

TALKING TRANSPARENCY, #1 -- How to discuss **open meetings** with candidates for local office

The next few weeks will be full of opportunities to meet the candidates for local elected offices such as city council and school boards, leading up to the November 5th elections. In addition to questions about city budgets or school policies, voters should ask candidates about what it means to have a transparent governmental body.

Iowa Code chapter 21 outlines the requirements of open meetings. The purpose of the Chapter is clearly stated in the first section: *“Intent — declaration of policy. This chapter seeks to assure, through a requirement of open meetings of governmental bodies, that the basis and rationale of governmental decisions, as well as those decisions themselves, are easily accessible to the people. Ambiguity in the construction or application of this chapter should be resolved in favor of openness.”*

An open meeting is not an option. It is required by Iowa law. Governmental bodies are mandated to provide at least 24 hour notice of meetings. No matter what the gathering is called (regular, special, work session, electronic, etc.), if there is deliberation or action upon any matter within the scope of the body’s policy-making duties by a majority of the members, it is considered a meeting and must be open.

The public must also have notice of the agenda for the meeting. This agenda must be worded in a way that the public is reasonably apprised of the business to be conducted at the meeting. Voting must be conducted in open session. Closed sessions are strictly limited to the few exceptions outlined in Chapter 21 and must follow the rules outlined by Iowa law.

Minutes shall be kept of all meetings. The minutes must include the date, time and place, the members present, and the action taken at the meeting. The vote of each member present must be made public at the meeting and in the minutes. These minutes are public records.

All elected and appointed members of a governmental body are required to be trained about open meetings and public records laws. Failure to follow open meetings laws can result in court sanctions or review by the Iowa Public Information Board.

Specific information about the open meetings law and training guidance is available at the Iowa Public Information Board website: www.ipib.iowa.gov or by calling the IPIB at 515-725-1783.