City Clerk

THE BROWN ACT

OPEN MEETINGS FOR LOCAL LEGISLATIVE BODIES

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CALIFORNIA ATTORNEY
GENERAL'S OFFICE

While the Act creates broad public access rights to the meetings of legislative bodies, it also recognizes the legitimate needs of government to conduct some of its meetings outside of the public eye. Closed-session meetings are specifically defined and are limited in scope. They primarily involve personnel issues, pending litigation, labor negotiations and real property acquisitions. (§§ 54956.8, 54956 9, 54957, 54957.6.) Each closed-session meeting must be preceded by a public agenda and by an oral announcement (§§ 54954.2, 54957.7.) When final action is taken in closed session, the legislative body may be required to report on such action. (§ 54957 1)

The following chapters contain a more detailed discussion of the persons governed by the Act, the notice and agenda requirements, access rights of the public, limitations on closed sessions and available remedies for violation of the Act

CHAPTER II

BODIES SUBJECT TO THE BROWN ACT

The Brown Act applies to the "legislative bodies" of all local agencies in California, e g , councils, boards, commissions and committees (§§ 54951, 54952) In addition, any person elected to serve as a member of a legislative body who has not assumed the duties of office shall conform his or her conduct to the requirements of the Act, and shall be treated for purposes of enforcement of the Act as if he or she had already assumed office. (§ 54952.1; see, 216 *Sutter Bay Associates* v *County of Sutter* (1997) 58 Cal.App.4th 860.)

The Act does not apply to individual decision makers who are not elected or appointed members of legislative bodies such as agency or department heads when they meet with advisors, staff, colleagues or anyone else. Similarly, the Act does not apply to multi-member bodies which are created by an individual decision maker (75 Ops.Cal.Atty.Gen. 263, 269 (1992); 56 Ops Cal Atty Gen. 14, 17 (1973).) However, where a body directs or authorizes a single individual to appoint a body, it would probably be subject to the Act. (*Frazer* v. *Dixon Unified School District* (1993) 18 Cal.App.4th 781, 793; *International Longshoremen's & Warehousemen's Union* v *Los Angeles Expert Terminal, Inc.* (1999) 69 Cal.App.4th 287, 297.) Boards and commissions that are created by statute or ordinance are subject to the Act even if they are under the jurisdiction of an individual department head.

A single individual acting on behalf of an agency is not a "legislative body" since the definition of that term connotes a group of individuals. Thus, a hearing officer, functioning by himself or herself in an employee disciplinary hearing, is not a legislative body (*Wilson* v. *San Francisco Mun. Ry* (1973) 29 Cal.App.3d 870, 878-879), nor is an individual city councilmember screening candidates for a vacant city office. (Cal.Atty.Gen., Indexed Letter, No. IL 76-181 (September 13, 1976).)

The Act applies to the meetings of "legislative bodies" of "local agencies." An understanding of each of these terms is necessary in order to properly apply the provisions of the Act to individual situations These terms will be discussed in the following sections

1. Local Agencies

Local agencies include all cities, counties, school districts, municipal corporations, special districts, and all other local public entities (§ 54951.) The first determination one must make in assessing the applicability of the Act is whether the agency is local in nature. If the agency is essentially local in character, it is probably subject to the Act. (§ 54951.) If, however, the agency is a multi-member state body, the Bagley-Keene Act applies. (§ 11120 et seq.) The fact that an agency is created by state or federal law, rather than local ordinance, does not mean that the agency is not essentially local in character (§ 54952(a).) Factors in assessing the local versus state character of a body may include. the geographical coverage of the agency, the duties of the agency, provisions concerning membership and appointment, or the existence of an oversight agency

The issue of whether an agency is local or state in character was addressed in *Torres* v *Board of Commissioners* (1979) 89 Cal.App 3d 545, in the context of determining whether a housing authority was subject to the Act. The court stated·

> "While a housing authority may be a state agency for some purposes . . if it is within the Brown Act's definition of a local agency, it is simply not included within the State Act. We hold that a housing authority created by Health and Safety Code section 34200 et seq. is included within the statutory definition of a local agency under the Brown Act in that it is either an 'other local public agency' or a 'municipal corporation' or both, as those terms are used in Government Code section 54951.... The term 'municipal corporation' is broader than the term 'city,' particularly when the term 'city' already appears in the applicable statute. . . . In order to give meaning to the term 'municipal corporation' in Government Code section 54951 we hold that such term is not restricted to its technical sense of a 'city,' general law or charter, but rather includes such entities as housing authorities. . . . In addition, a housing authority is local in scope and character, restricted geographically in its area of operation, and does not have statewide power or jurisdiction even though it is created by, and is an agent of, the state rather than of the city or county in which it functions. . . .
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> "Furthermore, as perceptively noted by the trial court, the placement of Government Code section 11120 and its history is some persuasive indication that the State Act was meant to cover executive departments of the state government and was not meant to cover local agencies merely because they were created by state law. A housing authority is no more a state agency under

these acts than is a city or a county. The fact that such entities from time to time administer matters of state concern may make them state agents for such purposes but not state agencies under the open meeting acts." [Citations omitted.] (*Torres* v. *Board of Commissioners* (1979) 89 Cal.App.3d 545, 549-550)

The Act has also been found to apply to an air pollution control district (71 Ops Cal.Atty.Gen 96 (1988)), a regional open space district (73 Ops Cal.Atty.Gen. 1 (1990), and to such other local bodies as area and local voluntary health planning agencies (Cal.Atty.Gen., Indexed Letter, No. IL 72-79 (April 4, 1979).) The Act is a matter of statewide concern and, therefore, applies equally to charter and general law cities. (*San Diego Union* v *City Council* (1983) 146 Cal App 3d 947, 957)

The Act does not apply to the judicial branch of government or boards and commissions which are an adjunct to the judiciary (See Cal Atty Gen., Indexed Letter, No IL 75-109 (June 3, 1975); Cal.Atty Gen., Indexed Letter, No. IL 62-46 (May 15, 1962), Cal.Atty.Gen , Indexed Letter, No. IL 60-16 (February 14, 1960).) This office has also concluded the Act is not applicable to county central committees of a political party because they are neither public entities nor are they included in any of the special statutory provisions of the Act. (59 Ops Cal.Atty.Gen 162, 164 (1976).)

2. Legislative Bodies

Having concluded that the Act applies to bodies that are "local" in character, we turn now to a discussion of the requirement that such local bodies qualify as "legislative bodies" within the meaning of the Act. The term "legislative body" is not used in its technical sense in the Act. (§ 54952.) The Act's application is not limited to boards and commissions insofar as they perform "legislative" functions. Bodies that perform actions which are primarily executive or quasi-judicial in nature are also subject to the Act as well. (61 Ops Cal Atty Gen. 220 (1978); 57 Ops.Cal.Atty.Gen. 189 (1974).)

In the past, the different types of bodies covered by the Act were set forth in several Government Code sections. This approach led to confusion with respect to the interrelationship between these sections and exemptions contained within them. (*Freedom Newspapers* v. *Orange County Employees Retirement System* (1993) 6 Cal.4th 821.) In 1994, the Legislature amended the Act to consolidate, into a single section, all of the provisions defining those bodies that are subject to the Act's requirements. (§ 54952.) By so doing, the Legislature hoped to clarify the definitions and the exemptions contained in them.

Below is a discussion of the various types of bodies that are defined as "legislative bodies" for purposes of the Act.

A. Governing Bodies

The governing bodies of local government agencies are the most basic type of body subject to the Act's requirements. These include the board of supervisors of a county, the city council of a city or the governing board of a district. (§ 54952(a).) In addition, the Act expressly applies to local bodies created by state or federal statute. (§54952(a).) The board of directors for a joint powers authority would be covered as a governing body of a local agency, joint powers authorities are also covered because they are created according to a procedure established by state law. (§ 6500 et seq.)

B. Subsidiary Bodies

Any board, commission, committee or other body of a local agency created by charter, ordinance, resolution or formal action of a legislative body is itself a legislative body. (§ 54952(b)) Generally, this is the case regardless of whether the body is permanent or temporary, advisory or decisionmaking. However, there is a specific exemption for an advisory committee which is comprised solely of less than a quorum of the members of the legislative body that created the advisory body. (§ 54952(b).) This exception does not apply if the advisory committee is a standing committee. (§ 54952(b)) A standing committee is a committee which has continuing jurisdiction over a particular subject matter (e.g , budget, finance, legislation) or if the committee's meeting schedule is fixed by charter, ordinance, resolution or other formal action of the legislative body that created it (See examples, *infra,* p 6.)

The term "formal action" is used twice in section 54952(b) in connection with advisory committees and standing committees. The term "formal action of a legislative body" appears to be a term intended to distinguish between the official actions of the body and the informal actions of particular board members For example, in *Joiner* v. *City of Sebastopol* (1981) 125 Cal.App.3d 799, 805, the court concluded that the city council had taken formal action by designating two of its members to sit on an advisory committee and establish the committee's agenda, even though the council did not act by formal resolution. Similarly, in *Frazer* v. *Dixon Unified School District* (1993) 18 Cal App.4th 781, 792-793, the court indicated that a school board's authorization to the superintendent to appoint a committee under specified circumstances constituted a creation of an advisory committee by formal action of the board. "Formal action of a legislative body" is not limited to a formal resolution or a formal vote by the body.

When a legislative body designates less than a quorum of its members that does not constitute a standing committee to meet with representatives of another legislative body to exchange information and report back to their respective bodies, a meeting between the representatives would be exempt from the Act. (*Joiner* v. *City of Sebastopol* (1981) 125 Cal.App.3d 799, 805.) However, if a legislative body designates less than a quorum of its members to meet with representatives of another legislative body to

perform a task, such as the making of a recommendation, an advisory committee consisting of the representatives from both bodies would be created. Such a committee would be subject to the open meeting and notice provisions of the Act. (*Joiner* v. *City of Sebastopol* (1981) 125 Cal.App.3d 799, 805) The fact that the advisory committee was contingent upon the second body's compliance does not detract from the conclusion that the creation of the committee must be attributed to the first body's action. (*Joiner* v. *City of Sebastopol* (1981) 125 Cal.App.3d 799, 805.)

The following illustrates how section 54952(b) operates. A city council creates four bodies to address various city problems.

- Commission comprised of councilmembers, the city manager and interested citizens: This committee is covered by the Act because there is no exemption for it regardless of whether it is decisionmaking or advisory in nature.

- Advisory committee comprised of two councilmembers for the purpose of reviewing all issues related to parks and recreation in the city on an ongoing basis: This committee is a standing committee which is subject to the Act's requirements because it has continuing jurisdiction over issues related to parks and recreation in the city

- Advisory committee comprised of two city councilmembers for the purpose of producing a report in six months on downtown traffic congestion: This committee is an exempt advisory committee because it is comprised solely of less than a quorum of the members of the city council. It is not a standing committee because it is charged with accomplishing a specific task in a short period of time, i.e , it is a limited term ad hoc committee

- Advisory committee comprised of two councilmembers to meet on the second Monday of each month pursuant to city council resolution: This committee is subject to the Act as a standing committee because its meeting schedule is fixed by the city council

C. Private or Nonprofit Corporations and Other Entities

Under specified circumstances, meetings of boards, commissions, committees or other multi-member bodies that govern private corporations, limited liability companies or other entities may become subject to the open meeting requirements of the Act. Ordinarily, these private corporations or other entities will be nonprofit corporations. In some instances, they are created by the governmental entity to support the efforts of the governmental entity. Other times they are privately created and, to some degree, may partner with a governmental entity to accomplish a common goal. (See Ed. Code, § 47604(a) [concerning possible application to charter schools].) The circumstances

the meaning of the Act Therefore, the meeting should have been noticed and members of the media and public should have been admitted to witness the meeting. In reaching its conclusion, the court stated:

> "An informal conference or caucus permits crystallization of secret decisions to a point just short of ceremonial acceptance. There is rarely any purpose to a nonpublic pre-meeting conference except to conduct some part of the decisional process behind closed doors. Only by embracing the collective inquiry and discussion stages, as well as the ultimate step of official action, can an open meeting regulation frustrate these evasive devices As operative criteria, formality and informality are alien to the law's design, exposing it to the very evasions it was designed to prevent Construed in the light of the Brown Act's objectives, the term 'meeting' extends to informal sessions or conferences of the board members designed for the discussion of public business The Elks Club luncheon, attended by the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors, was such a meeting." (*Sacramento Newspaper Guild* v. *Sacramento County Bd of Suprs* (1968) 263 Cal.App 2d 41, 50-51, see also 42 Ops.Cal Atty.Gen. 61 (1963) ["informal," "study," "discussion," "informational," "factfinding," or "precouncil" gatherings of a quorum of the members of a board are within the scope of the Act as meetings].)

The Act contains the following specific exemptions.

A. Conferences and Retreats

The Act exempts conferences and similar gatherings, which are open to the public, that involve issues of interest to the public or to public agencies of the type represented by the legislative body in question, so long as the majority of the members of the legislative body do not discuss among themselves, other than as part of the scheduled program, any issues of a specific nature which are within the subject matter jurisdiction of the legislative body. (§ 54952.2(c)(2).) However, the conference need not necessarily be a conference of public agencies to fall within the exemption; rather, the gathering could be a conference of media outlets, environmental organizations, health care entities, social welfare organizations so long as the subject of the conference is related to the body's jurisdiction. The exemption for conferences does contain two limitations. First, a majority of the members of the legislative body in attendance at the conference may not caucus or discuss among themselves business of a specific nature within the body's jurisdiction. However, members may enter into discussions on issues or business affecting their local agency in a public forum as part of the scheduled program of the conference. Second, the conference must be open to the public, although the exemption specifically provides that a member of the public need not be provided with free admission where others are charged a fee.

Agency retreats, unlike conferences, do not involve a number of public agencies and interested individuals apart from the legislative body itself. Therefore, retreats continue to be subject to the open meeting and notice requirements of the Act

B. Other Public Meetings

When a majority of a legislative body attends an open and publicized meeting held by a person or organization, other than the local agency on a matter of local interest, the legislative body is not deemed to be conducting a meeting, so long as the members in attendance do not discuss among themselves, other than as part of the scheduled program, issues of a specific nature related to the subject matter jurisdiction of the body. (§ 54952.2(c)(3).) This exception applies to attendance at a meeting conducted by a private individual, or private organization, so long as the meeting concerns issues of local interest and is open to the public and well publicized in advance. Under the terms of the exception, members of a legislative body who attend a meeting conducted by another person or organization may not caucus or discuss among themselves specific business within the body's jurisdiction However, a member of the legislative body may discuss issues related to the purpose of the meeting during public testimony Candidate debates including incumbents and challengers would be permitted under this exception.

C. Meetings of Other Legislative Bodies

When a majority of the legislative body attends an open and noticed meeting of another legislative body of the same or a different local agency, the legislative body is not deemed to be conducting a meeting, so long as the members in attendance do not discuss, among themselves, other than as part of the scheduled meeting, issues of a specific nature related to the subject matter jurisdiction of the body. (§ 54952.2(c)(4).) Thus, when a majority of a planning commission attends a meeting of the city council for the same city, it need not treat such attendance as a meeting of the planning commission for purposes of the Act. Similarly, when a majority of the members of a city council attend a meeting of the county board of supervisors, the city council is not conducting a meeting within the meaning of the Act. However, if two bodies conduct a joint meeting, each body should notice the meeting as a joint meeting of the two bodies. This exception, which is contained in section 54952.2(c)(4), does not apply when a majority of the members of a parent legislative body attend a meeting of a standing committee of the parent body. However, section 54952 2(c)(6) specifically addresses this issue. It provides that a majority of the parent body may attend an open and noticed meeting of a standing committee so long as the members who are not members of the standing committee and which cause a majority of the parent body to be present, attend only as observers. In 81 Ops.Cal.Atty.Gen. 156, 158 (1998), this office concluded that persons who attended solely as observers could not address the

committee by testifying, asking questions or providing information In addition, the opinion concluded that observers could not sit at the dias.

D. Social or Ceremonial Occasions

Attendance by a majority of the members of the legislative body at a purely social or ceremonial occasion is not deemed to be a meeting, so long as the members do not discuss among themselves specific business within the jurisdiction of the body. (§ 54952.2(c)(5).) This has long been the law in California. (*Sacramento Newspaper Guild* v. *Sacramento County Bd.* of *Suprs* (1968) 263 Cal.App.2d 41; 43 Ops Cal.Atty Gen. 36, 38 (1964).) In practice, this prohibition may sometimes be difficult to observe since persons attending social or ceremonial occasions frequently wish to discuss specific issues with their governmental officials. However, where a majority of a legislative body is present, the members must not discuss specific business within the jurisdiction of the body to avoid violating the Act.

2. Serial Meetings

The issue of serial meetings stands at the vortex of two significant public policies. first, the constitutional right of citizens to address grievances and communicate with their elected representatives; and second, the Act's policy favoring public deliberation by multi-member boards, commissions and councils. The purpose of the serial meeting prohibition is not to prevent citizens from communicating with their elected representatives, but rather to prevent public bodies from circumventing the requirement for open and public deliberation of issues.

The Act expressly prohibits serial meetings that are conducted through direct communications, personal intermediaries or technological devices for the purpose of developing a concurrence as to action to be taken (§ 54952.2(b), *Stockton Newspapers, Inc.* v. *Redevelopment Agency* (1985) 171 Cal.App.3d 95, 103.) This provision raises two questions: first, what is a serial meeting for purposes of this definition; and second, what does it mean to develop a concurrence as to action to be taken.

Typically, a serial meeting is a series of communications, each of which involves less than a quorum of the legislative body, but which taken as a whole involves a majority of the body's members. For example, a chain of communications involving contact from member A to member B who then communicates with member C would constitute a serial meeting in the case of a five-person body. Similarly, when a person acts as the hub of a wheel (member A) and communicates individually with the various spokes (members B and C), a serial meeting has occurred. In addition, a serial meeting occurs when intermediaries for board members have a meeting to discuss issues. For example, when a representative of member A meets with representatives of members B and C to discuss an agenda item, the members have conducted a serial meeting through their representatives as intermediaries. The statutory definition also applies to situations in which technological devices are used to connect people at the same time

who are in different locations (but see the discussion below concerning the exception for teleconference meetings)

Once serial communications are found to exist, it must be determined whether the communications were used to develop a concurrence as to action to be taken. If the serial communications were not used to develop a concurrence as to action to be taken, the serial communications do not constitute a meeting and the Act is not applicable. In construing these terms, one should be mindful of the ultimate purposes of the Act -- to provide the public with an opportunity to monitor and participate in the decision-making processes of boards and commissions. As such, substantive conversations among members concerning an agenda item prior to a public meeting probably would be viewed as contributing to the development of a concurrence as to the ultimate action to be taken. Conversations which advance or clarify a member's understanding of an issue, or facilitate an agreement or compromise among members, or advance the ultimate resolution of an issue, are all examples of communications which contribute to the development of a concurrence as to action to be taken by the legislative body. Accordingly, with respect to items that have been placed on an agenda or that are likely to be placed upon an agenda, members of legislative bodies should avoid serial communications of a substantive nature concerning such items.

Problems arise when systematic communications begin to occur which involve members of the board acquiring substantive information for an upcoming meeting or engaging in debate, discussion, lobbying or any other aspect of the deliberative process either among themselves or with staff For example, executive officers may wish to brief their members on policy decisions and background events concerning proposed agenda items. This office believes that a court could determine that such communications violate the Act, because such discussions are part of the deliberative process. If these communications are permitted to occur in private, a large part of the process by which members reach their decisions may have occurred outside the public eye. Under these circumstances, the public would be able only to witness a shorthand version of the deliberative process, and its ability to monitor and contribute to the decision-making process would be curtailed. Therefore, we recommend that when the executive director is faced with this situation, he or she prepare a memorandum outlining the issues for all of the members of the board as well as the public In this way, the serial meeting violation may be avoided and everyone will have the benefit of reacting to the same information.

However, this office does not think that the prohibition against serial meetings would prevent an executive officer from planning upcoming meetings by discussing times, dates, and placement of matters on the agenda. It also appears that an executive officer may receive spontaneous input from any of the board members with respect to these or other matters so long as a quorum is not involved.

The express language of the statute concerning serial meetings largely codifies case law developed by the courts and the opinions issued by this office in the past. In *Frazer* v *Dixon Unified School District* (1993) 18 Cal App.4th 781, 796-798, the court concluded that the Act applies equally to the deliberations of a body and its decision to take action If a collective commitment were a necessary component of every meeting, the body could conduct most or all of its deliberation behind closed doors so long as the body did not actually reach agreement prior to consideration in public session. Accordingly, the court concluded that the collective acquisition of information constituted a meeting. The court cited briefing sessions as examples of deliberative meetings which are subject to the Act's requirements, and contrasted these sessions with activities that fall outside the purview of the Act, such as the passive receipt of an individual's mail or the solitary review of a memorandum by an individual board member

In *Stockton Newspapers, Inc* v. *Redevelopment Agency* (1985) 171 Cal.App.3d 95, 105, the court concluded that a series of individual telephone calls between the agency attorney and the members of the body constituted a meeting. In that case, the attorney individually polled the members of the body for their approval on a real estate transaction. The court concluded that even though the meeting was conducted in a serial fashion, it nevertheless was a meeting for the purposes of the Act. (See also, 65 Ops.Cal.Atty Gen. 63, 66 (1982); 63 Ops.Cal.Atty Gen 820, 828-829 (1980))

3. Individual Contacts Between Members of the Public and Board Members

The prohibition against serial meetings must be reconciled with the exemption for individual contacts and communications contained in section 54952.2(c)(1). Individual contacts or communications between a member of a legislative body and any other person are specifically exempt from the definition of a meeting. (§ 54952.2(c)(1).) The purpose of this exception appears to be to protect the constitutional rights of individuals to contact their government representatives regarding issues which concern them. To harmonize this exemption with the serial meeting prohibition, the term "any other person" is construed to mean any person other than a board member or agency employee. Thus, while this provision exempts from the Act's coverage conversations between board members and members of the public, it does not exempt conversations among board members, or between board members and their staff.

By using the words "individual contacts or conversations" it appears that the Legislature was attempting to ensure that individual contacts would not be defined as a meeting, while still preventing the members of a body from orchestrating contacts between a private party and a quorum of the body. Accordingly, if a member of the public requests a conversation with an individual member of the board, who then acts independently of the board and its other members in deciding whether to talk with the member of the public, no meeting will have occurred even if the member of the public ultimately meets with a quorum of the body.