

The City of Alexandria Boards,
Commissions and Advisory Groups
Board and Commissions Member Handbook

2020



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1. INTRODUCTION

This handbook was prepared by City of Alexandria staff for members of the City of Alexandria Boards and Commissions to inform them of the duties and responsibilities of a member to City Council appointed boards, commissions, and other Advisory Groups (hereafter referred to as Advisory Groups). The desire to create this handbook and improve support to Alexandria's Advisory Groups is in addition to the City's *What's Next Alexandria Handbook for Civic Engagement*.

The main website for the City of Alexandria Advisory Groups (<https://www.alexandriava.gov/Boards>) contains a complete list and description of all City of Alexandria Advisory Groups, as well as links to other important information.

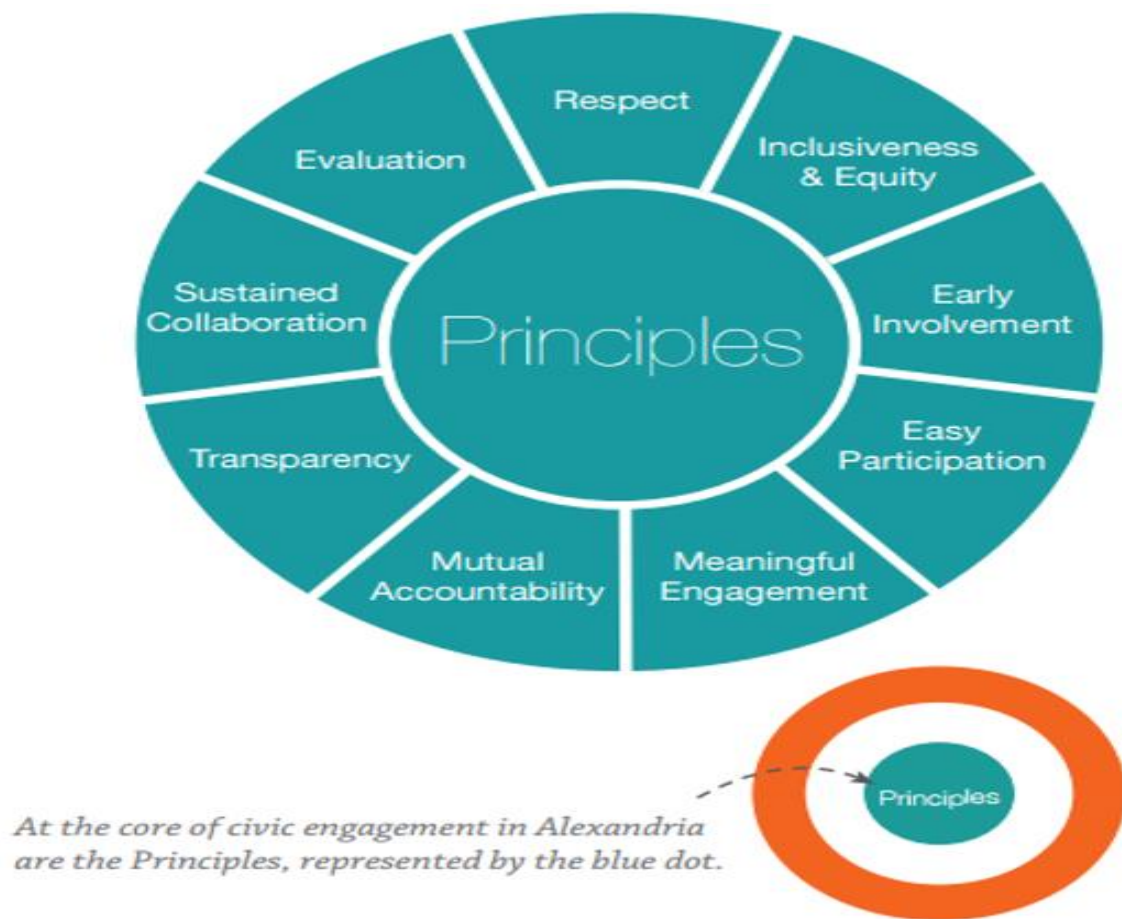
2. CIVIC ENGAGEMENT EXPECTATIONS FOR ADVISORY GROUPS

Advisory Group discussions and activities are at the center of Alexandria's civic engagement culture and provide a bridge between the broad community and City policy. Alexandria's civic success is rooted in [Principles of Engagement](#) and has been supported by years of citizen activism. Robust civic engagement requires active participation from the community, City staff, and the City Council. The *Principles of Engagement* (Figure 1) identify the following nine key aspects of shared decision-making and outline key expectations for all participants across those aspects.

- A. **Respect** -- Alexandria values a process of engagement where participants demonstrate respect in words and actions and approach decisions with open-mindedness so that everyone feels comfortable expressing their opinion regardless of differences.
- B. **Inclusiveness and Equity** -- Alexandria reaches out to and encourages the participation of all members of the community in dialogue and decision-making processes, including those who will be affected by the issue as well as those who have not historically been engaged. All members of the community are informed and empowered to participate; all views are equally heard and inform the outcome; and all impacts and benefits are fairly distributed.
- C. **Early Involvement** -- Alexandria identifies and involves stakeholders early in decision-making processes. Community members are involved in framing issues before any conclusions have been drawn, requiring early and ongoing communication with participants through each phase in the process.
- D. **Easy Participation** -- Alexandria promotes open and readily accessible government. Communications and information are timely, easy to understand, and offered in a variety of formats, appropriate to a given process.
- E. **Meaningful Engagement** -- Alexandria provides opportunities for all community members to participate in an open and unbiased process, free of predetermined outcomes, to consider and deliberate feasible options.
- F. **Mutual Accountability** -- The City and community are mutually accountable for a fair process, honest and respectful participation, informed and fact-based discussion, outcomes that reflect input, and acceptance of the result.

- G. **Transparency** -- City government will act with integrity in an open process, and will provide timely access to clear, trustworthy information, presented and employed by all parties from the beginning to the end of the process, including the reasoning that leads to and supports policy conclusions.
- H. **Sustained Collaboration** -- Alexandria promotes a culture of community engagement that enhances public decision-making processes and invests in long-term working relationships, learning opportunities and ongoing, open collaboration among community members, community groups, City leaders, and staff.
- I. **Evaluation** -- The City will work in partnership with the community to periodically assess the application of Civic Engagement Principles. The evaluation will quantify participant feedback, document lessons learned, and identify strategies for refinement.

Figure 1. Principles of Engagement



Additionally, in 2004, City Council adopted [Guidelines for Civic Discourse](#) that should be followed by Advisory Group members. The Guidelines state:

Members of the Alexandria community, its elected officials and City staff place a high value on constructive and thoughtful debate on public issues. To this end, all who participate in meetings in the

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Chamber, including public officials, staff and members of the community, are expected to observe the following guidelines.

- *Treat Everyone with Respect and Courtesy*
- *Do Your Homework – Be Prepared and Be Familiar with the Docket*
- *Express Your Ideas and Opinions in an Open and Helpful Manner*
- *Be Respectful of Others' Time by Being Clear and Concise in Your Comments and/or Questions*
- *Demonstrate Honesty and Integrity in Your Comments and Actions*
- *Focus on the Issues Before the Decision-Making Body – Avoid Personalizing Issues*
- *Listen and Let Others Express their Ideas and Opinions*
- *If a Decision is Made with which You Do Not Concur, Agree to Disagree and/or Use Appropriate Means of Civil and Civic recourse, and Move On*

Roles and Responsibilities for City of Alexandria Advisory Groups

Activity	City Council	City Clerk	Advisory Group Chair	Staff Liaison
Maintain and Update Advisory Group Member Roster		- Maintains Master Copy of Roster.		- Maintains Official Roster.
Identify New Members	- Reviews applications received.	- Ensures that all information needed for consideration and appointment is provided to City Council Liaison.	- Assisted by Advisory Group members, recruits interested persons and encourages them to apply through established application process.	- Recruits interested persons and encourages them to apply through established application process.
Appoint New Members	- Appoints new members at City Council meetings.	- Ensures that official notice to new member is provided.		

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Activity	City Council	City Clerk	Advisory Group Chair	Staff Liaison
New Member Orientation		-Provides information on oath requirement.	- Works with Staff Liaison to provide mission specific member orientation.	- Works with Advisory Group Chair to provide mission specific information. - Makes contact with new members within five business days.
Establish/Revise Mission & to Enforce Bylaws			- Responsible for ensuring Advisory Group work conforms to By-laws and enabling legislation - May request that City Council consider changes to group's scope	- Supports Advisory Group Chair in ensuring By-laws and enabling legislation are followed.
Work Program Planning			- Takes lead in developing annual work plan in collaboration with Advisory Group members and Staff Liaison.	- Provides support and information for annual work plan development.
Set Meeting Agendas and Distribute Materials			- Works with Staff Liaison to set agenda and identify appropriate materials for Advisory Group members. - Informs Staff Liaison of external information that might be needed for the work and deliberations.	- Responsible for ensuring Advisory Group members and the public have notice of meeting and access to appropriate materials per FOIA requirements.

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Activity	City Council	City Clerk	Advisory Group Chair	Staff Liaison
Organize Subcommittees			-Where authorized by By-laws or enabling legislation.	
Facilitate Meetings			- Responsible for facilitating all Advisory Group meetings. - May designate duties to Vice Chair when unavailable.	- Assists as needed to ensure effectiveness of meetings.
Seek Public Input at Meetings			- Facilitates if such input is part of regular order of business.	- Ensures proper notice of meeting and opportunity for public participation.
Manage Meeting Process			- Facilitates and has primary responsibility.	- Assists Advisory Group Chair as needed.
Draft Recommendations and Develop Annual Report			- Prepares and submits to City Council in collaboration with Staff Liaison.	- Works in collaboration with Advisory Group Chair if desired.

3. Appointment as a member

After appointment by City Council, all members are required by City Code 2-4-7(h) on or before assuming the position on such committee, to qualify by taking the following oath or affirmation either: i) verbally before the city clerk, or other officer authorized to administer oaths or affirmations, or ii) in writing on a form provided by the office of the city clerk and clerk of council:

I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support the Constitution of the United States and the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Virginia, and that I will faithfully and impartially discharge and perform all the duties incumbent on me as (insert title of office) according to the best of my ability (so help me God).

4. By-laws and other governing documents

Advisory Groups should maintain focus on the mission as articulated in the By-laws and ordinance or resolution that creates the group. Advisory groups only have authority to undertake activities they are tasked with performing by City Council. Groups should annually review the By-laws to determine if changes are required.

5. Annual Reports

Transparency and mutual accountability are two of Alexandria's principles of engagement. Accordingly, each Advisory Group is required to create and submit a report to City Council each year within 60 days after the close of the fiscal year. After the annual report is submitted to City Council, it must be made available to the public for inspection and copying. Advisory Groups may add more information to their annual reports, but all annual reports are required to contain the following information:

- A list of all members of the Advisory Group.
- A description of the Advisory Group's most important activities during the reporting year.
- Recommendations of the Advisory Group for improving its functions and duties, along with changes that should be made to other laws, policies, procedures, and programs (including recommendations for additional federal or state legislation) within the expertise of the Advisory Group

6. Attendance and Absences

Engagement and participation of Advisory Group members is crucial to the success of their group. Therefore, the Chair of each Advisory Group is responsible for keeping a record of each member's attendance to Advisory Group meetings. The Chair of each Advisory Group is responsible for forwarding a copy of the attendance record for the immediately preceding 12 months by July 1st of each year. Members of Advisory Groups are required to attend at least 75 percent of all meetings for the group on which they serve. Failure to attend at least 75 percent of all meeting for the group may result in removal by the City Council for neglect of duty.

The Chair of an Advisory Group in his or her discretion may excuse the absence of a member from a meeting or multiple meetings if they are informed within a reasonable time in advance by the absent member. These excused absences shall not be considered by the group Chair when preparing the attendance record, but they shall be noted as "excused absences" on the record.

7. Meeting Agendas

Advisory Groups and their Staff Liaisons should set meeting agendas through a collaborative process. Agendas should be set to accomplish Advisory Group objectives and set priorities for follow-up tasks and actions. Staff Liaisons provide administrative support for preparing the agenda, distributing it to the members, and posting as required by FOIA.

8. Meeting Minutes

It is essential, and required by FOIA, to capture the information and results from all open meetings, whether of the full Advisory Group or of a subcommittee (if the subcommittee meeting constitutes a meeting under FOIA), to provide a clear record of activity and allow outside parties to follow the work of the group, and so that absent members may catch up with meetings they have missed.

- All meetings must comply with the legal guidelines of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)
- Either the Staff Liaison or another designee should be identified to keep notes and create minutes or a detailed summary of information, conversations, and results.
- Minutes are the official record of the meeting and must be made publicly available, preferably on the web, following group approval. Minutes must include the date, time, location and meeting attendees and at least a general summary of the discussion and any votes (show counts for vote outcome including abstentions and recusals).
- Portions of meetings may be taped using video equipment, tablets, or similar devices. Although these may be useful in helping members catch up to missed meetings or provide accessible public access to key presentations, they are not to be used as a replacement for the written minutes.

9. Open Meeting Requirements

By definition, Open Meeting requirements must be met when more than two (or a quorum if less than three) Advisory Group members get together – formally or informally, in person or electronically – and public business (i.e. topics associated with the Advisory Group’s work) is discussed or transacted.

Public access to Advisory Group meetings is a statutory right of the public pursuant to FOIA. The following are relevant excerpts from the Act that apply to Advisory Group meetings:

- Notice of a meeting must be posted at least 3 working days prior to the meeting in accordance with Appendix A.
- All meetings of public bodies, including all Advisory Groups to the City Council, are to be public, including meetings and work sessions during which no votes are cast or any decisions made. FOIA has limited exemptions from this requirement, see the Closed Meetings subsection below.
- At least one copy of all agenda packets and materials provided to members of the Advisory Group for a meeting shall be made available for the public at the same time such documents are furnished to the members of the Advisory Group.
- Minutes shall be recorded at all public meetings and must include the meeting date, location and attendees and at least a summary of matters discussed, and any votes taken. Such minutes are required to be publicly available.
- Any person may photograph, film, record, or otherwise reproduce any portion of a meeting required to be open. The Advisory Group conducting the meeting may adopt rules governing the placement and use of recording equipment to prevent interference with the proceedings.

- Voting by secret or written ballot in an Open Meeting is not allowed and is a violation of FOIA.

10. Closed Meetings

Advisory Groups may close their publicly-noticed meetings to the public only if they are discussing one of the topics expressly authorized by law including, among others:

- Specific personnel matters.
- Disposition or acquisition of real property.
- Prospective competitive procurements where a public meeting would compromise the City's bargaining position.
- Consultation with legal counsel.

The City Attorney's Office should be consulted when an Advisory Group is considering a closed meeting. Appropriate notice requirements must be met, and the body must adopt a motion specifying the statutory basis for the closed meeting as well as a certification after the closed session has been concluded. All closed meeting discussions are confidential and any actions to be taken based on the closed session must be done only in a reconvened public meeting following the closed meeting.

11. Quorum

No action or business shall take place without the presence of a quorum. The quorum must consist of a majority of the voting members in the Advisory Group. A regular member that is not voting for whatever reason, such as a conflict of interest, shall still be considered when counting a quorum. Vacant positions shall not be considered for quorum. Additionally, note that members may not cast any votes until they have taken the oath or affirmation required in City Code 2-4-7(h).

12. Voting

It is important that the voices and opinions of every member of an Advisory Group are heard to ensure inclusiveness, equity, and transparency. Therefore, all votes must be taken in public session and the votes of at least a majority of the Advisory Group are required to take any action that:

- Is administratively final at the Advisory Group level without a further appeal.
- May be appealed by the City Council or a court of competent jurisdiction.
- Is a part of a recommendation or proposal for action by City Council or any other City Board or Commission.

Note that the affirmative votes of a larger majority may be required by the Advisory Group's enabling legislation. Voting by secret or written ballot in an Open Meeting is not allowed and is a violation of FOIA. Additionally, note that members may not cast any votes until they have taken the oath or affirmation required in City Code 2-4-7(h).

13. Remote Participation in Meetings

Generally remote participation in meetings is not permitted under the Freedom of Information Act. FOIA only allows public bodies that wish to permit one or more of their members to participate in meetings remotely in cases of a personal matter, emergency, or medical condition when i) a quorum is physically assembled and ii) the public body has adopted an electronic participation policy that complies with § 2.2-3708.2 of the FOIA. Participation by the absent member due to an emergency or a personal matter is limited to two meetings of the Advisory Group per calendar year. If a member is participating remotely in accordance with the electronic participation policy, he or she may participate in the meeting as if she or he were physically in attendance. Other than in compliance with an adopted electronic policy, remote participation and electronic meetings, including conference calls, skype, and other electronic means are not permitted.

14. Records Requirements

All records of the Advisory Group are subject to the FOIA. These documents include meeting agendas, meeting minutes, written communication among Advisory Group members, letters written, annual work plan, and the annual report. This means that, should a member of the public ask to review all deliberations on a subject that the Advisory Group discussed, Advisory Group members are required to produce any records (e.g. emails, messages, notes) related to the topic. Prior to being released, the City of Alexandria's City Attorney's Office reviews all documents to assure that documents responsive to the request – with redactions should they be necessary – are released within the required timeframe. All Advisory Group records must also be preserved based on the City's record management policy and the Library of Virginia Retention schedule.

15. Conflicts of Interest

The State and Local Government Conflict of Interests Act affects all persons elected or appointed to any governmental or advisory agency or group of the City of Alexandria government. The term "advisory agency" includes citizen Advisory Groups appointed to make non-binding recommendations to the Alexandria City Council or the City Manager.

No member may accept money or any other thing of value or take other advantages based upon his position as a member of the Advisory Group. Members cannot have a personal interest in a contract or transaction. If a member of an Advisory Group has concerns about whether they should participate in a transaction, they may contact the City Clerk or their staff liaison.

16. Required Disclosure Forms

As required by the State and Local Government Conflict of Interests Act, Section 2.2-3113 et seq. of the Virginia Code or [Section 2-5-11](#) of the City of Alexandria Code, many Advisory Group members are required to file one or more of the following upon appointment and annually by the date set by the Virginia State Code with the Clerk to the City Council:

- Financial Disclosure Statement, or
- Statement of Economic Interest, or
- Disclosure of Real Estate Holdings.

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The appropriate form(s) are sent to new appointees by the City Clerk with their appointment letter and must be filed within 30 days of appointment. The Advisory Groups with members required to submit these forms are listed in [City Code](#).

Current members receive an annual reminder with the appropriate form from the Clerk to the City Council. Completed forms are due in the City Clerk's Office by the enumerated deadline. Failure to file the appropriate form is a violation of State and City law and may result in the removal of the member from the Advisory Group.

17. Subcommittees

Subcommittees can be helpful in focusing the Advisory Group's attention on specific issues that require research and investigation. Subcommittees meet outside of the normal Advisory Group meetings to undertake their work and report back to the main body at regular intervals. The subcommittee meetings should follow the same protocols as the main Advisory Group. Any gathering of more than two members, (or a quorum, if less than three) of the Advisory Group, where Advisory Group work is discussed, constitutes a meeting and must be conducted in public and properly noticed pursuant to FOIA.

When forming subcommittees, the responsibility to attend subcommittee meetings is in addition to the responsibility to attend Advisory Group meetings. Members should be mindful of the additional time commitment and work being created.

18. Communication

A. Communicating with the City Council

The Advisory Group's role is to advise Council and accordingly, official letters from Advisory Groups should only be written to the City Council rather than other entities.

- Letters should be addressed to City Council and directed to the current Mayor. Some Advisory Groups have a designated City Council member who serves as Council Liaison to the group and communication should also be coordinated with the Council Liaison.
- Letters should be written by the Advisory Group members.
- Letters should be sent to the City Clerk and copy the City Manager's Office when a Staff Liaison is requested to send a letter to the City Council on behalf of their Advisory Group
- Letters and other actions of the Advisory Group must be discussed and voted on in a public meeting. Advisory Groups cannot make any decisions or take action through email, telephone calls, or outside of a public meeting.
- All communications from the Advisory Group should be signed by the Chair or his/her designee.
- Any committee desiring to submit written testimony to any federal or state legislative body or regulatory agency, other than the city council, in an official capacity shall first receive the approval of the city council.

B. Communicating with Department Leadership and City Manager's Office

Advisory groups should communicate with Department Leadership and the City Manager's Office through their Staff Liaison.

C. Communicating with Advisory Group Members

Advisory Groups manage email communication in different ways that work best for them. No matter what tool is used, it should be used in compliance with all legal requirements including FOIA. It may be helpful for members to create an email address for their work with the Advisory Group or create folders within existing email accounts to separate records related to this work.

D. Communicating among Advisory Groups

Advisory Group Chairs are encouraged to communicate with other Advisory Groups that have similar goals or connected issues.

APPENDIX A.

Meeting Notice Legal Requirements Under FOIA

Legal Requirements

- Timing
 - Three (3) working days prior to the meeting
 - A working day is a day that City offices are regularly open for business
 - The day of the meeting is not to be counted, but the day the notice was published does count
 - Example: If a meeting is to be held on Thursday, notice must be posted by Monday. Monday would count as one of the working days, but Thursday would not.
- Contents of notice
 - Date
 - Time and
 - Location
- Where to post notice
 - On the City's website
 - At a prominent public location at which notices are regularly posted and
 - Office of the clerk
- Agenda
 - At least one copy of the agenda and agenda packets, unless exempt, shall be made available for public inspection at the same time such documents are furnished to the board
- Minutes
 - Must be recorded at all open meetings
 - Shall include:
 - The date, time, and location of the meeting
 - The members of the public body recorded as present and absent and
 - A summary of the discussion on matters proposed, deliberated or decided, and a record of any votes taken