What’s New with the Brown Act?
Including Fundamentals and Recent Developments in Meeting Administration
Tracy Noonan, Thousand Oaks City Attorney
Eric Danly, Petaluma City Attorney
"All **meetings** of the **legislative body** of a local agency shall be **open and public**, and all persons shall be permitted to attend any meeting of the legislative body of a local agency...”

Government Code § 54953(a)
Topics

* What is a “meeting”?
* What is a “legislative body”?
* What rules apply to meetings?
* Meeting disruptions
* What are the remedies for violations?
Who is subject to the Brown Act?
Legislative Bodies

- Legislative Bodies
  - Governing body (City Council)
  - Boards and commissions
  - Standing committees of CCB’s

- NOT a Legislative Body
  - Temporary advisory committees or ad hoc sub-committees of less than a quorum of the legislative body
  - A group of employees; a group of citizens that is not appointed by the legislative body.
What is a “meeting”?

Gov. Code section 54952.2(a)
Meetings

- Majority of Body
- Collectively (same time and place)
- Hear, Discuss, Deliberate or Take Action
- Within Subject Matter Jurisdiction
What is not a “meeting”?
Individual Contacts
Conferences and seminars must be open to the public and limited to issues of general interest.

Members of the body should not discuss City business.
Community Meetings

Need to be open to the public and publicized

Recommended to avoid any direct participation or at the very least don’t discuss items within your subject matter
A majority can attend social or ceremonial events, but don’t talk about business within their purview.

Also, remember optics.
Other Exceptions

- Meetings of the governing board or other commissions of the Agency
- Attending subcommittee meetings as observers
Illegal “meetings”

- Collective briefings (more than a quorum together with staff)
- Retreats or workshops on City business
- Serial meetings (Daisy chain and Hub and Spoke)
Serial Meetings are Illegal

* Daisy Chain or Hub and Spoke
Staff Briefings

ONLY OK IF

* Informational
* No views of other members shared to other members
Teleconference Meetings

Traditional Requirements

* §54953 requires remote location to be open to the public, listed on the agenda, the agenda to be posted at the remote location(s), and the public able to participate at remote location

* Also requires all actions by roll call vote, and a quorum of the body must participate from locations within the agency’s jurisdiction
Remote/Teleconference Meetings (AB 2449)

* Relaxes traditional teleconference/remote meeting requirements only for “just cause” or due to “emergency circumstances” as defined
* Does not require identification of teleconference site
* Does not require site be open to the public
Remote/Teleconference Meetings (AB 2499)

“Just cause”:

* Childcare or caregiving need of a family member or domestic partner
* Contagious illness that prevents attending in person
* Need related to a disability not otherwise accommodated
* Travel while on official business of the body or another state or local agency
Remote/Teleconference Meetings (AB 2499)

* “Emergency circumstances”:

* A physical or family medical emergency that prevents a member from attending in person
Members may participate in meeting remotely under “Just Cause” requirements:

- Must notify the body as soon as possible, including at the start of the meeting, describing the “just cause” for remote participation
- Not more than twice in a calendar year
Members may participate in meeting remotely under “Emergency Circumstances” requirements:

- Must seek approval of the body as soon as possible, including at the start of the meeting, describing the emergency circumstances requiring remote participation
- Not more than 3 consecutive months or 20% of an agency’s regular meetings
Remote/Teleconference Meetings (AB 2499)

- Additional requirements:
  - Quorum must participate from a single, identified location open to the public in its jurisdiction
  - Remote public participation by video and phone
  - If remote public participation is disrupted, the body must suspend action until it is restored
  - Submission of public comments cannot be required in advance of the meeting – no cut off period
  - Remote member must participate by video
  - Remote member must disclose those 18 years or older that are present in the room
AB-557 amends §54953 to relax traditional teleconferencing requirements during proclaimed states of emergency for meetings:

- To determine if, due to the emergency, meeting in person would risk the health or safety of attendees
- When the body has determined that meeting in person would risk the health or safety of attendees
Remote Meetings
AB 557 (2024)

* Requirements for AB 557 remote meetings:
  * Must give notice of call-in or internet options for public participation and comment
  * If remote public participation is disrupted, the body must suspend action until it is restored
  * Submission of public comments cannot be required in advance of the meeting – no cut off period
Requirements for AB 557 remote meetings:

- Cannot terminate timed public comment period for agenda items or general public comment early
- Must provide reasonable public comment period for agenda items if no specified time
- Must make findings at least every 45 days after first AB 557 teleconference
- January 1, 2026 sunset
Rules Governing Meeting Notice
Regular Meeting

- Agenda: posted 72 hours in advance
- Accurate description
- Freely accessible location
Don’t discuss items not on the agenda.
Except ...

- Brief response
- Clarification
- Brief announcements
- Requests for future report
- Placement of items on future agenda
Public Participation
Public Comments

- Freedom of Speech
- Criticism of agency or individuals allowed
Limited Public Forum

* Right to speak is limited compared to public and designated forums
* May adopt reasonable content and viewpoint neutral regulations
  * Can limit speaker time, restrict comments to subject matter jurisdiction
Rules and Decorum

* Speaker cards
* Rules of decorum
* Time limits
* Recording
Meeting Disruptions
Removal of Disruptive Citizen

(Govt. Code Section 54957.95)

* Allows presiding officer to remove if citizen is disruptive.
* Must first warn about disruption and failure to cease will result in removal.
A number of jurisdictions have received hate speech and discriminatory comments based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and identity during remote public comment.
The public has a right to criticize officials and staff.

Objectionable speech that complies with lawful forum rules is generally protected.

The best antidote to objectional speech may be more speech.
Meeting Disruptions

Zoom Bombing - Strategies

- As limited forums - council meetings can restrict comments in time and to the Council’s jurisdiction
- The Brown Act does not require permitting remote public participation when legislative body members are not remote
- Consider City’s duty to provide a safe workplace
Enforcement
Enforcement & Consequences

* Notice and opportunity to cure
* Civil action for invalidation of actions
* Attorneys’ fees and costs
* Criminal prosecution:
  1. Action taken at a meeting
  2. In violation of the Act
  3. With intent to deprive public of information
Further Resources