

# Question: Are there restrictions in the Iowa Code concerning the start time of a meeting or how long a meeting lasts?

*Editor's Note: This is a monthly column prepared by the Iowa Public Information Board to update Iowans on the IPIB's activities and provide information on some of the issues routinely addressed by the board.*



**ANSWER:** Not specifically. Iowa Code section 21.4(2)(a) states that a meeting “shall be held at a place reasonably accessible to the public, and at a time reasonably convenient to the public...” There is no definition in Chapter 21 of ‘reasonably convenient’.

There is little judicial guidance for determining ‘reasonably convenient’. A district court case, *S.A. Sutton v. Dubuque City Council*, 2004 WL 5640887 (Iowa Dist. Ct. for Dubuque County, March 2, 2004) is of limited value. The challenge in the Dubuque case concerned a 5 p.m. meeting time. The Court found that starting time did not violate Iowa Code section 21.4(2)(a). The ruling opined that a 2 a.m. meeting would be “facially unreasonable,” but offered no other advice.

Recently, the Iowa Public Information Board (IPIB) reviewed a complaint concerning a school board that officially changed its monthly meeting time to 6 a.m. The school board discussed the change at open meetings and voted in open session to move the regular meeting time. The rationale stated for the change was that there would be fewer conflicts with other school activities, especially early evening arts, academics, and sporting events.

The IPIB dismissed this specific complaint. The IPIB added, however, that this dismissal should not be utilized as precedence by any governmental body contemplating a move of its meeting time. The IPIB also directed staff to research and draft an administrative rule concerning meeting times.

The length of a meeting has not

been the topic of any formal complaint and is not specifically addressed by the statute. Informal concerns have been raised concerning an electronic meeting that was scheduled to last five hours and regular meetings that begin at 6 p.m. and last until midnight. This issue may also be addressed by an administrative rule.

Anyone having suggestions on this issue is asked to contact the IPIB at [ipib@iowa.gov](mailto:ipib@iowa.gov) and share those suggestions. Opinions, rulings, FAQs, monthly columns, and training documents are available on the IPIB website – [www.ipib.iowa.gov](http://www.ipib.iowa.gov). Questions for the IPIB can be posted on the website or by calling 515-725-1781.

## IPIB Facts and Figures

During the month of May 2016, 80 contacts were made with the Iowa Public Information Board office.

<u>TYPE</u>	<u>MAY 2016</u>	<u>2016 YEAR-TO-DATE</u>
Formal complaints	11	53
Advisory opinions	0	8
Declaratory orders	0	1
Informal complaints	7	39
Informal requests	62	268
Miscellaneous	0	4
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>373</b>

### Who can contact the IPIB and how long does it take?

Any person can contact the IPIB for assistance by telephone (515-725-1781), by email, or on the website. So far, in 2016, 373 identifiable people have contacted the IPIB. Of these, 48% were private citizens, 40% were government officials or employees, and 12% were members of the media.

In the month of May 2016, 67% of the incoming contacts were resolved the same day, 14% were resolved in one to five days, and 19% were resolved in six or more days.