

# Open Meetings Law

## FAQ

**R.S. 42:11 – R.S. 42:28\***

**\*Formerly R.S.42:4.1-42:13  
Renumbered by the Louisiana Law Institute  
pursuant to Act 861 of the 2010 Regular Session**

**[\(Redesignation Chart\)](#)**

## **Overview:**

The following is a summary of the general principles and guidelines concerning Louisiana's Open Meetings Law. This document is presented in a frequently asked questions (FAQ) format. While fairly detailed, it is important to remember that every situation is unique and as a result each situation deserves careful individual review.

There are numerous links within the document directing your attention to areas within the document and to other related documents posted on the Louisiana Legislative Auditor's website and on external websites to facilitate your use of this document. For example, under the index section, you may go directly to any area of the FAQ by clicking the question you wish to view. Within the FAQ, there are several links to direct you to other areas of the FAQ and to relevant external documents. If you click on the individual question number, you will link to the index to allow you to select another question to view.

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### **Q.1. What is the Louisiana Open Meetings Law, and where is it found?**

**R.S. [42:12](#) – [42:28](#)**

- A.1.** The Open Meetings Law, found in La. R.S. 42:12 – 42:28, regulates [meetings](#) of [public bodies](#).

The Open Meetings Law is meant to ensure that decisions by the government are made in an open forum. The Open Meetings Law operates in conjunction with Louisiana’s Public Records Law to insure that [Article XII, Section 3](#) of the Louisiana Constitution’s mandate that “No person shall be denied the right to observe the deliberations of public bodies and examine public documents, except in cases established by law.” The Open Meetings Law is designed to ensure state integrity and to increase the public’s trust and awareness of its governing officials.

Act 861 of the 2010 Regular Session enacted [R.S. 42:11](#) to make the official short title the “Open Meetings Law. The Act states:

*This Chapter shall be known and may be cited as the "Open Meetings Law".*

### **Q.2. To whom does the Open Meetings Law apply? **R.S. [42:14](#) R.S. [42:17](#)****

- A.2.** Louisiana’s Open Meetings Law applies to the meetings of any “[public body](#)” unless there is an express provision in R.S. [42:16](#), R.S. [42:17](#), or R.S. [42:18](#) that allows the meeting to be closed.

Open Meetings Law does not apply to judicial proceedings.

### **Q.3. What is a public body? **R.S. [42:13](#)****

- A.3.** A “public body” is a village, town, and city governing authority; parish governing authority; boards, such as school, port, or levee boards; any other state, parish, municipal, or special district boards, commissions, or authorities, as well as any of their political subdivisions where such body possesses policy making, advisory, or administrative functions, including any committee or subcommittee of any of these bodies.

Essentially any municipal government, state agency, or political subdivision that has a policy making, administrative, or advisory function is subject to the Open Meetings Law. The rules also apply to any official committee of the public body that has been delegated any of these functions by the public body, or any unofficial committee or gathering of the body that consists of a quorum of the body.

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*Spain v. LHSAA* declared that organizations, which are composed of public officers or that serve a governmental function, are public bodies for the purpose of being subjected to the Open Meetings Law, and need not be “official” committees to be held as such. AG Op. No. 09-0197 states that an *ad hoc* committee created by a parish governing authority is a “public body.”

**AG Op. 10-0155** cites the LA Supreme Court’s four factor test for determining an entity’s status as public or private: (1) whether the entity was created by the legislature, (2) whether its powers were specifically defined by the legislature, (3) whether the property of the entity belongs to the public, and (4) whether the entity’s functions are exclusively of a public character and performed solely for the public benefit [*State v. Smith, 357 So.2d 505 (La.1978)*]. All four factors must be present for a court to determine that an entity is public.

### **Q.4. How should the Open Meetings Law be interpreted? R.S. 42:12**

**A.4.** According to R.S. 42:12(A), the Open Meetings Law should be construed liberally. This means that if there is a question as to interpretation of a provision the entity should provide as much access/openness as possible. The Open Meetings Law operates with a general premise that all meetings of public bodies should be open to the public. The burden, therefore, is on the individual seeking to engage in closed meetings to prove that an exception applies allowing the closing of the meeting.

### **Q.5. What is a meeting? R.S. 42: 13**

**A.5.** A meeting is a convening of a quorum of a public body to deliberate or act on a matter that the public body has supervision, control, jurisdiction, or advisory power over. A meeting is also a convening of a quorum of a public body by the public body or another public official to receive information regarding a matter that the public body has supervision, control, jurisdiction, or advisory power over.

The Open Meetings Law does not apply to chance meetings or social gatherings of members of a public body at which there is no vote or other action taken, including formal or informal polling of the members. There has, however, been a movement to presume that a meeting is taking place when a quorum of a body gathers and discussions of business take place.

If a gathering consists of a quorum of the body or a meeting of a committee of the body to conduct any business of the body, it should be presumed to be a meeting and thus subject to the requirements of the Open Meetings Law.

### **Q.6. What is a Quorum? R.S. 42:13(A)(3)**

**A.6.** A quorum is defined as a simple majority (50% +1) of the total membership of a public body. This is a default definition and only applies in the absence of a

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statutorily defined quorum for the public body, which may be a greater or lesser percentage of the body. No official action may be undertaken by the body in the absence of a quorum of the body. An example of prohibited action would include debate on an item in the absence of a quorum, coupled with a vote without debate on the item in an open meeting, as this would circumvent restrictions on closed meetings and preclude public observation of the debate. The members of the body, however, may engage in informal discussion of any matter in the absence of a quorum.

The Attorney General (AG) has stated in Opinion No. 00-144 that a public body cannot define a quorum of less than a majority of the total members through its by-laws, as any such action would be an abrogation of the clearly stated definition in R.S. [42:13\(A\)\(3\)](#). Absent a statutorily defined quorum for the body, the quorum for the body must be a simple majority.

### Q.7. What is a Walking Quorum?

**A.7.** For purposes of the Open Meetings Law, a “**walking quorum**” is a meeting of a public body where different members leave the meeting and different members enter the meeting so that while an actual quorum is never physically present, an actual quorum during the course of the meeting participates in the discussion. AG Op. Nos. 90-349, 04-0128.

Gatherings at which there is not a quorum present are not meetings under the Open Meetings Law as presence of a quorum for the gathering is required for the gathering to constitute a meeting. According to *Brown v. East Baton Rouge Parish School Board* and AG Op. #99-0050, walking quorums, in which members of the body come and go or in which absent members are contacted during the meeting so as to prevent a gathering of a quorum of the body, are not allowed and violate the prohibitions of using any method to circumvent the intent of Louisiana’s Open Meetings Law.

### Q.8. What are the requirements of an Open Meeting? R.S. [42:14](#) – [42:23](#)

**A.8.** Meetings of public bodies are required to:

- have prior notice of the meeting at least 24 hours before the meeting with placement of a copy of the notice at the place of the meeting or at the body’s official office;
- allow for some means of public comment; Act 850 of the 2010 Regular Session, amending [R.S. 42:14\(D\)](#), adds the requirement that each public body except school boards conducting a meeting which is subject to the notice requirement of [R.S. 42:19\(A\)](#) shall allow a public comment period at any point in the meeting prior to action on an agenda item upon which a vote is to be taken. The governing body

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may adopt reasonable rules and restrictions regarding such comment period.

- allow for recording of the meeting by the audience;
- have recorded minutes of the proceedings; and
- have “open” meetings - public bodies may not close their meetings to the public absent narrowly defined exceptions.

A copy of the Open Meetings Law must also be posted at the location of the meeting.

### **Q.9. Is the public allowed to participate in Open Meetings? R.S. [42:14](#) - [42:18](#)**

**A.9.** Yes.

- Meetings of public bodies must be open to the public unless closed pursuant to a statutory exception. R.S. [42:16](#) – [42:18](#) allow closed executive sessions. Public bodies must provide an opportunity for public comment at any point in the meeting prior to action on the agenda item upon which a vote is to be taken. The governing body may adopt reasonable rules and restrictions regarding such comment period.
- Act 850 of the 2010 Regular Session, amending [R.S. 42:14](#), adds the requirement that each public body except school boards conducting a meeting which is subject to the notice requirement of [R.S. 42:19\(A\)](#) shall allow a public comment period at any point in the meeting prior to action on an agenda item upon which a vote is to be taken.
- School boards are subject to R.S. [42:15](#)
- There is a similar obligation imposed for school boards with an exception that public comment must occur prior to taking any vote and must occur before each topic and not at the beginning of the meeting. R.S. [42:15](#). The purpose of making meetings open is to allow individuals to observe the deliberations of public bodies.

### **Q.10. Are public bodies required to give notice before they meet? R.S. [42:19](#)**

**A.10.** Yes. All public bodies, except the legislature and its committees, shall give written public notice of any meeting.

If the meeting is a regular meeting established by law, resolution, or ordinance, the written public notice must be given at the beginning of each calendar year, and

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Written public notice must be given no later than twenty-four (24) hours before any regular, special, or re-scheduled meeting.

A copy of the notice must be placed at the place of the meeting or at the official office of the body.

### **Q.11. What must be included in the meeting notice?**

**R.S. 42:19**

**A.11.** All notices must include the date, time, and place of the meeting(s). Additionally, the required written public notice for any individual meeting requires attachment of an agenda. If an executive session is to be held regarding strategy sessions or negotiations for collective bargaining or litigation, the following must also be attached to the notice:

- Statement identifying the court, case number, and parties relative to any pending litigation to be considered at the meeting; and
- Statement identifying the parties involved and reasonably identifying the subject matter of any prospective litigation for which formal written demand has been made that is to be considered at the meeting.

**There is an exception for the requirements of notice in extraordinary emergencies, but public bodies are still required to give notice of the meeting as they deem appropriate and as the circumstances permit.**

The agenda must be reasonably clear to provide the public sufficient notice of what subjects will be discussed, according to the Attorney General as stated in AG Op. #07-0181.

R.S. 42:17(D) provides an exception to notice requirements of R.S. 42:19 for meetings of private citizens' advisory groups or private citizens' advisory committees established by a public body, so long as the members do not receive compensation and serve only in an advisory capacity, except textbook advisory committees of DOE or BESE.

### **Q.12. What are the procedures to add or delete items on from an agenda?**

**R.S. 42:19**

**A.12.** Items may be added to the agenda only by a unanimous vote of the body present at an open meeting. Any motion for a vote to add an item to the agenda shall include the subject matter of the additional agenda item with reasonable specificity and the purpose for adding the item to the agenda. Public comment on the motion must be provided prior to any vote to add an item to the agenda taking place.

R.S. 42:19 sets forth the requirements for notice of meetings states at (A)(1)(b)(ii)

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that the notice shall include the agenda. Furthermore, any such matter shall be identified in the motion to take up the matter not on the agenda with reasonable specificity, including the purpose for the addition to the agenda, and entered into the minutes of the meeting. Prior to any vote on the motion to take up a matter not on the agenda by the public body, there must be an opportunity for public comment on the motion in accordance with R.S. 42:14 or 15. The public body shall not use its authority to take up a matter not on the agenda as a subterfuge to defeat the purposes of R.S. 42:12 through 23.

### **Q.13. What is an extraordinary emergency?**

**R.S. 42:17 R.S. 42:18**

**A.13.** Extraordinary emergencies, for the purpose of the Open Meetings Law, are limited to natural disaster, threat of epidemic, civil disturbances, suppression of insurrections, the repelling of invasions, or other matters of similar magnitude. According to the AG, the classic definition of extraordinary emergency includes work stoppages and strikes. AG Op. No. 85-789.

A meeting at the first available work day after Christmas to avoid a possible court challenge for non-payment of tenure award was a case of extraordinary emergency. *Eastwold v. Garsaud*, 427 So.2d 48 (La. App. 4<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1983).

### **Q.14. How is written public notice given?**

**R.S. 42:19**

**A.14.** The Open Meetings Law contains an illustrative list of methods of acceptable means for providing written public notice. The following are listed acceptable methods for giving written public notice:

- Posting copies of notice at the principal office of the public body holding the meeting, or if no such office exists, at the building in which the meeting is to be held; or
- Publication of the notice in the official journal of the public body no less than twenty-four hours before the meeting; or
- Mailing a copy of the notice to any member of the news media who requests notice of meetings:
  - Any such member of the news media shall be given notice of all meetings in the same manner as is given to members of the public body.

Public notice of day to day sessions of the legislature is governed by the Louisiana Constitution, rules of procedure of the Senate and House of Representatives, and the Joint Rules.

### **Q.15. How is a public body's principal office and official journal determined?**

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- A.15.** The body defines its principal office, though a test similar to those applied to corporations would seem proper.

The official journal of the public body is determined by the body subject to the requirements found in Chapter 4 of Title 43 of the Revised Statutes.

**Q.16. When may public bodies have “closed” executive sessions? R.S. 42:16**

- A.16.** Public bodies may have “closed” executive sessions only as provided by statute. R.S. 42:16, 42:17, and 42:18 provide the instances a public body may enter into executive session as well as what matters may be discussed within an executive session.

In order for a public body to enter into an executive session, a vote of 2/3 of members present at an open meeting, for which proper notice was given pursuant to R.S. 42:19, is necessary along with an accompanying statement of the reason for entering into the executive session. The vote of each member on the motion to enter into executive session along with the reason for entering the executive session must be recorded and entered into the minutes.

AG Op. #88-462 states that the notice of intent to move into executive session is not required even if the body has advanced knowledge of necessity for entering executive session, so long as notice is properly given for the meeting.

**Q.17. What are valid reasons for entering into executive session? R.S. 42:17 – 42:18**

- A.17.** Valid reasons for entering into executive session include:

- Discussion of character, professional competence, or physical or mental health of a person;
- Strategy sessions or negotiations with respect to collective bargaining, prospective litigation after formal written demand, or litigation when an open meeting would have a detrimental effect on the bargaining or litigating position of the public body;
- Discussion regarding the report, development, or course of action regarding security personnel, plans, or devices;
- Investigative proceedings regarding allegations of misconduct;
- Cases of extraordinary emergency, limited to natural disaster, threat of epidemic, civil disturbances, suppression of insurrections, the repelling of invasions, or other matters of similar magnitude;

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- Any meeting of the [State Mineral Board](#) at which records or matters entitled to confidential status by existing laws are required to be considered or discussed by the board with its staff or with any employee or other individual, firm, or corporation;
- Discussions between a city or parish [school board](#) and individual students or the parents or tutors of such students, or both;
- Presentations and discussions at meetings of civil service boards of test questions, answers, and papers produced and exhibited by the office of the state examiner, municipal fire and police civil service, pursuant to R.S. [33:2492](#) or [33:2552](#);
- Portion of any meeting of the Second Injury Board during which records or matters regarding the settlement of a worker's compensation claim are required to be considered or discussed by the board with its staff in order to grant prior written approval as required by R.S. [23:1378\(A\)\(8\)](#); and
- Any other matters that are or that will be provided for by the Legislature.
- [Act 188 of the 2011 Regular Session](#) revising R.S. [42:17](#) added the provision that executive session does not apply to discussing the award of a public contract except as provided in R.S. [39:1593\(C\)\(2\)\(c\)](#).

R.S. [42:18](#) allows for additional reasons for executive session by the houses of the legislature and its committees.

**Q.18. What is required to have a closed session to discuss an individual's character and fitness? R.S. [42: 17\(A\)\(1\)](#)**

**A.18.** Absent extraordinary circumstances, the individual that is the subject of discussion must be given at least 24 hour written notice prior to the meeting. The individual can require that the discussion occur in an open meeting. This discussion cannot be of the appointment of the individual to a public body.

**Q.19. What is considered litigation for the purpose of closing a meeting?**

**R.S. [42:19](#)**

**A.19.** A body is not allowed to close a meeting to discuss the possibility of litigation, and may only discuss current litigation that is on-going, already filed, in closed session if discussion in open meeting would be detrimental to the body's position in the litigation. A body must also ensure that the proper information concerning the case number, statement of the matter, identity of the court and parties, is included on the agenda and public notice prior to the meeting in which the closed session will take place.

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### **Q.20. What are the requirements for the State Mineral Board to close its meetings?**

**A.20.** The State Mineral Board may have closed sessions under any of the other statutorily provided exceptions, but may also close their meetings at which records or matters entitled to confidential status by existing laws are required to be considered or discussed by the board with its staff or with any employee or other individual, firm, or corporation to whom the records or matters are confidential in nature. The records must be disclosed to and accepted by the board subject to such privilege for the exclusive use in evaluating lease bids or development covering state-owned lands and water bottoms. An exception for the records must be provided for in Chapter I of Title 44 of the Louisiana Revised Statutes or other such statutes to which the board is subject.

### **Q.21. What are the requirements for a school board to close its meeting to discuss a student?**

**A.21.** Students must be within the jurisdiction of the respective school board. The discussion must be regarding problems of such students or their parents or tutors, and must be open if the parent, tutor, or student requires that it be held in open meeting.

### **Q.22. Are public bodies required to keep minutes?**

**R.S. 42:20**

**A.22.** Yes, public bodies are required to keep written minutes of all of their open meetings.

These minutes must at least include the following:

- The date, time, and place of the meeting;
- The members of the public body recorded as either present or absent;
- The substance of all matters decided, and, at the request of any member, a record, by individual member, of any votes taken; and
- Any other information that the public body requests be included or reflected in the minutes.

The AG stated in Op. No. 94-376 that minutes need not be verbatim transcripts of the meeting and that summaries satisfy the requirement.

All minutes are public documents and subject to public records requests unless specifically exempted.

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According to Title 43 of the Louisiana Revised Statutes the various political subdivisions of the state are required to publish the minutes of their proceedings in the official journal of the body.

R.S. [42:17\(D\)](#) provides an exception to the minutes requirements of R.S. [42:20](#) for meetings of private citizens' advisory groups or private citizens' advisory committees established by a public body, so long as the members do not receive compensation and serve only in an advisory capacity, except textbook advisory committees of DOE or BESE.

### **Q.23. Are public bodies required to vote in any particular manner? R.S. [42:14](#)**

**A.23.** Yes, members must vote *viva voce*. This requirement has been determined by the AG to require the physical presence of the member and prohibits submission of votes in writing by absent members, AG Op. No. 07-0040, or through vote via telephone, AG Op. No. 02-0106. Further, members are not allowed proxies unless specifically afforded this right by specific statute (AG Op. Nos. 92-352 and 10-0055) and may not undertake voting by secret ballot.

The *viva voce* requirement can be satisfied through use of electronic machines that display how individuals vote. AG Op. No. 80-2.

[AG Op. No. 11-0070](#) provides: "This office has previously opined that the 'viva voce' language in R.S. 42:14 requires a vote with a 'live voice,' and that the person voting must be physically present. See La. Atty. Gen. Op. Nos. 07-0040 and 99-385. Thus, the members of a public body cannot validly authorize an action via a written vote, even if done unanimously."

### **Q.24. Must public bodies allow the recording of their meetings? R.S. [42:23](#)**

**A.24.** Yes, the proceedings of all or any part of a public meeting may be video or tape recorded, filmed, or broadcast live. However, the public body shall establish standards for the use of lighting, recording, or broadcasting equipment to insure proper decorum in a public meeting. The AG has stated in Op. No. 95-277 that public bodies are required to allow recording even if they provide recording themselves, but may regulate where the media may be located to facilitate order and safety.

### **Q.25. What happens if a public body violates the Open Meetings Law? R.S. [42:24](#)**

**A.25.** Any action taken in violation of the Open Meetings Law shall be voidable by a court of competent jurisdiction. However, any suit to void any action must be commenced within sixty days of the action.

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Actions taken at a meeting that were in violation of Open Meeting Law due to lack of notice at least 24 hours before meeting, were cured by subsequent ratification of the action taken at subsequent valid meeting. *Marien v. Rapides Parish Police Jury*, 717 So.2d 1187 (La. App. 3<sup>rd</sup> Cir. 1998).

City Municipal Fire and Police Civil Service Board held an executive session, in violation of Open Meetings Law, when Board members neither voted nor gave a reason for the executive session after hearing on paramedic employee's civil service appeal at Board's regularly scheduled public meeting, and thus, Board's action was void; Law allowed public body to hold an executive session only after an affirmative vote of two-thirds of members present, and provided that the vote of each member and the reason for holding such an executive session had to be recorded and entered into the meeting minutes. *59 So.3d 412 (La. App. 2 Cir. 11/24/10). Writ Granted 3/4/2011*

### **Q.26. Who must enforce the Open Meetings Law?**

**R.S. 42:25**

**A.26.** The AG is required to enforce the Open Meetings Law throughout the state, and district attorneys are charged with enforcement within the judicial districts within which they serve. Any individual who has been denied any right under the Open Meetings Law or that believes that they have been violated may institute enforcement proceedings.

### **Q.27. What relief may be granted for violations?**

**R.S. 42:26**

**A.27.** A plaintiff in an enforcement proceeding may be granted any or all of the following:

- A writ of mandamus – Court order to compel a public official or body to perform mandatory or purely ministerial duties correctly;
- Injunctive relief – Temporarily compel the public body to act or stop acting, pending a final resolution on the issue;
- Declaratory judgment – a binding adjudication that establishes the rights and other legal relations of the parties without providing for or ordering enforcement;
- Judgment rendering the action void as provided in R.S. 42:24; and
- Judgment awarding civil penalties as provided in R.S. 42:28.

### **Q.28. Where can one have enforcement proceedings instituted?**

**R.S. 42:27**

**A.28.** Enforcement proceedings shall be instituted in the district court for the parish in which the meeting took place or will take place.

### **Q.29. What is the maximum amount that can be assessed as a civil penalty for Open Meetings Law violations?**

**R.S. 42:28**

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**A. 29.** A maximum of \$100 per violation can be assessed against an individual who knowingly and willfully participates in a meeting conducted in violation of the Open Meetings Law. The member shall be personally liable for the payment of such penalty.

### **Q.30. Can a public body have a meeting on a legal holiday?**

**A.30.** There is nothing that prohibits a public body from having its meetings on any day of the week including legal holidays, but the public body must continue to adhere to all requirements of the Open Meetings Law. AG Op. No. 74-016.

While a public body may not be prohibited from conducting business on legal holidays, doing so as a matter of principle should be avoided. Meetings on legal holidays may be construed as an attempt to circumvent the requirements of the Open Meetings Law, if there is not a valid reason for conducting the meeting on the legal holiday, such as an emergency situation that requires action of timely nature.

## **AG Opinions**

**AG Op. No. 10-0271 – The AG discusses the procedure for amending the posted agenda and the remedies available for a violation of the Open Meetings Law.**

AG Op. No. 10-0023 – A discussion of a quasi public entity. The AG states that important to the determination that the entity is a quasi public entity is that it derives a portion of its income from payments received from public agencies or bodies. In addition, the function of the entity has a close connexity to the regulatory function of a particular “public body” defined in R.S. 42:4.2(A)(2) [now R.S. 42: 13, editor’s note] and is subject to Open Meetings Law.

AG Op. No. 09-0037 - It is proper for “financial matters” to be placed on the Sabine Parish School Board’s consent agenda, if such matters are routine or non-controversial. If a member of the public body determines that any item on the consent agenda requires discussion, then the item must be treated as a typical agenda item, allowing for debate and a separate vote.

**Act 35 of the 2011 First Ex. Session amended R.S. 42:15 regarding public comment for the school board meetings in Orleans Parish.**