

MEETING PROCEDURES, ORGANIZATION, AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

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INTRODUCTION

Meetings are a key part of the county governing process. Through meetings, county and local governing authorities and committees¹ can debate issues, recommend policy changes, and make decisions about county government operations and how tax dollars are spent. However, only the county governing authority can make final decisions. At their core, meetings also provide opportunities for the public to observe and participate in the governing process, which fosters interest and increases participation in county government.

Meetings greatly benefit the county governing authority by providing a forum to debate, receive public input, and make decisions. However, meetings also offer the potential for undue conflict and confusion if proper meeting procedures are not in place. Therefore, it is essential to adopt and use procedures that provide clear guidelines on how meetings are to be organized and managed. Well-defined meeting procedures can also ensure that items brought before the county governing authority are properly adopted, participants' time is respected, and the public can properly engage in the process.

This chapter is a high-level overview of meeting procedures, organization, and management. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a basic understanding of county meetings, including:

- Common types of county meetings.
- How to conduct a meeting — procedures, preparation, and legal requirements.
- Who should participate and their roles.
- Best practices for effective meeting management.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the Open Meetings and Open Records Chapter. The content and recommendations provided within each chapter, while distinct, reinforce best practices and legal requirements. For an in-depth review of adopting and effectively incorporating meeting procedures see the [ACCG Parliamentary Procedure for Counties Guide](#) and [ACCG Meetings Organization and Public Access for Counties Guide](#).

For convenience, “county governing authority” will be used to represent all county governing entities described in this chapter — boards of commissioners, sole commissioners, and consolidated governments, as well as other county boards, authorities, agencies, and commissions.

COUNTY MEETINGS

Before meeting procedures can be discussed, it is necessary to understand what constitutes a meeting and the different types of meetings commonly used by county

governing authorities. Georgia law defines a meeting as a gathering of a quorum of an agency's governing body — or a committee it has created — where official business, policy, or public matter is formulated, presented, discussed, or voted upon.² A quorum is the minimum number of people required for any official business or action to take place. Not all gatherings that include a quorum are considered meetings, such as social events, church services, etc. However, any gathering of a quorum in which county business is discussed or votes are taken qualifies as a meeting.³

Regardless of what type of meeting is being held, meetings are required to be open to the public with very few exceptions.⁴ The state law that provides for meeting requirements is referred to as the Open Meetings Law and must be followed by all county governing authorities.⁵ Additional information regarding the Open Meetings Law can be found in the Open Meetings and Open Records Chapter and in the [ACCG Open Meetings and Open Records Guide](#).

Common Types of County Meetings

Meetings are necessary to effectively manage, debate, and discuss county business. They also can be used to disseminate information, educate the public, or gain feedback on specific issues.

Regularly Scheduled Meetings

Regularly scheduled meetings with county governing authorities are held on a fixed schedule to conduct routine county business, such as adoption of contracts and grants, passage of ordinances and resolutions, and reports from department heads on ongoing projects. These meetings may include work sessions, agenda setting meetings, and committee meetings. The meetings may occur once a month or several times a month. For example, a county may have regularly scheduled meetings on the second and fourth Thursday of each month at 6:00 pm and work sessions on the second and fourth Tuesday at 10:00 am. Agenda-setting meetings may be held two weeks prior to the monthly county governing authority meeting. Committees may have regularly scheduled meetings as well. For example, the finance and budget committees made up of staff and elected officials may meet the first Monday of every month, or a park and recreation advisory committee consisting of members of the public may meet the 15th of each month.

The frequency and timing of meetings depend on the requirements provided for in the county's local enabling Act or set by an ordinance or resolution.

Work Session and Agenda-Setting Meetings

County governing authorities use work sessions and agenda-setting meetings to help better prepare for regularly scheduled meetings. These meetings allow county government authority members to analyze issues and ask staff in-depth questions about

proposals to come before them at the regularly scheduled meeting or a later date. By delving deeper into issues in work sessions, members are better informed and prepared to make decisions for official action. This is especially true of complex issues, such as the adoption of financial policies.

It is also helpful to use work sessions for issues that will require future action. For example, a department head may share information about a program or grant that could benefit the county and would require an application by the county at a future date. By having this discussion in advance of the regularly scheduled meeting — without the pressure to act immediately — both staff and members of the county governing authority have ample time to discuss issues, challenges, or respective benefits. Similarly, agenda-setting meetings allow for discussion of agenda items in advance of the regularly held meeting and what items should be included, removed, or added.

While neither work session nor agenda setting meetings may result in final action by the county governing authority, both meetings are still subject to requirements of the Open Meetings Law because county business is being discussed.⁶

Special Called Meetings

A special called meeting is typically set to discuss and vote on a specific issue. Such meetings may be called to allow the county governing authority to act on a pressing matter that needs to be addressed before the next regularly scheduled meeting — for example, adoption of a contract that must go into effect immediately or an emergency situation such as a hurricane or a pandemic. Special called meetings are additionally used to provide adequate time to discuss an issue that is expected to require lengthy debate or significant public input, such as the location of a new public park or what projects to include in the next special purpose local option sales tax (SPLOST).

Committee Meetings

County governing authorities can create committees to help develop policy recommendations and research issues on behalf of the county. These committees may serve as standing committees, such as a budget or finance committee. They may also be created for a specific purpose, such as SPLOST or TSPLOST (transportation special local option sales tax) project development or census outreach. Committees may consist of members of the county governing authority, other elected officials, staff members, members of the public, or any combination thereof, as appropriate for the purpose of the committee.

Committees cannot act on behalf of the county governing authority but are still subject to the same meeting requirements.⁷ While committees often make recommendations and provide reports, ultimately the county governing authority makes the final decision as to whether a recommendation or policy is adopted or rejected.

Public Hearings

Public hearings by county governing authorities are generally held:

1. To provide a forum for the public to voice their opinions on a county matter.
2. To serve as a fact gathering session for future action to be taken by the county governing authority.
3. To fulfill a legal requirement.

Hearings can be part of a regularly scheduled meeting of the county governing authority or may be held at a separate time and place.

Public hearings offer the perfect opportunity for the public to engage with county governing authorities. Hearings may serve as a venue for the public to comment on county issues or for the county governing authority to obtain firsthand public opinion about a county proposal. Public hearings not only enable elected and appointed officials to interface with the public directly, but also assist counties in fulfilling requirements provided in state law.

Executive Sessions

Unlike other types of meetings, executive sessions by definition are closed meetings that are not accessible to members of the public.⁸ An executive session can be called to close part of a regularly scheduled meeting — or other type of meeting — as necessary to discuss matters which require confidentiality by law. Only issues that are specifically listed in law can be discussed, which include:

- Acquisition, lease, or disposal of real estate and property.⁹
- Certain tax matters.¹⁰
- Discussion of lawsuits or other pending litigation with the county attorney.¹¹
- Certain personnel issues.¹²
- Discussion of certain records exempt from disclosure by the Open Records Law.¹³
- Cybersecurity services.¹⁴

Although the Open Meetings Law allows certain matters to be discussed in private, the county governing authority is generally required to take a public vote in open session on issues discussed in an executive session.¹⁵ The law includes specific provisions regarding how to close a meeting, what can be discussed, who should be present, and what type of documents are required to be prepared and signed. A full overview of these requirements is provided in the Open Meetings and Open Records Chapter, as well as in the [ACCG Open Meetings and Open Records Guide](#).

HOW TO CONDUCT A MEETING

Meeting management is one of the most important aspects of running an effective meeting. No one wants to attend a meeting that lasts for hours on end, has no structure, and allows attendees to talk over each other. The best way to ensure that a meeting is well managed is by having clear, concise, and consistent meeting procedures that are used in all meetings.

This section provides an overview of what procedures may be adopted, what steps should be taken in preparation for a meeting, who should participate, and best practices to apply to ensure effective meeting management. See the Open Meetings and Open Records Chapter for a specific description of executive session procedures.

Meeting Procedures

County governing authorities should adopt rules on how meetings should be conducted. These rules — generally referred to as parliamentary procedures — help staff and county governing authority members know how to participate in and effectively manage meetings.

The first step in determining what parliamentary procedures should be adopted is to verify if there is already local legislation on how the county governing authority can operate a meeting. For example, local legislation could provide quorum or majority vote requirements, or how and when the chair votes. If there is local legislation for meeting procedures, any proposed changes would need to follow those requirements, unless the legislation is changed.

Much of what may be included in meeting procedures can be based on preference. Questions to consider may include:

- What should be the order of business?
- What process should be used to prepare the agenda?
- Should consent agendas be used?
- At what point in the meeting should public comment be allowed and how much time should be allotted?
- What rules of conduct should be adopted?
- Who should serve as the parliamentarian?

When updating county governing authority meeting procedures, it is important to confirm that there is no conflict with other board procedures, such as the zoning board.¹⁶ The county attorney should be involved in any changes or modifications to a county's meeting procedures to ensure the law is being properly followed and — as noted above — no conflicts exist.

Robert's Rules of Order

Many county governing authorities choose to adopt *Robert's Rules of Order*¹⁷ as their official meeting procedures; it is well known and the preferred method to conduct meetings. However, *Robert's Rules of Order* is generally intended for larger governing bodies, such as Congress, and includes more complex motions and procedures than may be needed at the county governing level. If *Robert's Rules of Order* is adopted as the official parliamentary procedures, modifications may be needed to make it more applicable to the needs of the county governing authority.

Meeting Preparation and Requirements

The Open Meetings Law prescribes meeting time, place, and notice requirements, which can vary.¹⁸ The time and date will depend on the type of meeting and a county's local legislation or meeting procedure requirements. In general, official county business takes place at the county site (i.e., the county seat) except in emergency situations.¹⁹ Local legislation should be reviewed to determine if meetings of the county governing authority must be held at the county courthouse or other county administrative buildings when a vote will be taken or county matters are discussed.²⁰ Other types of meetings, such as public hearings or committee meetings, are also subject to the Open Meetings Law. However, there is usually greater flexibility in determining location sites because they are held for input-gathering or advisory in nature — no official or final action is authorized.

In general, meeting notices are required to be posted at the place where the meeting will be held and on the county website, if available.²¹ Notice should also be provided to the media and be available upon request. For a full discussion of meeting time, place, and notice requirements, see the Open Meetings and Open Records Chapter and the [ACCG Open Meetings and Open Records Guide](#).

Setting the Agenda

An agenda is a list of items that will be considered at a meeting and sets the purpose and priorities to be accomplished. Setting the agenda is a very important part of meeting preparation; it will guide the meeting in terms of content and timing. Before a meeting takes place, an agenda needs to be prepared and made available to the public, media, and members of the county governing authority. State law requires the meeting agenda to be posted at the county meeting site within two weeks of the meeting.²² It is also recommended that agendas be posted on the county website.

The county governing authority's adopted meeting procedures should include the following details regarding agendas:

- The order of listed agenda items (i.e., the order of business).

- How the agenda should be created and finalized — through an agenda-setting meeting, approval of the chair, or some other means.
- When, how, and to whom agenda items should be submitted.

Consent Agenda

Consideration should also be given as to whether consent agendas should be used. A consent agenda is a time-saving measure that includes several non-controversial items which can be voted on as a group rather than separately — for example, meeting minutes or privileged resolutions. If any member of the county governing authority objects to an item being included on the consent agenda, he or she can ask for that item to be removed and voted on separately.

Voting Requirements

The Open Meetings Law specifies how votes taken during a meeting should be made and recorded.²³ However, before voting can begin, a quorum must first be present. A quorum is the required minimum number of county governing authority members needed to conduct a meeting. Quorums may be set in local legislation or through adopted meeting procedures. If no quorum has been adopted, it should be a majority of the members of the county governing authority.

Once a quorum is present, the meeting can begin. All official actions taken by the county governing authority — such as the adoption of an ordinance or the approval of a contract — are required to be made in public to be considered valid and binding. As such, certain votes about issues discussed in executive session must have a vote taken in an open meeting.²⁴ For more information on executive sessions, see the Open Meetings and Open Records Chapter and the [ACCG Open Meetings and Open Records Guide](#).

All members present should vote on all proposals for which a vote is called, unless a member is abstaining due to a conflict of interest or the chair is not permitted to vote due to local legislation restrictions. The name of each person voting for or against a motion is required to be included in the minutes.²⁵ Unless the minutes show that a county governing authority member voted against a proposal or abstained, it is presumed that all members voted to approve the item.

A written summary and prompt recording of regular minutes of a meeting are required. For more details, see the Open Meetings and Open Records Chapter.

Meeting Participants

Equally important to meeting preparation is identifying who will be present and able to actively participate. Each participant has a distinct role to play in ensuring the business of the county is conducted properly and efficiently, which may vary according to the

items being discussed or type of meeting being held. Key meeting participants include county governing authority members, county staff, and the general public.

County Governing Authority Members

First and foremost, county governing authority members should be active participants. The presiding officer is charged with managing the meeting, ensuring that meeting procedures are followed and items are considered in a timely manner. Generally, the chair serves as the presiding officer unless local legislation provides for an alternative source. Whether the chair can take part in the meeting as an active voting member depends upon the local legislation or established meeting procedures. The other county governing authority members should be engaged in the meeting, and be prepared to ask questions and make decisions as needed.

County Staff

County staff serve as essential members of the meeting process. Staff help to prepare meeting documents, provide information and reports, record the actions of the meeting, and provide legal review and consultation as needed. The three staff members that generally have roles at meetings of the county governing authority are the county clerk, attorney, and the manager or administrator.

Role of the County Clerk

The county clerk is typically tasked — through meeting procedures adopted by the county governing authority — to oversee meeting preparation. While meeting responsibilities may vary by county and staff position, county clerk duties generally include soliciting meeting materials, preparing meeting packets prior to the meeting, and preparing the meeting summary. The clerk also provides the permanent record of the meeting by preparing minutes. Although the clerk is generally in charge of these requirements, counties have the option to designate an alternative staff person as part of the meeting procedures if so desired.

Role of the County Attorney

Although not all counties require it, the county attorney's presence at county governing authority meetings is highly recommended. County attorneys play a pivotal role in county government by providing legal review and advice to the county governing authority members and staff as needed. County attorneys ensure that meeting documents, agendas, and proposals to be considered are in proper form before the meeting, which can greatly reduce the number of procedural and legal issues that may arise. In addition, the county attorney should prepare and review other legal documents that come before the county governing authority, such as resolutions, ordinances, and contracts.

County attorneys are not required to serve as parliamentarians for county governing authorities, but they often do. As part of adopted meeting procedures, the county governing authority may determine who, or which position, may act as parliamentarian. The role of the parliamentarian is to advise the presiding officer (typically the chair), as well as other county governing authority members, regarding proper parliamentary procedure and process. Regardless of who fulfills the role of parliamentarian, the designated person needs to know the adopted meeting procedures.

Role of the County Manager or County Administrator

The county manager or administrator (manager/administrator) should be present at all meetings to answer questions and present reports regarding county operations. County managers/administrators often assist the county clerk by ensuring materials are prepared in advance of the meeting. Their participation includes providing guidance and professional recommendations to county governing authority members on action items that may come before them.

The county manager/administrator may also ask other staff members to participate, particularly if a staff member is the best source of information for an agenda item. For example, the finance director may be the best person to present the proposed budget for the upcoming fiscal year or the public works director may be the best choice to provide an update regarding the progress of road resurfacing projects. Although it is not required, many county governing authorities require all department heads to attend regularly scheduled meetings and work sessions to be available if questions arise.

Public Participation

Participation of the general public in local government meetings is essential to good governance. Meetings provide an important opportunity for the public to view and be a part of the government process. Meetings allow citizens to hear issues important to the community and provide a venue in which they may experience county officials making decisions on their behalf. The county governing authority and county staff must follow the requirements of the Open Meetings Law, making it easy for the public to attend, watch, and participate.

The method by which the public can participate should be part of the county's adopted meeting procedures. Details should include whether public comment is permitted, the amount of time allotted for public comment, and where in the order of business public comment may occur. State law grants the public the ability to record meetings with visual or audio equipment. However, the county government authority can establish guidelines regarding where equipment can be set up so that it does not interfere with meeting progress.²⁶

Decorum and other conduct requirements may also be incorporated into the meeting procedures to ensure that comments made by members of the county governing authority, county staff, and the public remain civil and orderly.

BEST PRACTICES FOR EFFECTIVE MEETING MANAGEMENT

Effective meeting management is a fine art, although it may appear easy when a meeting runs smoothly. Much thought and preparation goes into making sure necessary materials and documentation are readily available and that participants have the information needed to ensure a successful outcome.

Preparing the members of the county governing authority in advance and making the meeting easily accessible to the public are foundational components to hosting a successful public meeting. The best practices described in this section serve as a guide for county staff and elected officials on how to accomplish these goals.

Plan in Advance

Proper planning and preparation are key components of a well-organized meeting. Whether preparing for a work session, committee meeting, or a regularly scheduled meeting, it is crucial that enough time be allotted for both staff and members of the county governing authority to plan and prepare.

Staff must be given adequate time to prepare, review, and assemble meeting materials in advance of the meeting. This includes soliciting and gathering items for the agenda as provided for in the adopted meeting procedures, reviewing documents for proper format and content, and assembling the agenda and meeting packets. The county attorney should always be asked to review the agenda and meeting packets in advance of a meeting to identify potential procedural and legal issues that need to be addressed. A timeframe for the attorney to accomplish these tasks should be built into the planning schedule.

Members of the county governing authority also need adequate time to review materials in advance of the meeting. The timeframe to provide meeting materials may be included in the adopted county meeting procedures, but the amount of time may differ based on the type of meeting. While a committee meeting or work session may only need to have materials a few days in advance, meeting packets for regularly scheduled meetings should be provided at least a week before the meeting, if possible. Also, keep in mind that agendas are required by law to be posted within two weeks of the meeting.²⁷

Advanced planning not only helps staff to more effectively prepare meeting materials and identify potential problems ahead of the meeting, but it also provides the members of the county governing authority adequate time to thoroughly review and read meeting materials. With advanced planning, meeting participants should be well prepared to ask questions and discuss issues during the meeting.

Know the County's Meeting Procedures

Your county may have adopted the best meeting procedures in the state, but not understanding or knowing how these procedures should be applied will render them useless. Therefore, it is essential that the county attorney review the adopted meeting procedures with key staff and county governing authority members on an annual basis to ensure that everyone is familiar with and correctly practices these procedures.

Understanding meeting procedures helps meetings run smoothly. More importantly, by following the established procedures, county governing authority members can be sure that motions are properly adopted and recorded.

Failure to properly follow adopted meeting procedures can lead to challenges to any action taken during the meeting. Such challenges have the potential to invalidate decisions made by the county governing authority (e.g., a vote for a multimillion-dollar project could be set aside). There are serious consequences in failing to properly adopt measures before the county governing authority. Therefore, proper training and review of meeting procedures on a regular basis is highly recommended.

Maximize Public Access

When planning meetings, county governing authorities may want to consider how the public can be accommodated in terms of meeting times and venues. For example, for regularly scheduled meetings that are not restricted by local legislation, consider whether it is possible to rotate meeting times so that members of the public who cannot attend a daytime meeting may be able to attend the next meeting at night, or vice versa. Also, for meetings that are not required to be held at the county meeting site or may draw large crowds — such as public hearings or committee meetings — choose a venue that is large enough to accommodate the expected number of attendees.

Using digital technology — such as live streaming — or broadcasting meetings through websites, digital platforms, or public access channels, also gives the public an opportunity to view meetings if they are unable to physically attend. Many counties also work with local cable providers to broadcast county governing authority meetings multiple times throughout the month or archive meetings on the county's website or other county social media accounts to keep the public informed about county government decisions.

Be Civil and Inclusive

In order to ensure that meetings are civil and everyone feels comfortable and included, rules of conduct and decorum should be part of meeting procedures. Bad behavior — such as name-calling, being physically threatening, talking over one another, or allowing deferential treatments to some groups and not others — should not be allowed for any reason or at any time in the operation of county government and certainly not during a public meeting.

Rules of decorum should not only address how the public should conduct themselves in meetings, but also how county governing authority members and their respective chairs should behave. Profanity, name-calling, racial or discriminatory comments, calling out members, and making inciting comments should never be permitted. Decorum requirements can also state how members of the county governing authority should address one another and members of the public, as well as how members of the public may address the county governing authority.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the best meetings have proper procedures in place to direct their planning, management, and public engagement. Efforts should be made to ensure staff and members of the county governing authority know their meeting procedures and are fully prepared to participate and engage in the meeting process.

¹ County governments - boards of commissioners, sole commissioners, consolidated governments); other local government authorities - development authorities, zoning commissions, parks and recreation boards, etc.; committees - staff, commissioner, public, etc.

² O.C.G.A. § 50-14-1(a)(3)(A).

³ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-1(a)(3)(B). Statewide meetings – such as the ACCG Annual Conference, meetings with state and federal officials that take place at their state or federal office, car-pooling, inspection of public facilities, and/or social, religious, civil or other ceremonial events – are not considered to be a meeting as long as no county business is discussed or votes are taken.

⁴ Executive session meetings, staff meetings for investigative purposes, meetings of law enforcement agencies, and incidental conversation unrelated to county business are excluded from the Open Meetings Law. For more information on these excluded meetings, see the [ACCG Open Meetings and Open Records Guide](#).

⁵ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-1 et seq.

⁶ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-1(a)(3)(A).

⁷ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-1(a)(3)(A)(ii).

⁸ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-1(a)(2).

⁹ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-3 (b)(1)(B) and (C).

¹⁰ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-2(2).

¹¹ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-2 (1).

¹² O.C.G.A. § 50-14-3(b)(2).

¹³ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-3(b)(4).

¹⁴ O.C.G.A. §§ 50-14-2(b)(5); 50-18-72(a)(25)(v).

¹⁵ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-3(b)(1) and (2).

¹⁶ O.C.G.A. § 36-66-5.

¹⁷ <https://robertsrules.com>.

¹⁸ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-1(d)(1).

¹⁹ O.C.G.A. § 38-3-54.

²⁰ *Brewster v. Houston County*, 235 Ga. 68 (1975); See also O.C.G.A. § 36-4-1 et seq.; *Jackson v. Gasses*, 230 Ga. 712 (1973); *Dozier v. Norris*, 241 Ga. 230 (1978); 1983 Op. Att’y Gen. No. U83-47.

²¹ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-1(d)(1).

²² O.C.G.A. § 50-14-1(e)(1).

²³ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-1(e)(2).

²⁴ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-3(b)(1) and (2).

²⁵ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-1 (e)(2)(B).

²⁶ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-1(c).

²⁷ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-1(e)(1).