficulty providing seven days’ notice of their meetings, but difficulties have arisen when a quorum of a state agency’s governing body wished to meet with a legislative committee.<sup>276</sup> If one or more of the state agency board members were to testify or answer questions, the agency itself would have held a meeting subject to the notice, record-keeping and openness requirements of the Act.<sup>277</sup> Legislative committees, however, post notices “as provided by the rules of the house of representatives or of the senate,”<sup>278</sup> and these generally require shorter time periods than the seven-day notice required for state agencies.<sup>279</sup> Thus, a state agency could find it impossible to give seven days’ notice of a quorum’s attendance at a legislative hearing concerning its legislation or budget. The Legislature dealt with this difference in notice requirements by adopting section 551.0035 of the Government Code, which provides as follows:

- (a) This section applies only to the attendance by a quorum of a governmental body at a meeting of a committee or agency of the legislature. This section does not apply to attendance at the meeting by members of the legislative committee or agency holding the meeting.
- (b) The attendance by a quorum of a governmental body at a meeting of a committee or agency of the legislature is not considered to be a meeting of that governmental body if the deliberations at the meeting by the members of that governmental body consist only of publicly testifying at the meeting, publicly commenting at the meeting, and publicly responding at the meeting to a question asked by a member of the legislative committee or agency.<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> *Id.* § 551.043(b)(3) (emphasis added).

<sup>274</sup> *City of San Antonio v. Fourth Court of Appeals*, 820 S.W.2d 762 (Tex. 1991).

<sup>275</sup> *Id.* at 768.

<sup>276</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. JC-0308 (2000) at 2.

<sup>277</sup> *Id.* at 2; *see also* Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. JC-0248 (2000) at 2.

<sup>278</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.046.

<sup>279</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. JC-0308 (2000) at 2.

<sup>280</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.0035.

## E. Place of Posting

The Act expressly states where notice shall be posted. The posting requirements vary depending on the governing body posting the notice.<sup>281</sup> Sections 551.048 through 551.056 address the posting requirements of state entities, cities and counties, school districts, and other districts and political subdivisions. These provisions are quite detailed and, therefore, are set out here in full:

### § 551.048. State Governmental Body: Notice to Secretary of State; Place of Posting Notice

- (a) A state governmental body shall provide notice of each meeting to the secretary of state.<sup>282</sup>
- (b) The secretary of state shall post the notice on the Internet. The secretary of state shall provide during regular office hours a computer terminal at a place convenient to the public in the office of the secretary of state that members of the public may use to view the notice.

### § 551.049. County Governmental Body: Place of Posting Notice

A county governmental body shall post notice of each meeting on a bulletin board at a place convenient to the public in the county courthouse.

### § 551.050. Municipal Governmental Body: Place of Posting Notice

- (a) In this section, “electronic bulletin board” means an electronic communication system that includes a perpetually illuminated screen on which the governmental body can post messages or notices viewable without manipulation by the public.
- (b) A municipal governmental body shall post notice of each meeting on a physical or electronic bulletin board at a place convenient to the public in the city hall.

### § 551.0501. Joint Board: Place of Posting Notice

- (a) In this section, “electronic bulletin board” means an electronic communication system that includes a perpetually illuminated screen on which the governmental body can post messages or notices viewable without manipulation by the public.

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<sup>281</sup> The Amarillo Court of Appeals recently rejected a challenge to the sufficiency of a notice that identified the building of the meeting “without identifying the meeting room, full street address, or name of the city.” *Terrell v. Pampa Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 572 S.W.3d 294, 299 (Tex. App.—Amarillo 2019, pet. denied).

<sup>282</sup> Notices of open meetings filed in the office of the secretary of state as provided by law are published in the Texas Register. TEX. GOV’T CODE § 2002.011(3); see 1 TEX. ADMIN. CODE § 91.21 (Tex. Sec’y of State, How to File an Open Meeting Notice).

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- (b) A joint board created under Section 22.074, Transportation Code, shall post notice of each meeting on a physical or electronic bulletin board at a place convenient to the public in the board's administrative offices.

### **§ 551.051. School District: Place of Posting Notice**

A school district shall post notice of each meeting on a bulletin board at a place convenient to the public in the central administrative office of the district.

### **§ 551.052. School District: Special Notice to News Media**

- (a) A school district shall provide special notice of each meeting to any news media that has;
  - (1) requested special notice; and
  - (2) agreed to reimburse the district for the cost of providing the special notice.
- (b) The notice shall be by telephone, facsimile transmission, or electronic mail.

### **§ 551.053. District or Political Subdivision Extending Into Four or More Counties: Notice to Public, Secretary of State, and County Clerk; Place of Posting Notice**

- (a) The governing body of a water district or other district or political subdivision that extends into four or more counties shall:
  - (1) post notice of each meeting at a place convenient to the public in the administrative office of the district or political subdivision;
  - (2) provide notice of each meeting to the secretary of state; and
  - (3) either provide notice of each meeting to the county clerk of the county in which the administrative office of the district or political subdivision is located or post notice of each meeting on the district's or political subdivision's Internet website.
- (b) The secretary of state shall post the notice provided under Subsection (a)(2) on the Internet. The secretary of state shall provide during regular office hours a computer terminal at a place convenient to the public in the office of the secretary of state that members of the public may use to view the notice.
- (c) A county clerk shall post a notice provided to the clerk under Subsection (a)(3) on a bulletin board at a place convenient to the public in the county courthouse.

**§ 551.054. District or Political Subdivision Extending Into Fewer Than Four Counties: Notice to Public and County Clerks; Place of Posting Notice**

- (a) The governing body of a water district or other district or political subdivision that extends into fewer than four counties shall:
  - (1) post notice of each meeting at a place convenient to the public in the administrative office of the district or political subdivision; and
  - (2) either provide notice of each meeting to the county clerk of each county in which the district or political subdivision is located or post notice of each meeting on the district's or political subdivision's Internet website.
- (b) A county clerk shall post a notice provided to the clerk under Subsection (a)(2) on a bulletin board at a place convenient to the public in the county courthouse.

**§ 551.055. Institution of Higher Education**

In addition to providing any other notice required by this subchapter, the governing board of a single institution of higher education:

- (1) shall post notice of each meeting at the county courthouse of the county in which the meeting will be held;
- (2) shall publish notice of a meeting in a student newspaper of the institution if an issue of the newspaper is published between the time of the posting and the time of the meeting; and
- (3) may post notice of a meeting at another place convenient to the public.

Posting notice is mandatory, and actions taken at a meeting for which notice was posted incorrectly will be voidable.<sup>283</sup> In *Sierra Club v. Austin Transportation Study Policy Advisory Committee*, the court held that the committee was a special district covering four or more counties for purposes of the Act and, as such, was required to submit notice to the secretary of state pursuant to the statutory predecessor to section 551.053.<sup>284</sup> Thus, a governmental body that does not clearly fall within one of the categories covered by sections 551.048 through 551.056 should consider satisfying all potentially applicable posting requirements.<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.141; see *Smith Cnty. v. Thornton*, 726 S.W.2d 2, 3 (Tex. 1986).

<sup>284</sup> *Sierra Club v. Austin Transp. Pol'y Advisory Comm.*, 746 S.W.2d 298, 301 (Tex. App.—Austin 1988, writ denied).

<sup>285</sup> See Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. JM-120 (1983) at 3 (concluding that industrial development corporation must post notice in the same manner and location as political subdivision on whose behalf it was created).



**§ 551.056. Additional Posting Requirements for Certain Municipalities, Counties, School Districts, Junior College Districts, Development Corporations, Authorities, and Joint Boards**

Section 551.056 requires certain governmental bodies and economic development corporations to post notice on their Internet websites, in addition to other postings required by the Act. This provision applies to the following entities, if the entity maintains an Internet website or has a website maintained for it:

- (1) a municipality;
- (2) a county;
- (3) a school district;
- (4) the governing body of a junior college or junior college district, including a college or district that has changed its name in accordance with Chapter 130, Education Code;
- (5) a development corporation organized under the Development Corporation Act (Subtitle C1, Title 12, Local Government Code);
- (6) a regional mobility authority included within the meaning of an “authority” as defined by Section 370.003, Transportation Code; and
- (7) a joint board created under Section 22.074, Transportation Code.<sup>286</sup>

If a covered municipality’s population is 48,000 or more and a county’s population is 65,000 or more, it must also post the agenda for the meeting on its website.<sup>287</sup> Section 551.056 also provides that the validity of a posted notice made in good faith to comply with the Act is not affected by a failure to comply with its requirements due to a technical problem beyond the control of the entity.<sup>288</sup>

**F. Internet Posting of Notice and Meeting Materials**

Provisions in the Act specific to general academic teaching institutions and certain junior college districts require such institutions to post specified meeting materials to their Internet website. If applicable, section 551.1281 and section 551.1282 require the Internet posting “as early as practicable in advance of the meeting” of “any written agenda and related supplemental written

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<sup>286</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.056(b).

<sup>287</sup> See *id.* § 551.056(c)(1)–(2); see also *id.* § 551.056(c)(3)–(6) (providing that certain other covered entities must post agenda on Internet).

<sup>288</sup> *Id.* § 551.056(d); see also *Argyle Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Wolf*, 234 S.W.3d 229, 248–49 (Tex. App.—Fort Worth 2007, no pet.) (determining that there was no evidence of bad faith on part of the school district). Cf. *Terrell v. Pampa Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 345 S.W.3d 641, 644 (Tex. App.—Amarillo 2011, pet. denied) (finding a material issue in summary judgment proceedings about whether ISD “actually attempted to post the notices and, therefore, met the good faith exception to the requirement to concurrently post notices”).

materials” that are provided to the governing board members for their use in the meeting.<sup>289</sup> This posting requirement excludes any written materials “that the general counsel or other appropriate attorney” for the particular governmental body certifies are confidential.<sup>290</sup>

## **G. Emergency Meetings: Providing and Supplementing Notice**

Special rules allow for posting notice of emergency meetings and for supplementing a posted notice with emergency items. These rules affect the timing and content of the notice but not its physical location. Section 551.045 provides:

- (a) In an emergency or when there is an urgent public necessity, the notice of a meeting to deliberate or take action on the emergency or urgent public necessity, or the supplemental notice to add the deliberation or taking of action on the emergency or urgent public necessity as an item to the agenda for a meeting for which notice has been posted in accordance with this subchapter, is sufficient if the notice or supplemental notice is posted for at least one hour before the meeting is convened.
- (a-1) A governmental body may not deliberate or take action on a matter at a meeting for which notice or supplemental notice is posted under Subsection (a) other than:
  - (1) a matter directly related to responding to the emergency or urgent public necessity identified in the notice or supplemental notice of the meeting as provided by Subsection (c); or
  - (2) an agenda item listed on a notice of the meeting before the supplemental notice was posted.
- (b) An emergency or urgent public necessity exists only if immediate action is required of a governmental body because of:
  - (1) an imminent threat to public health and safety, including a threat described by Subdivision (2) if imminent; or
  - (2) a reasonably unforeseeable situation, including:
    - (A) fire, flood, earthquake, hurricane, tornado, or wind, rain, or snow storm;
    - (B) power failure, transportation failure, or interruption of communication facilities;

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<sup>289</sup> *Id.* §§ 551.1281–.1282.

<sup>290</sup> *Id.*

## Notice Requirements

- (C) epidemic; or
  - (D) riot, civil disturbance, enemy attack, or other actual or threatened act of lawlessness or violence.
- (c) The governmental body shall clearly identify the emergency or urgent public necessity in the notice or supplemental notice under this section.
  - (d) A person who is designated or authorized to post notice of a meeting by a governmental body under this subchapter shall post the notice taking at face value the governmental body's stated reason for the emergency or urgent public necessity.
  - (e) For purposes of Subsection (b)(2), the sudden relocation of a large number of residents from the area of a declared disaster to a governmental body's jurisdiction is considered a reasonably unforeseeable situation for a reasonable period immediately following the relocation.<sup>291</sup>

The public notice of a meeting to deliberate or take action on an emergency or urgent public necessity must be posted at least one hour before the meeting is scheduled to begin. A governmental body may decide to consider an emergency item during a previously scheduled meeting instead of calling a new emergency meeting. The governmental body must post a supplemental notice to add the deliberation or taking of action on the emergency or urgent public necessity as an item to the agenda at least one hour before the meeting begins.<sup>292</sup>

In addition to posting the public notice of an emergency meeting or supplementing a notice with an emergency item, the governmental body must give special notice of the emergency meeting or emergency item to members of the news media who have previously (1) filed a request with the governmental body, and (2) agreed to reimburse the governmental body for providing the special notice.<sup>293</sup> The notice to members of the news media is to be given by telephone, facsimile transmission or electronic mail at least one hour before the meeting is convened.<sup>294</sup>

The public notice of an emergency meeting or an emergency item must “clearly identify” the emergency or urgent public necessity for calling the meeting or for adding the item to the agenda of a previously scheduled meeting.<sup>295</sup> The Act defines “emergency” for purposes of emergency meetings and emergency items.<sup>296</sup>

Section 551.045(a-1) prohibits a governmental body from deliberating or taking action on a matter at an emergency meeting or one for which a supplemental notice has been posted other than a matter directly related to responding to the emergency or urgent public necessity identified in the

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<sup>291</sup> *Id.* § 551.045.

<sup>292</sup> *Id.* § 551.045(a).

<sup>293</sup> *Id.* § 551.047(b).

<sup>294</sup> *Id.* § 551.047(c).

<sup>295</sup> *Id.* § 551.045(c).

<sup>296</sup> *Id.* § 551.045(b); *see River Rd. Neighborhood Ass'n v. S. Tex. Sports*, 720 S.W.2d 551, 557 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 1986, writ dismissed) (construing “emergency” consistently with definition later adopted by Legislature).

## Notice Requirements

emergency notice or supplemental notice or an agenda item listed on the meeting notice before the supplemental notice was posted.<sup>297</sup> Section 551.142 expressly authorizes the attorney general to bring an action by mandamus or injunction in a Travis County district court to stop, prevent, or reverse a violation or threatened violation of section 551.045(a-1).<sup>298</sup>

Because section 551.045 provides for one-hour notice only for emergency meetings or for adding emergency items to the agenda, a governmental body adding a *non*emergency item to its agenda must satisfy the general notice period of section 551.043 or section 551.044, as applicable, regarding the subject of that item.

A governmental body's determination that an emergency exists is subject to judicial review.<sup>299</sup> The existence of an emergency depends on the facts in a particular case.<sup>300</sup>

Under section 551.091, a commissioners court can hold an open or closed meeting, including by telephone, "solely to deliberate about disaster or emergency conditions and related public safety matters that require an immediate response."<sup>301</sup> This provision is limited and only applicable when the following two circumstances are present:

- (1) [The county is one] for which the governor has issued an executive order or proclamation declaring a state of disaster or a state of emergency; and
- (2) . . . transportation to the meeting location is dangerous or difficult as a result of the disaster or emergency.<sup>302</sup>

A meeting held under this provision may be held without complying with the requirements of chapter 551, including the requirement to provide notice.<sup>303</sup> However, to the extent practicable under the circumstances, the commissioners court shall provide reasonable public notice of a meeting held under section 551.091 and to allow members of the public and the media to observe the meeting if it is an open meeting.<sup>304</sup> Though it may deliberate, the commissioners court may not vote or take final action in the meeting.<sup>305</sup> The commissioners court is also required to prepare

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<sup>297</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.045(a-1).

<sup>298</sup> *Id.* § 551.142(c), (d).

<sup>299</sup> *See River Rd. Neighborhood Ass'n*, 720 S.W.2d at 557–58 (concluding that immediate need for action was brought about by board's decisions not to act at previous meetings and was not due to an emergency); *Garcia v. City of Kingsville*, 641 S.W.2d 339, 341–42 (Tex. App.—Corpus Christi 1982, no writ) (concluding that dismissal of city manager was not a matter of urgent public necessity); *see also Markowski v. City of Marlin*, 940 S.W.2d 720, 724 (Tex. App.—Waco 1997, writ denied) (concluding that city's receipt of lawsuit filed against it by fire captain and fire chief was emergency); *Piazza v. City of Granger*, 909 S.W.2d 529, 533 (Tex. App.—Austin 1995, no writ) (concluding that notice stating city council's "lack of confidence" in police officer did not identify emergency).

<sup>300</sup> *Common Cause v. Metro. Transit Auth.*, 666 S.W.2d 610, 613 (Tex. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1984, writ ref'd n.r.e.); *see generally* Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. JC-0406 (2001) at 5–6.

<sup>301</sup> *See* TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.091(b).

<sup>302</sup> *Id.* § 551.091(a).

<sup>303</sup> *Id.* § 551.091(b).

<sup>304</sup> *Id.* § 551.091(c).

<sup>305</sup> *Id.* § 551.091(d)(1).

and keep minutes or a recording of the meeting and make the minutes or recording available to the public as soon as practicable.<sup>306</sup>

## H. Recess in a Meeting: Postponement in Case of a Catastrophe

Under section 551.0411, a governmental body that recesses an open meeting to the following regular business day need not post notice of the continued meeting if the action is taken in good faith and not to circumvent the Act. If a meeting continued to the following regular business day is then continued to another day, the governmental body must give notice of the meeting's continuance to the other day.<sup>307</sup>

Section 551.0411 also provides for a catastrophe that prevents the governmental body from convening an open meeting that was properly posted under section 551.041. The governmental body may convene in a convenient location within 72 hours pursuant to section 551.045 if the action is taken in good faith and not to circumvent the Act. However, if the governmental body is unable to convene the meeting within 72 hours, it may subsequently convene the meeting only if it gives written notice of the meeting.

A "catastrophe" is defined as "a condition or occurrence that interferes physically with the ability of a governmental body to conduct a meeting" including:

- (1) fire, flood, earthquake, hurricane, tornado, or wind, rain or snow storm;
- (2) power failure, transportation failure, or interruption of communication facilities;
- (3) epidemic; or
- (4) riot, civil disturbance, enemy attack, or other actual or threatened act of lawlessness or violence.<sup>308</sup>

## I. County Clerk May Charge a Fee for Posting Notice

A county clerk may charge a reasonable fee to a district or political subdivision to post an Open Meetings Act notice.<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> *Id.* § 551.091(d)(2). Section 551.091 expires on September 1, 2027. *See id.* § 551.091(e).

<sup>307</sup> *See* TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.0411(a). Before section 551.0411 was adopted, the court in *Rivera v. City of Laredo*, held that a meeting could not be continued to any day other than the immediately following day without reposting notice. *See Rivera v. City of Laredo*, 948 S.W.2d 787, 793 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 1997, writ denied).

<sup>308</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.0411(c).

<sup>309</sup> *See* TEX. LOC. GOV'T CODE § 118.011(c); Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. Nos. GA-0152 (2004) at 3, M-496 (1969) at 3.

## VIII. Open Meetings

### A. Convening the Meeting

A meeting may not be convened unless a quorum of the governmental body is present in the meeting room.<sup>310</sup> This requirement applies even if the governmental body plans to go into an executive session, or closed meeting, immediately after convening.<sup>311</sup> The public is entitled to know which members are present for the executive session and whether there is a quorum.<sup>312</sup>

### B. Location of the Meeting

The Act requires a meeting of a governmental body to be held in a location accessible to the public.<sup>313</sup> It thus precludes a governmental body from meeting in an inaccessible location. Recognizing that the question whether a specific location is accessible is a fact question, this office recently opined that a court would unlikely conclude as a matter of law that the Act prohibits a governmental body from holding a meeting held in a location that requires the presentation of photo identification for admittance.<sup>314</sup> This office has also opined that the Board of Regents of a state university system could not meet in Mexico, regardless of whether the board broadcast the meeting by videoconferencing technology to areas in Texas where component institutions were located.<sup>315</sup> Nor could an entity subject to the Act meet in an underwriter's office in another state.<sup>316</sup> In addition, pursuant to the Americans with Disabilities Act, a meeting room in which a public meeting is held must be physically accessible to individuals with disabilities. *See infra* Part XII.C of this *Handbook*.

### C. Rights of the Public

A meeting that is “open to the public” under the Act is one that the public is permitted to attend.<sup>317</sup> Many governmental bodies conduct “public comment,” “public forum” or “open mike” sessions at which members of the public may address comments on any subject to the governmental body.<sup>318</sup> A public comment session is a meeting as defined by section 551.001(4)(B) of the

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<sup>310</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.001(2), (4) (defining “deliberation” and “meeting”); *Cox Enters., Inc. v. Bd. of Trs.*, 706 S.W.2d 956, 959 (Tex. 1986); *but see* TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.091(b) (authorizing commissioners courts in certain disaster circumstances to hold a meeting without complying with chapter 551, “including the requirement to . . . first convene in an open meeting”).

<sup>311</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.101; *see Martinez v. State*, 879 S.W.2d 54, 56 (Tex. Crim. App. 1994); *Cox Enters., Inc.*, 706 S.W.2d at 959.

<sup>312</sup> *Martinez*, 879 S.W.2d at 56; *Cox Enters., Inc.*, 706 S.W.2d at 959.

<sup>313</sup> Other statutes may specify the location of a governmental body's meeting. *See* TEX. WATER CODE § 49.062 (special purpose districts), TEX. LOC. GOV'T CODE §§ 504.054, .055 (specifying alternative meeting locations for a board of an economic development corporation organized under the Development Corporation Act, Title 12, subtitle C1, Local Government Code).

<sup>314</sup> Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. KP-0020 (2015) at 2 (acknowledging that a court would likely weigh the need for the identification requirement as a security measure against the public's right of access guaranteed under the Act).

<sup>315</sup> Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. JC-0487 (2002) at 7.

<sup>316</sup> Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. JC-0053 (1999) at 5–6.

<sup>317</sup> Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. M-220 (1968) at 5.

<sup>318</sup> Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. JC-0169 (2000) at 4.

## Open Meetings

Government Code because the members of the governmental body “receive information from . . . or receive questions from [a] third person.”<sup>319</sup> Accordingly, the governmental body must give notice of a public comment session.

Section 551.007 entitles the public to speak about items on the agenda at meetings of certain governmental bodies.<sup>320</sup> Section 551.007 applies to governmental bodies listed in subsections 551.001(3)(B)–(L), including most local governmental bodies and other specified entities.<sup>321</sup> But 551.007 excludes a governmental body listed in section 551.001(3)(A), which is “a board, commission, department, committee, or agency within the executive or legislative branch of state government that is directed by one or more elected or appointed officials.”<sup>322</sup> Section 551.007 provides that a governmental body to which the section applies “shall allow each member of the public who desires to address the body regarding an item on an agenda . . . to address the body regarding the item at the meeting before or during the body’s consideration of the item.”<sup>323</sup> The new section expressly authorizes a governmental body to adopt reasonable rules regarding the public’s right to address the body, “including rules that limit the total amount of time that a member of the public may address the body on a given item.”<sup>324</sup> In setting such rules, a governmental body may not unfairly discriminate among speakers for or against a particular point of view.<sup>325</sup> Additionally, new section 551.007 provides that “a governmental body may not prohibit public criticism of the governmental body, including criticism of any act, omission, policy, procedure, program, or service,” except criticism otherwise prohibited by law.<sup>326</sup> Further, a governmental body making a rule limiting the amount of time for a member to address the governmental body and that does not use simultaneous translation equipment must give twice as much time to a person who addresses the governmental body through a translator.<sup>327</sup>

The Act does not entitle the public to choose the items to be placed on the agenda for discussion at the meeting.<sup>328</sup> The Act permits a member of the public or a member of the governmental body to raise a subject that has not been included in the notice for the meeting, but any discussion of the subject must be limited to a proposal to place the subject on the agenda for a future meeting. Section 551.042 of the Act provides for this procedure:

- (a) If, at a meeting of a governmental body, a member of the public or of the governmental body inquires about a subject for which notice has not been given

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<sup>319</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.001(4)(B)(iv); *see* Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. JC-0169 (2000) at 3.

<sup>320</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.007.

<sup>321</sup> *Id.* § 551.007(a); *see also id.* § 551.001(3)(B)–(L).

<sup>322</sup> *See id.* § 551.007(a); *see id.* § 551.001(3)(A).

<sup>323</sup> *See id.* § 551.007(b).

<sup>324</sup> *See id.* § 551.007(c); *see also* Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. KP-0300 (2020) at 2

<sup>325</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. LO-96-111 (1996) at 1.

<sup>326</sup> *See* TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.007(e).

<sup>327</sup> *See id.* § 551.007(d).

<sup>328</sup> *See generally* *Charlestown Homeowners Ass’n, Inc. v. LaCoke*, 507 S.W.2d 876, 883 (Tex. App.—Dallas 1974, writ ref’d n.r.e.) (stating that the Act “does not mean that all such meetings must be ‘open’ in the sense that persons other than members are free to speak”).

## Open Meetings

as required by this subchapter, the notice provisions of this subchapter do not apply to:

- (1) a statement of specific factual information given in response to the inquiry; or
  - (2) a recitation of existing policy in response to the inquiry.
- (b) Any deliberation of or decision about the subject of the inquiry shall be limited to a proposal to place the subject on the agenda for a subsequent meeting.<sup>329</sup>

Another section of the Act permits members of the public to record open meetings with a recorder or a video camera:

- (a) A person in attendance may record all or any part of an open meeting of a governmental body by means of a recorder, video camera, or other means of aural or visual reproduction.
- (b) A governmental body may adopt reasonable rules to maintain order at a meeting, including rules relating to:
  - (1) the location of recording equipment; and
  - (2) the manner in which the recording is conducted.
- (c) A rule adopted under Subsection (b) may not prevent or unreasonably impair a person from exercising a right granted under Subsection (a).<sup>330</sup>

### D. Final Actions

Section 551.102 of the Act provides as follows:

A final action, decision, or vote on a matter deliberated in a closed meeting under this chapter may only be made in an open meeting that is held in compliance with the notice provisions of this chapter.<sup>331</sup>

A governmental body's final action, decision or vote on any matter within its jurisdiction may be made only in an open session held in compliance with the notice requirements of the Act. The

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<sup>329</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.042.

<sup>330</sup> *Id.* § 551.023.

<sup>331</sup> *Id.* § 551.102; see *Rubalcaba v. Raymondville Indep. Sch. Dist.*, No. 13-14-00224-CV, 2016 WL 1274486, at \*3 (Tex. App.—Corpus Christi, Mar. 31, 2016, no pet.) (mem. op.) (determining that “[w]hile a discussion may have taken place in executive session which may have been in violation of the Act,” the fact that the vote occurred in open session after the alleged violations meant that “the vote was not taken in violation” of the Act); *Tex. State Bd. of Pub. Accountancy v. Bass*, 366 S.W.3d 751, 762 (Tex. App.—Austin 2012, no pet.) (“[T]he statute contemplates that some deliberations may occur in executive session, but establishes that the final resolution of the matter must occur in open session.”).



## Open Meetings

governmental body may not vote in an open session by secret written ballot.<sup>332</sup> Furthermore, a governmental body may not take action by written agreement without a meeting.<sup>333</sup>

A city governing body may delegate to others the authority to make decisions affecting the transaction of city business if it does so in a meeting by adopting a resolution or ordinance by majority vote.<sup>334</sup> When six cities delegated to a consultant corporation the right to investigate and pursue claims against a gas company, including the right to hire counsel for those purposes, the attorney hired by the consultant could opt out of a class action on behalf of each city, and the cities did not need to hold an open meeting to approve the attorney's decision to opt out in another instance.<sup>335</sup> When the city attorney had authority under the city charter to bring a lawsuit and did not need city council approval to appeal, a discussion of the appeal by the city manager, a quorum of council members and the city attorney did not involve a final action.<sup>336</sup>

The fact that the State Board of Insurance discussed and approved a reduction in force at meetings that violated the Act did not affect the validity of the reduction, where the commissioner of insurance had independent authority to terminate employees.<sup>337</sup> The board's superfluous approval of the firings was irrelevant to their validity.<sup>338</sup> Similarly, the fact that the State Board of Public Accountancy's discussions in closed sessions, even if the closed sessions were improper under the Act, touched on the accountants' license revocations did not void the board's order removing the accountants' licenses when the vote of revocation was taken in open session.<sup>339</sup>

In the usual case, when the authority to make a decision or to take an action is vested in the governmental body, the governmental body must act in an open session. In *Toyah Independent School District v. Pecos-Barstow Independent School District*,<sup>340</sup> for example, the Toyah school board sued to enjoin enforcement of an annexation order approved by the board of trustees of Reeves County in a closed meeting.<sup>341</sup> The board of trustees of Reeves County had excluded all

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<sup>332</sup> Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. H-1163 (1978) at 2.

<sup>333</sup> *Webster v. Tex. & Pac. Motor Transp. Co.*, 166 S.W.2d 75, 77 (Tex. 1942); Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. Nos. GA-0264 (2004) at 6–7, JM-120 (1983) at 4; *see also* Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. DM-95 (1992) at 5–6 (considering letter concerning matter of governmental business or policy that was circulated and signed by individual members of governmental body outside of open meeting).

<sup>334</sup> *City of San Benito v. Rio Grande Valley Gas Co.*, 109 S.W.3d 750, 757 (Tex. 2003) (quoting from *Cent. Power & Light Co. v. City of San Juan*, 962 S.W.2d 602, 613 (Tex. App.—Corpus Christi 1998, pet. dism'd w.o.j.)).

<sup>335</sup> *See id.* at 758.

<sup>336</sup> *See City of San Antonio v. Aguilar*, 670 S.W.2d 681, 685–86 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 1984, writ dism'd); *see also* Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. MW-32 (1979) at 1–2 (concluding that procedure whereby executive director notified board of his intention to request attorney general to bring lawsuit and board member could request in writing that matter be placed on agenda of next meeting did not violate the Act).

<sup>337</sup> *Spiller v. Tex. Dep't of Ins.*, 949 S.W.2d 548, 551 (Tex. App.—Austin 1997, writ denied); *see also Swate v. Medina Cmty. Hosp.*, 966 S.W.2d 693, 698 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 1998, pet. denied) (concluding that hospital board's alleged violation of Act did not render termination void where hospital administrator had independent power to hire and fire).

<sup>338</sup> *Spiller*, 949 S.W.2d at 551.

<sup>339</sup> *Tex. State Bd. of Pub. Accountancy*, 366 S.W.3d at 761–62 (“Thus, to establish that the Board's orders violated the Act, the accountants must establish that ‘the actual vote or decision’ to adopt the orders was not made in open session.”) (footnote and citation omitted).

<sup>340</sup> *Toyah Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Pecos-Barstow Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 466 S.W.2d 377 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 1971, no writ).

<sup>341</sup> *Id.* at 377.

## Open Meetings

members of the public from the meeting room before voting in favor of an order annexing the Toyah district to a third school district.<sup>342</sup> The court determined that the board of trustees' action violated the Act and held that the order of annexation was ineffective.<sup>343</sup> The *Toyah Independent School District* court thus developed the remedy of judicial invalidation of actions taken by a governmental body in violation of the Act. This remedy is now codified in section 551.141 of the Act. The voidability of a governmental body's actions taken in violation of the Act is discussed in Part XI.C of this *Handbook*.

Furthermore, the actual vote or decision on the ultimate issue confronting the governmental body must be made in an open session.<sup>344</sup> In *Board of Trustees v. Cox Enterprises, Inc.*,<sup>345</sup> the court of appeals held that a school board violated the statutory predecessor to section 551.102 when it selected a board member to serve as board president. In an executive session, the board took a written vote on which of two board members would serve as president, and the winner of the vote was announced. The board then returned to the open session and voted unanimously for the individual who won the vote in the executive session.<sup>346</sup> Although the board argued that the written vote in the executive session was "simply a straw vote" that did not violate the Act, the court of appeals found that "there is sufficient evidence to support the trial court's conclusion that the actual resolution of the issue was made in the executive session contrary to the provisions of" the statutory predecessor to section 551.102.<sup>347</sup> Thus, as *Cox Enterprises* makes clear, a governmental body should not take a "straw vote" or otherwise attempt to count votes in an executive session.

On the other hand, members of a governmental body deliberating in a permissible executive session may express their opinions or indicate how they will vote in the open session. The court in *Cox Enterprises* stated that "[a] contrary holding would debilitate the role of the deliberations which are permitted in the executive sessions and would unreasonably limit the rights of expression and advocacy."<sup>348</sup>

In certain circumstances, a governmental body may make a "decision" or take an "action" in an executive session that will not be considered a "final action, decision, or vote" that must be taken

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<sup>342</sup> *Id.* at 378 n.1.

<sup>343</sup> *Id.* at 380; *see also City of Stephenville v. Tex. Parks & Wildlife Dep't*, 940 S.W.2d 667, 674–75 (Tex. App.—Austin 1996, writ denied) (noting that Water Commission's decision to hear some complaints raised on motion for rehearing and to exclude others should have been taken in open session held in compliance with Act); *Gulf Reg'l Educ. Television Affiliates v. Univ. of Houston*, 746 S.W.2d 803, 809 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1988, writ denied) (concluding that governmental body's decision to hire attorney to bring lawsuit was invalid because it was not made in open meeting); Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. H-1198 (1978) at 2 (concluding that Act does not permit governmental body to enter into agreement and authorize expenditure of funds in closed session).

<sup>344</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.102; *see also Nash v. Civil Serv. Comm'n*, 864 S.W.2d 163, 166 (Tex. App.—Tyler 1993, no writ).

<sup>345</sup> *Bd. of Trs. v. Cox Enters., Inc.*, 679 S.W.2d 86, 90 (Tex. App.—Texarkana 1984), *aff'd in part, rev'd in part on other grounds*, 706 S.W.2d 956 (Tex. 1986).

<sup>346</sup> *Id.* at 90.

<sup>347</sup> *Id.*

<sup>348</sup> *Id.* at 89 (footnote omitted); *see also Nash*, 864 S.W.2d at 166 (stating that Act does not prohibit board from reaching tentative conclusion in executive session and announcing it in open session where members have opportunity to comment and cast dissenting vote); *City of Dallas v. Parker*, 737 S.W.2d 845, 850 (Tex. App.—Dallas 1987, no writ) (holding that proceedings complied with Act when "conditional" vote was taken during recess, result was announced in open session, and vote of each member was apparent).

## *Open Meetings*

in an open session. The court in *Cox Enterprises* held that the school board did not take a “final action” when it discussed making public the names and qualifications of the candidates for superintendent or when it discussed selling surplus property and instructed the administration to solicit bids. The court concluded that the board was simply announcing that the law would be followed rather than taking any action in deciding to make public the names and qualifications of the candidates. The court also noted that further action would be required before the board could decide to sell the surplus property; therefore, the instruction to solicit bids was not a “final action.”<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>349</sup> *Bd. of Trs.*, 679 S.W.2d at 89–90.

## IX. Closed Meetings

### A. Overview of Subchapter D of the Open Meetings Act

The Act provides certain narrowly drawn exceptions to the requirement that meetings of a governmental body be open to the public.<sup>350</sup> These exceptions are found in sections 551.071 through 551.090 and are discussed in detail in Part B of this section of the *Handbook*.

Section 551.101 states the requirements for holding a closed meeting. It provides:

If a closed meeting is allowed under this chapter, a governmental body may not conduct the closed meeting unless a quorum of the governmental body first convenes in an open meeting for which notice has been given as provided by this chapter and during which the presiding officer publicly:

- (1) announces that a closed meeting will be held, and
- (2) identifies the section or sections of this chapter under which the closed meeting is held.<sup>351</sup>

Thus, a quorum of the governmental body must be assembled in the meeting room, the meeting must be convened as an open meeting pursuant to proper notice, and the presiding officer must announce that a closed session will be held and must identify the sections of the Act authorizing the closed session.<sup>352</sup> There are several purposes for requiring the presiding officer to identify the section or sections that authorize the closed session: to cause the governmental body to assess the applicability of the exceptions before deciding to close the meeting; to fix the governmental body's legal position as relying upon the exceptions specified; and to inform those present of the exceptions, thereby giving them an opportunity to object intelligently.<sup>353</sup> Judging the sufficiency of the presiding officer's announcement in light of whether it effectuated or hindered these purposes, the court of appeals in *Lone Star Greyhound Park, Inc. v. Texas Racing Commission* determined that the presiding officer's reference to the content of a section, rather than to the section number, sufficiently identified the exception.<sup>354</sup>

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<sup>350</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE §§ 551.071–.091; *see also Cox Enters., Inc. v. Bd. of Trs.*, 706 S.W.2d 956, 958 (Tex. 1986) (noting the narrowly drawn exceptions).

<sup>351</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.101.

<sup>352</sup> *Martinez v. State*, 879 S.W.2d 54, 56 n.5 (Tex. Crim. App. 1994).

<sup>353</sup> *Lone Star Greyhound Park, Inc. v. Tex. Racing Comm'n*, 863 S.W.2d 742, 747 (Tex. App.—Austin 1993, writ denied); *see also Standley v. Sansom*, 367 S.W.3d 343, 355 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 2012, pet. denied) (using the four purposes outlined in *Lone Star* to determine sufficiency of challenged notice for executive session).

<sup>354</sup> *Lone Star Greyhound Park, Inc.*, 863 S.W.2d at 748.

## B. Provisions Authorizing Deliberations in Closed Meeting

### 1. Section 551.071. Consultations with Attorney

Section 551.071 authorizes a governmental body to consult with its attorney in an executive session to seek his or her advice on legal matters. It provides as follows:

A governmental body may not conduct a private consultation with its attorney except:

- (1) when the governmental body seeks the advice of its attorney about:
  - (A) pending or contemplated litigation; or
  - (B) a settlement offer; or
- (2) on a matter in which the duty of the attorney to the governmental body under the Texas Disciplinary Rules of Professional Conduct of the State Bar of Texas clearly conflicts with this chapter.<sup>355</sup>

This provision implements the attorney-client privilege, an attorney's duty to preserve the confidences of a client.<sup>356</sup> It allows a governmental body to meet in executive session with its attorney when it seeks the attorney's advice with respect to pending or contemplated litigation or settlement offers,<sup>357</sup> including pending or contemplated administrative proceedings governed by the Administrative Procedure Act.

In addition, subsection 551.071(2) of the Government Code permits a governmental body to consult in an executive session with its attorney "on a matter in which the duty of the attorney to the governmental body under the Texas Disciplinary Rules of Professional Conduct of the State Bar of Texas clearly conflicts" with the Act.<sup>358</sup> Thus, a governmental body may hold an executive session to seek or receive its attorney's advice on legal matters that are not related to litigation or the settlement of litigation.<sup>359</sup> A governmental body may not invoke section 551.071 to convene a closed session and then discuss matters outside of that provision.<sup>360</sup> "General discussion of policy, unrelated to legal matters is not permitted under the language of [this exception] merely

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<sup>355</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.071.

<sup>356</sup> *Tex. State Bd. of Pub. Accountancy*, 366 S.W.3d at 759; *see* Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. Nos. JC-0506 (2002) at 4, JC-0233 (2000) at 3, H-816 (1976) at 4, M-1261 (1972) at 9–10.

<sup>357</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.071(1); *Lone Star Greyhound Park Inc.*, 863 S.W.2d at 748.

<sup>358</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.071(2).

<sup>359</sup> *Cf. Weatherford v. City of San Marcos*, 157 S.W.3d 473, 486 (Tex. App.—Austin 2004, pet. denied) (concluding that city council did not violate Act when it went into executive session to seek attorney's advice about land use provision); Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. Nos. JC-0233 (2000) at 3, JM-100 (1983) at 2.

<sup>360</sup> *Gardner v. Herring*, 21 S.W.3d 767, 776 (Tex. App.—Amarillo 2000, no pet.). *But see In re City of Galveston*, No. 14-14-01005-CV, 2015 WL 971314, \*5–6 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] March 3, 2015, orig. proceeding) (mem. op) (acknowledging that the Act does not mandate a "rigid stricture of direct legal question . . . followed by a direct legal answer" and that the "conveyance of factual information or the expression of opinion or intent by a member of the governmental body may be appropriate in a closed meeting . . . if the purpose of such statement is to facilitate the rendition of legal advice by the government's attorney").

because an attorney is present.”<sup>361</sup> A governmental body may, for example, consult with its attorney in executive session about the legal issues raised in connection with awarding a contract, but it may not discuss the merits of a proposed contract, financial considerations, or other nonlegal matters in an executive session held under section 551.071 of the Government Code.<sup>362</sup>

The attorney-client privilege can be waived by communicating privileged matters in the presence of persons who are not within the privilege.<sup>363</sup> Two governmental bodies waived this privilege by meeting together for discussions intended to avoid litigation between them, each party consulting with its attorney in the presence of the other, “the party from whom it would normally conceal its intentions and strategy.”<sup>364</sup> An executive session under section 551.071 is not allowed for such discussions. A governmental body may, however, admit to a session closed under this exception its agents or representatives, where those persons’ interest in litigation is aligned with that of the governmental body and their presence is necessary for full communication between the governmental body and its attorney.<sup>365</sup>

This exception is an affirmative defense on which the governmental body bears the burden of proof.<sup>366</sup>

## 2. Section 551.072. Deliberations about Real Property

Section 551.072 authorizes a governmental body to deliberate in executive session on certain matters concerning real property. It provides as follows:

A governmental body may conduct a closed meeting to deliberate the purchase, exchange, lease, or value of real property if deliberation in an open meeting would have a detrimental effect on the position of the governmental body in negotiations with a third person.<sup>367</sup>

Section 551.072 permits an executive session only where public discussion of the subject would have a detrimental effect on the governmental body’s negotiating position with respect to a third party.<sup>368</sup> Where a court found that open discussion would not be detrimental to a city’s negotiations, a closed session under this provision was not permitted.<sup>369</sup> It does not allow a

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<sup>361</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. JM-100 (1983) at 2; *see Finlan v. City of Dallas*, 888 F. Supp. 779, 782 n.9 (N.D. Tex. 1995); Tex. Att’y Gen. No. JC-0233 (2000) at 3.

<sup>362</sup> *Olympic Waste Servs. v. City of Grand-Saline*, 204 S.W.3d 496, 503–04 (Tex. App.—Tyler 2006, no pet.) (citing Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. JC-0233 (2000) at 3).

<sup>363</sup> *See* Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. Nos. JC-0506 (2002) at 6, JM-100 (1983) at 2.

<sup>364</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. MW-417 (1981) at 2–3; *see also* Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. JM-1004 (1989) at 4 (concluding that school board member who has sued other board members may be excluded from executive session held to discuss litigation).

<sup>365</sup> *See* Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. JC-0506 (2002) at 6; *see also* Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. JM-238 (1984) at 5.

<sup>366</sup> *See Killam Ranch Props., Ltd. v. Webb Cnty.*, 376 S.W.3d 146, 157 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 2012, pet. denied); *City of Farmers Branch v. Ramos*, 235 S.W.3d 462, 466 (Tex. App.—Dallas 2007, no pet.); *Olympic Waste Servs.*, 204 S.W.3d at 504.

<sup>367</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.072.

<sup>368</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. MW-417 (1981) at 2 (construing statutory predecessor to Government Code section 551.072).

<sup>369</sup> *See City of Laredo v. Escamilla*, 219 S.W.3d 14, 21 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 2006, pet. denied).

governmental body to “cut a deal in private, devoid of public input or debate.”<sup>370</sup> A governmental body’s discussion of nonmonetary attributes of property to be purchased that relate to the property’s value may fall within this exception if deliberating in open session would detrimentally affect subsequent negotiations.<sup>371</sup>

**3. Section 551.0725. Deliberations by Certain Commissioners Courts about Contract Being Negotiated**

Section 551.0725 provides as follows:

- (a) The commissioners court of a county may conduct a closed meeting to deliberate business and financial issues relating to a contract being negotiated if, before conducting the closed meeting:
  - (1) the commissioners court votes unanimously that deliberation in an open meeting would have a detrimental effect on the position of the commissioners court in negotiations with a third person; and
  - (2) the attorney advising the commissioners court issues a written determination that deliberation in an open meeting would have a detrimental effect on the position of the commissioners court in negotiations with a third person.
- (b) Notwithstanding Section 551.103(a), Government Code, the commissioners court must make a recording of the proceedings of a closed meeting to deliberate the information.

Section 551.103(a) provides that a governmental body shall either keep a certified agenda or make a recording of the proceedings of each closed meeting, except for a private consultation with its attorney permitted by section 551.071.

**4. Section 551.0726. Texas Facilities Commission: Deliberation Regarding Contract Being Negotiated**

This section, which provides as follows, is very similar to section 551.0725:

- (a) The Texas Facilities Commission may conduct a closed meeting to deliberate business and financial issues relating to a contract being negotiated if, before conducting the closed meeting:
  - (1) the commission votes unanimously that deliberation in an open meeting would have a detrimental effect on the position of the state in negotiations with a third person; and

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<sup>370</sup> *Finlan*, 888 F. Supp. at 787.

<sup>371</sup> *Save Our Springs All., Inc. v. Austin Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 973 S.W.2d 378, 382 (Tex. App.—Austin 1998, no pet.).

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- (2) the attorney advising the commission issues a written determination finding that deliberation in an open meeting would have a detrimental effect on the position of the state in negotiations with a third person and setting forth that finding therein.
- (b) Notwithstanding Section 551.103(a), the commission must make a recording of the proceedings of a closed meeting held under this section.<sup>372</sup>

### **5. Section 551.073. Deliberation Regarding Prospective Gifts**

Section 551.073 provides as follows:

A governmental body may conduct a closed meeting to deliberate a negotiated contract for a prospective gift or donation to the state or the governmental body if deliberation in an open meeting would have a detrimental effect on the position of the governmental body in negotiations with a third person.<sup>373</sup>

Before the Act was codified as Government Code chapter 551 in 1993, a single provision encompassed the present sections 551.073 and 551.072.<sup>374</sup> The authorities construing the statutory predecessor to section 551.072 may be relevant to section 551.073.<sup>375</sup>

### **6. Section 551.074. Personnel Matters**

Section 551.074 authorizes certain deliberations about officers and employees of the governmental body to be held in executive session:

- (a) This chapter does not require a governmental body to conduct an open meeting:
  - (1) to deliberate the appointment, employment, evaluation, reassignment, duties, discipline, or dismissal of a public officer or employee; or
  - (2) to hear a complaint or a charge against an officer or employee.
- (b) Subsection (a) does not apply if the officer or employee who is the subject of the deliberation or hearing requests a public hearing.<sup>376</sup>

This section permits executive session deliberations concerning an individual officer or employee.<sup>377</sup> Deliberations about a *class* of employees, however, must be held in an open

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<sup>372</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.0726.

<sup>373</sup> *Id.* § 551.073.

<sup>374</sup> See Act of Mar. 28, 1973, 63d Leg., R.S., ch. 31, § 2, 1973 Tex. Gen. Laws 45, 46 (former article 6252-17, § 2(f), Revised Civil Statutes).

<sup>375</sup> See, e.g., *Dallas Cnty. Flood Control Dist. No. 1 v. Cross*, 815 S.W.2d 271, 282–83 (Tex. App.—Dallas 1991, writ denied).

<sup>376</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.074.

<sup>377</sup> A federal court has said that this provision is not restricted “only to actions affecting a current employee.” *Hispanic Educ. Comm. v. Houston Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 886 F. Supp. 606, 611 (S.D. Tex. 1994), *aff'd*, 68 F.3d 467



session.<sup>378</sup> For example, when a governmental body discusses salary scales without referring to a specific employee, it must meet in open session.<sup>379</sup> The closed meetings authorized by section 551.074 may deal only with officers and employees of a governmental body; closed deliberations about the selection of an independent contractor are not authorized.<sup>380</sup>

Section 551.074 authorizes the public officer or employee under consideration to request a public hearing.<sup>381</sup> In *Bowen v. Calallen Independent School District*,<sup>382</sup> a teacher requested a public hearing concerning nonrenewal of his contract, but did not object when the school board moved to go into executive session. The court concluded that the school board did not violate the Act.<sup>383</sup> Similarly, in *James v. Hitchcock Independent School District*,<sup>384</sup> a school librarian requested an open meeting on the school district's unilateral modification of her contract. The court stated that refusal of the request for a hearing before the school board "is permissible only where the teacher does not object to its denial."<sup>385</sup> However, silence may not be deemed a waiver if the employee has no opportunity to object.<sup>386</sup> When a board heard the employee's complaint, moved onto other topics, and then convened an executive session to discuss the employee after he left, the court found that the employee had not had an opportunity to object.<sup>387</sup>

## **7. Section 551.0745. Deliberations by Commissioners Court about County Advisory Body**

Attorney General Opinion DM-149 (1992) concluded that members of an advisory committee are not public officers or employees within section 551.074 of the Government Code, authorizing executive session deliberations about certain personnel matters. Section 551.0745 now provides that a commissioners court of a county is not required to deliberate in an open meeting about the "appointment, employment, evaluation, reassignment, duties, discipline, or dismissal of a member of an advisory body; or . . . to hear a complaint or charge against a member of an advisory body."<sup>388</sup> However, this provision does not apply if the person who is the subject of the deliberation requests a public hearing.<sup>389</sup>

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(5th Cir. 1995); *but see* Tex. Att'y Gen. LO-88-52 (1988) at 3 (stating that the exception "applies only to public employees and officers, not to applicants for public employment or office").

<sup>378</sup> *Gardner*, 21 S.W.3d at 777; Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. H-496 (1975) (construing predecessor to Government Code section 551.074).

<sup>379</sup> *See* Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. H-496 (1975).

<sup>380</sup> *Swate v. Medina Cmty. Hosp.*, 966 S.W.2d 693, 699 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 1998, pet. denied); *Bd. of Trs. v. Cox Enters., Inc.*, 679 S.W.2d 86, 90 (Tex. App.—Texarkana 1984), *aff'd in part, rev'd in part on other grounds*, 706 S.W.2d 956 (Tex. 1986); Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. MW-129 (1980) at 1–2.

<sup>381</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.074(b); *see City of Dallas*, 737 S.W.2d at 848; *Corpus Christi Classroom Tchrs. Ass'n v. Corpus Christi Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 535 S.W.2d 429, 430 (Tex. App.—Corpus Christi 1976, no writ).

<sup>382</sup> *Bowen v. Calallen Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 603 S.W.2d 229 (Tex. App.—Corpus Christi 1980, writ ref'd n.r.e.).

<sup>383</sup> *Id.* at 236; *accord Thompson v. City of Austin*, 979 S.W.2d 676, 685 (Tex. App.—Austin 1998, no pet.).

<sup>384</sup> *James v. Hitchcock Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 742 S.W.2d 701 (Tex. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1987, writ denied).

<sup>385</sup> *Id.* at 707 (citing *Bowen*, 603 S.W.2d at 236).

<sup>386</sup> *Gardner*, 21 S.W.3d at 775.

<sup>387</sup> *Id.*

<sup>388</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.0745.

<sup>389</sup> *See id.*

**8. Section 551.075. Conference Relating to Investments and Potential Investments Attended by Board of Trustees Growth Fund**

Section 551.075 authorizes a closed meeting between the board of trustees of the Texas Growth Fund and an employee of the Fund or a third party in certain circumstances.<sup>390</sup>

**9. Section 551.076. Deliberations Regarding Security Devices or Security Audits**

Section 551.076 provides as follows:

This chapter does not require a governmental body to conduct an open meeting to deliberate:

- (1) the deployment, or specific occasions for implementation, of security personnel or devices; or
- (2) a security audit.<sup>391</sup>

**10. Section 551.077. Agency Financed by Federal Government**

Section 551.077 provides that chapter 551 does not require an agency financed entirely by federal money to conduct an open meeting.<sup>392</sup>

**11. Section 551.078, .0785. Deliberations Involving Individuals' Medical or Psychiatric Records**

These two provisions permit specified governmental bodies to discuss an individual's medical or psychiatric records in closed session. Section 551.078 is the narrower provision, applying to a medical board or medical committee when discussing the records of an applicant for a disability benefit from a public retirement system.<sup>393</sup> Section 551.0785 is much broader, allowing a governmental body that administers a public insurance, health or retirement plan to hold a closed session when discussing the records or information from the records of an individual applicant for a benefit from the plan. The benefits appeals committee for a public self-funded health plan may also meet in executive session for this purpose.<sup>394</sup>

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<sup>390</sup> *Id.* § 551.075.

<sup>391</sup> *Id.* § 551.076; *see* Tex. Att'y Gen. LO-93-105, at 3 (indicating a belief that "the applicability of 551.076 rests upon the definition of 'security personnel'").

<sup>392</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.077.

<sup>393</sup> *Id.* § 551.078; *see also* Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. DM-340 (1995) at 2 (concluding that section 551.078 authorizes board of trustees of a public retirement system to consider medical and psychiatric records in closed session).

<sup>394</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.0785.

## **12. Sections 551.079–.0811. Exceptions Applicable to Specific Entities**

Sections 551.079 through 551.0811 are set out below. The judicial decisions and attorney general opinions construing the Act have had little to say about these provisions.

### **§ 551.079. Texas Department of Insurance**

- (a) The requirements of this chapter do not apply to a meeting of the commissioner of insurance or the commissioner’s designee with the board of directors of a guaranty association established under Chapter 2602, Insurance Code, or Article 21.28–C or 21.28–D, Insurance Code, in the discharge of the commissioner’s duties and responsibilities to regulate and maintain the solvency of a person regulated by the Texas Department of Insurance.
- (b) The commissioner of insurance may deliberate and determine the appropriate action to be taken concerning the solvency of a person regulated by the Texas Department of Insurance in a closed meeting with persons in one or more of the following categories:
  - (1) staff of the Texas Department of Insurance;
  - (2) a regulated person;
  - (3) representatives of a regulated person; or
  - (4) members of the board of directors of a guaranty association established under Chapter 2602, Insurance Code, or Article 21.28–C or 21.28–D, Insurance Code.

### **§ 551.080. Board of Pardons and Paroles**

This chapter does not require the Board of Pardons and Paroles to conduct an open meeting to interview or counsel an inmate of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

### **§ 551.081. Credit Union Commission**

This chapter does not require the Credit Union Commission to conduct an open meeting to deliberate a matter made confidential by law.

### **§ 551.0811. The Finance Commission of Texas**

This chapter does not require The Finance Commission of Texas to conduct an open meeting to deliberate a matter made confidential by law.

### **13. Sections 551.082, .0821, .083. Certain School Board Deliberations**

Section 551.082 provides as follows:

- (a) This chapter does not require a school board to conduct an open meeting to deliberate in a case:
  - (1) involving discipline of a public school child; or
  - (2) in which a complaint or charge is brought against an employee of the school district by another employee and the complaint or charge directly results in a need for a hearing.
- (b) Subsection (a) does not apply if an open hearing is requested in writing by a parent or guardian of the child or by the employee against whom the complaint or charge is brought.<sup>395</sup>

A student who makes a written request for an open hearing on a disciplinary matter, but does not object to an executive session when announced, waives his or her right to an open hearing.<sup>396</sup>

Section 551.0821 provides as follows:

- (a) This chapter does not require a school board to conduct an open meeting to deliberate a matter regarding a public school student if personally identifiable information about the student will necessarily be revealed by the deliberation.
- (b) Directory information about a public school student is considered to be personally identifiable information about the student for purposes of Subsection (a) only if a parent or guardian of the student, or the student if the student has attained 18 years of age, has informed the school board, the school district, or a school in the school district that the directory information should not be released without prior consent. In this subsection, “directory information” has the meaning assigned by the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (20 U.S.C. Section 1232g), as amended.
- (c) Subsection (a) does not apply if an open meeting about the matter is requested in writing by a parent or guardian of the student or by the student if the student has attained 18 years of age.

The Federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act provides for withholding federal funds from an educational agency or institution with a policy or practice of releasing education records

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<sup>395</sup> *Id.* § 551.082.

<sup>396</sup> *United Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Gonzalez*, 911 S.W.2d 118, 127 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 1995, writ denied).

or personally identifiable information.<sup>397</sup> Section 551.0821 enables school boards to deliberate in closed session to avoid revealing personally identifiable information about a student.

Section 551.083 provides as follows:

This chapter does not require a school board operating under a consultation agreement authorized by Section 13.901, Education Code [repealed in 1993], to conduct an open meeting to deliberate the standards, guidelines, terms, or conditions the board will follow, or instruct its representatives to follow, in a consultation with a representative of an employee group.<sup>398</sup>

#### **14. Section 551.085. Deliberation by Governing Board of Certain Providers of Health Care Services**

Section 551.085 provides as follows:

- (a) This chapter does not require the governing board of a municipal hospital, municipal hospital authority, county hospital, county hospital authority, hospital district created under general or special law, or nonprofit health maintenance organization created under Section 534.101, Health and Safety Code,<sup>399</sup> to conduct an open meeting to deliberate:
  - (1) pricing or financial planning information relating to a bid or negotiation for the arrangement or provision of services or product lines to another person if disclosure of the information would give advantage to competitors of the hospital, hospital district, or nonprofit health maintenance organization; or
  - (2) information relating to a proposed new service or product line of the hospital, hospital district, or nonprofit health maintenance organization before publicly announcing the service or product line.
- (b) The governing board of a health maintenance organization created under Section 281.0515, Health and Safety Code,<sup>400</sup> that is subject to this chapter is not required to conduct an open meeting to deliberate information described by Subsection (a).<sup>401</sup>

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<sup>397</sup> 20 U.S.C.A. § 1232g; *see also Axtell v. Univ. of Tex.*, 69 S.W.3d 261, 267 (Tex. App.—Austin 2002, no pet.) (holding that student did not have cause of action under Tort Claims Act for release of his grades to radio station).

<sup>398</sup> *See* Act of May 28, 1993, 73d Leg., R.S., ch. 347, § 8.33, 1993 Tex. Gen. Laws 1479, 1556. *See* Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. H-651 (1975) at 3 (construing predecessor of Government Code section 551.083).

<sup>399</sup> Section 534.101 of the Health and Safety Code authorizes community mental health and mental retardation centers to create a limited purpose health maintenance organization. TEX. HEALTH & SAFETY CODE §§ 534.101–.124.

<sup>400</sup> This provision authorizes certain hospital districts to establish HMOs.

<sup>401</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.085.

**15. Section 551.086. Certain Public Power Utilities: Competitive Matters**

This section was adopted as part of an act relating to electric utility restructuring and is only briefly summarized here.<sup>402</sup> Anyone wishing to know when and how it applies should read it in its entirety.<sup>403</sup> It provides that certain public power utilities are not required to conduct an open meeting to deliberate, vote or take final action on any competitive matter as defined by section 552.133 of the Government Code.<sup>404</sup> Section 552.133 defines “competitive matter” as “a utility-related matter that is related to the public power utility’s competitive activity, including commercial information and would, if disclosed, give advantage to competitors or prospective competitors.”<sup>405</sup> The definition of “competitive matter” further provides that the term is reasonably related to several categories of information specifically defined<sup>406</sup> and does not include other specified categories of information.<sup>407</sup> “Public power utility” is defined as “an entity providing electric or gas utility services” that is subject to the provisions of the Act.<sup>408</sup> Finally, this executive session provision includes the following provision on notice:

For purposes of Section 551.041, the notice of the subject matter of an item that may be considered as a competitive matter under this section is required to contain no more than a general representation of the subject matter to be considered, such that the competitive activity of the public power utility with respect to the issue in question is not compromised or disclosed.<sup>409</sup>

**16. Section 551.087. Deliberation Regarding Economic Development Negotiations**

The provision reads as follows:

This chapter does not require a governmental body to conduct an open meeting:

- (1) to discuss or deliberate regarding commercial or financial information that the governmental body has received from a business prospect that the governmental body seeks to have locate, stay, or expand in or near the territory of the governmental body and with which the governmental body is conducting economic development negotiations; or
- (2) to deliberate the offer of a financial or other incentive to a business prospect described by Subdivision (1).<sup>410</sup>

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<sup>402</sup> See Act of May 27, 1999, 76th Leg., R.S., ch. 405, 1999 Tex. Gen. Laws 2543, 2543–2625.

<sup>403</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.086.

<sup>404</sup> *Id.* § 551.086(c).

<sup>405</sup> *Id.* § 552.133(a-1).

<sup>406</sup> *Id.* § 552.133(a-1)(1)(A)–(F).

<sup>407</sup> *Id.* § 552.133(a-1)(2)(A)–(O).

<sup>408</sup> *Id.* § 551.086(b)(1).

<sup>409</sup> *Id.* § 551.086(d).

<sup>410</sup> *Id.* § 551.087.

**17. Section 551.088. Deliberation Regarding Test Item**

This provision states as follows:

This chapter does not require a governmental body to conduct an open meeting to deliberate a test item or information related to a test item if the governmental body believes that the test item may be included in a test the governmental body administers to individuals who seek to obtain or renew a license or certificate that is necessary to engage in an activity.<sup>411</sup>

An executive session may be held only when expressly authorized by law. Thus, before section 551.088 was adopted, the Act did not permit a governmental body to meet in executive session to discuss the contents of a licensing examination.<sup>412</sup>

**18. Section 551.089. Deliberation Regarding Security Devices or Security Audits; Closed Meeting**

Section 551.089 provides as follows:

This chapter does not require a governmental body to conduct an open meeting to deliberate:

- (1) security assessments or deployments relating to information resources technology;
- (2) network security information as described by Section 2059.055(b); or
- (3) the deployment, or specific occasions for implementation, of security personnel, critical infrastructure, or security devices.<sup>413</sup>

**19. Section 551.090. Enforcement Committee Appointed by Texas State Board of Public Accountancy**

Section 551.090 provides that an enforcement committee appointed by the State Board of Public Accountancy is not required to conduct an open meeting to investigate and deliberate a disciplinary action under Subchapter K, Chapter 901, Occupations Code, relating to the enforcement of Chapter 901 or the rules of the Texas State Board of Public Accountancy.<sup>414</sup>

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<sup>411</sup> *Id.* § 551.088.

<sup>412</sup> *See* Tex. Att’y Gen. LO-96-058, at 2.

<sup>413</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.089. Chapter 2059 of the Government Code relates to the “Texas Computer Network Security System.” *Id.* §§ 2059.001–.153.

<sup>414</sup> *Id.* § 551.090; *see also* TEX. OCC. CODE §§ 901.501–.511 (subchapter K entitled “Prohibited Practices and Disciplinary Procedures”).

## **20. Section 551.091. Commissioners Courts: Deliberation Regarding Disaster or Emergency**

Section 551.091 provides that a commissioners court in a county “for which the governor has issued an executive order or proclamation declaring a state of disaster or a state of emergency” and “in which transportation to the meeting location is dangerous or difficult as a result of the disaster or emergency” may hold a closed meeting to deliberate about disaster or emergency conditions “without complying” with the Act, including the requirement to first convene the meeting in an open meeting.<sup>415</sup>

### **C. Closed Meetings Authorized by Other Statutes**

Some state agencies are authorized by their governing law to hold closed meetings in addition to those authorized by the Act.<sup>416</sup> Chapter 418 of the Government Code, the Texas Disaster Act, which relates to managing emergencies and disasters, including those caused by terroristic acts, provides in section 418.183(f):

A governmental body subject to Chapter 551 is not required to conduct an open meeting to deliberate information to which this section applies. Notwithstanding Section 551.103(a), the governmental body must make a tape recording of the proceedings of a closed meeting to deliberate the information.<sup>417</sup>

Section 418.183 states that “[t]his section applies only to information that is confidential under” specific sections of chapter 418.<sup>418</sup>

Similarly, the Texas Oyster Council is subject to the Act but is “not required to conduct an open meeting to deliberate confidential communications and records . . . relating to the investigation of a food-borne illness that is suspected of being related to molluscan shellfish.”<sup>419</sup> And though an appraisal review board is generally required to conduct protest hearings in the open, it is authorized to conduct a closed hearing if the hearing involves disclosure or proprietary or confidential information.<sup>420</sup>

### **D. No Implied Authority for Closed Meetings**

Older attorney general opinions have stated that a governmental body could deliberate in a closed session about confidential information, even though no provision of the Act authorizing a closed

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<sup>415</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.091(a)–(b). Section 551.091 expires on September 1, 2027. *See id.* § 551.091(e).

<sup>416</sup> *See, e.g.*, TEX. FAM. CODE § 264.005(g) (County Child Welfare Boards); TEX. LAB. CODE § 401.021(3) (certain proceedings of Workers' Compensation Commission); TEX. OCC. CODE § 152.009(c) (Board of Medical Examiners; deliberation about license applications and disciplinary actions).

<sup>417</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 418.183(f).

<sup>418</sup> *Id.* § 418.183(a).

<sup>419</sup> TEX. HEALTH & SAFETY CODE § 436.108(f); *see also* TEX. LOC. GOV'T CODE § 161.172(b) (excluding county ethics commissions in certain counties from operation of parts of chapter 551).

<sup>420</sup> TEX. TAX CODE § 41.66(d-1).



## Closed Meetings

session applied to the deliberations.<sup>421</sup> These opinions reasoned that information made confidential by statute was not within the Act's prohibition against privately discussing "public business or public policy," or that the board members could deliberate on information in a closed session if an open meeting would result in violation of a confidentiality provision.<sup>422</sup>

However, Attorney General Opinion MW-578 (1982) held that the Texas Employment Commission had no authority to review unemployment benefit cases in closed session, even though in some of the cases very personal information was disclosed about claimants and employers. Reasoning that the Act states that closed meetings may be held only where specifically authorized, the opinion concluded that there was no basis to read into it implied authority for closed meetings.<sup>423</sup> It disapproved the language in earlier opinions that suggests otherwise, but stated that the commission could protect privacy rights by avoiding discussion of private information.<sup>424</sup> Thus, the disapproved opinions should no longer be relied on as a source of authority for a closed session.

### E. Who May Attend a Closed Meeting

Only the members of a governmental body have a right to attend an executive session,<sup>425</sup> except that the governmental body's attorney must be present when it meets under section 551.071. A governmental body has discretion to include in an executive session any of its officers and employees whose participation is necessary to the matter under consideration.<sup>426</sup> Thus, a school board could require its superintendent of schools to attend all executive sessions of the board without violating the Act.<sup>427</sup> Given the board's responsibility to oversee the district's management and the superintendent's administrative responsibility and leadership of the district, the board could reasonably conclude that the superintendent's presence was necessary at executive sessions.<sup>428</sup>

A commissioners court may include the county auditor in a meeting closed under section 551.071 to consult with its attorney if the court determines that (1) the auditor's interests are not adverse to the county's; (2) the auditor's presence is necessary for the court to communicate with its attorney;

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<sup>421</sup> Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. Nos. H-1154 (1978) at 3 (concluding that county child welfare board may meet in executive session to discuss case files made confidential by statute), H-780 (1976) at 3 (concluding that Medical Advisory Board must meet in closed session to consider confidential reports about medical condition of applicants for a driver's license), H-484 (1974) at 3 (concluding that licensing board may discuss confidential information from applicant's file and may prepare examination questions in closed session), H-223 (1974) at 5 (concluding that administrative hearings in comptroller's office concerning confidential tax information may be closed).

<sup>422</sup> Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. H-484 (1974) at 2.

<sup>423</sup> See Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. MW-578 (1982) at 4.

<sup>424</sup> *Id.*

<sup>425</sup> See Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. Nos. JM-6 (1983) at 1–2 (stating that only members of the governmental body have the right to convene in executive session), KP-0006 (2015) at 2.

<sup>426</sup> Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. JC-0375 (2001) at 2; see also Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. GA-0277 (2004) at 3 (concluding that commissioners court may allow the county clerk to attend its executive sessions), KP-0006 (2015) at 2 (concluding that a representative of a municipality may attend an executive session of a housing authority if the governing body of the housing authority determines the municipal representative's participation is necessary to the matter to be discussed).

<sup>427</sup> Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. JC-0375 (2001) at 2.

<sup>428</sup> *Id.*

## *Closed Meetings*

and (3) the county auditor's presence will not waive the attorney-client privilege.<sup>429</sup> If the meeting is closed under an executive session provision other than section 551.071, the commissioners court may include the county auditor if the auditor's interests are not adverse to the county and his or her participation is necessary to the discussion.<sup>430</sup>

A governmental body must not admit to an executive session a person whose presence is contrary to the governmental interest protected by the provision authorizing the session. A person who wishes to sell real estate to a city may not attend an executive session under section 551.072, a provision designed to protect the city's bargaining position in negotiations with a third party.<sup>431</sup> Nor may a governmental body admit the opposing party in litigation to an executive session under section 551.071.<sup>432</sup> A governmental body has no authority to admit members of the public to a meeting closed under section 551.074 to give input about the public officer or employee being considered at the meeting.<sup>433</sup>

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<sup>429</sup> Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. JC-0506 (2002) at 6; *see* Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. JM-238 (1984) at 5 (concluding that county officers and employees may attend closed session of county commissioners court to discuss litigation against sheriff and commissioners court about county jail conditions).

<sup>430</sup> *See* Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. JC-0506 (2002) at 6.

<sup>431</sup> *Finlan v. City of Dallas*, 888 F. Supp. 779, 787 (N.D. Tex. 1995).

<sup>432</sup> *See* Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. Nos. JM-1004 (1989) at 4 (concluding that school board member who has sued other board members may be excluded from executive session held to discuss litigation), MW-417 (1981) at 2–3 (concluding that provision authorizing governmental body to consult with attorney in executive session about contemplated litigation does not apply to joint meeting between the governmental bodies to avoid lawsuit between them).

<sup>433</sup> *See* Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. GA-0511 (2007) at 6.

## X. Records of Meetings

### A. Minutes or Recordings of Open Meeting

Section 551.021 of the Government Code provides as follows:

- (a) A governmental body shall prepare and keep minutes or make a recording of each open meeting of the body.
- (b) The minutes must:
  - (1) state the subject of each deliberation; and
  - (2) indicate each vote, order, decision, or other action taken.<sup>434</sup>

Section 551.022 of the Government Code provides:

The minutes and recordings of an open meeting are public records and shall be available for public inspection and copying on request to the governmental body's chief administrative officer or the officer's designee.<sup>435</sup>

If minutes are kept instead of a recording, the minutes should record every action taken by the governmental body.<sup>436</sup> If open sessions of a commissioners court meeting are recorded, the recordings are available to the public under the Public Information Act.<sup>437</sup> (For a discussion of record retention laws, refer to Part XII.F of this *Handbook*).

### B. Special Recording Requirements

Section 551.1283 requires special purpose districts subject to chapters 51, 53, 54, or 55 of the Water Code with populations of 500 or more to post the minutes of a meeting held to consider the adoption of an ad valorem tax rate on the district's Internet website if it has one.<sup>438</sup> Such districts are also required to make an audio recording of the public hearing on written request of a resident

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<sup>434</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.021; *see also* Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. GA-0727 (2009) at 2 (opining that Texas State Library and Archives Commission rule requiring written minutes of every open meeting of a state agency is likely invalid as inconsistent with section 551.021(a), which authorizes a governmental body to make a recording of an open meeting).

<sup>435</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.022; *see York v. Tex. Guaranteed Student Loan Corp.*, 408 S.W.3d 677, 688 (Tex. App.—Austin 2013, no pet.) (concluding that exceptions in the Public Information Act do not operate to prevent public disclosure of minutes requested under section 551.022).

<sup>436</sup> *See York*, 408 S.W.3d at 687 (defining “minutes” to refer “to the record or notes of a meeting or proceeding, whatever they may contain”).

<sup>437</sup> Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. JM-1143 (1990) at 2–3 (concluding that tape recording of open session of commissioners court meeting is subject to Open Records Act); *see* Tex. Att'y Gen. ORD-225 (1979) at 3 (concluding that handwritten notes of open meetings made by secretary of governmental body are subject to disclosure under Open Records Act); ORD-32 (1974) at 2 (concluding that audio tape recording of open meeting of state licensing agency used as aid in preparation of accurate minutes is subject to disclosure under Open Records Act).

<sup>438</sup> *See* TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.1283(a)–(b).

and to provide the recording to the resident no later than five days after the hearing.<sup>439</sup> These special districts must also post “links to any other Internet website or websites the district uses to comply with Section 2051.202 of this code and Section 26.18, Tax Code.”<sup>440</sup>

Section 551.091, which authorizes county commissioners courts in limited disaster circumstances to hold an open or closed meeting without complying with the requirements of chapter 551, still requires the commissioners court prepare and keep minutes or a recording of the meeting and make the minutes or recording available to the public as soon as practicable.<sup>441</sup>

### **C. Certified Agenda or Recording of Closed Meeting**

A governmental body must make and keep either a certified agenda or a recording of each executive session, except for an executive session held by the governmental body to consult with its attorney in accordance with section 551.071 of the Government Code.<sup>442</sup> If a certified agenda is kept, the presiding officer must certify that the agenda is a true and correct record of the executive session.<sup>443</sup> The certified agenda must include “(1) a statement of the subject matter of each deliberation, (2) a record of any further action taken, and (3) an announcement by the presiding officer at the beginning and the end of the closed meeting indicating the date and time.”<sup>444</sup> While the agenda does not have to be a verbatim transcript of the meeting, it must at least provide a brief summary of each deliberation.<sup>445</sup> Whether a particular agenda satisfies the Act is a question of fact that must be addressed by the courts. Attorney General Opinion JM-840 (1988) cautioned governmental bodies to consider providing greater detail in the agenda with regard to topics not authorized for consideration in executive session or to avoid the uncertainty concerning the requisite detail required in an agenda by recording executive sessions.<sup>446</sup> Any member of a governmental body participating in a closed session knowing that an agenda or recording is not being made commits a Class C misdemeanor.<sup>447</sup>

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<sup>439</sup> See *id.* § 551.1283(b).

<sup>440</sup> See *id.* § 551.1283(d). Section 2051.202 of the Government Code requires a district to post on its website, among other things, the location and schedule of meetings, as well as meeting notices, minutes, and instructions for requesting certain meeting locations. See Act of May 26, 2021, 87th Leg., R.S., ch. 647, § 3, 2021 Tex. Sess. Law Serv. 1310, 1311 (to be codified at TEX. GOV'T CODE § 2051.202(d)(11), (13), (14)). Generally, section 26.18 of the Tax Code requires taxing units to post information relating to their tax rate and budget information on a website. See TEX. TAX CODE § 26.18.

<sup>441</sup> *Id.* § 551.091(d)(2).

<sup>442</sup> *Id.* § 551.103(a); see Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. JM-840 (1988) at 3 (discussing meaning of “certified agenda”). But see TEX. GOV'T CODE §§ 551.0725(b) (providing that notwithstanding section 551.103(a), the commissioners court must make a recording of the proceedings of a closed meeting under this section), 551.0726(b) (“[N]otwithstanding Section 551.103(a), the [Texas Facilities] Commission must make a recording of the proceedings of a closed meeting held under this section.”).

<sup>443</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.103(b).

<sup>444</sup> *Id.* § 551.103(c).

<sup>445</sup> Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. JM-840 (1988) at 4–7.

<sup>446</sup> *Id.* at 5–6 (referring to legislative history of section indicating that its primary purpose is to document fact that governmental body did not discuss unauthorized topics in closed session).

<sup>447</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.145.

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The certified agenda or recording of an executive session must be kept a minimum of two years after the date of the session.<sup>448</sup> If during that time a lawsuit that concerns the meeting is brought, the agenda or recording of that meeting must be kept pending resolution of the lawsuit.<sup>449</sup> The commissioners court, not the county clerk, is the proper custodian for the certified agenda or recording of a closed meeting, but it may delegate that duty to the county clerk.<sup>450</sup>

A certified agenda or recording of an executive session is confidential. A person who knowingly and without lawful authority makes these records public commits a Class B misdemeanor and may be held liable for actual damages, court costs, reasonable attorney fees and exemplary or punitive damages.<sup>451</sup> Section 551.104 provides for court-ordered access to the certified agenda or recording under specific circumstances:

- (b) In litigation in a district court involving an alleged violation of this chapter, the court:
  - (1) is entitled to make an in camera inspection of the certified agenda or recording;
  - (2) may admit all or part of the certified agenda or recording as evidence, on entry of a final judgment; and
  - (3) may grant legal or equitable relief it considers appropriate, including an order that the governmental body make available to the public the certified agenda or recording of any part of a meeting that was required to be open under this chapter.
- (c) the certified agenda or recording of a closed meeting is available for public inspection and copying only under a court order issued under Subsection (b)(3).<sup>452</sup>

Section 551.104 authorizes a district court to admit all or part of the certified agenda or recording of a closed session as evidence in an action alleging a violation of the Act, thus providing the only means under state law whereby a certified agenda or recording of a closed session may be released to the public.<sup>453</sup> The Office of the Attorney General has recognized that it lacks authority under the Public Information Act<sup>454</sup> to review certified agendas or recordings of closed sessions for compliance with the Open Meetings Act.<sup>455</sup> However, the confidentiality provision may be

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<sup>448</sup> *Id.* § 551.104(a).

<sup>449</sup> *Id.*

<sup>450</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. GA-0277 (2004) at 3–4.

<sup>451</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.146.

<sup>452</sup> *Id.* § 551.104.

<sup>453</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. JM-995 (1988) at 5; *In re Smith Cnty.*, 521 S.W.3d 447, 454 (Tex. App.—Tyler 2017, no pet.) (stating that “it is clear that [section 551.104] applies to litigation before the recording of a closed meeting is made available to the public[;] . . . once the recordings of the closed meetings become readily available to the public, section 551.104 no longer applies”).

<sup>454</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE ch. 552.

<sup>455</sup> See Tex. Att’y Gen. ORD-495 (1988) at 2, 4.

preempted by federal law.<sup>456</sup> When the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission served a Texas city with an administrative subpoena for tapes of closed city council meetings, the Open Meetings Act did not excuse compliance.<sup>457</sup>

A member of the governmental body has a right to inspect the certified agenda or recording of a closed meeting, even if he or she did not participate in the meeting.<sup>458</sup> This is not a release to the public in violation of the confidentiality provisions of the Act, because a board member is not a member of the public within that prohibition. The governmental body may adopt a procedure permitting review of the certified agenda or recording, but may not entirely prohibit a board member from reviewing the record. The board member may not copy the recording or certified agenda of a closed meeting, nor may a former member of a governmental body inspect these records once he or she leaves office.<sup>459</sup>

#### **D. Additional Recording Requirements for Certain Districts**

Section 551.1283 requires a special purpose district subject to chapter 51, 53, 54, or 55 of the Water Code with a population of 500 or more to “make an audio recording of reasonable quality” of a “public hearing to consider the adoption of an ad valorem tax rate” upon timely request of a resident of the district.<sup>460</sup> The district must make the recording available to the resident not later than the fifth business day after the date of the hearing and also maintain a copy of the recording for at least one year.<sup>461</sup>

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<sup>456</sup> *Equal Emp. Opportunity Comm’n v. City of Orange, Tex.*, 905 F. Supp. 381, 382 (E.D. Tex. 1995).

<sup>457</sup> *Id.*

<sup>458</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. JC-0120 (1999) at 4, 5, 7 (overruling Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. DM-227 (1993), in part).

<sup>459</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. LO-98-033, at 2–3; *cf.*, Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. DM-227 (1993) at (2) (concluding that the Act does not preclude a member of a governmental body from reviewing the certified agenda or tape recording of a closed meeting in which the member had participated).

<sup>460</sup> See Act of May 10, 2019, 86th Leg., R.S., ch. 105, § 2, 2019 Tex. Sess. Law Serv. 176, 177 (to be codified at TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.1283).

<sup>461</sup> *See id.*

## XI. Penalties and Remedies

### A. Introduction

The Act provides civil remedies and criminal penalties for violations of its provisions. District courts have original jurisdiction over criminal violations of the Act as misdemeanors involving official misconduct.<sup>462</sup> The Act does not authorize the attorney general to enforce its provisions. However, a district attorney, criminal district attorney or county attorney may request the attorney general's assistance in prosecuting a criminal case, including one under the Act.<sup>463</sup>

### B. Mandamus or Injunction

Section 551.142 of the Act provides as follows:

- (a) An interested person, including a member of the news media, may bring an action by mandamus or injunction to stop, prevent, or reverse a violation or threatened violation of this chapter by members of a governmental body.
- (b) The court may assess costs of litigation and reasonable attorney fees incurred by a plaintiff or defendant who substantially prevails in an action under Subsection (a). In exercising its discretion, the court shall consider whether the action was brought in good faith and whether the conduct of the governmental body had a reasonable basis in law.<sup>464</sup>

Texas courts examining this provision have said that “[t]he Open Meetings Act expressly waives sovereign immunity for violations of the [A]ct.”<sup>465</sup> The four-year limitations period in section 16.051 of the Civil Practices and Remedies Code applies to an action under this provision.<sup>466</sup>

Generally, a writ of mandamus would be issued by a court to require a public official or other person to perform duties imposed on him or her by law. A mandamus ordinarily commands a person or entity to act, while an injunction restrains action.<sup>467</sup> The Act does not automatically confer jurisdiction on the county court, but where the plaintiff's money demand brings the amount in controversy within the court's monetary limits, the county court has authority to issue injunctive and mandamus relief.<sup>468</sup> Absent such a pleading, jurisdiction in original mandamus and original injunction proceedings lies in the district court.<sup>469</sup>

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<sup>462</sup> See *State v. Williams*, 780 S.W.2d 891, 892–93 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 1989, no writ).

<sup>463</sup> See TEX. GOV'T CODE § 402.028(a).

<sup>464</sup> *Id.* § 551.142.

<sup>465</sup> *Hays Cnty. v. Hays Cnty. Water Plan. P'ship*, 69 S.W.3d 253, 257 (Tex. App.—Austin 2002, no pet.); see *Riley v. Comm'rs Court*, 413 S.W.3d 774, 776–77 (Tex. App.—Austin 2013, pet. denied).

<sup>466</sup> *Rivera v. City of Laredo*, 948 S.W.2d 787, 793 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 1997, writ denied).

<sup>467</sup> *Boston v. Garrison*, 256 S.W.2d 67, 69 (Tex. 1953).

<sup>468</sup> *Martin v. Victoria Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 972 S.W.2d 815, 818 (Tex. App.—Corpus Christi 1998, pet. denied).

<sup>469</sup> *Id.*

## Penalties and Remedies

Section 551.142(a) authorizes any interested person, including a member of the news media, to bring a civil action seeking either a writ of mandamus or an injunction.<sup>470</sup> In keeping with the purpose of the Act, standing under the Act is interpreted broadly.<sup>471</sup> Standing conferred by the Act is broader than taxpayer standing, and a citizen does not need to prove an interest different from the general public, “because ‘the interest protected by the Open Meetings Act is the interest of the general public.’”<sup>472</sup> The phrase “any interested person” includes a government league,<sup>473</sup> an environmental group,<sup>474</sup> the president of a local homeowners group,<sup>475</sup> a city challenging the closure of a hospital by the county hospital district,<sup>476</sup> a town challenging annexation ordinances,<sup>477</sup> and a city manager regarding a meeting he attended.<sup>478</sup> A suspended police officer and a police officers’ association were “interested persons” who could bring a suit alleging that the city council had violated the Act in selecting a police chief.<sup>479</sup>

Despite previous court opinions recognizing that an individual may bring a declaratory judgment action pursuant to the Uniform Declaratory Judgments Act, chapter 37 of the Texas Civil Practice and Remedies Code,<sup>480</sup> the Texas Supreme Court recently concluded that section 551.421’s waiver of sovereign immunity includes only a mandamus or injunction.<sup>481</sup> Thus, a “declaration” that an action is void is no longer a vehicle by which to challenge a governmental body’s action taken in violation of the Act.

Section 551.142(b) authorizes a court to award reasonable attorney fees and litigation costs to the party who substantially prevails in an action brought under the Act.<sup>482</sup> This relief, however, is discretionary.

Section 551.142(c) authorizes the attorney general, in a district court in Travis County, to seek mandamus or an injunction to stop, prevent, or reverse a violation or threatened violation of section

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<sup>470</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.142(a); *see Cameron Cnty. Good Gov’t League v. Ramon*, 619 S.W.2d 224, 230–31 (Tex. App.—Beaumont 1981, writ ref’d n.r.e.).

<sup>471</sup> *See Burks v. Yarbrough*, 157 S.W.3d 876, 880 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2005, no pet.); *Hays Cnty. Water Plan. P’ship v. Hays Cnty.*, 41 S.W.3d 174, 177 (Tex. App.—Austin 2003, no pet.).

<sup>472</sup> *See Hays Cnty. Plan. P’ship*, 41 S.W.3d at 177–78 (quoting *Save Our Springs All., Inc. v. Lowry*, 934 S.W.2d 161, 163 (Tex. App.—Austin 1996, orig. proceeding [leave denied])).

<sup>473</sup> *See Cameron Cnty.*, 619 S.W.2d at 230.

<sup>474</sup> *See Save Our Springs All., Inc.*, 934 S.W.2d at 162–64.

<sup>475</sup> *Id.*

<sup>476</sup> *Matagorda Cnty. Hosp. Dist. v. City of Palacios*, 47 S.W.3d 96, 102 (Tex. App.—Corpus Christi 2001, no pet.).

<sup>477</sup> *City of Port Isabel v. Pinnell*, 161 S.W.3d 233, 241 (Tex. App.—Corpus Christi 2005, no pet.).

<sup>478</sup> *City of Donna v. Ramirez*, 548 S.W.3d 26, 34–35 (Tex. App.—Corpus Christi 2017, pet. denied).

<sup>479</sup> *Rivera v. City of Laredo*, 948 S.W.2d 787, 792 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 1997, writ denied).

<sup>480</sup> *Bd. of Trs. v. Cox Enters., Inc.*, 679 S.W.2d 86, 88 (Tex. App.—Texarkana 1984), *aff’d in part, rev’d in part on other grounds*, 706 S.W.2d 956 (Tex. 1986) (recognizing news media’s right to bring declaratory judgment action to determine if board violated the Act); *see also City of Fort Worth v. Groves*, 746 S.W.2d 907, 913 (Tex. App.—Fort Worth 1988, no writ) (concluding that resident and taxpayer of city had standing to bring suit for declaratory judgment and injunction against city for violation of the Act).

<sup>481</sup> *Town of Shady Shores v. Swanson*, 590 S.W.3d 544, 554 (Tex. 2019).

<sup>482</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 551.142(b); *see Austin Transp. Study Pol’y Advisory Comm. v. Sierra Club*, 843 S.W.2d 683, 690 (Tex. App.—Austin 1992, writ denied) (upholding award of attorney fees).



551.142(a-1), a provision which limits a governmental body's actions in an emergency meeting or one for which an emergency supplemental notice is posted.<sup>483</sup>

Depending on the nature of the violation, additional monetary damages may be assessed against a governmental body that violated the Act. In *Ferris v. Texas Board of Chiropractic Examiners*,<sup>484</sup> the appellate court awarded back pay and reinstatement to an executive director whom the board had attempted to fire at two meetings convened in violation of the Act. Finally, at the third meeting held to discuss the matter, the board lawfully fired the executive director. Back pay was awarded for the period between the initial unlawful firing and the third meeting at which the director's employment was lawfully terminated.<sup>485</sup>

Court costs or attorney fees as well as certain other monetary damages can also be assessed under section 551.146, which relates to the confidentiality of the certified agenda. It provides that an individual, corporation or partnership that knowingly and without lawful authority makes public the certified agenda or recording of an executive session shall be liable for:

- (1) actual damages, including damages for personal injury or damage, lost wages, defamation, or mental or other emotional distress;
- (2) reasonable attorney fees and court costs; and
- (3) at the discretion of the trier of fact, exemplary damages.<sup>486</sup>

### **C. Voidability of a Governmental Body's Action in Violation of the Act; Ratification of Actions**

Section 551.141 provides that "[a]n action taken by a governmental body in violation of this chapter is voidable."<sup>487</sup> Before this section was adopted, Texas courts held as a matter of common law that a governmental body's actions that are in violation of the Act are subject to judicial

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<sup>483</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.142(c).

<sup>484</sup> *Ferris v. Tex. Bd. of Chiropractic Exam'rs*, 808 S.W.2d 514, 518–19 (Tex. App.—Austin 1991, writ denied).

<sup>485</sup> *Id.* at 519 (awarding executive director attorney fees of \$7,500).

<sup>486</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.146(a)(2).

<sup>487</sup> *Id.* § 551.141.

invalidation.<sup>488</sup> Section 551.141 does not require a court to invalidate an action taken in violation of the Act, and it may choose not to do so, given the facts of a specific case.<sup>489</sup>

In *Point Isabel Independent School District v. Hinojosa*,<sup>490</sup> the Corpus Christi Court of Appeals construed this provision to permit the judicial invalidation of only the specific action or actions found to violate the Act. Prior to doing so, the court addressed the sufficiency of the notice for the school board's July 12, 1988, meeting. With regard to that issue, the court determined that the description "personnel" in the notice was insufficient notice of the selection of three principals at the meeting, a matter of special interest to the public, but was sufficient notice of the selection of a librarian, an English teacher, an elementary school teacher, a band director and a part-time counselor.<sup>491</sup> (For further discussion of required content of notice under the Act, see *supra* Part VII.A of this *Handbook*.) The court in *Point Isabel Independent School District* then turned to the question of whether the board's invalid selection of the three principals tainted all hiring decisions made at the meeting. The court felt that, given the reference in the statutory predecessor to section 551.141 to "an action taken" and not to "all actions taken," this provision meant only that a specific action or specific actions violating the Act were subject to judicial invalidation. Consequently, the court refused the plaintiff's request to invalidate all hiring decisions made at the meeting and held void only the board's selection of the three principals.<sup>492</sup>

A governmental body cannot give retroactive effect to a prior action taken in violation of the Act, but may ratify the invalid act in a meeting held in compliance with the Act.<sup>493</sup> The ratification will be effective only from the date of the meeting at which the valid action is taken.<sup>494</sup>

In *Ferris v. Texas Board of Chiropractic Examiners*, the Austin Court of Appeals refused to give retroactive effect to a decision to fire the executive director reached at a meeting of the board that was held in compliance with the Act.<sup>495</sup> The board had attempted to fire the director at two

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<sup>488</sup> See *Lower Colorado River Auth. v. City of San Marcos*, 523 S.W.2d 641, 646 (Tex. 1975); *Toyah Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Pecos-Barstow Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 466 S.W.2d 377, 380 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 1971, no writ); see also *Ferris*, 808 S.W.2d at 517; Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. H-594 (1975) at 2 (noting that governmental body cannot independently assert its prior action that governmental body failed to ratify is invalid when it is to governmental body's advantage to do so).

<sup>489</sup> See *Collin Cnty., Tex. v. Homeowners Ass'n for Values Essential to Neighborhoods*, 716 F. Supp. 953, 960 n.12 (N.D. Tex. 1989) (declining to dismiss lawsuit that county authorized in violation of Act's notice requirements if county within thirty days of court's opinion and order authorized lawsuit at meeting in compliance with the Act). But see *City of Bells v. Greater Texoma Util. Auth.*, 744 S.W.2d 636, 640 (Tex. App.—Dallas 1987, no writ) (dismissing authority's lawsuit initiated at meeting in violation of the Act's notice requirements).

<sup>490</sup> *Point Isabel Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Hinojosa*, 797 S.W.2d 176 (Tex. App.—Corpus Christi 1990, writ denied).

<sup>491</sup> *Id.* at 182.

<sup>492</sup> *Id.* at 182–83; see also *Hill v. Palestine Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 113 S.W.3d 14, 17 (Tex. App.—Tyler 2000, pet. denied) (holding a deliberation that violated the Open Meetings Act did not render voidable a subsequent vote held in compliance with the Act).

<sup>493</sup> *Lower Colo River Auth.*, 523 S.W.2d at 646–47 (recognizing effectiveness of increase in electric rates only from date reauthorized at lawful meeting); *City of San Antonio v. River City Cabaret, Ltd.*, 32 S.W.3d 291, 293 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 2000, pet. denied). Cf. *Dallas Cnty. Flood Control v. Cross*, 815 S.W.2d 271, 284 (Tex. App.—Dallas 1991, writ denied) (holding ineffective district's reauthorization at lawful meeting of easement transaction initially authorized at unlawful meeting, because to do so, given the facts in that case, would give retroactive effect to transaction).

<sup>494</sup> *River City Cabaret, Ltd.*, 32 S.W.3d at 293.

<sup>495</sup> *Ferris*, 808 S.W.2d at 518–19.

previous meetings that did not comply with the Act. The subsequent lawful termination did not cure the two previous unlawful firings retroactively, and the court awarded back pay to the director for the period between the initial unlawful firing and the final lawful termination.<sup>496</sup>

Ratification of an action previously taken in violation of the Act must comply with all applicable provisions of the Act.<sup>497</sup> In *Porth v. Morgan*, the Houston County Hospital Authority Board attempted to reauthorize the appointment of an individual to the board but did not comply fully with the Act.<sup>498</sup> The board had originally appointed the individual during a closed meeting, violating the requirement that final action take place in an open meeting. The original appointment also violated the notice requirement, because the posted notice did not include appointing a board member as an item of business. At a subsequent open meeting, the board chose the individual as its vice-chairman and, as such, a member of the board, but the notice did not say that the board might appoint a new member or ratify its prior invalid appointment. Accordingly, the board's subsequent selection of the individual as vice-chairman did not ratify the board's prior invalid appointment.

#### **D. Criminal Provisions**

Certain violations of the Act's requirements concerning certified agendas or recordings of executive sessions are punishable as Class C or Class B misdemeanors. Section 551.145 provides as follows:

- (a) A member of a governmental body commits an offense if the member participates in a closed meeting of the governmental body knowing that a certified agenda of the closed meeting is not being kept or that a recording of the closed meeting is not being made.
- (b) An offense under Subsection (a) is a Class C misdemeanor.<sup>499</sup>

Section 551.146 provides:

- (a) An individual, corporation, or partnership that without lawful authority knowingly discloses to a member of the public the certified agenda or recording of a meeting that was lawfully closed to the public under this chapter:
  - (1) commits an offense; and
  - (2) is liable to a person injured or damaged by the disclosure for:
    - (A) actual damages, including damages for personal injury or damage, lost wages, defamation, or mental or other emotional distress;

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<sup>496</sup> *Id.*

<sup>497</sup> *See id.* at 518 (“A governmental entity may ratify only what it could have lawfully authorized initially.”).

<sup>498</sup> *Porth v. Morgan*, 622 S.W.2d 470, 473, 475–76 (Tex. App.—Tyler 1981, writ ref'd n.r.e.).

<sup>499</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.145.

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- (B) reasonable attorney fees and court costs; and
  - (C) at the discretion of the trier of fact, exemplary damages.
- (b) An offense under Subsection (a)(1) is a Class B misdemeanor.
  - (c) It is a defense to prosecution under Subsection (a)(1) and an affirmative defense to a civil action under Subsection (a)(2) that:
    - (1) the defendant had good reason to believe the disclosure was lawful; or
    - (2) the disclosure was the result of a mistake of fact concerning the nature or content of the certified agenda or recording.<sup>500</sup>

In order to find that a person has violated one of these provisions, the person must be determined to have “knowingly.” Section 6.03(b) of the Penal Code, defines that state of mind as follows:

A person acts knowingly, or with knowledge, with respect to the nature of his conduct or to circumstances surrounding his conduct when he is aware of the nature of his conduct or that the circumstances exist. A person acts knowingly, or with knowledge, with respect to his conduct when he is aware that his conduct is reasonably certain to cause the result.<sup>501</sup>

A 2012 court of appeals case enumerated the elements of this criminal offense to be (1) a lawfully closed meeting, (2) a knowing disclosure of the agenda or tape recording of the lawfully closed meeting to a member of the public, and (3) a disclosure made without lawful authority.<sup>502</sup> In *Cooksey v. State*, Cooksey attached a copy of the tape recording of a closed meeting to his petition in his suit to remove the county judge.<sup>503</sup> He was later charged with violation of section 551.146.<sup>504</sup> The court of appeals determined that the posted notice for the emergency meeting did not clearly identify the emergency and thus the meeting was not sufficient as a “lawfully closed meeting” to uphold Cooksey’s conviction.<sup>505</sup>

Section 551.146 does not prohibit members of the governmental body or other persons who attend an executive session from making public statements about the subject matter of the executive session.<sup>506</sup> Other statutes or duties, however, may limit what a member of the governmental body may say publicly.

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<sup>500</sup> *Id.* § 551.146.

<sup>501</sup> TEX. PENAL CODE § 6.03(b).

<sup>502</sup> *Cooksey v. State*, 377 S.W.3d 901, 905 (Tex. App.—Eastland 2012, no pet.).

<sup>503</sup> *Id.* at 903–04.

<sup>504</sup> *Id.* at 904.

<sup>505</sup> *Id.* at 907.

<sup>506</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. JM-1071 (1989) at 2–3.

## *Penalties and Remedies*

Sections 551.143 and 551.144 of the Government Code establish criminal sanctions for certain conduct that violates openness requirements. A member of a governmental body must be found to have acted “knowingly” to be found guilty of either of these offenses. Section 551.143 provides:

- (a) A member of a governmental body commits an offense if the member:
  - (1) knowingly engages in at least one communication among a series of communications that each occur outside of a meeting authorized by this chapter and that concern an issue within the jurisdiction of the governmental body in which the members engaging in the individual communications constitute fewer than a quorum of members but the members engaging in the series of communications constitute a quorum of members; and
  - (2) knew at the time the member engaged in the communication that the series of communications:
    - (A) involved or would involve a quorum; and
    - (B) would constitute a deliberation once a quorum of members engaged in the series of communications.<sup>507</sup>

Section 551.144 provides as follows:

- (a) A member of a governmental body commits an offense if a closed meeting is not permitted under this chapter and the member knowingly:
  - (1) calls or aids in calling or organizing the closed meeting, whether it is a special or called closed meeting;
  - (2) closes or aids in closing the meeting to the public, if it is a regular meeting; or
  - (3) participates in the closed meeting, whether it is a regular, special, or called meeting.<sup>508</sup>
- (b) An offense under Subsection (a) is a misdemeanor punishable by:
  - (1) a fine of not less than \$100 or more than \$500;
  - (2) confinement in the county jail for not less than one month or more than six months; or

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<sup>507</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.143.

<sup>508</sup> See *Asgeirsson v. Abbott*, 773 F. Supp. 2d 684, 690 (W.D. Tex. 2011), *aff'd*, 696 F. 3d 454 (5th Cir. 2012), *cert. denied*, 568 U.S. 1249 (2013) (upholding constitutionality of section 551.144).

## *Penalties and Remedies*

- (3) both the fine and confinement.<sup>509</sup>
- (c) It is an affirmative defense to prosecution under Subsection (a) that the member of the governmental body acted in reasonable reliance on a court order or a written interpretation of this chapter contained in an opinion of a court of record, the attorney general, or the attorney for the governmental body.<sup>510</sup>

In 1998, the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals determined in *Tovar v. State*<sup>511</sup> that a government official who knowingly participated in an impermissible closed meeting may be found guilty of violating the Act even though he did not know that the meeting was prohibited under the Act. Subsection 551.144(c) now provides an affirmative defense to prosecution under subsection (a) if the member of the governmental body acted in reasonable reliance on a court order or a legal opinion as set out in subsection (c).<sup>512</sup>

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<sup>509</sup> See *Martinez v. State*, 879 S.W.2d 54, 55–56 (Tex. Crim. App. 1994) (upholding validity of information which charged county commissioners with violating Act by failing to comply with procedural prerequisites for holding closed session).

<sup>510</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.144.

<sup>511</sup> *Tovar v. State*, 978 S.W.2d 584 (Tex. Crim. App. 1998).

<sup>512</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.144(c).

## XII. Open Meetings Act and Other Statutes

### A. Other Statutes May Apply to a Public Meeting

The Act is not the only provision of law relevant to a public meeting of a particular governmental entity. For example, section 551.004 of the Government Code expressly provides:

This chapter does not authorize a governmental body to close a meeting that a charter of the governmental body:

- (1) prohibits from being closed; or
- (2) requires to be open.<sup>513</sup>

In *Shackelford v. City of Abilene*,<sup>514</sup> the Texas Supreme Court held that an Abilene resident had a right to require public meetings under the Abilene city charter, which included the following provision:

All meetings of the Council and all Boards or Commissions appointed by the Council shall be open to the public.<sup>515</sup>

Members of a particular governmental body should consult any applicable statutes, charter provisions, ordinances and rules for provisions affecting the entity's public meetings. Laws other than the Act govern preparing the agenda for a meeting<sup>516</sup> but the procedures for agenda preparation must be consistent with the openness requirements of the Act.<sup>517</sup>

Even though a particular entity is not a "governmental body" as defined by the Act, another statute may require it to comply with the Act's provisions.<sup>518</sup> Some exercises of governmental power, for example, a city's adoption of zoning regulations, require the city to hold a public hearing at which parties in interest and citizens have an opportunity to be heard.<sup>519</sup> Certain governmental actions may be subject to statutory notice provisions<sup>520</sup> in addition to notice required by the Act.

The Act does not answer all questions about conducting a public meeting. Thus, persons responsible for a particular governmental body's meetings must know about other laws applicable to these meetings. While this *Handbook* cannot identify all provisions relevant to meetings of

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<sup>513</sup> *Id.* § 551.004.

<sup>514</sup> *Shackelford v. City of Abilene*, 585 S.W.2d 665, 667 (Tex. 1979).

<sup>515</sup> *Id.* at 667 (emphasis omitted).

<sup>516</sup> Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. Nos. DM-473 (1998) at 3, DM-228 (1993) at 2–3, JM-63 (1983) at 3, MW-32 (1979) at 1.

<sup>517</sup> Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. Nos. DM-473 (1998) at 3, DM-228 (1993) at 3.

<sup>518</sup> See TEX. EDUC. CODE § 12.1051 (applying open meetings and public information laws to open-enrollment charter schools); see also TEX. ELEC. CODE §§ 31.033(d), .155(d) (applying the Act to county election commissions and joint election commission), TEX. WATER CODE § 16.053(h)(12) (providing that regional water planning groups are subject to the Open Meetings Act).

<sup>519</sup> See TEX. LOC. GOV'T CODE § 211.006.

<sup>520</sup> See *id.* § 152.013(b); see also TEX. ELEC. CODE §§ 31.033(d), .155(d).

Texas governmental bodies, we will point out statutes that are of special importance to governmental bodies.

## **B. Administrative Procedure Act**

The Administrative Procedure Act (the “APA”) establishes “minimum standards of uniform practice and procedure for state agencies” in the rulemaking process and in hearing and resolving contested cases.<sup>521</sup> The state agencies subject to the APA are as a rule also subject to the Act.<sup>522</sup> The decision-making process under the APA is not excepted from the requirements of the Act.<sup>523</sup>

However, this office has concluded that the APA creates an exception to the requirements of the Act with regard to contested cases.<sup>524</sup> A governmental body may consider a claim of privilege in a closed meeting when (1) the claim is made during a contested case proceeding under the APA, and (2) the resolution of the claim requires the examination and discussion of the allegedly privileged information.<sup>525</sup> Although the Act does not authorize a closed meeting for this purpose, the APA incorporates certain rules of evidence and civil procedure, including the requirement that claims of privilege or confidentiality be determined in a nonpublic forum.<sup>526</sup>

The APA does not, on the other hand, create exceptions to the requirements of the Act when the two statutes can be harmonized. In *Acker v. Texas Water Commission*, the Texas Supreme Court concluded that the statutory predecessor to section 2001.061 of the Government Code did not authorize a quorum of the members of a governmental body to confer in private regarding a contested case.<sup>527</sup> Section 2001.061(b) provides in pertinent part: “A state agency member may communicate ex parte with another member of the agency unless prohibited by other law.”<sup>528</sup> The court concluded that, when harmonized with the provisions of the Act, this section permits a state agency’s members to confer ex parte, but only when less than a quorum is present.<sup>529</sup>

## **C. The Americans with Disabilities Act**

Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (the “ADA”) prohibits discrimination against disabled individuals in the activities, services and programs of public entities.<sup>530</sup> All the activities of state and local governmental bodies are covered by the ADA, including meetings. Governmental bodies subject to the Act must also ensure that their meetings comply with the ADA.<sup>531</sup> For purposes of the ADA, an individual is an individual with a disability if he or she meets one of the following three tests: the individual must have a physical or mental impairment

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<sup>521</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 2001.001(1); *see also id.* § 2001.003(1), (6).

<sup>522</sup> *See id.* § 2001.003(7) (defining “state agency”).

<sup>523</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. H-1269 (1978) at 1 (considering statutory predecessor to APA).

<sup>524</sup> Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. JM-645 (1987) at 5–6.

<sup>525</sup> *Id.*

<sup>526</sup> *Id.* at 4–5; *see* TEX. GOV’T CODE § 2001.083.

<sup>527</sup> *Acker v. Tex. Water Comm’n*, 790 S.W.2d 299, 301 (Tex. 1990).

<sup>528</sup> TEX. GOV’T CODE § 2001.061.

<sup>529</sup> *Acker*, 790 S.W.2d at 301.

<sup>530</sup> 42 U.S.C.A. §§ 12131–12165.

<sup>531</sup> *See id.* § 12132; 28 C.F.R. §§ 35.130, .149, .160. *See generally Tyler v. City of Manhattan*, 849 F. Supp. 1429, 1434–35 (D. Kan. 1994).



that substantially limits one or more of the individual's major life activities; he or she has a record of having this type of physical or mental impairment; or he or she is regarded by others as having this type of impairment.<sup>532</sup>

A governmental body may not exclude a disabled individual from participation in the activities of the governmental body because the facilities are physically inaccessible.<sup>533</sup> The room in which a public meeting is held must be physically accessible to a disabled individual.<sup>534</sup> A governmental body must also ensure that communications with disabled individuals are as effective as communications with others.<sup>535</sup> Thus, a governmental body must take steps to ensure that disabled individuals have access to and can understand the contents of the meeting notice and to ensure that they can understand what is happening at the meeting. This duty includes furnishing appropriate auxiliary aids and services when necessary.<sup>536</sup>

The following statement about meeting accessibility is included on the Secretary of State's Internet site where state and regional agencies submit notice of their meetings:

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, an individual with a disability must have equal opportunity for effective communication and participation in public meetings. Upon request, agencies must provide auxiliary aids and services, such as interpreters for the deaf and hearing impaired, readers, large print or Braille documents. In determining the type of auxiliary aid or services, agencies must give primary consideration to the individual's request. Those requesting auxiliary aids or services should notify the contact person listed on the meeting several days before the meeting by mail, telephone, or RELAY Texas. TTY: 7-1-1.<sup>537</sup>

#### **D. The Open Meetings Act and the Whistleblower Act**

In *City of Elsa v. Gonzalez*, a former city manager complained to the city council that it had violated the Open Meetings Act in the meeting at which he was fired.<sup>538</sup> His court challenge included a Whistleblower claim based on his report to the city council of the violation of the Open Meetings Act.<sup>539</sup> The Texas Supreme Court determined that the former city manager had not established, under the Whistleblower Act, an appropriate law enforcement agency to which to report a violation.<sup>540</sup>

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<sup>532</sup> 42 U.S.C.A. § 12102(1); 28 C.F.R. § 35.104.

<sup>533</sup> See 28 C.F.R. § 35.149-.150.

<sup>534</sup> See *Dees v. Austin Travis Cnty. Mental Health & Mental Retardation*, 860 F. Supp. 1186, 1190 (W.D. Tex. 1994); see generally *Tyler*, 849 F. Supp. at 1442.

<sup>535</sup> 28 C.F.R. § 35.160.

<sup>536</sup> *Id.* § 35.160(b)(1).

<sup>537</sup> Available at <http://www.sos.state.tx.us/open/access.shtml>.

<sup>538</sup> *City of Elsa v. Gonzalez*, 325 S.W.3d 622 (Tex. 2010).

<sup>539</sup> See *id.* at 626-28.

<sup>540</sup> See *id.* at 628.

## E. The Open Meetings Act Distinguished from the Public Information Act

Although the Open Meetings Act and the Public Information Act<sup>541</sup> both serve the purpose of making government accessible to the people, they work differently to accomplish this goal.<sup>542</sup> The definitions of “governmental body” in the two statutes are generally similar, but the Public Information Act also applies to entities supported by public funds,<sup>543</sup> while the Open Meetings Act does not.<sup>544</sup> Each statute contains a different set of exceptions.<sup>545</sup> The Public Information Act authorizes the attorney general to determine whether records requested by a member of the public may be withheld and to enforce his rulings by writ of mandamus.<sup>546</sup> The Open Meetings Act has no comparable provisions. Chapter 402, subchapter C of the Government Code authorizes the attorney general to issue legal opinions at the request of certain officers. Pursuant to this authority, the attorney general has addressed and resolved numerous questions of law arising under the Open Meetings Act.<sup>547</sup> Because questions of fact cannot be resolved in the opinion process, an attorney general opinion will not determine whether particular conduct of a governmental body violated the Open Meetings Act.<sup>548</sup>

In addition, the exceptions in one statute are not necessarily incorporated into the other statute. The mere fact that a document was discussed in an executive session does not make it confidential under the Public Information Act.<sup>549</sup> Nor does the Public Information Act authorize a governmental body to hold an executive session to discuss records merely because the records are within one of the exceptions to the Public Information Act.<sup>550</sup> While some early attorney general opinions treated the exceptions to one statute as incorporated into the other, these decisions have been expressly or implicitly overruled.<sup>551</sup>

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<sup>541</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE ch. 552.

<sup>542</sup> See *York v. Tex. Guaranteed Student Loan Corp.*, 408 S.W.3d 677, 684–87 (Tex. App.—Austin 2013, no pet.) (discussing interplay between the Open Meetings Act and the Public Information Act).

<sup>543</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 552.003(1)(A)(xiv).

<sup>544</sup> See Tex. Att'y Gen. LO-98-040, at 2.

<sup>545</sup> See Tex. Att'y Gen. ORD-491 (1988) at 4.

<sup>546</sup> See TEX. GOV'T CODE §§ 552.301–.309, .321–.327.

<sup>547</sup> *Id.* §§ 402.041–.045.

<sup>548</sup> See Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. Nos. GA-0326 (2005) at 4, JC-0307 (2000) at 1, DM-95 (1992) at 1, JM-840 (1988) at 6, H-772 (1976) at 6; see also *Bexar Medina Atascosa Water Dist. v. Bexar Medina Atascosa Landowners' Ass'n*, 2 S.W.3d 459, 461 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 1999, pet. denied) (stating that whether specific conduct violates the Act is generally a question of fact).

<sup>549</sup> See *City of Garland v. Dallas Morning News*, 22 S.W.3d 351, 366–67 (Tex. 2000) (stating “[t]hat a matter can be discussed in closed meetings does not mean that all documents involving the same matter are exempt from public access”); Tex. Att'y Gen. ORD-605 (1992) at 3 (names of applicants); ORD-485 (1987) at 4–5 (investigative report); see also Tex. Att'y Gen. ORD-491 (1988) at 7 (noting the fact that meeting was not subject to the Act does not make minutes of meeting confidential under Open Records Act).

<sup>550</sup> Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. Nos. JM-595 (1986) at 4–5 (concluding that Open Records Act does not authorize executive session discussion of written evaluations on selection of consultants and bidders), MW-578 (1982) at 4 (concluding there is no implied authority under the Act to hold closed session to review private information in unemployment benefit case files).

<sup>551</sup> See, e.g., Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. H-1154 (1978) at 3 (closed meeting for discussion of confidential child welfare case files); Tex. Att'y Gen. ORD-461 (1987) (tape recording of closed session is not public under Open Records Act); ORD-259 (1980) (value of donation pledged to city is confidential under statutory predecessor to section 551.072 of the Government Code).

## **F. Records Retention**

The Open Meetings Act requires a governmental body to prepare and keep minutes or make a recording of each open meeting.<sup>552</sup> It also requires a governmental body to keep a certified agenda or make a recording of each closed meeting, except for a closed meeting held under the attorney consultation exception, and to preserve the certified agenda or recording for a period of two years.<sup>553</sup> Other than these provisions, the Open Meetings Act does not speak to a governmental body's record-keeping obligations. Similarly, the Public Information Act, in its provisions governing access to a governmental body's public information, does not specifically address a governmental body's responsibility to retain its records.<sup>554</sup>

Instead, other provisions require a local governmental body or state agency to retain and manage its governmental records.<sup>555</sup> These provisions require local governments and state agencies to establish a records management program that complies with record retention schedules adopted by the Texas State Library and Archives Commission ("TSLAC").<sup>556</sup> A local government record means

[a]ny document, paper, letter, book, map, photograph, sound or video recording, microfilm, magnetic tape, electronic medium, or other information recording medium, regardless of physical form or characteristic and regardless of whether public access to it is open or restricted under the laws of the state, created or received by a local government or any of its officers or employees pursuant to law, including an ordinance, or in the transaction of public business.<sup>557</sup>

A state record is "any written, photographic, machine-readable, or other recorded information created or received by or on behalf of a state agency or an elected state official that documents activities in the conduct of state business or use of public resources."<sup>558</sup> Under either of these definitions, a governmental body's meeting minutes, notices, agenda and agenda packets, recordings of meetings, and any other record associated with an open or closed meeting are going

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<sup>552</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.021(a).

<sup>553</sup> *Id.* §§ 551.103, .104.

<sup>554</sup> *See id.* §§ 552.001–.376 ("Public Information Act"), .004 (providing that governmental bodies, and elected public officials, may determine the time its information not currently in use will be preserved, "subject to any . . . applicable rule or law governing the destruction and other disposition of state and local governmental records or public information.").

<sup>555</sup> *See* TEX. LOC. GOV'T CODE §§ 201.001–205.009 (the "Local Government Records Act"); TEX. GOV'T CODE §§ 441.180–.205 (subchapter L entitled: "Preservation and Management of State Records and Other Historical Resources").

<sup>556</sup> *See* TEX. LOC. GOV'T CODE §§ 203.002, .005 (elected county officer shall provide for the administration of an "active and continuing records management program"), 203.021 (governing body of a local government shall provide for an "active and continuing program for the efficient and economical management of all local government records"), TEX. GOV'T CODE § 441.183 (head of each state agency "shall establish and maintain a records management program on a continuing and active basis"); *see also* TEX. LOC. GOV'T CODE § 203.042(b)(2) (retention period may not be less than a retention period for the record established by the TSLAC), TEX. GOV'T CODE §§ 441.185(a) (agency records management officer shall submit a records retention schedule to the state records administrator).

<sup>557</sup> TEX. LOC. GOV'T CODE § 201.003(8).

<sup>558</sup> TEX. GOV'T CODE § 441.180(11).

*Open Meetings Act and Other Statutes*

to be local or state records. As such, they must be retained and managed by the local government or state agency as required by the respective retention schedule and may be destroyed only as permitted under the retention schedule.<sup>559</sup>

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<sup>559</sup> See TEX. LOC. GOV'T CODE §§ 202.001–.009 (“Destruction and Alienation of Records”), TEX. GOV'T CODE § 441.187 (governing destruction of state records).

## **Appendix A: Text of the Open Meetings Act**

### **SUBCHAPTER A. GENERAL PROVISIONS**

#### **§ 551.001. Definitions**

In this chapter:

- (1) “Closed meeting” means a meeting to which the public does not have access.
- (2) “Deliberation” means a verbal or written exchange between a quorum of a governmental body, or between a quorum of a governmental body and another person, concerning an issue within the jurisdiction of the governmental body.
- (3) “Governmental body” means:
  - (A) a board, commission, department, committee, or agency within the executive or legislative branch of state government that is directed by one or more elected or appointed members;
  - (B) a county commissioners court in the state;
  - (C) a municipal governing body in the state;
  - (D) a deliberative body that has rulemaking authority or quasi-judicial power and that is classified as a department, agency, or political subdivision of a county or municipality;
  - (E) a school district board of trustees;
  - (F) a county board of school trustees;
  - (G) a county board of education;
  - (H) the governing board of a special district created by law;
  - (I) a local workforce development board created under Section 2308.253;
  - (J) a nonprofit corporation that is eligible to receive funds under the federal community services block grant program and that is authorized by this state to serve a geographic area of the state;
  - (K) a nonprofit corporation organized under Chapter 67, Water Code, that provides a water supply or wastewater service, or both, and is exempt from ad valorem taxation under Section 11.30, Tax Code;
  - (L) a joint board created under Section 22.074, Transportation Code; and
  - (M) a board of directors of a reinvestment zone created under Chapter 311, Tax Code.
- (4) “Meeting” means:
  - (A) a deliberation between a quorum of a governmental body, or between a quorum of a governmental body and another person, during which

public business or public policy over which the body has supervision or control is discussed or considered or during which the governmental body takes formal action; or

- (B) except as otherwise provided by this subdivision, a gathering:
  - (i) that is conducted by the governmental body or for which the governmental body is responsible;
  - (ii) at which a quorum of members of the governmental body is present;
  - (iii) that has been called by the governmental body; and
  - (iv) at which the members receive information from, give information to, ask questions of, or receive questions from any third person, including an employee of the governmental body, about the public business or public policy over which the governmental body has supervision or control.

The term does not include the gathering of a quorum of a governmental body at a social function unrelated to the public business that is conducted by the body, the attendance by a quorum of a governmental body at a regional, state, or national convention or workshop, ceremonial event, or press conference, or the attendance by a quorum of a governmental body at a candidate forum, appearance, or debate to inform the electorate, if formal action is not taken and any discussion of public business is incidental to the social function, convention, workshop, ceremonial event, press conference, forum, appearance, or debate.

The term includes a session of a governmental body.

- (5) “Open” means open to the public.
- (6) “Quorum” means a majority of a governmental body, unless defined differently by applicable law or rule or the charter of the governmental body.
- (7) “Recording” means a tangible medium on which audio or a combination of audio and video is recorded, including a disc, tape, wire, film, electronic storage drive, or other medium now existing or later developed.
- (8) “Videoconference call” means a communication conducted between two or more persons in which one or more of the participants communicate with the other participants through duplex audio and video signals transmitted over a telephone network, a data network, or the Internet.

#### **§ 551.0015. Certain Property Owners’ Associations Subject to Law**

- (a) A property owners’ association is subject to this chapter in the same manner as a governmental body:
  - (1) if:

*Appendix A: Text of the Open Meetings Act*

- (A) membership in the property owners' association is mandatory for owners or for a defined class of owners of private real property in a defined geographic area in a county with a population of 2.8 million or more or in a county adjacent to a county with a population of 2.8 million or more;
  - (B) the property owners' association has the power to make mandatory special assessments for capital improvements or mandatory regular assessments; and
  - (C) the amount of the mandatory special or regular assessments is or has ever been based in whole or in part on the value at which the state or a local governmental body assesses the property for purposes of ad valorem taxation under Section 20, Article VIII, Texas Constitution; or
- (2) if the property owners' association:
- (A) provides maintenance, preservation, and architectural control of residential and commercial property within a defined geographic area in a county with a population of 2.8 million or more or in a county adjacent to a county with a population of 2.8 million or more; and
  - (B) is a corporation that:
    - (i) is governed by a board of trustees who may employ a general manager to execute the association's bylaws and administer the business of the corporation;
    - (ii) does not require membership in the corporation by the owners of the property within the defined area; and
    - (iii) was incorporated before January 1, 2006.
  - (b) The governing body of the association, a committee of the association, and members of the governing body or of a committee of the association are subject to this chapter in the same manner as the governing body of a governmental body, a committee of a governmental body, and members of the governing body or of a committee of the governmental body.

**§ 551.002. Open Meetings Requirement**

Every regular, special, or called meeting of a governmental body shall be open to the public, except as provided by this chapter.

**§ 551.003. Legislature**

In this chapter, the legislature is exercising its powers to adopt rules to prohibit secret meetings of the legislature, committees of the legislature, and other bodies associated with the legislature, except as specifically permitted in the constitution.

**§ 551.0035. Attendance by Governmental Body at Legislative Committee or Agency Meeting**

- (a) This section applies only to the attendance by a quorum of a governmental body at a meeting of a committee or agency of the legislature. This section does not apply to attendance at the meeting by members of the legislative committee or agency holding the meeting.
- (b) The attendance by a quorum of a governmental body at a meeting of a committee or agency of the legislature is not considered to be a meeting of that governmental body if the deliberations at the meeting by the members of that governmental body consist only of publicly testifying at the meeting, publicly commenting at the meeting, and publicly responding at the meeting to a question asked by a member of the legislative committee or agency.

**§ 551.004. Open Meetings Required by Charter**

This chapter does not authorize a governmental body to close a meeting that a charter of the governmental body:

- (1) prohibits from being closed; or
- (2) requires to be open.

**§ 551.005. Open Meetings Training**

- (a) Each elected or appointed public official who is a member of a governmental body subject to this chapter shall complete a course of training of not less than one and not more than two hours regarding the responsibilities of the governmental body and its members under this chapter not later than the 90th day after the date the member:
  - (1) takes the oath of office, if the member is required to take an oath of office to assume the person's duties as a member of the governmental body; or
  - (2) otherwise assumes responsibilities as a member of the governmental body, if the member is not required to take an oath of office to assume the person's duties as a member of the governmental body.
- (b) The attorney general shall ensure that the training is made available. The office of the attorney general may provide the training and may also approve any acceptable course of training offered by a governmental body or other entity. The attorney general shall ensure that at least one course of training approved or provided by the attorney general is available on videotape or a functionally similar and widely available medium at no cost. The training must include instruction in:
  - (1) the general background of the legal requirements for open meetings;
  - (2) the applicability of this chapter to governmental bodies;



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- (3) procedures and requirements regarding quorums, notice, and recordkeeping under this chapter;
  - (4) procedures and requirements for holding an open meeting and for holding a closed meeting under this chapter; and
  - (5) penalties and other consequences for failure to comply with this chapter.
- (c) The office of the attorney general or other entity providing the training shall provide a certificate of course completion to persons who complete the training required by this section. A governmental body shall maintain and make available for public inspection the record of its members' completion of the training.
  - (d) Completing the required training as a member of the governmental body satisfies the requirements of this section with regard to the member's service on a committee or subcommittee of the governmental body and the member's ex officio service on any other governmental body.
  - (e) The training required by this section may be used to satisfy any corresponding training requirements concerning this chapter or open meetings required by law for the members of a governmental body. The attorney general shall attempt to coordinate the training required by this section with training required by other law to the extent practicable.
  - (f) The failure of one or more members of a governmental body to complete the training required by this section does not affect the validity of an action taken by the governmental body.
  - (g) A certificate of course completion is admissible as evidence in a criminal prosecution under this chapter. However, evidence that a defendant completed a course of training offered under this section is not prima facie evidence that the defendant knowingly violated this chapter.

**§ 551.006. Written Electronic Communications Accessible to Public**

- (a) A communication or exchange of information between members of a governmental body about public business or public policy over which the governmental body has supervision or control does not constitute a meeting or deliberation for purposes of this chapter if:
  - (1) the communication is in writing;
  - (2) the writing is posted to an online message board or similar Internet application that is viewable and searchable by the public; and
  - (3) the communication is displayed in real time and displayed on the online message board or similar Internet application for no less than 30 days after the communication is first posted.
- (b) A governmental body may have no more than one online message board or similar Internet application to be used for the purposes described in Subsection

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- (a). The online message board or similar Internet application must be owned or controlled by the governmental body, prominently displayed on the governmental body's primary Internet web page, and no more than one click away from the governmental body's primary Internet web page.
- (c) The online message board or similar Internet application described in Subsection (a) may only be used by members of the governmental body or staff members of the governmental body who have received specific authorization from a member of the governmental body. In the event that a staff member posts a communication to the online message board or similar Internet application, the name and title of the staff member must be posted along with the communication.
- (d) If a governmental body removes from the online message board or similar Internet application a communication that has been posted for at least 30 days, the governmental body shall maintain the posting for a period of six years. This communication is public information and must be disclosed in accordance with Chapter 552.
- (e) The governmental body may not vote or take any action that is required to be taken at a meeting under this chapter of the governmental body by posting a communication to the online message board or similar Internet application. In no event shall a communication or posting to the online message board or similar Internet application be construed to be an action of the governmental body.

**§ 551.007. Public Testimony**

- (a) This section applies only to a governmental body described by Sections 551.001(3)(B)–(L).
- (b) A governmental body shall allow each member of the public who desires to address the body regarding an item on an agenda for an open meeting of the body to address the body regarding the item at the meeting before or during the body's consideration of the item.
- (c) A governmental body may adopt reasonable rules regarding the public's right to address the body under this section, including rules that limit the total amount of time that a member of the public may address the body on a given item.
- (d) This subsection applies only if a governmental body does not use simultaneous translation equipment in a manner that allows the body to hear the translated public testimony simultaneously. A rule adopted under Subsection (c) that limits the amount of time that a member of the public may address the governmental body must provide that a member of the public who addresses the body through a translator must be given at least twice the amount of time as a member of the public who does not require the assistance of a translator in

order to ensure that non-English speakers receive the same opportunity to address the body.

- (e) A governmental body may not prohibit public criticism of the governmental body, including criticism of any act, omission, policy, procedure, program, or service. This subsection does not apply to public criticism that is otherwise prohibited by law.

## **SUBCHAPTER B. RECORD OF OPEN MEETING**

### **§ 551.021. Minutes or Recording of Open Meeting Required**

- (a) A governmental body shall prepare and keep minutes or make a recording of each open meeting of the body.
- (b) The minutes must:
  - (1) state the subject of each deliberation; and
  - (2) indicate each vote, order, decision, or other action taken.

### **§ 551.022. Minutes and Recordings of Open Meeting: Public Record**

The minutes and recordings of an open meeting are public records and shall be available for public inspection and copying on request to the governmental body's chief administrative officer or the officer's designee.

### **§ 551.023. Recording of Meeting by Person in Attendance**

- (a) A person in attendance may record all or any part of an open meeting of a governmental body by means of a recorder, video camera, or other means of aural or visual reproduction.
- (b) A governmental body may adopt reasonable rules to maintain order at a meeting, including rules relating to:
  - (1) the location of recording equipment; and
  - (2) the manner in which the recording is conducted.
- (c) A rule adopted under Subsection (b) may not prevent or unreasonably impair a person from exercising a right granted under Subsection (a).

## **SUBCHAPTER C. NOTICE OF MEETINGS**

### **§ 551.041. Notice of Meeting Required**

A governmental body shall give written notice of the date, hour, place, and subject of each meeting held by the governmental body.

**§ 551.0411. Meeting Notice Requirements in Certain Circumstances**

- (a) Section 551.041 does not require a governmental body that recesses an open meeting to the following regular business day to post notice of the continued meeting if the action is taken in good faith and not to circumvent this chapter. If an open meeting is continued to the following regular business day and, on that following day, the governmental body continues the meeting to another day, the governmental body must give written notice as required by this subchapter of the meeting continued to that other day.
- (b) A governmental body that is prevented from convening an open meeting that was otherwise properly posted under Section 551.041 because of a catastrophe may convene the meeting in a convenient location within 72 hours pursuant to Section 551.045 if the action is taken in good faith and not to circumvent this chapter. If the governmental body is unable to convene the open meeting within those 72 hours, the governmental body may subsequently convene the meeting only if the governmental body gives written notice of the meeting as required by this subchapter.
- (c) In this section, “catastrophe” means a condition or occurrence that interferes physically with the ability of a governmental body to conduct a meeting, including:
  - (1) fire, flood, earthquake, hurricane, tornado, or wind, rain, or snow storm;
  - (2) power failure, transportation failure, or interruption of communication facilities;
  - (3) epidemic; or
  - (4) riot, civil disturbance, enemy attack, or other actual or threatened act of lawlessness or violence.

**§ 551.0415. Governing Body of Municipality or County: Reports About Items of Community Interest Regarding Which No Action Will be Taken**

- (a) Notwithstanding Sections 551.041 and 551.042, a quorum of the governing body of a municipality or county may receive from staff of the political subdivision and a member of the governing body may make a report about items of community interest during a meeting of the governing body without having given notice of the subject of the report as required by this subchapter if no action is taken and, except as provided by Section 551.042, possible action is not discussed regarding the information provided in the report.
- (b) For purposes of Subsection (a), “items of community interest” includes:
  - (1) expressions of thanks, congratulations, or condolence;
  - (2) information regarding holiday schedules;
  - (3) an honorary or salutary recognition of a public official, public employee, or other citizen, except that a discussion regarding a change

in the status of a person's public office or public employment is not an honorary or salutory recognition for purposes of this subdivision;

- (4) a reminder about an upcoming event organized or sponsored by the governing body;
- (5) information regarding a social, ceremonial, or community event organized or sponsored by an entity other than the governing body that was attended or is scheduled to be attended by a member of the governing body or an official or employee of the political subdivision; and
- (6) announcements involving an imminent threat to the public health and safety of people in the political subdivision that has arisen after the posting of the agenda.

**§ 551.042. Inquiry Made at Meeting**

- (a) If, at a meeting of a governmental body, a member of the public or of the governmental body inquires about a subject for which notice has not been given as required by this subchapter, the notice provisions of this subchapter do not apply to:
  - (1) a statement of specific factual information given in response to the inquiry; or
  - (2) a recitation of existing policy in response to the inquiry.
- (b) Any deliberation of or decision about the subject of the inquiry shall be limited to a proposal to place the subject on the agenda for a subsequent meeting.

**§ 551.043. Time and Accessibility of Notice; General Rule**

- (a) The notice of a meeting of a governmental body must be posted in a place readily accessible to the general public at all times for at least 72 hours before the scheduled time of the meeting, except as provided by Sections 551.044–551.046.
- (b) If this chapter specifically requires or allows a governmental body to post notice of a meeting on the Internet:
  - (1) the governmental body satisfies the requirement that the notice must be posted in a place readily accessible to the general public at all times by making a good-faith attempt to continuously post the notice on the Internet during the prescribed period;
  - (2) the governmental body must still comply with any duty imposed by this chapter to physically post the notice at a particular location; and
  - (3) if the governmental body makes a good-faith attempt to continuously post the notice on the Internet during the prescribed period, the notice

physically posted at the location prescribed by this chapter must be readily accessible to the general public during normal business hours.

**§ 551.044. Exception to General Rule: Governmental Body With Statewide Jurisdiction**

- (a) The secretary of state must post notice on the Internet of a meeting of a state board, commission, department, or officer having statewide jurisdiction for at least seven days before the day of the meeting. The secretary of state shall provide during regular office hours a computer terminal at a place convenient to the public in the office of the secretary of state that members of the public may use to view notices of meetings posted by the secretary of state.
- (b) Subsection (a) does not apply to:
  - (1) the Texas Department of Insurance, as regards proceedings and activities under Title 5, Labor Code, of the department, the commissioner of insurance, or the commissioner of workers' compensation; or
  - (2) the governing board of an institution of higher education.

**§ 551.045. Exception to General Rule: Notice of Emergency Meeting or Emergency Addition to Agenda**

- (a) In an emergency or when there is an urgent public necessity, the notice of a meeting to deliberate or take action on the emergency or urgent public necessity, or the supplemental notice to add the deliberation or taking of action on the emergency or urgent public necessity as an item to the agenda for a meeting for which notice has been posted in accordance with this subchapter, is sufficient if the notice or supplemental notice is posted for at least one hour before the meeting is convened.
- (a-1) A governmental body may not deliberate or take action on a matter at a meeting for which notice or supplemental notice is posted under Subsection (a) other than:
  - (1) a matter directly related to responding to the emergency or urgent public necessity identified in the notice or supplemental notice of the meeting as provided by Subsection (c); or
  - (2) an agenda item listed on a notice of the meeting before the supplemental notice was posted.
- (b) An emergency or an urgent public necessity exists only if immediate action is required of a governmental body because of:
  - (1) an imminent threat to public health and safety, including a threat described by Subdivision (2) if imminent; or
  - (2) a reasonably unforeseeable situation, including:

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- (A) fire, flood, earthquake, hurricane, tornado, or wind, rain, or snow storm;
  - (B) power failure, transportation failure, or interruption of communication facilities;
  - (C) epidemic; or
  - (D) riot, civil disturbance, enemy attack, or other actual or threatened act of lawlessness or violence.
- (c) The governmental body shall clearly identify the emergency or urgent public necessity in the notice or supplemental notice under this section.
- (d) A person who is designated or authorized to post notice of a meeting by a governmental body under this subchapter shall post the notice taking at face value the governmental body's stated reason for the emergency or urgent public necessity.
- (e) For purposes of Subsection (b)(2), the sudden relocation of a large number of residents from the area of a declared disaster to a governmental body's jurisdiction is considered a reasonably unforeseeable situation for a reasonable period immediately following the relocation.

**§ 551.046. Exception to General Rule: Committee of Legislature**

The notice of a legislative committee meeting shall be as provided by the rules of the house of representatives or of the senate.

**§ 551.047. Special Notice to News Media of Emergency Meeting or Emergency Addition to Agenda**

- (a) The presiding officer of a governmental body, or the member of a governmental body who calls an emergency meeting of the governmental body or adds an emergency item to the agenda of a meeting of the governmental body, shall notify the news media of the emergency meeting or emergency item as required by this section.
- (b) The presiding officer or member is required to notify only those members of the news media that have previously;
  - (1) filed at the headquarters of the governmental body a request containing all pertinent information for the special notice; and
  - (2) agreed to reimburse the governmental body for the cost of providing the special notice.
- (c) The presiding officer or member shall give the notice by telephone, facsimile transmission, or electronic mail at least one hour before the meeting is convened.

**§ 551.048. State Governmental Body: Notice to Secretary of State; Place of Posting Notice**

- (a) A state governmental body shall provide notice of each meeting to the secretary of state.
- (b) The secretary of state shall post the notice on the Internet. The secretary of state shall provide during regular office hours a computer terminal at a place convenient to the public in the office of the secretary of state that members of the public may use to view the notice.

**§ 551.049. County Governmental Body: Place of Posting Notice**

A county governmental body shall post notice of each meeting on a bulletin board at a place convenient to the public in the county courthouse.

**§ 551.050. Municipal Governmental Body: Place of Posting Notice**

- (a) In this section, “electronic bulletin board” means an electronic communication system that includes a perpetually illuminated screen on which the governmental body can post messages or notices viewable without manipulation by the public.
- (b) A municipal governmental body shall post notice of each meeting on a physical or electronic bulletin board at a place convenient to the public in city hall.

**§ 551.0501. Joint Board: Place of Posting Notice**

- (a) In this section, “electronic bulletin board” means an electronic communication system that includes a perpetually illuminated screen on which the governmental body can post messages or notices viewable without manipulation by the public.
- (b) A joint board created under Section 22.074, Transportation Code, shall post notice of each meeting on a physical or electronic bulletin board at a place convenient to the public in the board’s administrative offices.

**§ 551.051. School District: Place of Posting Notice**

A school district shall post notice of each meeting on a bulletin board at a place convenient to the public in the central administrative office of the district.

**§ 551.052. School District: Special Notice to News Media**

- (a) A school district shall provide special notice of each meeting to any news media that has:
  - (1) requested special notice; and
  - (2) agreed to reimburse the district for the cost of providing the special notice.



- (b) The notice shall be by telephone, facsimile transmission, or electronic mail.

**§ 551.053. District or Political Subdivision Extending Into Four or More Counties: Notice to Public, Secretary of State, and County Clerk; Place of Posting Notice**

- (a) The governing body of a water district or other district or other political subdivision that extends into four or more counties shall:
  - (1) post notice of each meeting at a place convenient to the public in the administrative office of the district or political subdivision;
  - (2) provide notice of each meeting to the secretary of state; and
  - (3) either provide notice of each meeting to the county clerk of the county in which the administrative office of the district or political subdivision is located or post notice of each meeting on the district's or political subdivision's Internet website.
- (b) The secretary of state shall post the notice provided under Subsection (a)(2) on the Internet. The secretary of state shall provide during regular office hours a computer terminal at a place convenient to the public in the office of the secretary of state that members of the public may use to view the notice.
- (c) A county clerk shall post a notice provided to the clerk under Subsection (a)(3) on a bulletin board at a place convenient to the public in the county courthouse.

**§ 551.054. District or Political Subdivision Extending Into Fewer Than Four Counties: Notice to Public and County Clerks; Place of Posting Notice**

- (a) The governing body of a water district or other district or political subdivision that extends into fewer than four counties shall:
  - (1) post notice of each meeting at a place convenient to the public in the administrative office of the district or political subdivision; and
  - (2) either provide notice of each meeting to the county clerk of each county in which the district or political subdivision is located or post notice of each meeting on the district's or political subdivision's Internet website.
- (b) A county clerk shall post a notice provided to the clerk under Subsection (a)(2) on a bulletin board at a place convenient to the public in the county courthouse.

**§ 551.055. Institution of Higher Education**

In addition to providing any other notice required by this subchapter, the governing board of a single institution of higher education:

- (1) shall post notice of each meeting at the county courthouse of the county in which the meeting will be held;

- (2) shall publish notice of a meeting in a student newspaper of the institution if an issue of the newspaper is published between the time of the posting and the time of the meeting; and
- (3) may post notice of a meeting at another place convenient to the public.

**§ 551.056. Additional Posting Requirements for Certain Municipalities, Counties, School Districts, Junior College Districts, Development Corporations, Authorities, and Joint Boards**

- (a) This section applies only to a governmental body or economic development corporation that maintains an Internet website or for which an Internet website is maintained. This section does not apply to a governmental body described by Section 551.001(3)(D).
- (b) In addition to the other place at which notice is required to be posted by this subchapter, the following governmental bodies and economic development corporations must also concurrently post notice of a meeting on the Internet website of the governmental body or economic development corporation:
  - (1) a municipality;
  - (2) a county;
  - (3) a school district;
  - (4) the governing body of a junior college or junior college district, including a college or district that has changed its name in accordance with Chapter 130, Education Code;
  - (5) a development corporation organized under the Development Corporation Act (Subtitle C1, Title 12, Local Government Code);
  - (6) a regional mobility authority included within the meaning of an “authority” as defined by Section 370.003, Transportation Code; and
  - (7) a joint board created under Section 22.074, Transportation Code.
- (c) The following governmental bodies and economic development corporations must also concurrently post the agenda for the meeting on the Internet website of the governmental body or economic development corporation.
  - (1) a municipality with a population of 48,000 or more;
  - (2) a county with a population of 65,000 or more;
  - (3) a school district that contains all or part of the area within the corporate boundaries of a municipality with a population of 48,000 or more;
  - (4) the governing body of a junior college district, including a district that has changed its name in accordance with Chapter 130, Education Code, that contains all or part of the area within the corporate boundaries of a municipality with a population of 48,000 or more;

- (5) a development corporation organized under the Development Corporation Act (Subtitle C1, Title 12, Local Government Code) that was created by or for:
  - (A) a municipality with a population of 48,000 or more; or
  - (B) a county or district that contains all or part of the area within the corporate boundaries of a municipality with a population of 48,000 or more.
- (6) a regional mobility authority included within the meaning of an “authority” as defined by Section 370.003, Transportation Code.
- (d) The validity of a posted notice of a meeting or an agenda by a governmental body or economic development corporation subject to this section that made a good faith attempt to comply with the requirements of this section is not affected by a failure to comply with a requirement of this section that is due to a technical problem beyond the control of the governmental body or economic development corporation.

#### **SUBCHAPTER D. EXCEPTIONS TO REQUIREMENT THAT MEETINGS BE OPEN**

##### **§ 551.071. Consultation with Attorney; Closed Meeting**

A governmental body may not conduct a private consultation with its attorney except:

- (1) when the governmental body seeks the advice of its attorney about:
  - (A) pending or contemplated litigation; or
  - (B) a settlement offer; or
- (2) on a matter in which the duty of the attorney to the governmental body under the Texas Disciplinary Rules of Professional Conduct of the State Bar of Texas clearly conflicts with this chapter.

##### **§ 551.072. Deliberation Regarding Real Property; Closed Meeting**

A governmental body may conduct a closed meeting to deliberate the purchase, exchange, lease, or value of real property if deliberation in an open meeting would have a detrimental effect on the position of the governmental body in negotiations with a third person.

##### **§ 551.0725. Commissioners Courts: Deliberation Regarding Contract Being Negotiated; Closed Meeting**

- (a) The commissioners court of a county may conduct a closed meeting to deliberate business and financial issues relating to a contract being negotiated if, before conducting the closed meeting:

- (1) the commissioners court votes unanimously that deliberation in an open meeting would have a detrimental effect on the position of the commissioners court in negotiations with a third person; and
  - (2) the attorney advising the commissioners court issues a written determination that deliberation in an open meeting would have a detrimental effect on the position of the commissioners court in negotiations with a third person.
- (b) Notwithstanding Section 551.103(a), Government Code, the commissioners court must make a recording of the proceedings of a closed meeting to deliberate the information.

**§ 551.0726. Texas Facilities Commission: Deliberation Regarding Contract Being Negotiated; Closed Meeting**

- (a) The Texas Facilities Commission may conduct a closed meeting to deliberate business and financial issues relating to a contract being negotiated if, before conducting the closed meeting:
- (1) the commission votes unanimously that deliberation in an open meeting would have a detrimental effect on the position of the state in negotiations with a third person; and
  - (2) the attorney advising the commission issues a written determination finding that deliberation in an open meeting would have a detrimental effect on the position of the state in negotiations with a third person and setting forth that finding therein.
- (b) Notwithstanding Section 551.103(a), the commission must make a recording of the proceedings of a closed meeting held under this section.

**§ 551.073. Deliberation Regarding Prospective Gift; Closed Meeting**

A governmental body may conduct a closed meeting to deliberate a negotiated contract for a prospective gift or donation to the state or the governmental body if deliberation in an open meeting would have a detrimental effect on the position of the governmental body in negotiations with a third person.

**§ 551.074. Personnel Matters; Closed Meeting**

- (a) This chapter does not require a governmental body to conduct an open meeting:
- (1) to deliberate the appointment, employment, evaluation, reassignment, duties, discipline, or dismissal of a public officer or employee; or
  - (2) to hear a complaint or charge against an officer or employee.
- (b) Subsection (a) does not apply if the officer or employee who is the subject of the deliberation or hearing requests a public hearing.

**§ 551.0745. Personnel Matters Affecting County Advisory Body; Closed Meeting**

- (a) This chapter does not require the commissioners court of a county to conduct an open meeting:
  - (1) to deliberate the appointment, employment, evaluation, reassignment, duties, discipline, or dismissal of a member of an advisory body; or
  - (2) to hear a complaint or charge against a member of an advisory body.
- (b) Subsection (a) does not apply if the individual who is the subject of the deliberation or hearing requests a public hearing.

**§ 551.075. Conference Relating to Investments and Potential Investments Attended by Board of Trustees of Texas Growth Fund; Closed Meeting**

- (a) This chapter does not require the board of trustees of the Texas growth fund to confer with one or more employees of the Texas growth fund or with a third party in an open meeting if the only purpose of the conference is to:
  - (1) receive information from the employees of the Texas growth fund or the third party relating to an investment or a potential investment by the Texas growth fund in:
    - (A) a private business entity, if disclosure of the information would give advantage to a competitor; or
    - (B) a business entity whose securities are publicly traded, if the investment or potential investment is not required to be registered under the Securities and Exchange Act of 1934 (15 U.S.C. Section 78a et seq.), and its subsequent amendments, and if disclosure of the information would give advantage to a competitor; or
  - (2) question the employees of the Texas growth fund or the third party regarding an investment or potential investment described by Subdivision (1), if disclosure of the information contained in the question or answers would give advantage to a competitor.
- (b) During a conference under Subsection (a), members of the board of trustees of the Texas growth fund may not deliberate public business or agency policy that affects public business.
- (c) In this section, “Texas growth fund” means the fund created by Section 70, Article XVI, Texas Constitution.

**§ 551.076. Deliberation Regarding Security Devices or Security Audits; Closed Meeting**

This chapter does not require a governmental body to conduct an open meeting to deliberate:

- (1) the deployment, or specific occasions for implementation, of security personnel or devices; or

- (2) a security audit.

**§ 551.077. Agency Financed by Federal Government**

This chapter does not require an agency financed entirely by federal money to conduct an open meeting.

**§ 551.078. Medical Board or Medical Committee**

This chapter does not require a medical board or medical committee to conduct an open meeting to deliberate the medical or psychiatric records of an individual applicant for a disability benefit from a public retirement system.

**§ 551.0785. Deliberations Involving Medical or Psychiatric Records of Individuals**

This chapter does not require a benefits appeals committee for a public self-funded health plan or a governmental body that administers a public insurance, health, or retirement plan to conduct an open meeting to deliberate:

- (1) the medical records or psychiatric records of an individual applicant for a benefit from the plan; or
- (2) a matter that includes a consideration of information in the medical or psychiatric records of an individual applicant for a benefit from the plan.

**§ 551.079. Texas Department of Insurance**

- (a) The requirements of this chapter do not apply to a meeting of the commissioner of insurance or the commissioner's designee with the board of directors of a guaranty association established under Chapter 2602, Insurance Code, or Article 21.28–C or 21.28–D, Insurance Code,<sup>560</sup> in the discharge of the commissioner's duties and responsibilities to regulate and maintain the solvency of a person regulated by the Texas Department of Insurance.
- (b) The commissioner of insurance may deliberate and determine the appropriate action to be taken concerning the solvency of a person regulated by the Texas Department of Insurance in a closed meeting with persons in one or more of the following categories:
  - (1) staff of the Texas Department of Insurance;
  - (2) a regulated person;
  - (3) representatives of a regulated person; or

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<sup>560</sup> Now, repealed.

- (4) members of the board of directors of a guaranty association established under Chapter 2602, Insurance Code, or Article 21.28–C or 21.28–D, Insurance Code.

**§ 551.080. Board of Pardons and Paroles**

This chapter does not require the Board of Pardons and Paroles to conduct an open meeting to interview or counsel an inmate of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

**§ 551.081. Credit Union Commission**

This chapter does not require the Credit Union Commission to conduct an open meeting to deliberate a matter made confidential by law.

**§ 551.0811. The Finance Commission of Texas**

This chapter does not require The Finance Commission of Texas to conduct an open meeting to deliberate a matter made confidential by law.

**§ 551.082. School Children; School District Employees; Disciplinary Matter or Complaint**

- (a) This chapter does not require a school board to conduct an open meeting to deliberate in a case:
  - (1) involving discipline of a public school child; or
  - (2) in which a complaint or charge is brought against an employee of the school district by another employee and the complaint or charge directly results in a need for a hearing.
- (b) Subsection (a) does not apply if an open hearing is requested in writing by a parent or guardian of the child or by the employee against whom the complaint or charge is brought.

**§ 551.0821. School Board: Personally Identifiable Information about Public School Student**

- (a) This chapter does not require a school board to conduct an open meeting to deliberate a matter regarding a public school student if personally identifiable information about the student will necessarily be revealed by the deliberation.
- (b) Directory information about a public school student is considered to be personally identifiable information about the student for purposes of Subsection (a) only if a parent or guardian of the student, or the student if the student has attained 18 years of age, has informed the school board, the school district, or a school in the school district that the directory information should not be released without prior consent. In this subsection, “directory information” has the meaning assigned by the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (20 U.S.C. Section 1232g), as amended.

- (c) Subsection (a) does not apply if an open meeting about the matter is requested in writing by the parent or guardian of the student or by the student if the student has attained 18 years of age.

**§ 551.083. Certain School Boards; Closed Meeting Regarding Consultation With Representative of Employee Group**

This chapter does not require a school board operating under a consultation agreement authorized by Section 13.901, Education Code,<sup>561</sup> to conduct an open meeting to deliberate the standards, guidelines, terms, or conditions the board will follow, or instruct its representatives to follow, in a consultation with representative of an employee group.

**§ 551.084. Investigation; Exclusion of Witness From Hearing**

A governmental body that is investigating a matter may exclude a witness from a hearing during the examination of another witness in the investigation.

**§ 551.085. Governing Board of Certain Providers of Health Care Services**

- (a) This chapter does not require the governing board of a municipal hospital, municipal hospital authority, county hospital, county hospital authority, hospital district created under general or special law, or nonprofit health maintenance organization created under Section 534.101, Health and Safety Code, to conduct an open meeting to deliberate:
  - (1) pricing or financial planning information relating to a bid or negotiation for the arrangement or provision of services or product lines to another person if disclosure of the information would give advantage to competitors of the hospital, hospital district, or nonprofit health maintenance organization; or
  - (2) information relating to a proposed new service or product line of the hospital, hospital district, or nonprofit health maintenance organization before publicly announcing the service or product line.
- (b) The governing board of a health maintenance organization created under Section 281.0515, Health and Safety Code, that is subject to this chapter is not required to conduct an open meeting to deliberate information described by Subsection (a).

**§ 551.086. Certain Public Power Utilities; Competitive Matters**

- (a) Notwithstanding anything in this chapter to the contrary, the rules provided by this section apply to competitive matters of a public power utility.
- (b) In this section:

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<sup>561</sup> Now, repealed.



- (1) “Public power utility” means an entity providing electric or gas utility services that is subject to the provisions of this chapter.
- (2) “Public power utility governing body” means the board of trustees or other applicable governing body, including a city council, of a public power utility.
- (c) This chapter does not require a public power utility governing body to conduct an open meeting to deliberate, vote, or take final action on any competitive matter, as that term is defined by Section 552.133. This section does not limit the right of a public power utility governing body to hold a closed session under any other exception provided for in this chapter.
- (d) For purposes of Section 551.041, the notice of the subject matter of an item that may be considered as a competitive matter under this section is required to contain no more than a general representation of the subject matter to be considered, such that the competitive activity of the public power utility with respect to the issue in question is not compromised or disclosed.
- (e) With respect to municipally owned utilities subject to this section, this section shall apply whether or not the municipally owned utility has adopted customer choice or serves in a multiply certificated service area under the Utilities Code.
- (f) Nothing in this section is intended to preclude the application of the enforcement and remedies provisions of Subchapter G.

**§ 551.087. Deliberation Regarding Economic Development Negotiations; Closed Meeting**

This chapter does not require a governmental body to conduct an open meeting:

- (1) to discuss or deliberate regarding commercial or financial information that the governmental body has received from a business prospect that the governmental body seeks to have locate, stay, or expand in or near the territory of the governmental body and with which the governmental body is conducting economic development negotiations; or
- (2) to deliberate the offer of a financial or other incentive to business prospect described by Subdivision (1).

**§ 551.088. Deliberations Regarding Test Item**

This chapter does not require a governmental body to conduct an open meeting to deliberate a test item or information related to a test item if the governmental body believes that the test item may be included in a test the governmental body administers to individuals who seek to obtain or renew a license or certificate that is necessary to engage in an activity.

**§ 551.089. Deliberation Regarding Security Devices or Security Audits; Closed Meeting**

This chapter does not require a governmental body to conduct an open meeting to deliberate:

- (1) security assessments or deployments relating to information resources technology;
- (2) network security information as described by Section 2059.055(b); or
- (3) the deployment, or specific occasions for implementation, of security personnel, critical infrastructure, or security devices.

**§ 551.090. Enforcement Committee Appointed by Texas State Board of Public Accountancy**

This chapter does not require an enforcement committee appointed by the Texas State Board of Public Accountancy to conduct an open meeting to investigate and deliberate a disciplinary action under Subchapter K, Chapter 901, Occupations Code, relating to the enforcement of Chapter 901 or the rules of the Texas State Board of Public Accountancy.

**§ 551.091. Commissioners Courts: Deliberation Regarding Disaster or Emergency**

- (a) This section applies only to the commissioners court of a county:
  - (1) for which the governor has issued an executive order or proclamation declaring a state of disaster or a state of emergency; and
  - (2) in which transportation to the meeting location is dangerous or difficult as a result of the disaster or emergency.
- (b) Notwithstanding any other provision of this chapter and subject to Subsection (c), a commissioners court to which this section applies may hold an open or closed meeting, including a telephone conference call, solely to deliberate about disaster or emergency conditions and related public safety matters that require an immediate response without complying with the requirements of this chapter, including the requirement to provide notice before the meeting or to first convene in an open meeting.
- (c) To the extent practicable under the circumstances, the commissioners court shall provide reasonable public notice of a meeting under this section and if the meeting is an open meeting allow members of the public and the press to observe the meeting.
- (d) The commissioners court:
  - (1) may not vote or take final action on a matter during a meeting under this section; and
  - (2) shall prepare and keep minutes or a recording of a meeting under this section and make the minutes or recording available to the public as soon as practicable.
- (e) This section expires September 1, 2027.

## **SUBCHAPTER E. PROCEDURES RELATING TO CLOSED MEETING**

### **§ 551.101. Requirement to First Convene in Open Meeting**

If a closed meeting is allowed under this chapter, a governmental body may not conduct the closed meeting unless a quorum of the governmental body first convenes in an open meeting for which notice has been given as provided by this chapter and during which the presiding officer publicly:

- (1) announces that a closed meeting will be held; and
- (2) identifies the section or sections of this chapter under which the closed meeting is held.

### **§ 551.102. Requirement to Vote or Take Final Action in Open Meeting**

A final action, decision, or vote on a matter deliberated in a closed meeting under this chapter may only be made in an open meeting that is held in compliance with the notice provisions of this chapter.

### **§ 551.103. Certified Agenda or Recording Required**

- (a) A governmental body shall either keep a certified agenda or make a recording of the proceedings of each closed meeting, except for a private consultation permitted under Section 551.071.
- (b) The presiding officer shall certify that an agenda kept under Subsection (a) is a true and correct record of the proceedings.
- (c) The certified agenda must include:
  - (1) a statement of the subject matter of each deliberation;
  - (2) a record of any further action taken; and
  - (3) an announcement by the presiding officer at the beginning and the end of the meeting indicating the date and time.
- (d) A recording made under Subsection (a) must include announcements by the presiding officer at the beginning and the end of the meeting indicating the date and time.

### **§ 551.104. Certified Agenda or Recording; Preservation; Disclosure**

- (a) A governmental body shall preserve the certified agenda or recording of a closed meeting for at least two years after the date of the meeting. If an action involving the meeting is brought within that period, the governmental body shall preserve the certified agenda or recording while the action is pending.
- (b) In litigation in a district court involving an alleged violation of this chapter, the court:

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- (1) is entitled to make an in camera inspection of the certified agenda or recording;
  - (2) may admit all or part of the certified agenda or recording as evidence, on entry of a final judgment; and
  - (3) may grant legal or equitable relief it considers appropriate, including an order that the governmental body make available to the public the certified agenda or recording of any part of a meeting that was required to be open under this chapter.
- (c) The certified agenda or recording of a closed meeting is available for public inspection and copying only under a court order issued under Subsection (b)(3).

**SUBCHAPTER F. MEETINGS USING TELEPHONE, VIDEOCONFERENCE, OR INTERNET**

**§ 551.121. Governing Board of Institution of Higher Education; Board for Lease of University Lands; Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board: Special Meeting for Immediate Action**

- (a) In this section, “governing board,” “institution of higher education,” and “university system” have the meanings assigned by Section 61.003, Education Code.
- (b) This chapter does not prohibit the governing board of an institution of higher education, the Board for Lease of University Lands, or the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board from holding an open or closed meeting by telephone conference call.
- (c) A meeting held by telephone conference call authorized by this section may be held only if:
  - (1) the meeting is a special called meeting and immediate action is required; and
  - (2) the convening at one location of a quorum of the governing board, the Board for Lease of University Lands, or the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, as applicable, is difficult or impossible.
- (d) The telephone conference call meeting is subject to the notice requirements applicable to other meetings.
- (e) The notice of a telephone conference call meeting of a governing board must specify as the location of the meeting the location where meetings of the governing board are usually held. For a meeting of the governing board of a university system, the notice must specify as the location of the meeting the board’s conference room at the university system office. For a meeting of the Board for Lease of University Lands, the notice must specify as the location of the meeting a suitable conference or meeting room at The University of Texas System office. For a meeting of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating

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Board, the notice must specify as the location of the meeting a suitable conference or meeting room at the offices of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board or at an institution of higher education.

- (f) Each part of the telephone conference call meeting that is required to be open to the public must be:
  - (1) audible to the public at the location specified in the notice of the meeting as the location of the meeting;
  - (2) broadcast over the Internet in the manner prescribed by Section 551.128; and
  - (3) recorded and made available to the public in an online archive located on the Internet website of the entity holding the meeting.

**§ 551.122. Governing Board of Junior College District: Quorum Present at One Location**

- (a) This chapter does not prohibit the governing board of a junior college district from holding an open or closed meeting by telephone conference call.
- (b) A meeting held by telephone conference call authorized by this section may be held only if a quorum of the governing board is physically present at the location where meetings of the board are usually held.
- (c) The telephone conference call meeting is subject to the notice requirements applicable to other meetings.
- (d) Each part of the telephone conference call meeting that is required to be open to the public shall be audible to the public at the location where the quorum is present and shall be recorded. The recording shall be made available to the public.
- (e) The location of the meeting shall provide two-way communication during the entire telephone conference call meeting, and the identification of each party to the telephone conference shall be clearly stated before the party speaks.
- (f) The authority provided by this section is in addition to the authority provided by Section 551.121.
- (g) A member of a governing board of a junior college district who participates in a board meeting by telephone conference call but is not physically present at the location of the meeting is considered to be absent from the meeting for purposes of Section 130.0845, Education Code.

**§ 551.123. Texas Board of Criminal Justice**

- (a) The Texas Board of Criminal Justice may hold an open or closed emergency meeting by telephone conference call.

- (b) The portion of the telephone conference call meeting that is open shall be recorded. The recording shall be made available to be heard by the public at one or more places designated by the board.

**§ 551.124. Board of Pardons and Paroles**

At the call of the presiding officer of the Board of Pardons and Paroles, the board may hold a hearing on clemency matters by telephone conference call.

**§ 551.125. Other Governmental Body**

- (a) Except as otherwise provided by this subchapter, this chapter does not prohibit a governmental body from holding an open or closed meeting by telephone conference call.
- (b) A meeting held by telephone conference call may be held only if:
  - (1) an emergency or public necessity exists within the meaning of Section 551.045 of this chapter; and
  - (2) the convening at one location of a quorum of the governmental body is difficult or impossible; or
  - (3) the meeting is held by an advisory board.
- (c) The telephone conference call meeting is subject to the notice requirements applicable to other meetings.
- (d) The notice of the telephone conference call meeting must specify as the location of the meeting the location where meetings of the governmental body are usually held.
- (e) Each part of the telephone conference call meeting that is 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 and shall be recorded. The recording shall be made available to the public.
- (f) The location designated in the notice as the location of the meeting shall provide two-way communication during the entire telephone conference call meeting and the identification of each party to the telephone conference call shall be clearly stated prior to speaking.

**§ 551.126. Higher Education Coordinating Board**

- (a) In this section, “board” means the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.
- (b) The board may hold an open meeting by telephone conference call or video conference call in order to consider a higher education impact statement if the preparation of a higher education impact statement by the board is to be provided under the rules of either the house of representatives or the senate.

- (c) A meeting held by telephone conference call must comply with the procedures described in Section 551.125.
- (d) A meeting held by video conference call is subject to the notice requirements applicable to other meetings. In addition, a meeting held by video conference call shall:
  - (1) be visible and audible to the public at the location specified in the notice of the meeting as the location of the meeting;
  - (2) be recorded by audio and video; and
  - (3) have two-way audio and video communications with each participant in the meeting during the entire meeting.

**§ 551.127. Videoconference Call**

- (a) Except as otherwise provided by this section, this chapter does not prohibit a governmental body from holding an open or closed meeting by videoconference call.
- (a-1) A member or employee of a governmental body may participate remotely in a meeting of the governmental body by means of a videoconference call if the video and audio feed of the member's or employee's participation, as applicable, is broadcast live at the meeting and complies with the provisions of this section.
- (a-2) A member of a governmental body who participates in a meeting as provided by Subsection (a-1) shall be counted as present at the meeting for all purposes.
- (a-3) A member of a governmental body who participates in a meeting by videoconference call shall be considered absent from any portion of the meeting during which audio or video communication with the member is lost or disconnected. The governmental body may continue the meeting only if a quorum of the body remains present at the meeting location or, if applicable, continues to participate in a meeting conducted under Subsection (c).
- (b) A meeting may be held by videoconference call only if a quorum of the governmental body is physically present at one location of the meeting, except as provided by Subsection (c).
- (c) A meeting of a state governmental body or a governmental body that extends into three or more counties may be held by videoconference call only if the member of the governmental body presiding over the meeting is physically present at one location of the meeting that is open to the public during the open portions of the meeting.
- (d) A meeting held by videoconference call is subject to the notice requirements applicable to other meetings in addition to the notice requirements prescribed by this section.

- (e) The notice of a meeting to be held by videoconference call must specify as a location of the meeting the location where a quorum of the governmental body will be physically present and specify the intent to have a quorum present at that location, except that the notice of a meeting to be held by videoconference call under Subsection (c) must specify as a location of the meeting the location where the member of the governmental body presiding over the meeting will be physically present and specify the intent to have the member of the governmental body presiding over the meeting present at that location. The location where the member of the governmental body presiding over the meeting is physically present shall be open to the public during the open portions of the meeting.
- (f) Each portion of a meeting held by videoconference call that is required to be open to the public shall be visible and audible to the public at the location specified under Subsection (e). If a problem occurs that causes a meeting to no longer be visible and audible to the public at that location, the meeting must be recessed until the problem is resolved. If the problem is not resolved in six hours or less, the meeting must be adjourned.
- (g) The governmental body shall make at least an audio recording of the meeting. The recording shall be made available to the public.
- (h) The location specified under Subsection (e), and each remote location from which a member of the governmental body participates, shall have two-way audio and video communication with each other location during the entire meeting. The face of each participant in the videoconference call, while that participant is speaking, shall be clearly visible, and the voice audible, to each other participant and, during the open portion of the meeting, to the members of the public in attendance at a location of the meeting that is open to the public.
- (i) The Department of Information Resources by rule shall specify minimum standards for audio and video signals at a meeting held by videoconference call. The quality of the audio and video signals perceptible at each location of the meeting must meet or exceed those standards.
- (j) The audio and video signals perceptible by members of the public at each location of the meeting described by Subsection (h) must be of sufficient quality so that members of the public at each location can observe the demeanor and hear the voice of each participant in the open portion of the meeting.
- (k) Without regard to whether a member of the governmental body is participating in a meeting from a remote location by videoconference call, a governmental body may allow a member of the public to testify at a meeting from a remote location by videoconference call.

**§ 551.128. Internet Broadcast of Open Meeting**

- (a) In this section, “Internet” means the largest nonproprietary cooperative public computer network, popularly known as the Internet.



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- (b) Except as provided by Subsection (b-1) and subject to the requirements of this section, a governmental body may broadcast an open meeting over the Internet.
- (b-1) A transit authority or department subject to Chapter 451, 452, 453, or 460, Transportation Code, an elected school district board of trustees for a school district that has a student enrollment of 10,000 or more, an elected governing body of a home-rule municipality that has a population of 50,000 or more, or a county commissioners court for a county that has a population of 125,000 or more shall:
  - (1) make a video and audio recording of reasonable quality of each:
    - (A) regularly scheduled open meeting that is not a work session or a special called meeting; and
    - (B) open meeting that is a work session or special called meeting if:
      - (i) the governmental body is an elected school district board of trustees for a school district that has a student enrollment of 10,000 or more; and
      - (ii) at the work session or special called meeting, the board of trustees votes on any matter or allows public comment or testimony; and
  - (2) make available an archived copy of the video and audio recording of each meeting described by Subsection (1) on the Internet.
- (b-2) A governmental body described by Subsection (b-1) may make available the archived recording of a meeting required by Subsection (b-1) on an existing Internet site, including a publicly accessible video-sharing or social networking site. The governmental body is not required to establish a separate Internet site and provide access to archived recordings of meetings from that site.
- (b-3) A governmental body described by Subsection (b-1) that maintains an Internet site shall make available on that site, in a conspicuous manner:
  - (1) the archived recording of each meeting to which Subsection (b-1) applies; or
  - (2) an accessible link to the archived recording of each such meeting.
- (b-4) A governmental body described by Subsection (b-1) shall:
  - (1) make the archived recording of each meeting to which Subsection (b-1) applies available on the Internet not later than seven days after the date the recording was made; and
  - (2) maintain the archived recording on the Internet for not less than two years after the date the recording was first made available.
- (b-5) A governmental body described by Subsection (b-1) is exempt from the requirements of Subsections (b-2) and (b-4) if the governmental body's failure to make the required recording of a meeting available is the result of a

catastrophe, as defined by Section 551.0411, or a technical breakdown. Following a catastrophe or breakdown, a governmental body must make all reasonable efforts to make the required recording available in a timely manner.

- (b-6) A governmental body described by Subsection (b-1) may broadcast a regularly scheduled open meeting of the body on television.
- (c) Except as provided by Subsection (b-2), a governmental body that broadcasts a meeting over the Internet shall establish an Internet site and provide access to the broadcast from that site. The governmental body shall provide on the Internet site the same notice of the meeting that the governmental body is required to post under Subchapter C. The notice on the Internet must be posted within the time required for posting notice under Subchapter C.

**§ 551.1281. Governing Board of General Academic Teaching Institution or University System: Internet Posting of Meeting Materials and Broadcast of Open Meeting**

- (a) In this section, “general academic teaching institution” and “university system” have the meanings assigned by Section 61.003, Education Code.
- (b) The governing board of a general academic teaching institution or of a university system that includes one or more component general academic teaching institutions, for any regularly scheduled meeting of the governing board for which notice is required under this chapter, shall:
  - (1) post as early as practicable in advance of the meeting on the Internet website of the institution or university system, as applicable, any written agenda and related supplemental written materials provided to the governing board members in advance of the meeting by the institution or system for the members’ use during the meeting;
  - (2) broadcast the meeting, other than any portions of the meeting closed to the public as authorized by law, over the Internet in the manner prescribed by Section 551.128; and
  - (3) record the broadcast and make the recording publicly available in an online archive located on the institution’s or university system’s Internet website.
- (c) Subsection (b)(1) does not apply to written materials that the general counsel or other appropriate attorney for the institution or university system certifies are confidential or may be withheld from public disclosure under Chapter 552.
- (d) The governing board of a general academic teaching institution or of a university system is not required to comply with the requirements of this section if that compliance is not possible because of an act of God, force majeure, or a similar cause not reasonably within the governing board’s control.

**§ 551.1282. Governing Board of Junior College District: Internet Posting of Meeting Materials and Broadcast of Open Meeting**

- (a) This section applies only to the governing board of a junior college district with a total student enrollment of more than 20,000 in any semester of the preceding academic year.
- (b) A governing board to which this section applies, for any regularly scheduled meeting of the governing board for which notice is required under this chapter, shall:
  - (1) post as early as practicable in advance of the meeting on the Internet website of the district any written agenda and related supplemental written materials provided by the district to the board members for the members' use during the meeting;
  - (2) broadcast the meeting, other than any portions of the meeting closed to the public as authorized by law, over the Internet in the manner prescribed by Section 551.128; and
  - (3) record the broadcast and make that recording publicly available in an online archive located on the district's Internet website.
- (c) Subsection (b)(1) does not apply to written materials that the general counsel or other appropriate attorney for the district certifies are confidential or may be withheld from public disclosure under Chapter 552.
- (d) The governing board of a junior college district is not required to comply with the requirements of this section if that compliance is not possible because of an act of God, force majeure, or a similar cause not reasonably within the governing board's control.

**§ 551.1283. Governing Body of Certain Water Districts: Internet Posting of Meeting Materials; Recording of Certain Hearings**

- (a) This section only applies to a special purpose district subject to Chapter 51, 53, 54, or 55, Water Code, that has a population of 500 or more.
- (b) On written request of a district resident made to the district not later than the third day before a public hearing to consider the adoption of an ad valorem tax rate, the district shall make an audio recording of reasonable quality of the hearing and provide the recording to the resident in an electronic format not later than the fifth business day after the date of the hearing. The district shall maintain a copy of the recording for at least one year after the date of the hearing.
- (c) A district shall post the minutes of the meeting of the governing body to the district's Internet website if the district maintains an Internet website.

- (d) A district that maintains an Internet website shall post on that website links to any other Internet website or websites the district uses to comply with Section 2051.202 of this code and Section 26.18, Tax Code.
- (e) Nothing in this chapter shall prohibit a district from allowing a person to watch or listen to a board meeting by video or telephone conference call.

**§ 551.129. Consultations Between Governmental Body and Its Attorney**

- (a) A governmental body may use a telephone conference call, video conference call, or communications over the Internet to conduct a public consultation with its attorney in an open meeting of the governmental body or a private consultation with its attorney in a closed meeting of the governmental body.
- (b) Each part of the public consultation by a governmental body with its attorney in an open meeting of the governmental body under Subsection (a) must be audible to the public at the location specified in the notice of the meeting as the location of the meeting.
- (c) Subsection (a) does not:
  - (1) authorize the members of a governmental body to conduct a meeting of the governmental body by telephone conference call, video conference call, or communications over the Internet; or
  - (2) create an exception to the application of this subchapter.
- (d) Subsection (a) does not apply to a consultation with an attorney who is an employee of the governmental body.
- (e) For purposes of Subsection (d), an attorney who receives compensation for legal services performed, from which employment taxes are deducted by the governmental body, is an employee of the governmental body.
- (f) Subsection (d) does not apply to:
  - (1) the governing board of an institution of higher education as defined by Section 61.003, Education Code; or
  - (2) the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

**§ 551.130. Board of Trustees of Teacher Retirement System of Texas: Quorum Present at One Location**

- (a) In this section, “board” means the board of trustees of the Teacher Retirement System of Texas.
- (b) This chapter does not prohibit the board or a board committee from holding an open or closed meeting by telephone conference call.
- (c) The board or a board committee may hold a meeting by telephone conference call only if a quorum of the applicable board or board committee is physically present at one location of the meeting,

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- (d) A telephone conference call meeting is subject to the notice requirements applicable to other meetings. The notice must also specify:
  - (1) the location of the meeting where a quorum of the board or board committee, as applicable, will be physically present; and
  - (2) the intent to have a quorum present at that location.
- (e) The location where a quorum is physically present must be open to the public during the open portions of a telephone conference call meeting. The open portions of the meeting must be audible to the public at the location where the quorum is present and be recorded at that location. The recording shall be made available to the public.
- (f) The location of the meeting shall provide two-way communication during the entire telephone conference call meeting, and the identification of each party to the telephone conference call must be clearly stated before the party speaks.
- (g) The authority provided by this section is in addition to the authority provided by Section 551.125.
- (h) A member of the board who participates in a board or board committee meeting by telephone conference call but is not physically present at the location of the meeting is not considered to be absent from the meeting for any purpose. The vote of a member of the board who participates in a board or board committee meeting by telephone conference call is counted for the purpose of determining the number of votes cast on a motion or other proposition before the board or board committee.
- (i) A member of the board may participate remotely by telephone conference call instead of by being physically present at the location of a board meeting for not more than one board meeting per calendar year. A board member who participates remotely in any portion of a board meeting by telephone conference call is considered to have participated in the entire board meeting by telephone conference call. For purposes of the limit provided by this subsection, remote participation by telephone conference call in a meeting of a board committee does not count as remote participation by telephone conference call in a meeting of the board, even if:
  - (1) a quorum of the full board attends the board committee meeting; or
  - (2) notice of the board committee meeting is also posted as notice of a board meeting.
- (j) A person who is not a member of the board may speak at the meeting from a remote location by telephone conference call.

**§ 551.131. Water Districts**

- (a) In this section, “water district” means a river authority, groundwater conservation district, water control and improvement district, or other district

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created under Section 52, Article III, or Section 59, Article XVI, Texas Constitution.

- (b) This section applies only to a water district whose territory includes land in three or more counties.
- (c) A meeting held by telephone conference call or video conference call authorized by this section may be held only if:
  - (1) the meeting is a special called meeting and immediate action is required; and
  - (2) the convening at one location of a quorum of the governing body of the applicable water district is difficult or impossible.
- (d) A meeting held by telephone conference call must otherwise comply with the procedures under Sections 551.125(c), (d), (e), and (f).
- (e) A meeting held by video conference call is subject to the notice requirements applicable to other meetings. In addition, a meeting held by video conference call shall:
  - (1) be visible and audible to the public at the location specified in the notice of the meeting as the location of the meeting;
  - (2) be recorded by audio and video; and
  - (3) have two-way audio and video communications with each participant in the meeting during the entire meeting.

**SUBCHAPTER G. ENFORCEMENT AND REMEDIES; CRIMINAL VIOLATIONS**

**§ 551.141. Action Voidable**

An action taken by a governmental body in violation of this chapter is voidable.

**§ 551.142. Mandamus; Injunction**

- (a) An interested person, including a member of the news media, may bring an action by mandamus or injunction to stop, prevent, or reverse a violation or threatened violation of this chapter by members of a governmental body.
- (b) The court may assess costs of litigation and reasonable attorney fees incurred by a plaintiff or defendant who substantially prevails in an action under Subsection (a). In exercising its discretion, the court shall consider whether the action was brought in good faith and whether the conduct of the governmental body had a reasonable basis in law.
- (c) The attorney general may bring an action by mandamus or injunction to stop, prevent, or reverse a violation or threatened violation of Section 551.045(a-1) by members of a governmental body.

- (d) A suit filed by the attorney general under Subsection (c) must be filed in a district court of Travis County.

**§ 551.143. Prohibited Series of Communications; Offense; Penalty**

- (a) A member of a governmental body commits an offense if the member:
  - (1) knowingly engages in at least one communication among a series of communications that each occur outside of a meeting authorized by this chapter and that concern an issue within the jurisdiction of the governmental body in which the members engaging in the individual communications constitute fewer than a quorum of members but the members engaging in the series of communications constitute a quorum of the members; and
  - (2) knew at the time the member engaged in the communication that the series of communications:
    - (A) involved or would involve a quorum; and
    - (B) would constitute a deliberation once a quorum of members engaged in the series of communications.
- (b) An offense under Subsection (a) is a misdemeanor punishable by:
  - (1) a fine of not less than \$100 or more than \$500;
  - (2) confinement in the county jail for not less than one month or more than six months; or
  - (3) both the fine and confinement.

**§ 551.144. Closed Meeting; Offense; Penalty**

- (a) A member of a governmental body commits an offense if a closed meeting is not permitted under this chapter and the member knowingly:
  - (1) calls or aids in calling or organizing the closed meeting, whether it is a special or called closed meeting;
  - (2) closes or aids in closing the meeting to the public, if it is a regular meeting; or
  - (3) participates in the closed meeting, whether it is a regular, special, or called meeting.
- (b) An offense under Subsection (a) is a misdemeanor punishable by:
  - (1) a fine of not less than \$100 or more than \$500;
  - (2) confinement in the county jail for not less than one month or more than six months; or
  - (3) both the fine and confinement.

- (c) It is an affirmative defense to prosecution under Subsection (a) that the member of the governmental body acted in reasonable reliance on a court order or a written interpretation of this chapter contained in an opinion of a court of record, the attorney general, or the attorney for the governmental body.

**§ 551.145. Closed Meeting Without Certified Agenda or Recording; Offense; Penalty**

- (a) A member of a governmental body commits an offense if the member participates in a closed meeting of the governmental body knowing that a certified agenda of the closed meeting is not being kept or that a recording of the closed meeting is not being made.
- (b) An offense under Subsection (a) is a Class C misdemeanor.

**§ 551.146. Disclosure of Certified Agenda or Recording of Closed Meeting; Offense; Penalty; Civil Liability**

- (a) An individual, corporation, or partnership that without lawful authority knowingly discloses to a member of the public the certified agenda or recording of a meeting that was lawfully closed to the public under this chapter:
  - (1) commits an offense; and
  - (2) is liable to a person injured or damaged by the disclosure for:
    - (A) actual damages, including damages for personal injury or damage, lost wages, defamation, or mental or other emotional distress;
    - (B) reasonable attorney fees and court costs; and
    - (C) at the discretion of the trier of fact, exemplary damages.
- (b) An offense under Subsection (a)(1) is a Class B misdemeanor.
- (c) It is a defense to prosecution under Subsection (a)(1) and an affirmative defense to a civil action under Subsection (a)(2) that:
  - (1) the defendant had good reason to believe the disclosure was lawful; or
  - (2) the disclosure was the result of a mistake of fact concerning the nature or content of the certified agenda or recording.



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## Appendix C: Text of Governor Abbott's 2020 Suspension Letter<sup>562</sup>

Office of the Attorney General (OAG):

The Office of the Governor is in receipt of OAG's request to temporarily suspend certain open-meeting provisions of Texas law. OAG asserts that strict compliance with these laws could prevent, hinder, or delay necessary action by numerous governmental bodies in relation to efforts to cope with the COVID-19 disaster. State and local officials can slow the spread of COVID-19 by avoiding meetings that bring many people into congregate settings. OAG has identified provisions that frustrate this public-health goal by requiring that government officials, members of their staff, and members of the public be physically present at a specified meeting location. OAG's request would relax these open-meeting requirements to allow for telephonic or videoconference meetings of governmental bodies, without the need for face-to-face contact during a pandemic.

COVID-19 notwithstanding, Texans deserve transparency in government. To that end, OAG's request would leave important open-meeting protections in place. A governmental body would still be required to give the public written notice before holding a telephonic or videoconference meeting. *See, e.g.*, TEX. GOV'T CODE §§ 551.041, 551.043–551.044, 551.125(c), 551.127(d), 551.141. A governmental body would still have to provide the public with a recording of the telephonic or videoconference meeting. *See, e.g., id.* §§ 551.125(e), 551.127(g). And members of the public would still be entitled to participate and address the governmental body during the telephonic or videoconference meeting, perhaps through a dial-in number or videoconference software. *See, e.g., id.* §§ 551.007(b), 551.125(e).

Accordingly, the Office of the Governor agrees that it is appropriate to suspend certain open-meeting provisions, subject in each case to the following conditions that will apply to any governmental body invoking this suspension:

- The requisite notice of a telephonic or videoconference meeting must comply with existing law on meeting notices and also must include in the meeting notice a toll-free dial-in number or a free-of-charge videoconference link that provides two-way communication for members of the public to both hear the meeting and address the governmental body.
- If a governmental body prepares an agenda packet that would have publicly circulated in hard copy at a face-to-face meeting, an electronic copy of the agenda packet must be posted with the agenda to allow members of the public to follow along with the telephonic or videoconference meeting.

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<sup>562</sup> Though the suspensions have been lifted, the text of the Governor's letter is reproduced here for reference. As of September 1, 2021, the Act is applicable in its entirety.



*Appendix C: Governor Abbott's Suspension Letter*

- The public must be provided access to a recording of any telephonic or videoconference meeting.

In answering open-meeting questions during this disaster, OAG should remind state and local officials of the many requirements that remain in place during this temporary suspension. OAG's request recognizes that transparency is essential at this time, even if face-to-face contact is not.

In accordance with section 418.016 of the Texas Government Code, and subject to the conditions set forth above, the Office of the Governor suspends the following statutes to the extent necessary to allow telephonic or videoconference meetings and to avoid congregate settings in physical locations:

- those statutes that require a quorum or a presiding officer to be physically present at the specified location of the meeting; provided, however, that a quorum still must participate in the telephonic or videoconference meeting
  - TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.122(b)
  - TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.127(a-3), (b)–(c), (e), (h)–(i)
  - TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.130(c)–(d), (i)
  - TEX. GOV'T CODE § 322.003(d), (e)(2)
  - TEX. GOV'T CODE § 845.007(f)(2)
  - TEX. GOV'T CODE § 855.007(f)(2)
  - TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 74.102(f)
  - TEX. INS. CODE § 2151.057(d)(1)
  - TEX. LOCAL GOV'T CODE § 379B.0085(a)
- those that require physical posting of a notice; provided, however, that the online notice must include a toll-free dial-in number or a free-of-charge videoconference link, along with an electronic copy of any agenda packet
  - TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.043(b)(2)–(3)
  - TEX. GOV'T CODE §§ 551.049–551.051
- those that require the telephonic or videoconference meeting to be audible to members of the public who are physically present at the specified location of the meeting; provided, however, that the dial-in number or videoconference link provided in the notice must make the meeting audible to members of the public and allow for their two-way communication; and further provided that a recording of the meeting must be made available to the public
  - TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.121(f)(1)

*Appendix C: Governor Abbott's Suspension Letter*

- TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.122(d)
  - TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.125(e)–(f)
  - TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.126(d)(1)
  - TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.127(f), (j)
  - TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.130(e)–(f)
  - TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.131(e)(1)
  - TEX. GOV'T CODE § 322.003(e)(3)
  - TEX. GOV'T CODE § 436.054(e)
  - TEX. GOV'T CODE § 845.007(f)(3)
  - TEX. GOV'T CODE § 855.007(f)(3)
  - TEX. AGRIC. CODE § 41.061(c)–(d)
  - TEX. AGRIC. CODE § 41.1565(c)–(d)
  - TEX. AGRIC. CODE § 41.205(d)–(e)
  - TEX. AGRIC. CODE § 62.0021(c)–(d)
  - TEX. EDUC. CODE § 66.08(h)(2)(B)
  - TEX. FAM. CODE § 264.504(e)
  - TEX. FIN. CODE § 11.106(c)(4)–(5)
  - TEX. FIN. CODE § 154.355(d)(2)–(3)
  - TEX. INS. CODE § 462.059(a)(1), (c)
  - TEX. INS. CODE § 463.059(d)
  - TEX. INS. CODE § 2151.057(e)
  - TEX. INS. CODE § 2210.1051(b)(2)–(3)
  - TEX. INS. CODE § 2211.0521(b)(2)–(3)
  - TEX. LOCAL GOV'T CODE § 379B.0085(b)(2)–(3)
  - TEX. SPEC. LOC. DIST. CODE § 9601.056(c)
  - TEX. TRANSP. CODE § 173.106(e)–(f)
  - TEX. TRANSP. CODE § 366.262(c)–(d)
  - TEX. TRANSP. CODE § 370.262(c)–(d)
- those that may be interpreted to require face-to-face interaction between members of the public and public officials; provided, however, that governmental bodies must offer alternative methods of communicating with their public officials
    - TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.007(b)
    - TEX. GOV'T CODE § 551.125(b)(1), (d)

This suspension is in effect until terminated by the Office of the Governor or until the March 13, 2020 disaster declaration is lifted or expires.

Thank you,  
James P. Sullivan

*Appendix C: Governor Abbott's Suspension Letter*

Deputy General Counsel  
Office of Governor Greg Abbott