

# Open Meetings

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One of the fundamental activities in municipal government is the meetings of its governing body. These meetings are open to the public and city councils, as well as any city boards and commissions, must comply with Iowa's open meetings law. In 2025, the Iowa Legislature passed a law that requires certain city officials to complete an open meetings/open records training (more details below).

## Application to Cities

City councils, as well as city boards and commissions, are required to comply with the open meetings law (*Code of Iowa*, Chapter 21). The law applies to meetings of governmental bodies which are defined as "a board, council, commission, or other governing body of a political subdivision or tax-supported district..." It further applies the law to "an advisory board, advisory commission, advisory committee, task force, or other body created by statute or executive order of this state or created by an executive order of a political subdivision of this state to develop and make recommendations on public policy issues." This definition includes most city council subcommittees, many of which do not constitute a quorum of the council but are established to serve as an advisory committee.

## Open Meetings Defined

The open meetings law defines a meeting as "a gathering in person or by electronic means, formal or informal, of a majority of the members of a governmental body where there is deliberation or action upon any scope of the governmental body's policy-making duties." The definition further states that "meetings shall not include a gathering of members of a governmental body for purely ministerial or social purposes when there is no discussion of policy or no intent to avoid the purposes of this chapter."

Councils and their advisory commissions need to exercise caution. For example, a majority of the city council may travel in the same vehicle to a League workshop. This activity is a gathering, but not an official meeting under the open meetings law. However, the gathering becomes a meeting if there is the deliberation of city matters or if there is intent to avoid the law. It is important to restrain from talking about or discussing city business except in strict compliance with the statute.

## Open Meetings Requirements

Meetings must be held in a place reasonably accessible to the public and at a time reasonably convenient to the public. If for good cause such place or time is impossible or impractical, the nature of the cause justifying the departure from these requirements must be stated in the minutes.

A majority of all council seats constitute a quorum. A quorum must be present before any official action can take place. Vacant positions must be included when calculating the number of people that must be present. For example, a city with a five-member council must have three members present to have a quorum, even if there are one or two vacancies.

An Iowa Supreme Court case, *Hutchison v. Warren County*, provided a ruling that impacts the definition of a quorum for governmental bodies. In short, several former county employees alleged the county supervisors violated the open meetings law by not discussing plans for a staff reorganization in a public meeting and rather used a method to discuss plans by having the supervisors individually meet with the county administrator. The majority in the case held that “the definition of meeting in Section 21.2(2) extends to all in-person gatherings at which there is deliberation upon any matter within the scope of the policy-making duties of a governmental body by a majority of its members, including in-person gatherings attended by a majority of its members by virtue of an agent or proxy.”

While the ruling made clear that a majority of the governmental body must be represented to reach a quorum to discuss policymaking at a meeting, it creates a less clear standard as to when using an “agent or proxy” to constitute a meeting. Cities will need to carefully review how council members interact with professional staff to ensure they are in compliance with the law.

Cities must also give public notice for each meeting held, which includes regularly scheduled meetings as well as special meetings, work sessions and other gatherings. The notice must include the time, date and place of each meeting and the tentative agenda. Reasonable notice is defined to include advising the news organizations which have filed a request for notice and posting the notice on a bulletin board or other prominent place easily accessible to the public and clearly designated for that purpose at the city’s principal office. If no such office exists, the notice should be posted at the building where the meeting will be held.

Notice must be given at least 24 hours prior to the meeting unless for good cause such notice is impossible or impractical, such as an emergency situation. In this case, as much notice as is reasonably possible shall be given.

## Minutes

Each governmental body is required to keep minutes of all its meetings showing the date, time, place, members present and action taken at each meeting. The minutes must also show the

results of each vote taken and contain information sufficient to indicate the vote of each member present. The minutes are public records open to public examination. In addition, the minutes of council meetings must be published. Section 372.13 of the *Code* mandates that the city clerk publish the minutes within 15 days of a council meeting in a newspaper of general circulation (as defined in Chapter 618 of the *Code*). The minutes must include a list of all claims allowed, a summary of all receipts and show the gross amount of the claim.

Cities with a population less than 200 in which no newspaper is published may meet the publication requirement by posting the minutes in three public places that have been permanently designated by ordinance. All other cities are required to publish their minutes in a newspaper.

For a detailed description of meeting minutes requirements, please see the [Minutes page](#).

## Closed Meetings

Governmental bodies are allowed to close an open meeting “only to the extent a closed meeting is necessary” for reasons listed under Section 21.5 of the *Code*. City councils must carefully consider whether going to a closed session is needed and must follow proper procedure before doing so. For more information, please visit the [Closed Sessions page](#).

## Training Requirement

A law adopted in the 2025 legislative session set a requirement for all new elected officials and those appointed to governmental bodies (at the city government level, common examples include library boards, planning and zoning commissions, boards of adjustments and more) to complete a training on open meetings and open records laws. The training must be completed within 90 days of an official taking the oath of office or assuming the duties of their office.

The Iowa Public Information Board is responsible under the law to oversee the training requirement and provide classes. They are also allowed to authorize other entities to provide training. The law stipulates that the training must be at least one hour, but not more than two hours.

The law also requires a certificate of completion to be provided to each participant, and for governmental entities to preserve such certificates and make them available for public inspection.

More information can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

## Violations

Actions to enforce the open meetings law may be brought by any aggrieved person, taxpayer, a citizen of the state, the attorney general or a county attorney. Actions to enforce the open meetings law have been brought by council members, city employees and various media. The city bears the burden of proving that the meeting was not in violation. In addition, ignorance of the law is not a

defense. Individual members of the council may escape liability from a violation if the person voted against going into a closed session.

Members of the council also cannot be held liable for violations if they reasonably relied upon a decision of a court or a written opinion of the attorney general or their city attorney. For this reason, the League strongly urges cities to consult their city attorney prior to holding a closed session.

The fines for open meetings law violations were increased in a law adopted in 2025 by the state legislature. Each member who violates the law can be fined no less than \$500 and no more than \$2,500; a member who **knowingly** participated in the violation may be assessed damages not more than \$12,000 or less than \$5,000. The members in violation pay this fee to the city. In addition, the costs and reasonable attorney fees are to be paid to the party who established a violation. If the body is found to have had a lawful defense for the violation, the fees and costs must be paid from the city budget.

The [Iowa Public Information Board \(IPIB\)](#) is the state agency that provides oversight of the Open Meetings and Open Records laws. Any citizens has the right to file related complaints with IPIB for a potential investigation.

**Street Address**

500 SW 7th Street, Suite 101  
Des Moines, IA 50309-4506

**Remit Payments to**

PO Box 8296  
Des Moines, IA 50301  
**Phone** (515) 244-7282  
**Fax** (978) 367-9733