CHAPTER 21

OFFICIAL MEETINGS OPEN TO PUBLIC (OPEN MEETINGS)

Referred to in §7C.13, 13.14, 15.106A, 15.107C, 15.120, 15E.63, 16.2D, 20.17, 22.7(60), 23.1, 23.2, 23.5, 23.6, 23.7, 23.8, 23.10, 23.11, 28A.9, 28E.6, 28F.13, 28J.28, 49.4, 49.5, 68B.31A, 84A.1A, 84A.4, 99G.4, 99G.8, 101C.3, 137.109, 148.7, 161A.47, 183A.5, 185.34, 216A.132, 237.21, 256E.7, 256F.4, 256H.2, 256I.7, 261.8, 261E.9, 272C.6, 279.15, 279.24, 279.38, 279.38A, 331.210A, 331.213, 331.234, 331.235, 331.238, 331.248, 331.399, 331.909, 358C.12, 373.3, 441.37A, 455A.20, 480.3, 602.2103, 679C.108

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21.1 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.

[C79, 81, §28A.1]
C85, §21.1

21.2 Definitions.

As used in this chapter:

1. *"Governmental body"* means:

a. A board, council, commission, or other governing body expressly created by the statutes of this state or by executive order.

b. A board, council, commission, or other governing body of a political subdivision or tax-supported district in this state.

c. A multimembered body formally and directly created by one or more boards, councils, commissions, or other governing bodies subject to paragraphs *"a"* and *"b"* of this subsection.

d. Those multimembered bodies to which the state board of regents or a president of a university has delegated the responsibility for the management and control of the intercollegiate athletic programs at the state universities.

e. An advisory board, advisory commission, or task force created by the governor or the general assembly to develop and make recommendations on public policy issues.

f. A nonprofit corporation other than a fair conducting a fair event as provided in chapter 174, whose facilities or indebtedness are supported in whole or in part with property tax revenue and which is licensed to conduct pari-mutuel wagering pursuant to chapter 99D or a nonprofit corporation which is a successor to the nonprofit corporation which built the facility.

g. A nonprofit corporation licensed to conduct gambling games pursuant to chapter 99F.

h. An advisory board, advisory commission, advisory committee, task force, or other body created by statute or executive order of this state or created by an executive order of a political subdivision of this state to develop and make recommendations on public policy issues.

i. The governing body of a drainage or levee district as provided in chapter 468, including a board as defined in section 468.3, regardless of how the district is organized.

j. An advisory board, advisory commission, advisory committee, task force, or other body created by an entity organized under chapter 28E, or by the administrator or joint board specified in a chapter 28E agreement, to develop and make recommendations on public policy issues.

2. *"Meeting"* means a gathering in person or by electronic means, formal or informal, of a majority of the members of a governmental body where there is deliberation or action upon any matter within the scope of the governmental body's policy-making duties. Meetings shall not include a gathering of members of a governmental body for purely ministerial or social

purposes when there is no discussion of policy or no intent to avoid the purposes of this chapter.

3. *"Open session"* means a meeting to which all members of the public have access.

[C71, 73, 75, 77, §28A.1; C79, 81, §28A.2]

C85, §21.2

89 Acts, ch 73, §1; 90 Acts, ch 1175, §1; 90 Acts, ch 1271, §701; 91 Acts, ch 258, §26; 93 Acts, ch 25, §1; 2004 Acts, ch 1019, §1; 2009 Acts, ch 132, §1; 2009 Acts, ch 179, §31

Referred to in §9E.3, 21.11, 23.2, 331.909

21.3 Meetings of governmental bodies.

1. Meetings of governmental bodies shall be preceded by public notice as provided in section 21.4 and shall be held in open session unless closed sessions are expressly permitted by law. Except as provided in section 21.5, all actions and discussions at meetings of governmental bodies, whether formal or informal, shall be conducted and executed in open session.

2. Each governmental body shall keep minutes of all its meetings showing the date, time and place, the members present, and the action taken at each meeting. The minutes shall show the results of each vote taken and information sufficient to indicate the vote of each member present. The vote of each member present shall be made public at the open session. The minutes shall be public records open to public inspection.

[C71, 73, 75, 77, §28A.1, 28A.5; C79, 81, §28A.3]

C85, §21.3

93 Acts, ch 25, §2; 2020 Acts, ch 1062, §94

Referred to in §372.13

21.4 Public notice.

1. *a.* Except as provided in subsection 3, a governmental body shall give notice of the time, date, and place of each meeting including a reconvened meeting of the governmental body, and the tentative agenda of the meeting, in a manner reasonably calculated to apprise the public of that information. Reasonable notice shall include advising the news media who have filed a request for notice with the governmental body and posting the notice on a bulletin board or other prominent place which is easily accessible to the public and clearly designated for that purpose at the principal office of the body holding the meeting, or if no such office exists, at the building in which the meeting is to be held.

b. Each meeting shall be held at a place reasonably accessible to the public and at a time reasonably convenient to the public, unless for good cause such a place or time is impossible or impracticable. Special access to the meeting may be granted to persons with disabilities.

2. *a.* Except as otherwise provided in paragraph *"c"*, notice conforming with all of the requirements of subsection 1 shall be given at least twenty-four hours prior to the commencement of any meeting of a governmental body unless for good cause such notice is impossible or impractical, in which case as much notice as is reasonably possible shall be given.

b. When it is necessary to hold a meeting on less than twenty-four hours' notice, or at a place that is not reasonably accessible to the public, or at a time that is not reasonably convenient to the public, the nature of the good cause justifying that departure from the normal requirements shall be stated in the minutes.

c. If a governmental body is prevented from convening an otherwise properly noticed meeting under the requirements of subsection 1, the governmental body may convene the meeting if the governmental body posts an amended notice of the meeting conforming with all of the requirements of subsection 1.

3. Subsection 1 does not apply to any of the following:

a. A meeting reconvened within four hours of the start of its recess, where an announcement of the time, date, and place of the reconvened meeting is made at the original meeting in open session and recorded in the minutes of the meeting and there is no change in the agenda.

b. A meeting held by a formally constituted subunit of a parent governmental body during

a lawful meeting of the parent governmental body or during a recess in that meeting of up to four hours, or a meeting of that subunit immediately following the meeting of the parent governmental body, if the meeting of that subunit is publicly announced in open session at the parent meeting and the subject of the meeting reasonably coincides with the subjects discussed or acted upon by the parent governmental body.

4. If another section of the Code requires a manner of giving specific notice of a meeting, hearing, or an intent to take action by a governmental body, compliance with that section shall constitute compliance with the notice requirements of this section.

[C71, 73, 75, 77, 79, 81, §28A.4]

C85, §21.4

96 Acts, ch 1129, §113; 2008 Acts, ch 1032, §201; 2011 Acts, ch 106, §4, 17; 2016 Acts, ch 1025, §1

Referred to in §21.3, 21.8, 35C.1, 275.15, 282.11

21.5 Closed session.

1. A governmental body may hold a closed session only by affirmative public vote of either two-thirds of the members of the body or all of the members present at the meeting. A governmental body may hold a closed session only to the extent a closed session is necessary for any of the following reasons:

a. To review or discuss records which are required or authorized by state or federal law to be kept confidential or to be kept confidential as a condition for that governmental body's possession or continued receipt of federal funds.

b. To discuss application for letters patent.

c. To discuss strategy with counsel in matters that are presently in litigation or where litigation is imminent where its disclosure would be likely to prejudice or disadvantage the position of the governmental body in that litigation.

d. To discuss the contents of a licensing examination or whether to initiate licensee disciplinary investigations or proceedings if the governmental body is a licensing or examining board.

e. To discuss whether to conduct a hearing or to conduct hearings to suspend or expel a student, unless an open session is requested by the student or a parent or guardian of the student if the student is a minor.

f. To discuss the decision to be rendered in a contested case conducted according to the provisions of chapter 17A.

g. To avoid disclosure of specific law enforcement matters, such as current or proposed investigations or inspection or auditing techniques or schedules, which if disclosed would enable law violators to avoid detection.

h. To avoid disclosure of specific law enforcement matters, such as allowable tolerances or criteria for the selection, prosecution, or settlement of cases, which if disclosed would facilitate disregard of requirements imposed by law.

i. To evaluate the professional competency of an individual whose appointment, hiring, performance, or discharge is being considered when necessary to prevent needless and irreparable injury to that individual's reputation and that individual requests a closed session.

j. To discuss the purchase or sale of particular real estate only where premature disclosure could be reasonably expected to increase the price the governmental body would have to pay for that property or reduce the price the governmental body would receive for that property. The minutes and the audio recording of a session closed under this paragraph shall be available for public examination when the transaction discussed is completed.

k. To discuss information contained in records in the custody of a governmental body that are confidential records pursuant to section 22.7, subsection 50.

l. To discuss patient care quality and process improvement initiatives in a meeting of a public hospital or to discuss marketing and pricing strategies or similar proprietary information in a meeting of a public hospital, where public disclosure of such information would harm such a hospital's competitive position when no public purpose would be served by public disclosure. The minutes and the audio recording of a closed session under this

paragraph shall be available for public inspection when the public disclosure would no longer harm the hospital's competitive position. For purposes of this paragraph, "*public hospital*" means a hospital licensed pursuant to chapter 135B and governed pursuant to chapter 145A, 226, 347, 347A, or 392, or a health care facility operated by an institution governed by the state board of regents. This paragraph does not apply to the information required to be disclosed pursuant to section 347.13, subsection 11, or to any discussions relating to terms or conditions of employment, including but not limited to compensation of an officer or employee or group of officers or employees.

2. The vote of each member on the question of holding the closed session and the reason for holding the closed session by reference to a specific exemption under this section shall be announced publicly at the open session and entered in the minutes. A governmental body shall not discuss any business during a closed session which does not directly relate to the specific reason announced as justification for the closed session.

3. Final action by any governmental body on any matter shall be taken in an open session unless some other provision of the Code expressly permits such actions to be taken in closed session.

4. A governmental body shall not exclude a member of the governmental body from attending a closed session, unless the member's attendance at the closed session creates a conflict of interest for the member due to the specific reason announced as justification for holding the closed session.

5. *a.* A governmental body shall keep detailed minutes of all discussion, persons present, and action occurring at a closed session, and shall also audio record all of the closed session.

b. (1) The detailed minutes and audio recording of a closed session shall be sealed and shall not be public records open to public inspection. However, upon order of the court in an action to enforce this chapter, the detailed minutes and audio recording shall be unsealed and examined by the court in camera. The court shall then determine what part, if any, of the minutes should be disclosed to the party seeking enforcement of this chapter for use in that enforcement proceeding. In determining whether any portion of the minutes or recording shall be disclosed to such a party for this purpose, the court shall weigh the prejudicial effects to the public interest of the disclosure of any portion of the minutes or recording in question, against its probative value as evidence in an enforcement proceeding. After such a determination, the court may permit inspection and use of all or portions of the detailed minutes and audio recording by the party seeking enforcement of this chapter. A governmental body shall keep the detailed minutes and audio recording of any closed session for a period of at least one year from the date of that meeting, except as otherwise required by law.

(2) This paragraph "*b*" does not require the office of ombudsman to obtain a court order to examine the detailed minutes and audio recording of a closed session when such examination is relevant to an investigation under chapter 2C and the information sought is not available through other reasonable means. Any portion of the minutes or recording released by a governmental body to the office of ombudsman shall remain confidential pursuant to section 2C.9.

6. Nothing in this section requires a governmental body to hold a closed session to discuss or act upon any matter.

[C71, 73, 75, 77, §28A.3; C79, 81, §28A.5]

C85, §21.5

2002 Acts, ch 1076, §1; 2007 Acts, ch 63, §1, 2; 2008 Acts, ch 1191, §33, 99; 2009 Acts, ch 110, §1; 2011 Acts, ch 106, §5, 6, 17; 2013 Acts, ch 138, §114, 127; 2015 Acts, ch 67, §1; 2016 Acts, ch 1073, §14; 2016 Acts, ch 1074, §1; 2020 Acts, ch 1045, §4

Referred to in §21.3, 21.8, 22.7(60), 97B.8A, 203.11B, 203D.4, 279.24, 388.9, 411.5

21.6 Enforcement.

1. The remedies provided by this section against state governmental bodies shall be in addition to those provided by section 17A.19. Any aggrieved person, taxpayer to, or citizen of, the state of Iowa, or the attorney general or county attorney, may seek judicial enforcement of

the requirements of this chapter. Suits to enforce this chapter shall be brought in the district court for the county in which the governmental body has its principal place of business.

2. Once a party seeking judicial enforcement of this chapter demonstrates to the court that the body in question is subject to the requirements of this chapter and has held a closed session, the burden of going forward shall be on the body and its members to demonstrate compliance with the requirements of this chapter.

3. Upon a finding by a preponderance of the evidence that a governmental body has violated any provision of this chapter, a court:

a. Shall assess each member of the governmental body who participated in its violation damages in the amount of not more than five hundred dollars and not less than one hundred dollars. However, if a member of a governmental body knowingly participated in such a violation, damages shall be in the amount of not more than two thousand five hundred dollars and not less than one thousand dollars. These damages shall be paid by the court imposing it to the state of Iowa, if the body in question is a state governmental body, or to the local government involved if the body in question is a local governmental body. A member of a governmental body found to have violated this chapter shall not be assessed such damages if that member proves that the member did any of the following:

(1) Voted against the closed session.

(2) Had good reason to believe and in good faith believed facts which, if true, would have indicated compliance with all the requirements of this chapter.

(3) Reasonably relied upon a decision of a court, a formal opinion of the Iowa public information board, the attorney general, or the attorney for the governmental body, given in writing, or as memorialized in the minutes of the meeting at which a formal oral opinion was given, or an advisory opinion of the Iowa public information board, the attorney general, or the attorney for the governmental body, given in writing.

b. Shall order the payment of all costs and reasonable attorney fees in the trial and appellate courts to any party successfully establishing a violation of this chapter. The costs and fees shall be paid by those members of the governmental body who are assessed damages under paragraph "*a*". If no such members exist because they have a lawful defense under that paragraph to the imposition of such damages, the costs and fees shall be paid to the successful party from the budget of the offending governmental body or its parent.

c. Shall void any action taken in violation of this chapter, if the suit for enforcement of this chapter is brought within six months of the violation and the court finds under the facts of the particular case that the public interest in the enforcement of the policy of this chapter outweighs the public interest in sustaining the validity of the action taken in the closed session. This paragraph shall not apply to an action taken regarding the issuance of bonds or other evidence of indebtedness of a governmental body if a public hearing, election or public sale has been held regarding the bonds or evidence of indebtedness.

d. Shall issue an order removing a member of a governmental body from office if that member has engaged in a prior violation of this chapter for which damages were assessed against the member during the member's term.

e. May issue a mandatory injunction punishable by civil contempt ordering the members of the offending governmental body to refrain for one year from any future violations of this chapter.

4. Ignorance of the legal requirements of this chapter shall be no defense to an enforcement proceeding brought under this section. A governmental body which is in doubt about the legality of closing a particular meeting is authorized to bring suit at the expense of that governmental body in the district court of the county of the governmental body's principal place of business to ascertain the propriety of any such action, or seek a formal opinion of the attorney general or an attorney for the governmental body.

[C71, 73, 75, 77, §28A.7, 28A.8; C79, 81, §28A.6]

C85, §21.6

99 Acts, ch 9, §1; 2005 Acts, ch 99, §1; 2011 Acts, ch 106, §7, 17; 2012 Acts, ch 1115, §1, 17

Referred to in §23.5, 23.6, 23.10

21.7 Rules of conduct at meetings.

The public may use cameras or recording devices at any open session. Nothing in this chapter shall prevent a governmental body from making and enforcing reasonable rules for the conduct of its meetings to assure those meetings are orderly, and free from interference or interruption by spectators.

[C79, 81, §28A.7]
C85, §21.7

21.8 Electronic meetings.

1. A governmental body may conduct a meeting by electronic means only in circumstances where such a meeting in person is impossible or impractical and only if the governmental body complies with all of the following:

a. The governmental body provides public access to the conversation of the meeting to the extent reasonably possible.

b. The governmental body complies with section 21.4. For the purpose of this paragraph, the place of the meeting is the place from which the communication originates or where public access is provided to the conversation.

c. Minutes are kept of the meeting. The minutes shall include a statement explaining why a meeting in person was impossible or impractical.

2. A meeting conducted in compliance with this section shall not be considered in violation of this chapter.

3. A meeting by electronic means may be conducted without complying with paragraph *"a"* of subsection 1 if conducted in accordance with all of the requirements for a closed session contained in section 21.5.

[C79, 81, §28A.8]
C85, §21.8
2007 Acts, ch 22, §11

21.9 Employment conditions discussed.

A meeting of a governmental body to discuss strategy in matters relating to employment conditions of employees of the governmental body who are not covered by a collective bargaining agreement under chapter 20 is exempt from this chapter. For the purpose of this section, *"employment conditions"* mean areas included in the scope of negotiations listed in section 20.9.

[81 Acts, ch 30, §1]
C83, §28A.9
C85, §21.9

21.10 Information to be provided.

The authority which appoints members of governmental bodies shall provide the members with information about this chapter and chapter 22. The appropriate commissioner of elections shall provide that information to members of elected governmental bodies.

89 Acts, ch 73, §2

21.11 Applicability to nonprofit corporations.

This chapter applies to nonprofit corporations which are defined as governmental bodies subject to section 21.2, subsection 1, paragraph *"f"*, only when the meetings conducted by the nonprofit corporations relate to the conduct of pari-mutuel racing and wagering pursuant to chapter 99D.

90 Acts, ch 1175, §2