

940 CMR 29.00: OPEN MEETINGS

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29.01: Purpose, Scope and Other General Provisions

- (1) Authority. The Attorney General promulgates 940 CMR 29.00, relating to the Open Meeting Law, pursuant to M.G.L. c. 30A, § 25(a) and (b).
- (2) Purpose. The purpose of 940 CMR 29.00 is to interpret, enforce and effectuate the purposes of the Open Meeting Law, M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18 through 25.
- (3) Severability. If any provision of 940 CMR 29.00 or the application of such provision to any person, public body, or circumstances shall be held invalid, the validity of the remainder of 940 CMR 29.00 and the applicability of such provision to other persons, public bodies, or circumstances shall not be affected thereby.
- (4) Mailing. All complaints, notices (except meeting notices) and other materials that must be sent to another party shall be sent by one of the following means: first class mail, email, hand delivery, or by any other means at least as expeditious as first class mail.

29.02: Definitions

As used in 940 CMR 29.00, the following terms shall, unless the context clearly requires otherwise, have the following meanings:

Commission means the Open Meeting Law Advisory Commission, as defined by M.G.L. c. 30A, § 19(c).

District Public Body means a public body with jurisdiction that extends to two or more municipalities.

Emergency means a sudden, generally unexpected occurrence or set of circumstances demanding immediate action.

Intentional Violation means an act or omission by a public body or a member thereof, in knowing violation of M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18 through 25. Evidence of an intentional violation of M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18 through 25 shall include, but not be limited to, that the public body or public body member:

- (a) acted with specific intent to violate the law;
- (b) acted with deliberate ignorance of the law's requirements; or
- (c) was previously informed by receipt of a decision from a court of competent jurisdiction or advised by the Attorney General, pursuant to 940 CMR 29.07 or 940 CMR 29.08, that the conduct violates M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18 through 25.

Where a public body or public body member has made a good faith attempt at compliance with the law, but was reasonably mistaken about its requirements or, after full disclosure, acted in good faith compliance with the advice of the public body's legal counsel, such conduct will not be considered an intentional violation of M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18 through 25.

Person means all individuals and entities, including governmental officials and employees. Person does not include public bodies.

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Post Notice means to place a written announcement of a meeting on a bulletin board, electronic display, website, cable television channel, newspaper or in a loose-leaf binder in a manner conspicuously visible to the public, including persons with disabilities, at all hours, in accordance with 940 CMR 29.03.

Public Body has the identical meaning as set forth in M.G.L. c. 30A, § 18, that is, a multiple-member board, commission, committee or subcommittee within the executive or legislative branch or within any county, district, city, region or town, however created, elected, appointed or otherwise constituted, established to serve a public purpose; provided, however, that the governing board of a local housing, redevelopment or similar authority shall be deemed a local public body; provided, further, that the governing board or body of any other authority established by the general court to serve a public purpose in the commonwealth or any part thereof shall be deemed a state public body; provided, further, that "public body" shall not include the general court or the committees or recess commissions thereof, bodies of the judicial branch or bodies appointed by a constitutional officer solely for the purpose of advising a constitutional officer and shall not include the board of bank incorporation or the policyholders protective board; and provided, further, that a subcommittee shall include any multiple-member body created to advise or make recommendations to a public body.

Remote Participation means participation by a member of a public body during a meeting of that public body where the member is not physically present at the meeting location.

Qualification for Office means the election or appointment of a person to a public body and the taking of the oath of office, where required, and shall include qualification for a second or any subsequent term of office. Where no term of office for a member of a public body is specified, the member shall be deemed to be qualified for office on a biannual basis on January 1st of a calendar year beginning on January 1, 2011. Where a member's term of office began prior to July 1, 2010, and will not expire until after July 1, 2011, the member shall be deemed to have qualified for office on January 1, 2011.

29.03: Notice Posting Requirements

(1) Requirements Applicable to All Public Bodies.

(a) Except in an emergency, public bodies shall file meeting notices sufficiently in advance of a public meeting to permit posting of the notice at least 48 hours in advance of the public meeting, excluding Saturdays, Sundays and legal holidays, in accordance with M.G.L. c. 30A, § 20. In an emergency, the notice shall be posted as soon as reasonably possible prior to such meeting.

(b) Meeting notices shall be printed or displayed in a legible, easily understandable format and shall contain the date, time and place of such meeting and a listing of topics that the chair reasonably anticipates will be discussed at the meeting. The list of topics shall have sufficient specificity to reasonably advise the public of the issues to be discussed at the meeting. The date and time that the notice is posted shall be conspicuously recorded thereon or therewith.

(c) Notices posted under an alternative posting method authorized by 940 CMR 29.03(2) through (5) shall include the same content as required by 940 CMR 29.03(1)(b). If such an alternative posting method is adopted, the municipal clerk, in the case of a municipality, or the body, in all other cases, shall file with the Attorney General written notice of adoption of the alternative method, including the website address where applicable, and any change thereto, and the most current notice posting method on file with the Attorney General shall be consistently used.

(2) Requirements Specific to Local Public Bodies.

(a) The municipal clerk, or other person designated by agreement with the municipal clerk, shall post notice of the meeting in a manner conspicuously visible to the public at all hours in or on the municipal building in which the clerk's office is located. Such notice shall be accessible to the public in the municipal clerk's office. If such notice is not conspicuously visible to the public during hours when the clerk's office is closed, such notice shall also be made available through an alternative method prescribed or approved by the Attorney General under 940 CMR 29.03(2)(b)4. A description of such alternative method, sufficient

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to allow members of the public to obtain notice through such method, shall be posted in a manner conspicuously visible to the public at all hours on or adjacent to the main and handicapped accessible entrances to the municipal building in which the clerk's office is located.

(b) For local public bodies, the Attorney General has determined, pursuant to M.G.L. c. 30A, § 20(c), that the following alternative methods will provide more effective notice to the public:

1. public bodies may post notice of meetings on the municipal website;
2. public bodies may post notice of meetings on cable television, AND, post notice or provide cable television access in an alternate municipal building (*e.g.*, police or fire station) where the notice is accessible at all hours;
3. public bodies may post notice of meetings in a newspaper of general circulation in the municipality, AND, post notice or a copy of the newspaper containing the meeting notice at an alternate municipal building (*e.g.*, police or fire station) where the notice is accessible at all hours;
4. public bodies may place a computer monitor or electronic or physical bulletin board displaying meeting notices on or in a door, window, or near the entrance of the municipal building in which the clerk's office is located in such a manner as to be visible to the public from outside the building; or
5. public bodies may provide an audio recording of meeting notices, available to the public by telephone at all hours.

(3) Requirements Specific to Regional or District Public Bodies.

(a) Notice shall be filed and posted in each city and town within the region or district in the manner prescribed for local public bodies in that city or town.

(b) As an alternative method of notice, a regional or district public body may post a meeting notice on the regional or district public body's website. A copy of the notice shall be filed and kept by the chair of the public body or the chair's designee.

(4) Requirements Specific to Regional School Districts.

(a) The secretary of the regional school district committee shall be considered to be its clerk. The clerk of the regional school district shall file notice with the municipal clerk of each city and town within such district and each such municipal clerk shall post the notice in the manner prescribed for local public bodies in that city or town.

(b) As an alternative method of notice, a regional school district committee may post a meeting notice on the regional school district's website. A copy of the notice shall be filed and kept by the secretary of the regional school district committee or the secretary's designee.

(5) Requirements Specific to County Public Bodies.

(a) Notice shall be filed and posted in the office of the county commissioners and a copy of the notice shall be publicly posted in a manner conspicuously visible to the public at all hours in such place or places as the county commissioners shall designate for this purpose.

(b) As an alternative method of notice, a county public body may post a meeting on the county public body's website. A copy of the notice shall be filed and kept by the chair of the county public body or the chair's designee.

(6) Requirements Specific to State Public Bodies. Notice shall be posted on a website in accordance with procedures established by the Attorney General in consultation with the Information Technology Division of the Executive Office for Administration and Finance for the purpose of providing the public with effective notice. A copy of each notice shall also be sent by first class or electronic mail to the Secretary of State's Regulations Division. The chair of each state public body shall notify the Attorney General in writing of its Internet notice posting location and any change thereto. The public body shall consistently use the most current notice posting method on file with the Attorney General.

29.04: Certification

(1) For local public bodies, a document including M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18 through 25; a document including 940 CMR 29.00; and educational materials prepared by the Attorney General explaining M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18 through 25, and its application, shall be delivered by the municipal clerk to each member of a public body, whether elected or appointed, upon taking the

29.04: continued

oath of office, if required, and in every case before entering into performance of the office. Within two weeks after receipt of such materials, the member shall certify, on the form prescribed by the Attorney General, receipt of such materials. The municipal clerk shall maintain the signed certification for each such person, indicating the date the person received the materials.

(2) For regional, district, county or state public bodies, a document including M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18 through 25; a document including 940 CMR 29.00; and educational materials prepared by the Attorney General explaining M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18 through 25, and its application, shall be delivered by the appointing authority, executive director or other appropriate administrator or their designees, to each member of a public body, whether elected or appointed, upon taking the oath of office, if required, and in every case before entering into the performance of the office. Within two weeks after receipt of such materials, the member shall certify, on the form prescribed by the Attorney General, receipt of such materials. The appointing authority, executive director or other appropriate administrator, or their designees, shall maintain the signed certification for each such person, indicating the date the person received the materials.

29.05: Complaints

(1) All complaints shall be in writing, using the form approved by the Attorney General and available on the Attorney General's website. A public body need not, and the Attorney General will not, investigate or address anonymous complaints.

(2) Public bodies, or the municipal clerk in the case of a local public body, should provide any person, on request, with an Open Meeting Complaint Form. If a paper copy is unavailable, then the public body should direct the requesting party to the Attorney General's website, where an electronic copy of the form will be available for downloading and printing.

(3) For local public bodies, the complainant shall file the complaint with the chair of the public body, who shall disseminate copies of the complaint to the members of the public body. The complainant shall also file a copy of the complaint with the municipal clerk, who shall keep such filings in an orderly fashion for public review on request during regular business hours. For all other public bodies, the complainant shall file the complaint with the chair of the relevant public body, or if there is no chair, then with the public body. The complaint shall be filed within 30 days of the alleged violation of M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18 through 25, or if the alleged violation of M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18 through 25, could not reasonably have been known at the time it occurred, then within 30 days of the date it should reasonably have been discovered.

(4) The public body shall review timely complaints to ascertain the time, date, place and circumstances which constitute the alleged violation. If the public body needs additional information to resolve the complaint, then the chair may request it from the complainant within seven business days of receiving the complaint. The complainant shall respond within ten business days after he or she receives the request. The public body will then have an additional ten business days after receiving the complainant's response to review the complaint and take any remedial action pursuant to 940 CMR 29.05(5).

(5) Within 14 business days after receiving the complaint, unless an extension has been granted by the Attorney General as provided in 940 CMR 29.05(5)(a) and (b), the public body shall review the complaint's allegations; take remedial action, if appropriate; and send to the Attorney General a copy of the complaint and a description of any remedial action taken. The public body shall simultaneously notify the complainant that it has sent such materials to the Attorney General and shall provide the complainant with a copy of the description of any remedial action taken.

(a) Any remedial action taken by the public body in response to a complaint under 940 CMR 29.05(5) shall not be admissible as evidence that a violation occurred in any later administrative or judicial proceeding against the public body relating to the alleged violation.

(b) If the public body requires additional time to resolve the complaint, it may obtain an extension from the Attorney General by submitting a written request within 14 business days after receiving the complaint. The Attorney General will grant an extension if the request demonstrates good cause. Good cause will generally be found if, for example, the public body cannot meet within the 14 business day period to consider proposed remedial action. The Attorney General shall notify the complainant of any extension and the reason for it.

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(6) If at least 30 days have passed after the complaint was filed with the public body, and if the complainant is unsatisfied with the public body's resolution of the complaint, the complainant may file a complaint with the Attorney General. When filing a complaint with the Attorney General, the complainant shall include a copy of the original complaint along with any other materials the complainant believes are relevant. The Attorney General may decline to investigate complaints filed with the Attorney General more than 90 days after the alleged violation of M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18 through 25, unless an extension was granted to the public body or the complainant demonstrates good cause for the delay.

(7) The Attorney General shall acknowledge receipt of all complaints and will resolve them within a reasonable period of time, generally 90 days. If additional time is necessary to resolve a particular complaint, the Attorney General will notify the complainant and the public body.

(8) If a complaint appears untimely, is not in the proper form, or is missing information, the Attorney General shall return the complaint to the complainant within 14 business days of its receipt, noting its deficiencies. The complainant shall then have 14 business days to correct the deficiencies and resubmit the complaint to the Attorney General. If the deficiencies are not corrected, no further action on the complaint will be taken by the Attorney General.

29.06: Investigation

Whenever the Attorney General has reasonable cause to believe that a violation of M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18 through 25, has occurred that has not been adequately remedied, then the Attorney General may conduct an investigation.

(1) The Attorney General shall notify the public body or person that is the subject of a complaint and an investigation of the existence of the investigation within a reasonable period of time. The Attorney General shall also notify the public body or person of the nature of the alleged violation.

(2) Upon notice of the investigation, the subject of the investigation shall provide the Attorney General with all information relevant to the investigation. The subject may also submit a memorandum or other writing to the Attorney General, addressing the allegations being investigated.

If the subject of the investigation fails to voluntarily provide the necessary or relevant information within 30 days of receiving notice of the investigation, the Attorney General may issue subpoenas to obtain the information in accordance with M.G.L. c. 30A, § 24, to:

- (a) Take testimony under oath;
- (b) Examine or cause to be examined any documentary material; or
- (c) Require attendance during such examination of documentary material by any person having knowledge of the documentary material and take testimony under oath or acknowledgment in respect of any such documentary material.

Any documentary material or other information produced by any person pursuant to 940 CMR 29.06 shall not, unless otherwise ordered by a court of the Commonwealth for good cause shown, be disclosed without that person's consent by the Attorney General to any person other than the Attorney General's authorized agent or representative. However, the Attorney General may disclose the material in court pleadings or other papers filed in court; or, to the extent necessary, in an administrative hearing or other action taken to conduct or resolve the investigation pursuant to 940 CMR 29.00.

29.07: Resolution

(1) No Violation. If the Attorney General determines, after investigation, that M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18 through 25, has not been violated, the Attorney General shall terminate the investigation and notify, in writing, the subject of the investigation and any complainant.

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(2) Violation Resolved Without Hearing. If the Attorney General determines after investigation that M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18 through 25, has been violated, the Attorney General may resolve the investigation without a hearing. The Attorney General shall determine whether the relevant public body, one or more of its members, or both, were responsible, and whether the violation was intentional or unintentional. The Attorney General will notify, in writing, any complainant of the investigation's resolution. Upon finding a violation of the M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18 through 25, the Attorney General may take one of the following actions:

(a) Informal Action. The Attorney General may resolve the investigation with a telephone call, letter or other appropriate form of communication that explains the violation and clarifies the subject's obligations under M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18 through 25, providing the subject with a reasonable period of time to comply with any outstanding obligations.

(b) Formal Order. The Attorney General may resolve the investigation with a formal order. The order may require:

1. immediate and future compliance with M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18 through 25;
2. attendance at a training session authorized by the Attorney General;
3. that minutes, records or other materials be made public; or
4. other appropriate action.

Orders shall be available on the Attorney General's website.

(3) Violation Resolved After Hearing. The Attorney General may conduct a hearing where the Attorney General deems appropriate. The hearing shall be conducted pursuant to 801 CMR 1.00, *et seq.*, as modified by any regulations issued by the Attorney General. At the conclusion of the hearing, the Attorney General shall determine whether a violation of M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18 through 25, occurred, whether the public body, one or more of its members, or both, were responsible, and whether the violation was intentional or unintentional. The Attorney General will notify, in writing, any complainant of the investigation's resolution. Upon a finding that a violation occurred, the Attorney General may order:

- (a) immediate and future compliance with M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18 through 25;
- (b) attendance at a training session authorized by the Attorney General;
- (c) nullification of any action taken at the relevant meeting, in whole or in part;
- (d) imposition of a fine upon the public body of not more than \$1,000 for each intentional violation;
- (e) that an employee be reinstated without loss of compensation, seniority, tenure or other benefits;
- (f) that minutes, records or other materials be made public; or
- (g) other appropriate action.

Orders issued following a hearing shall be available on the Attorney General's website.

(4) A public body or any member of a body aggrieved by any order issued by the Attorney General under 940 CMR 29.07 may obtain judicial review of the order through an action in Superior Court seeking relief in the nature of certiorari. Any such action must be commenced in Superior Court within 21 days of receipt of the order.

29.08: Advisory Opinions

The Attorney General may issue advisory opinions on request or at his or her own initiative to provide guidance to public bodies and the public on changes to M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18 through 25, court decisions interpreting M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18 through 25, or other developments concerning M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18 through 25.

(1) The Attorney General shall ordinarily make a draft advisory opinion available for comment on the Attorney General's website at least 60 days prior to the planned issuance of the opinion. Notice of the posting shall be provided to the Commission.

(2) Comments on the draft advisory opinion shall be submitted, in writing, to the Attorney General at least 30 days prior to the planned issuance of the opinion.

(3) Action taken by a public body in good faith compliance with an advisory opinion, provided that the circumstances are not materially different, shall not constitute an intentional violation of M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18 through 25.

29.09: Other Enforcement Actions

Nothing in 940 CMR 29.06 or 29.07 shall limit the Attorney General's authority to file a civil action to enforce M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18 through 25 pursuant to M.G.L. c. 30A, § 23(f).

29.10: Remote Participation

(1) Preamble. Remote participation may be permitted subject to the following procedures and restrictions. However, the Attorney General strongly encourages members of public bodies to physically attend meetings whenever possible. By promulgating 940 CMR 29.10, the Attorney General hopes to promote greater participation in government. Members of public bodies have a responsibility to ensure that remote participation in meetings is not used in a way that would defeat the purposes of the Open Meeting Law, namely promoting transparency with regard to deliberations and decisions on which public policy is based.

(2) Adoption of Remote Participation. Remote participation in meetings of public bodies is not permitted unless the practice has been adopted as follows:

(a) Local Public Bodies. The Chief Executive Officer, as defined in M.G.L. c. 4, § 7, must authorize or, by a simple majority, vote to allow remote participation in accordance with the requirements of 940 CMR 29.10, with that authorization or vote applying to all subsequent meetings of all local public bodies in that municipality.

(b) Regional or District Public Bodies. The regional or district public body must, by a simple majority, vote to allow remote participation in accordance with the requirements of 940 CMR 29.10, with that vote applying to all subsequent meetings of that public body and its committees.

(c) Regional School Districts. The regional school district committee must, by a simple majority, vote to allow remote participation in accordance with the requirements of 940 CMR 29.10, with that vote applying to all subsequent meetings of that public body and its committees.

(d) County Public Bodies. The county commissioners must, by a simple majority, vote to allow remote participation in accordance with the requirements of 940 CMR 29.10, with that vote applying to all subsequent meetings of all county public bodies in that county.

(e) State Public Bodies. The state public body must, by a simple majority, vote to allow remote participation in accordance with the requirements of 940 CMR 29.10, with that vote applying to all subsequent meetings of that public body and its committees.

(f) Retirement Boards. A retirement board created pursuant to M.G.L. c. 32, § 20 or M.G.L. c. 34B, § 19 must, by a simple majority, vote to allow remote participation in accordance with the requirements of 940 CMR 29.10, with that vote applying to all subsequent meetings of that public body and its committees.

(3) Revocation of Remote Participation. Any person or entity with the authority to adopt remote participation pursuant to 940 CMR 29.10(2) may revoke that adoption in the same manner.

(4) Minimum Requirements for Remote Participation.

(a) Members of a public body who participate remotely and all persons present at the meeting location shall be clearly audible to each other;

(b) A quorum of the body, including the chair or, in the chair's absence, the person authorized to chair the meeting, shall be physically present at the meeting location, as required by M.G.L. c. 30A, § 20(d);

(c) Members of public bodies who participate remotely may vote and shall not be deemed absent for the purposes of M.G.L. c. 39, § 23D.

(5) Permissible Reasons for Remote Participation. If remote participation has been adopted in accordance with 940 CMR 29.10(2), a member of a public body shall be permitted to participate remotely in a meeting, in accordance with the procedures described in 940 CMR 29.10(7), if the chair or, in the chair's absence, the person chairing the meeting, determines that one or more of the following factors makes the member's physical attendance unreasonably difficult:

(a) Personal illness;

(b) Personal disability;

(c) Emergency;

(d) Military service; or

(e) Geographic distance.

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(6) Technology.

(a) The following media are acceptable methods for remote participation. Remote participation by any other means is not permitted. Accommodations shall be made for any public body member who requires TTY service, video relay service, or other form of adaptive telecommunications.

1. telephone, internet, or satellite enabled audio or video conferencing;
2. any other technology that enables the remote participant and all persons present at the meeting location to be clearly audible to one another.

(b) When video technology is in use, the remote participant shall be clearly visible to all persons present in the meeting location.

(c) The public body shall determine which of the acceptable methods may be used by its members.

(d) The chair or, in the chair's absence, the person chairing the meeting, may decide how to address technical difficulties that arise as a result of utilizing remote participation, but is encouraged, wherever possible, to suspend discussion while reasonable efforts are made to correct any problem that interferes with a remote participant's ability to hear or be heard clearly by all persons present at the meeting location. If technical difficulties result in a remote participant being disconnected from the meeting, that fact and the time at which the disconnection occurred shall be noted in the meeting minutes.

(e) The amount and source of payment for any costs associated with remote participation shall be determined by the applicable adopting entity identified in 940 CMR 29.10(2).

(7) Procedures for Remote Participation.

(a) Any member of a public body who wishes to participate remotely shall, as soon as reasonably possible prior to a meeting, notify the chair or, in the chair's absence, the person chairing the meeting, of his or her desire to do so and the reason for and facts supporting his or her request.

(b) At the start of the meeting, the chair shall announce the name of any member who will be participating remotely and the reason under 940 CMR 29.10(5) for his or her remote participation. This information shall also be recorded in the meeting minutes.

(c) All votes taken during any meeting in which a member participates remotely shall be by roll call vote.

(d) A member participating remotely may participate in an executive session, but shall state at the start of any such session that no other person is present and/or able to hear the discussion at the remote location, unless presence of that person is approved by a simple majority vote of the public body.

(e) When feasible, the chair or, in the chair's absence, the person chairing the meeting, shall distribute to remote participants, in advance of the meeting, copies of any documents or exhibits that he or she reasonably anticipates will be used during the meeting. If used during the meeting, such documents shall be part of the official record of the meeting, and shall be listed in the meeting minutes and retained in accordance with M.G.L. c. 30A, § 22.

(8) Further Restriction by Adopting Authority. 940 CMR 29.10 does not prohibit any person or entity with the authority to adopt remote participation pursuant to 940 CMR 29.10(2) from enacting policies, laws, rules or regulations that prohibit or further restrict the use of remote participation by public bodies within that person or entity's jurisdiction, provided those policies, laws, rules or regulations do not violate state or federal law.

(9) Remedy for Violation. If the Attorney General determines, after investigation, that 940 CMR 29.10 has been violated, the Attorney General may resolve the investigation by ordering the public body to temporarily or permanently discontinue its use of remote participation.

REGULATORY AUTHORITY

940 CMR 29.00: M.G.L. c. 30A, § 25(a) and (b).