

Guide: Board-Staff Interactions & Requests

The Board as a Whole

The town manager (often through staff) strives to be responsive to individual board members' inquiries and requests. This is done so no one member or subset of the board is at an advantage or disadvantage when it comes to accessing information affecting their ability to govern, monitor, deliberate, make well-informed decisions, and lead. This is especially important when the board is not unanimous regarding their views on a topic. Please let the town manager know if you don't receive information that would have been helpful (e.g., update, event, issue, something another board member received, etc.).

"One Hour Rule"

- ✓ Requests from the mayor or commissioner(s) for information (e.g., data, research, policy or code amendments, etc.) estimated to take more than one hour to complete go to the town board for consideration and official direction.
- ✓ This allows the entire board to be aware of noteworthy interests, requests, and issues fellow commissioners may be dealing with or working on. It helps the manager/staff coordinate responses, schedule the work, and balance with daily work and priorities set in the Strategic Plan.
- ✓ If the request is estimated to take less than one hour the town manager will request staff to complete the request. If the information requested is likely to be of interest to other board members the results will be shared with the entire board.
- ✓ Requests involving the unplanned expenditure of funds should be placed on a town board meeting agenda for consideration.

Board Member Interactions with Staff

Some organizations restrict or prohibit direct interaction between elected officials and town staff. One advantage of being smaller is that Hillsborough is traditionally more informal and can often coordinate more quickly than larger units without being so formal or bureaucratic.

It's acceptable for town board members to meet with department or division heads to get information. This can be informal, such as crossing paths around town, or more intentional via a meeting, phone call, or email. Since staff are usually subject matter experts and in the best position to provide accurate information, this is often the most efficient and effective way to provide information to town board members. Still, the manager, assistant manager, acting manager, and ideally the mayor, should always be made aware of any noteworthy discussions/issues. Frequently, this is done via copying the manager and mayor on an email or a quick call from someone involved

in the discussion. This allows the manager or acting manager to determine if the topic or information should be relayed to the entire board and if follow-up or adjustments are required.

A division/department head explaining how an operation or process works (e.g., rezoning, bulk item pick-up, non-profit applies for budget funding, etc.) are examples of minor information or standard processes that likely would not warrant informing the entire board.

Personnel & Operational Concerns

If there is frustration with an issue, problem, individual employee, or department's performance, it is usually most effective to handle these matters via directly contacting the manager or acting manager in a private setting. If the manager is not effective or quick enough in resolving an issue, a board member may ask that the issue be discussed in a private meeting, during a closed session if the matter is personnel related, or during an open board meeting. As a reminder, due to NCGS 160A-168 (privacy of employee personnel records) there may be limited information that can be provided to board members regarding circumstances and actions.

Three important reminders:

- No orders to staff! If something needs to be addressed, those types of requests are directed to the town manager or acting manager. This is usually the #1 issue of concern in board-staff relations that causes confusion and tension.
- No reprimanding, venting, or expressing displeasure at staff one-on-one or small groups. Employees work for their supervisor, division, or department head, and ultimately the town manager, not the board.
- Many employees are intimidated by elected officials. Please be mindful that employees may feel uncomfortable and in a bad position in certain situations when engaging with board members.

Issues in these areas can cause a board member to lose access to staff. It's been a long time since restrictions have had to be put in place in Hillsborough. The informal approach has mostly worked well for the past 25+ years and matches the vibe and way we all prefer to work together. It's natural, especially with board and staff dealing with a high number of issues, sometimes during chaotic times, that oversights will occur. Thus, an occasional friendly reminder will be sent out in addition to the annual review.