

Department of Neighborhood Empowerment Public Safety Information for Neighborhood Councils

The Department of Neighborhood Empowerment is committed to assisting Neighborhood Councils in maintaining a welcoming and safe environment for Board members and stakeholders at council meetings. The department has provided the following information for Neighborhood Councils to take proactive steps in addressing situations where Board members are confronted by hostile, threatening, and/or abusive comments and situations in the course of their volunteer work in the Neighborhood Council system. These suggestions should be followed in order to address any escalating safety situation. Please contact your Project Coordinator if you require assistance in developing a public safety plan for your Neighborhood Council meetings.

Training

All Board members should take training offered by the department in areas of effective communication, how to run meetings, workplace violence, and sexual harassment. These trainings provide Board members with tools and techniques of how to maintain civility between not only Board members, but other stakeholders who attend and provide public comment at meetings. The department may develop a particular training to suit an NC's specific needs if necessary.

Roles and Responsibilities

The Board should have consensus on the roles and responsibilities of the Board members and should work together to maintain order during meetings. The President or Chair runs the meeting, and it is her/his responsibility to ensure order at meetings. If someone is speaking or acting out of order, then the President or Chair should bring order back to the meeting through calm and assertive requests. The other Board members should also know their roles and be responsible Board members by speaking only when recognized by the President or Chair and within the set amount of time for discussion. Boards may choose a Parliamentarian, Sergeant at Arms, or Secretary to assist the President or Chair in maintaining order.

Codes of Conduct or Civility and Rules of Order

Neighborhood Councils should adopt a Code of Conduct or Civility and Rules of Order that everyone, including stakeholders attending meetings, should follow. The code and rules should be posted or available at every meeting to Board members and stakeholders, and the President or Chair should make an announcement at the start of the meeting that the code and rules are in effect and that those attending the meeting are expected to abide by the code and rules or they will be asked to leave.

Public Comment

Any time limits on public comment should be clear on the agenda and again should be repeated by the Chair or President. There should be a time keeper on the Board, and any time extensions should be equitably given.

Sometimes, public comment can be very passionate and contain questions for the Board. The Board does not need to respond to the public comment except with a quick, "Thank you." In fact, the Brown Act prevents a detailed response though a "Thank you" or "We will look to adding that to an upcoming agenda as a topic" is appropriate. If the issue brought before the Board needs further discussion, it can be agendaized for a later meeting.

If, during public comment, a speaker begins to use abusive and threatening language, the Chair or President should give a warning reminding the speaker of the code and rules and that if the speaker does not want to follow the ground rules, then they will be asked to leave.

Calling for a Recess

During extremely heated discussions between Board members and stakeholders that appear to be leading to a physical or threatening confrontation, the Chair or President should be ready to call for a 5 minute recess. Other Board members may request a recess as well to reestablish order.

Presence of LAPD or Security Guards

If the Board anticipates a topic that may cause hostile or threatening confrontations, it may be best to request the presence of the LAPD or pay for security guards to be present at the meeting. The City's General Services Department has provided a list of security guard companies that may be hired by the Neighborhood Council on an hourly basis if the LAPD is not available. Please contact your Project Coordinator if your Neighborhood Council would like to hire security guards.

Recording the Meeting

Another method in helping to maintain order is taping the meeting. Many people are less likely to act out of order if they know their actions are being videotaped. If your NC elects this method, the meeting tape becomes public record. The NC should make it clear in standing rules how they will maintain the tape, i.e. whether they will store the tape at a certain location and for how long. If the tape is simply to help keep order and is not being used in lieu of minutes, then the NC should state in its standing rules that the tape will be destroyed/erased within a certain amount of time. Alternatively, the Board may keep the tapes as a business record.

Removal of Individuals at Meetings

Removal of individuals at Board meetings should be a last resort unless safety issues are a concern. Because Neighborhood Council meetings are public, everyone is allowed to attend and make public comment. Therefore, the Board should first try the techniques listed above in dealing with challenging stakeholders. Board members should never attempt to physically remove anyone from a meeting. If the situation warrants removal because of safety issues, please contact the police.

Under the Brown Act, any person who interferes with the conduct of a Neighborhood Council meeting by willfully interrupting and/or disrupting the meeting is subject to removal. The Board can choose to post this warning at their meetings where stakeholders sign-in as a preventative measure. Removing someone under this provision should only be used after the Board has used the above techniques.

Incident Report

If there is a situation of workplace violence, sexual harassment, or abusive/threatening comments or other such action during a Board meeting, please work with your Project Coordinator to document the incident. The Project Coordinator will prepare an Incident Report to be reviewed by management so any further action can be taken to ensure the safety of the Board members and stakeholders.