

## Open Meetings Law

Montana's "sunshine laws" are described as among the most stringent in the nation. These laws are outlined in Article II Sections 8 (Right of participation) and Section 9 (Right to know) of the state's constitution. In [Title 2, Chapter 3](#), Public Participation in governmental Operations, the Montana Code Annotated describes provisions of the required "Notice and Opportunity to be Heard" in [Part 1](#), and "Open Meetings" in [Part 2](#). The Open Meetings law affords "reasonable opportunity to participate in the operation of governmental agencies prior to the final decision of the agency" ([2-3-201](#)).

There are four essential elements in the open meetings law:

1. If a quorum, defined as the number members legally required to conduct business, is convened by either physical presence or by means of electronic equipment ([2-3-202](#)) and,
2. Members will hear, discuss or act upon issues that it has jurisdiction over, ([2-3-202](#)), then,
3. The meeting must be open to the public and the press must be permitted to record the meeting ([2-3-211](#)) and,
4. Appropriate minutes of all meetings shall be kept and made available for the public ([2-3-212](#)).

Each governing board must adopt coordinated rules to facilitate public participation in decisions that are of significant interest to the public ([2-3-103](#)). These include a schedule of regular meeting times and agenda prepared and posted sufficiently in advance to provide notice of the topics to be discussed and actions to be considered. The public must also be afforded a reasonable opportunity to offer information and opinions, either orally or written, before final decisions are made.

A matter of significant public interest is defined as one "involving any non-ministerial decision or action which has meaning to, or affects a portion of the community." Discrepancies as to whether a meeting is a significant public interest should always err on the side of transparency and opportunities for public participation. Exceptions are detailed in [2-3-203](#) and include the following: whether the discussion relates to a matter of individual privacy and if the presiding officer determines that the demands of individual privacy clearly exceed the merits of public disclosure; litigation when an open meeting would have a detrimental effect on the litigating position or; any judicial deliberations in an adversarial proceeding.

The agenda for a meeting, as defined in [2-3-202](#), must include an item allowing public comment on any public matter that is not on the agenda of the meeting and that is within the commission's jurisdiction. However, the commission may not take action on any matter discussed unless specific notice of that matter is included on an agenda and public comment has been allowed on that matter. Public comment received at a meeting must be incorporated into the official minutes of the meeting, as provided in [2-3-212](#).