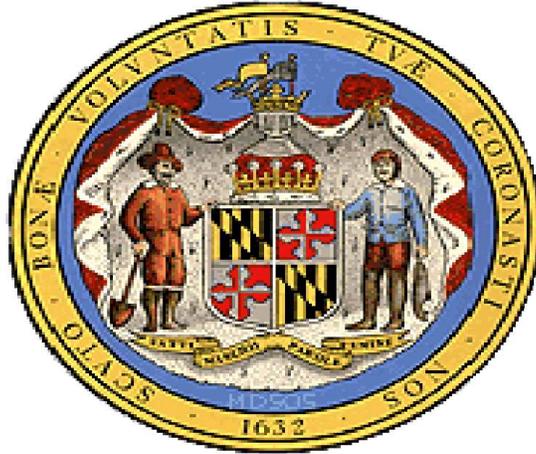


**OPEN MEETINGS ACT MANUAL**



**OFFICE OF THE  
MARYLAND ATTORNEY GENERAL**

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## *Preface*

As Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis famously said, “Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants.” In that spirit, the Maryland Open Meetings Act was adopted so that government bodies in the state would open their meetings to the public. Beyond that straightforward premise, however, lie important implementation considerations. Some arise from the rules that govern meetings subject to the Act. Others arise from the exceptions, exclusions, and special definitions that carry out the General Assembly’s decisions on which entities in the State do not have to discuss their business in public, which types of public business do not have to be conducted in public, and which topics do not have to be discussed in public.

Some of the provisions of the Act are easy to understand and apply; some are not. A few have been construed and explained by the courts; most have not. The overall policy of the Act—that it “is essential to the maintenance of a democratic society that, except in special and appropriate circumstances . . . public business be conducted openly and publicly”—can get lost in the details.

In 1991, fourteen years after the first version of the Act took effect, the General Assembly recognized that public bodies needed guidance on compliance with the Act, and it amended the Act to establish an independent board, the Open Meetings Compliance Board, to provide that guidance. The Board was directed to provide guidance by issuing advisory opinions in response to complaints from the public and by conducting educational programs for the staffs and attorneys of public bodies and the local government associations. The Office of the Attorney General was directed to share the education responsibilities and provide staff for the Board. Over the years, the Board has issued advisory opinions on almost every aspect of the Act. Under the aegis of this Office and as resources allow, the Board’s staff have conducted seminars on the Act, developed forms and other written guidance, indexed and published the Board’s opinions, and, in a collaborative effort with the Institute for Governmental Service and Research at the University of Maryland, developed the online course that public bodies’ designees may take to fulfill the training requirement now set by the Act.

This latest edition of the Open Meetings Act Manual supplements those efforts. Although it is not a substitute for advice from a public body’s own counsel, we hope it gives public bodies some practical guidance on how to comply with the Act. We hope also that this manual, along with the FAQs - A Quick Guide to Maryland’s Open Meetings Act, provides members of the media and public with information on what they may expect.

Brian E. Frosh  
November 2015

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
<i>A. The Act – its policy and purpose</i> .....	1
<i>B. How to use this manual</i> .....	2
<i>C. Other laws</i> .....	2
<b>Chapter 1: Applicability of the Act - When does the Act apply?</b> .....	3
Chapter summary .....	3
<i>A. Is the entity a “public body” subject to the Act?</i> .....	3
<i>B. Is the public body holding a “meeting?” Or did the members instead gather merely by chance, for social reasons, or for another occasion not intended to evade the Act?</i> .....	8
<i>C. Is the meeting subject to the Act because the public body is performing a “function” subject to the Act, or instead exempt because the public body is performing one of the three “functions” expressly excluded from the Act?</i> .....	14
<b>Chapter 2: Notice - For meetings subject to the Act, did the public body give “reasonable advance notice?”</b> .....	20
Chapter summary .....	20
<i>A. Timing</i> .....	20
<i>B. Format and Contents</i> .....	22
<i>C. Methods</i> .....	23
<b>Chapter 3: Open meeting requirement - Will the meeting in fact be open to the public?</b> .....	24
Chapter summary .....	24
<i>A. The right to “attend” a meeting</i> .....	24

B. <i>Size of the meeting place</i> .....	25
C. <i>Access to the meeting place</i> .....	25
D. <i>Videotaping and recording; meeting rules</i> .....	26
E. <i>Role of the Presiding Officer; disruptions</i> .....	27
<b>Chapter 4: Permissibility of closed sessions - Will the discussion fall within one of the 14 “exceptions” that permit the public body to exclude the public?</b> .....	<b>28</b>
Chapter summary .....	28
A. <i>The “personnel matters” exception</i> .....	29
B. <i>The “privacy or reputation’ exception</i> .....	30
C. <i>The “real property acquisition” exception</i> .....	30
D. <i>The “business location” exception</i> .....	31
E. <i>The “investment of public funds” exception</i> .....	31
F. <i>The “marketing of public securities” exception</i> .....	32
G. <i>The “legal advice” exception</i> .....	32
H. <i>The “pending or potential litigation” exception</i> .....	33
I. <i>The “collective bargaining” exception</i> .....	33
J. <i>The “public security” exception</i> .....	34
K. <i>The “scholastic, licensing and qualifying examination” exception</i> .....	34
L. <i>The “investigative proceeding regarding criminal conduct” exception</i> .....	34
M. <i>The “other law” exception</i> .....	35
N. <i>The “procurement” exception</i> .....	35
<b>Chapter 5: Conditions for closing a meeting – Did the public body take the necessary steps before, during, and after the closed session?</b> .....	<b>37</b>
Chapter summary .....	37
A. <i>Before the closed session: closing statement and vote</i> .....	37
B. <i>During the closed session, the duty to discuss only the disclosed topics</i> .....	40
C. <i>After the closed session, the disclosure of the events of the session</i> .....	41
<b>Chapter 6: Meeting documents – Did the public body prepare and retain the required meeting documents?</b> .....	<b>42</b>
Chapter summary .....	42

<i>A. Written meeting notice</i> .....	42
<i>B. Meeting minutes – open and closed sessions</i> .....	43
<i>C. Closing statement (see also Chapter 5)</i> .....	49
<b>Chapter 7: Guidance, judicial enforcement, and training – What roles does the Act assign to the Compliance Board, courts, and Office of the Attorney General?</b> .....	50
Chapter summary .....	50
<i>A. The Compliance Board</i> .....	50
<i>B. The courts</i> .....	55
<i>C. The Office of the Attorney General</i> .....	56

## Introduction

### *A. The Act – its policy and purpose*

When it adopted the Act, the Maryland General Assembly declared the goals to be achieved by ensuring that public business be conducted openly:

- (1) The ability of the public, its representatives, and the media to attend, report on, and broadcast meetings of public bodies and to witness the phases of the deliberation, policy formation, and decision making of public bodies ensures the accountability of government to the citizens of the State.
- (2) The conduct of public business in open meetings increases the faith of the public in government and enhances the effectiveness of the public in fulfilling its role in a democratic society.

§ 3-102(b).<sup>1</sup>

To those ends, the General Assembly stated the overriding policy of the Act that public bodies meet in public:

Except in special and appropriate circumstances when meetings of public bodies may be closed under this title, it is the public policy of the State that the public be provided with adequate notice of the time and location of meetings of public bodies, which shall be held in places reasonably accessible to individuals who would like to attend these meetings.

§ 3-102(c).

To implement this policy, the General Assembly has defined the entities that are subject to the Act, detailed the circumstances in which meetings could be closed to the public, exempted some types of public business from the Act entirely, and set minimum standards for giving notice and disclosing in minutes the events of open and closed sessions. The Act thus reflects the balance that the General Assembly struck between the public's need to know about the conduct of public business and the government's need, in "special and appropriate circumstances," to address certain types of matters behind closed doors. In case of doubt, the balance tilts towards openness: the default set by the Act is "except as otherwise expressly provided by [the Act], a public body shall meet in open session." § 3-301.

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<sup>1</sup> As currently codified, the Act appears at §§ 3-201 through 206 of the General Provisions Article of the Maryland Annotated Code (2014). The "§" and "Section" citations in this Manual are to that article. The Act is posted under the "Other Resources" heading on the Open Meetings page of the Attorney General's website: [www.oag.state.md.us/OpenGov/Openmeetings/index.htm](http://www.oag.state.md.us/OpenGov/Openmeetings/index.htm). The Maryland Code can be found online on the website of the General Assembly of Maryland: <http://mgaleg.maryland.gov/webmga/frm1st.aspx?tab=home>.

## ***B. How to Use this Manual***

This manual is based on four sources of information about the Act: the Act itself, the published opinions of Maryland’s appellate courts, the opinions that the Attorney General has issued in response to public officials’ questions about the Act,<sup>2</sup> and the advisory opinions of the Open Meetings Compliance Board. Of those sources, only the first two are binding authority. The other two, like this manual, are secondary sources that the courts sometimes consult.<sup>3</sup> So, while this manual attempts to explain the current state of the open meetings law, it is not binding authority and does not control the outcome in matters that might come before either the courts or the Compliance Board.

This manual is organized by seven broad topics that correspond to the broad topics in the online index to the Compliance Board’s opinions. By turning to the index, the reader can often find specific examples of the principles explained here. For example, a reader who has consulted Chapter 2 (E) of this manual for information about the timeliness of a meeting notice can then turn to Section 2 (E) of the topical index for a list of the Compliance Board’s opinions on that topic. The Compliance Board’s opinions are posted by volume at [www.oag.state.md.us/Opengov/Openmeetings/index.htm](http://www.oag.state.md.us/Opengov/Openmeetings/index.htm), under the link for “Compliance Board.” The links to the first several volumes lead in turn to a subject index for that volume, so finding those opinions requires an extra step.

## ***C. Other laws***

This manual only addresses the Maryland Open Meetings Act, §§ 3-101 through 3-501 of the General Provisions Article of the Maryland Code. Some public bodies are additionally subject to open meetings requirements set forth in different laws, such as a county charter or other law applicable only in certain political subdivisions. *See, e.g.*, 89 Op. Att’y Gen. 22 (2004) (discussing the St. Maryland’s County Open Meetings Act). Under the Act, when the other law contains a provision that “is more stringent,” that provision will apply. § 3-105. As explained by the Court of Appeals,

This provision establishes that, although the Maryland Sunshine Law is the touchstone by which public bodies are to conduct their meetings, the statute is not exclusive in its application. The statute only outlines the minimum requirements for conducting open meetings. . . . It does not supersede legislative enactments designed to bring more openness to public meetings.

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<sup>2</sup> Opinions of the Attorney General are posted at [www.oag.state.md.us/Opinions/index.htm](http://www.oag.state.md.us/Opinions/index.htm).

<sup>3</sup> For example, the Court of Special Appeals of Maryland, after noting that there were no cases on the question before it, cited an Opinion of the Attorney General that in turn cited Compliance Board opinions and the 10<sup>th</sup> edition of this manual. *Dyer v. Board of Education*, 216 Md. App. 530, 536-38 (2014).

*City of College Park v. Cotter*, 309 Md. 573, 586 (1987). *See also* 94 Op. Att’y Gen. 161 (2009) (discussing the provision that is now § 3-105).

## **Chapter One: Applicability of the Act – When does the Act apply?** (Index Topic #1).

**Chapter Summary:** To be subject to the Act, an entity must fall within the Act’s definition of a “public body.” Then, for a gathering of the public body’s members to be subject to the Act, the members must be “meeting,” as defined by the Act, and be performing one of the “functions” subject to the Act. Determining whether the Act applies to a particular gathering is thus a three-step process.<sup>4</sup> Each step in turn has multiple elements, some with multiple sub-parts. The Act’s threshold provisions are more complicated than the rest of the Act.

### ***A. Is the entity a “public body” subject to the Act? (Index topic I-A)***

The Act only applies to “public bodies.” An entity is a “public body” if it meets any of the three tests set by the definition of that term in § 3-101(h). An additional consideration is whether the entity is one of those expressly excluded from the definition. And, the courts have sometimes deemed private entities to be “public bodies” by virtue of considerations such as the government’s control over the particular entity’s existence, governance, and functions. The General Assembly has added specific entities and types of entities to the statutory definition over the years, so the Compliance Board’s opinions on the subject should be checked against the current law.

To figure out whether an entity meets the definition, a person needs first to gather the facts on how the entity was created (for example, by a statute, or by a person?), by whom its members are appointed, and what functions it serves. Only then can one apply the five sets of principles discussed below. If an entity does not meet the Act’s definition of “public body,” the Act does not apply to that entity’s gatherings.

#### **1. The first test: more than one member; created by a law, bylaw, resolution, or other legal instrument (the “created by law” test)**

The “created by law” test, which is set forth in § 3-101(h)(1), is usually easy to apply. First, a single person, while perhaps an official or government employee, does not constitute a “public body.” For example, one hearing officer is not a “public body,” 1 *OMCB Opinions* 176 (1996), nor is a county executive. 9 *OMCB Opinions* 234, 237 (2015). Also, an agency run

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<sup>4</sup> For an illustration of the Compliance Board’s application of the three-step process, see 6 *OMCB Opinions* 21 (2010).

by a secretary or department head is not an entity that “consists” of the government employees who work for it; the Act, read as a whole, contemplates an entity that consists of members whose presence can create a quorum. *See* 4 *OMCB Opinions* 132, 137 (2005) (“agency staff meetings are not generally subject to the Open Meetings Act, because staff members are not a ‘public body’”); 7 *OMCB Opinions* 284 (2011) (the Maryland Department of the Environment is “not a body either of ‘individuals,’ for purposes of [§ 3-101(h)(1)] or of ‘members appointed by the Governor’”); 9 *OMCB Opinions* 53 (2013) (State procurement personnel who were invited to attend periodic updates on developments in the field were not “conducting public business as ‘members of a ‘public body,’” but rather were “simply agency employees attending agency information sessions”); 9 *OMCB Opinions* 302 (2015) (mediation session held by Department of Natural Resources employees for lease applicant and protestants was not a gathering of a “public body”).

Next, the entity has to have been created by one of the eight types of legal instruments listed in the definition. Among other things, the list includes State and local laws and executive orders, the State constitution, local governments’ charters, and a “rule, resolution, or bylaw.” § 3-101(h)(2). The State’s Board of Public Works meets this test; it was created by Article XII, § 1 of the Maryland Constitution. *See* 6 *OMCB Opinions* 69, 72 (2009). By contrast, a gathering of government employees by their own volition does not meet the test. 80 Op. Att’y Gen. 90, 92 (1995).

The list of instruments was amended in 2013 to add memoranda of understanding (“MOUs”) and master agreements signed by the Department of Education and a majority of the county boards of education. § 3-101(h)(ii)(4). As to other MOUs, the Compliance Board has stated that when a public body, by resolution, enters into an MOU with another entity to create a new board, commission, or other body, the new entity might well meet this first test. *See* 9 *OMCB Opinions* 94, 97 (2013) (“the Act should not be interpreted to allow a parent public body to sidestep the Act by creating committees through MOUs with private entities”).

Questions arise as to when a committee of a public body meets the “created by law” test for a public body. The test is clearly met when the committee is identified by name in the public body’s bylaws, resolutions, or rules, as when a bylaw provision states, “There shall be a Finance Committee.” Less clear is the status of a committee created under the authority granted by a bylaw, resolution or rule that does not itself create the committee. The answer might depend on the degree to which the provision identifies the function of the committee—that is, the more precisely the provision identifies the function of a committee, the more likely it is that the committee will be deemed a public body. A case decided by the Court of Appeals and later applications of the definition by the Compliance Board give some general guidance on where that dividing line might fall.

In *Avara v. The Baltimore News American*, 292 Md. 543 (1982), the Court of Appeals addressed the status of the House-Senate Conference Committee appointed in 1981 under the rules of each house of the General Assembly. Those rules, as described by the Court, “authorize[d] the appointment of conference committees where the two Houses ‘are unable

to concur on the final form of a Bill.” *Id.* at 546. The committee had been appointed to “resolve differences between the two Houses in the budget.” The Court noted that such a committee had been appointed in every year since 1976 and that it was “likely” that a similar committee would be appointed in 1982. *Id.* at 547. Rejecting the State’s argument that the committee was not a “public body” because it was not created by the rules themselves, the Court stated that “Conference Committees are established and exist only in pursuance of House and Senate Rules and in the sense contemplated by [the definition] are plainly the creation of a rule.” *Id.* at 50. To conclude otherwise, the Court stated, “would be to ascribe an intention to the legislature to exclude from the Act’s coverage all those entities which, though lawfully transacting public business and exercising legislative or advisory functions, were nevertheless merely authorized but not required to exist.” *Id.* at 550-51. The Court further stated that such a result “would seriously undercut the Act’s effectiveness and would be wholly at odds with the broad public policy underlying its passage.” *Id.* at 551.

Likewise, the Compliance Board has deemed a committee to be a “public body” when a law, regulation, or bylaw has required the creation of an entity to perform certain tasks. *See* 5 *OMCB Opinions* 189 (2007) (panel “established in accordance with a statute that required the Critical Area Commission to appoint a panel of 5 of its members to conduct a public hearing on a proposal to amend a local critical area program”); 7 *OMCB Opinions* 21, 27 (2010) (boundary study committee appointed by an assistant superintendent in accordance with Board of Education policy requiring the appointment of such committees to advise on school districting); 7 *OMCB Opinions* 176, 184 (2011) (committee mandated by parent body’s resolution to perform certain functions). By contrast, the Compliance Board has found that the definition was not met by a library board’s finance committee that had been appointed pursuant to the board president’s broad power, under the bylaws, to appoint special committees and the board’s power to appoint “such standing committees as the [b]oard may desire.” 7 *OMCB Opinions* 105 (2011). Unlike the provisions in *Avara*, the boundary committee matter, and the Critical Area Commission matter, the bylaws neither described the particular committee nor delegated particular functions to a committee. The Compliance Board found that the committee had not been created by the bylaws.

Another question about committees is whether a committee that the parent body creates by an “informal consensus,” as opposed to a formal resolution, meets the “created by law” test. The Compliance Board has concluded that a committee created informally does not meet this prong. *See, e.g.*, 4 *OMCB Opinions* 132, 137 (2005) (“We have long distinguished between entities established by formal action of a public body versus entities established less formally, at the prerogative of a presiding officer or consensus of the body. While the former are subject to the Open Meetings Act, the latter are not.”). Nonetheless, a public body that creates a committee by consensus has not necessarily put that committee beyond the reach of the Act. The Compliance Board has cautioned that a public body’s formal delegation of duties to an informally-created committee “comes very close to making that group a public body for that purpose.” *See* 9 *OMCB Opinions* 83, 85 (2013). As discussed below in ¶ 5, the courts, too, have been unwilling to promote form over function when considering whether an entity is a “public body.” *See, e.g., Avara*, 292 Md. 543.

**2. The second test – for State entities, members appointed by the Governor or someone subject to his policy directive, with at least two individuals who are not employed by the State government**

**– for local entities, members appointed by the chief executive authority or someone subject to the executive’s policy direction, with at least two individuals who are not employed by the local government (the “executive appointment” test)**

The “executive appointment test,” which is set forth in § 3-101(h)(2)(i), is not always easy to apply. A multi-member entity is a “public body” if it was appointed by “an official subject to the policy direction” of the Governor or the chief executive authority of the political subdivision, *and* if it includes at least two people not employed by the State or political subdivision—unless the group is a “subcommittee” of such a body. § 3-101(h)(2)(i). For example, the Compliance Board found that a task force created by the Secretary of the Environment was a public body because the secretary was an “official subject to the policy direction of the Governor.” 5 *OMCB Opinions* 182 (2007).

The Act does not provide direction on who is “subject to the policy direction” of the executive. The Compliance Board addressed that question in the case of a committee appointed by a county police captain. The police captain, a merit system employee, was supervised by the deputy to the police chief, who had been appointed by the county executive. Relying on the legislative history of the provision, the Compliance Board found that the police captain was too far removed from the county executive to be deemed subject to the executive’s policy direction. 9 *OMCB Opinions* 279 (2015).

Section 3-101(h)(3)(ix) expressly excludes subcommittees of this type of public body from the definition of a “public body.” For the scope of that exclusion, see part 4, below.

**3. The third test, for State entities only – appointed by either an Executive Branch public body whose members were appointed by the Governor *or* by someone subject to that entity’s policy direction, with at least two individuals who are not employed by the State (the “executive entity appointment” test)**

The “executive entity appointment” test, which is set forth in § 3-101(h)(2)(ii), is best explained through an example. When a gubernatorially-appointed board or its director creates a committee that includes at least two people not employed by the State, that committee will be a “public body.” The test thus brings under the Act the committees that are made by State agencies headed by boards rather than by a department secretary. This definition of “public body” was added in 2009 with the enactment of House Bill 1194.

#### **4. The exclusions – entities that are specifically excluded from, or included in, the definition**

The General Assembly has provided that some entities are not subject to the Act even though those entities would meet one of the Act's three tests, and that other entities expressly are subject to the Act. See § 3-101(h)(2),(3). Among the specific exclusions are certain subcommittees, judicial nominating commissions, grand juries, petit juries, courts (except when they are engaged in rulemaking), the Governor's Cabinet, and a local counterpart to the Governor's Cabinet. § 3-101(h)(3). One entity, the Maryland School for the Blind, is expressly identified as a public body. § 3-101(h)(2)(iii).

The subcommittee exclusion, § 3-101(h)(3)(ix), applies only to subcommittees of public bodies that meet the executive appointment test. In 7 *OMCB Opinions* 284 (2011), for example, the Compliance Board concluded that the exclusion applied to a subcommittee of a task force that had been appointed by the Secretary of the Environment.

*Practice notes on the subcommittee exception:* • A subcommittee meeting will be deemed to be a meeting of the parent public body if a quorum of the members of the parent body attends. • "Subcommittees," in the usual sense, are comprised only of members of the parent public body. • Subcommittees should not be used as a way to perform the parent body's functions behind closed doors. The courts construe the Act so as to prohibit "evasive devices," and a subcommittee that conducts the parent body's own business risks being deemed a public body.

#### **5. The final set of considerations – the courts' "constructive public body" factors**

The Maryland appellate courts have sometimes deemed a privately-incorporated entity to be a "public body" subject to the Act. When doing so, they have looked to various factors, including the degree to which the entity's board is controlled by the government, as when the board members are appointed and subject to termination by a government official, the entity performs a purely public function, and the entity has few private functions. The inquiry is fact-specific. *See, e.g., City of Baltimore Development Corp. v. Carmel Realty Associates*, 395 Md. 299 (2006). The fact that a private entity receives or administers government funds is not by itself enough. In 9 *OMCB Opinions* 203 (2015), for example, the Compliance Board found that the facts that the private entity had applied to provide services to a government agency and that the agency selected it and regulated the provision of the services did not make it a "public body." *Id.* at 204.

In addressing an entity incorporated by the city attorney, at the mayor's direction, to operate the city's zoo, the Court of Special Appeals explained:

A private corporate form alone does not insure that the entity functions as a private corporation. When a private corporation is organized under government control and operated to carry on public business, it is acting, at least,

in a quasi-governmental way. When it does, in light of the stated purposes of the statute, it is unreasonable to conclude that such an entity can use the private corporate form as a parasol to avoid the statutorily-imposed sunshine of the Open Meetings Act.

*Andy's Ice Cream v. City of Salisbury*, 125 Md. App. 125, 154-55 (1999). The Compliance Board discussed these principles in 7 *OMCB Opinions* 195 (2011) and 9 *OMCB Opinions* 246 (2015). A key consideration is whether the privately-incorporated entity is structured in such a way that a governmental entity controls its governance, as when a governmental entity has the power to dissolve it or appoint its board. *See id.* at 252-54 (discussing cases).

***B. Is the public body holding a “meeting?” Or did the members instead gather merely by chance, for social reasons, or for some other occasion not intended to evade the Act?*** (Index topic #1B)

The next threshold question is whether the members of the public body are holding a “meeting,” because the Act only applies when a public body “meets.” The Act does not govern whether a particular public body must conduct public business in a meeting; the Act simply sets the rules that apply when a public body *does* meet. *See* 94 Op. Att’y Gen. 161, 173 (2009) (“[O]ur longstanding advice has been that the Open Meetings Act does not specify when a public body must hold a meeting”).

The Act defines the verb to “meet” as “to convene a quorum of a public body to consider or transact public business.” § 3-101(g). The Act does not apply to a “chance encounter, social gathering, or other occasion that is not intended to circumvent” the Act. § 3-103(a)(2). So, a public body’s gathering will be a “meeting” under the Act if three elements are met: (1) a quorum of its members is present; (2) the gathering is convened for the “consideration or transaction” of public business; and (3) when the gathering instead occurred by chance or social reasons, the quorum nonetheless used it to discuss public business.

To figure out whether a public body has “met,” a person needs to gather the facts on how many members of the particular body it takes to create a quorum, whether the group was discussing the public body’s business, and how many members were present for that discussion. If a quorum was not “meeting,” the Act does not apply.

**1. The presence of a quorum**

This element raises the questions of “what is a quorum?” and “can a quorum be met when the members are not physically present?”

The Act defines “quorum” to mean “a majority of the members of a public body” or else “the number of members that the law requires.” § 3-101(k). For example, if eight members of a 15-member board gather, their presence will usually create a quorum. Their

presence will not create a quorum, however, if the statute that creates the board requires the presence of nine members for a quorum. Other sources of information on a particular public body's quorum might be its bylaws and any applicable regulations and executive orders.

As for physical presence, a member who participates in a meeting by telephone will be deemed present. *Cf. Tuzzeer v. Yim, LLC*, 201 Md. App. 443, 471 (2011) (stating that the Act does not “prohibit[] a meeting with one or more members participating by telephone conference as long as the conference call is broadcast over a speakerphone so it can be heard by members of the public”). A discussion conducted entirely by teleconference will thus meet this element when a quorum is on the call.

The presence of a quorum for purposes of the Act gets murky when the members are not simultaneously in one place or on one conference call but nonetheless seem able to discuss public business as a group. The Compliance Board has often addressed complaints that a public body reached a decision through e-mails, separately-held telephone calls, or other modes of communication outside of a meeting of a quorum of the members. Usually, the Act's definition of a “meeting” to require the presence of a quorum has meant that the Act does not apply to sequential or written communications among the members. The Compliance Board reached that usual result in 7 *OMCB Opinions* 193 (2011). There, the board of commissioners seemed to have reversed itself on a decision without having deliberated in public, and the complainant inferred that they had met secretly. In fact, as explained to the Compliance Board, the commissioners had not “met”; they had reached the consensus “through sequential and one-on-one communications” with the board president, “conducted in person, by e-mail, and by telephone.” 7 *OMCB Opinions* 193 (2011). Nonetheless, the Compliance Board cautioned against “this way of proceeding.” *Id.* at 194. *See also* 8 *OMCB Opinions* 38, 40 (2012) (“when a public body . . . decides [a] matter, without discussion, on the basis of a lengthy motion, the public body should not be startled when a member of the public infers that every aspect of the matter was discussed and decided in secret.”).

The Compliance Board has also cautioned that courts might look beyond the quorum requirement to determine whether, as a practical matter, a quorum of the public body was in on the discussion. In 8 *OMCB Opinions* 56 (2012), a county board heard a land-use appeal in open session, announced that it would take the matter under advisement, and then, at a subsequent open meeting, adopted without discussion a written statement of its findings and conclusions. The board's counsel explained that, as was the custom, he had prepared the statement and taken it to each member separately, and that the members had not discussed the document as a group. On those facts, the Compliance Board concluded that no “meeting” had occurred—but it also advised the public body of the risks of such practices:

We are reluctant . . . to give the impression that the quorum requirement provides public bodies with an absolute defense to an alleged Open Meetings Act violation. In fact, a public body risks violating the Act by manipulating a quorum so as to avoid the Act's mandates. The Court of Appeals addressed such a violation in *Community and Labor United for Baltimore Charter Committee*

(“*C.L.U.B.*”) *v. Baltimore City Board of Elections*, 377 Md. 183 (2003). There, the City Council President closed a meeting without a vote after she ascertained that a quorum of the councilmembers was not present. *Id.* at 190-91. The Court held that the Council had violated the Act, and, further, that it had done so willfully. *Id.* at 196-97. The *C.L.U.B.* Court thus concluded that a public body, acting willfully to evade the Act, may be subject to the Act even in the absence of an actual quorum.<sup>5</sup>

*Id.* at 59. <sup>6</sup>

And, in 9 *OMCB Opinions* 283 (2015), the Compliance Board held that a county board of appeals violated the Act when it abruptly called a ten-minute recess in the middle of detailed deliberations on a special exception application and then returned to open session with a complete resolution of the matter. The board had recessed after its counsel suggested a break to “let your thoughts settle down,” and all of the members had left the meeting room together. Immediately upon their return, the chair stated, “we’ve had a little bit more discussion . . . OK, would someone like to make a motion at this point?” *Id.* at 285. Noting that the public body had not closed the meeting for reasons permitted by the Act, and that a consensus was reached during the recess whether or not the discussion was held in the presence of a simultaneous quorum, the Compliance Board stated that it did not “construe the Act to permit the use of recesses as a setting in which to consider public business behind closed doors.” *Id.* at 284. The Compliance Board further advised: “Public bodies may not use behind-the-scenes recesses as a means of shortcutting further public discussion of a matter that they have just been considering in open session.” *Id.* at 288. Citing the result in *C.L.U.B.*, 377 Md. 183, the Compliance Board cautioned that “the Act does not automatically switch off during a discussion when the number of members present falls briefly below the number required for a quorum.” *Id.* “Of more significance” for such recesses, the opinion states, “will be the

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<sup>5</sup> The Compliance Board further explained that courts in other states have given the term “walking quorum” to a public body’s use of the quorum requirement to avoid deliberating in public. *See, e.g., Asgeirsson v. Abbott*, 773 F. Supp. 2d 684, 706-707(W.D. Tex. 2011) (walking quorums “occur when members of a governmental body gather in numbers that do not physically constitute a quorum at any one time but who, through successive gatherings, secretly discuss a public matter with a quorum of that body”) (citations and some internal punctuation omitted); *Mabry v. Union Parish Sch. Bd.*, 974 So. 2d 787, 789 (La.App. 2 Cir. 2008) (a “walking quorum” is “a meeting of a public body where different members leave the meeting and different members enter the meeting so that while an actual quorum is never physically present an actual quorum during the course of the meeting participates in the discussion”); *Esperanza Peace & Justice Ctr. v. City of San Antonio*, 316 F. Supp. 2d 433, 471-478 (W.D. Tex. 2001) (reviewing cases on public bodies’ use of a quorum requirement to avoid public deliberations). *See also State ex. rel. Cincinnati Post v. City of Cincinnati*, 76 Ohio St. 3d 540, 668 N.E.2d 903 (Ohio 1996) (in addressing meetings held on three different days, stating, “The Ohio Sunshine Law cannot be circumvented by scheduling back-to-back meetings which, taken together, are attended by a majority of a public body.”).

<sup>6</sup> *C.L.U.B.* implicitly qualifies the Court’s earlier dicta in *City of College Park v. Cotter*, 309 Md. 573 (1987). In *Cotter*, the Court of Appeals applied a municipal open meeting ordinance which was stricter than the Act in that it did not permit the council to close a session to confer with its attorney. *Id.* at 592-94. Applying the similarly-worded definition of the term “meeting” in that ordinance, the Court stated in a footnote that “nothing prevents the City Attorney from meeting in closed session with less than a quorum of the Council members.” *Id.* at 595 n. 32. However, under *C.L.U.B.*, such meetings, if designed to circumvent the Act, could be subject to challenge. *See also* fn. 7.

totality of the circumstances, including whether the deliberations have continued during the break.” *Id.*<sup>7</sup>

Questions arise as to whether the exchange of electronic communications among a quorum means that a quorum is present. This Office opined in 1996 that sequential e-mail communications, which it then analogized to the exchange of information through regular mail, are not subject to the Act. *See* 81 Md. Op. Att’y Gen. 140, 142 (1996). That conclusion, reached before the development of most forms of social media and easy texting, should not be construed to apply automatically to all forms of electronic communication or even to all e-mail communications. In fact, the opinion states that the “result would be different” if the members were able to “use e-mail for ‘real time’ simultaneous interchange.” *Id.* at 143-44. Under the functional approach taken by the court in *C.L.U.B.*, an online discussion in which a quorum of the public body participates on a near-simultaneous basis might well be deemed to meet this element of the “meeting” test.<sup>8</sup>

The Compliance Board has advised public bodies about the risks of using the “reply all” and forward functions in email communications among the members of a public body. *See* 9 OMCB Opinions 259, 264 (2015). There, the Compliance Board quoted with approval the advice of Wisconsin’s Attorney General on the use of electronic communications by entities subject to that state’s open meetings law. The advice included the following prediction of the factors that courts would likely consider in addressing whether an email exchange was a meeting: “(1) the number of participants involved in the communication; (2) the number of communications regarding the subject; (3) a time frame within which the electronic communications occurred; and (4) the extent of the conversation-like interactions reflected in the communications.” *Id.* (quoting 2005 Wisc. AG LEXIS 29, 2-4 (Wisc. AG 2005) (internal quotation marks and citation omitted).

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<sup>7</sup> For another example of a “totality of the circumstances” approach to the quorum requirement, see *Armstrong v. Mayor & City Council of Baltimore*, 409 Md. 648 (2009). There, the Court of Appeals quoted at length, but did not explicitly review, the circuit court’s finding that a council committee had violated the Act by circulating a draft zoning bill among its members for their approval at separate times. Noting that “it is true that a quorum is technically necessary to trigger the Act,” the circuit court nonetheless examined whether, from the “totality of the circumstances,” the committee had violated the Act. The circuit court found that the committee had “intentionally avoid[ed] holding a meeting” of a quorum. The circuit court then concluded that it was “not consistent with the goal of the [Act]” to meet publicly on a bill without discussing it and then to circulate it later “from member to member without the public being permitted to observe any of the deliberative process.” *Id.* at 662-63 (quoting the circuit court’s opinion). The extent to which the Court adopted the circuit court’s reasoning is unclear. *See* 94 Op. Att’y Gen. 161 (2009).

<sup>8</sup> Some states’ open meetings laws expressly include “electronic communications” in the definition of “meeting.” *See, e.g.*, Iowa Code Ann. § 21.2 (West) (“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.”). A survey of the states’ laws on this topic and others can be found in the online Open Government Guide published by the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press: [www.rcfp.org/open-government-guide](http://www.rcfp.org/open-government-guide). The Reporters Committee has also published a guide to the federal open meetings law: [www.rcfp.org/federal-open-government-guide](http://www.rcfp.org/federal-open-government-guide).

**2. The gathering is convened for the “consideration or transaction” of public business; or,**

**3. If the quorum instead came together by chance or for social purposes, the quorum used the occasion to discuss public business**

These two related elements are met when a quorum comes together to consider *or* transact public business, and they are *not* met when the members are together for some other reason and do not discuss public business.

Some clear guidelines have emerged. First, the location of the meeting is irrelevant. If a quorum of the public body’s members comes together at a restaurant by chance and discusses public business, that gathering meets all of the elements of a “meeting.” 7 *OMCB Opinions* 269 (2011). The same is true of a “retreat.” *See, e.g., 3 OMCB Opinions* 122, 124 (2001).

Also irrelevant is the fact that the quorum does not make a decision or take an action. The Court of Appeals has said that a public body’s “consideration” of public business includes all phases of its deliberation, not just the decision,<sup>9</sup> and the Compliance Board has explained that receiving a briefing on public business is part of the process of considering it. *See 7 OMCB Opinions* 85, 87 (2011). Relevant instead are the facts about what the members discussed. If a quorum of members attends the same social event, the members are not “meeting” unless they gather and start discussing the public body’s business. *See, e.g., 5 OMCB Opinions* 93 (2007). Likewise, for example, if two members of a three-member board find themselves in the same restaurant or store, they are not “meeting” unless they start discussing the public body’s business. 7 *OMCB Opinions* 269.

Less clear is whether a public body is meeting to transact “public business” when a quorum is present at an event that another entity has convened to conduct that entity’s business. The Maryland courts have addressed that question in two contexts. *See City of New Carrollton v. Rogers*, 287 Md. 56 (1980); *Ajamian v. Montgomery County*, 99 Md. App. 665, 639 A.2d 157 (1994). In *Rogers*, the Court held without lengthy discussion that a city council had not conducted a “meeting” when a quorum of its members attended a civic association’s meeting to address questions about a possible annexation of property. 287 Md. at 81. In *Ajamian*, a quorum of a county council attended a closed meeting of the county Democratic Central Committee, and the council president responded to a request for a briefing on various councilmanic redistricting plans. 99 Md. App. at 671-72. A discussion about the plans ensued, and the central committee voted to support the plan proposed by the redistricting commission. The Council members neither joined the discussion nor voted. *Id.* The trial court found that there was “no vote,” no “deliberation by councilmembers,” no “meeting to deliberate and decide,” no intention to “evade the law,” “no evidence that the law was in fact evaded,” and “no factual basis for a finding of violation of [the Act].” *Id.* at 680 (internal punctuation

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<sup>9</sup> *See, e.g. City of New Carrollton v. Rogers*, 287 Md. 56, 72 (1980) (“ It is . . . the deliberative and decision-making process in its entirety which must be conducted in meetings open to the public since every step of the process, including the final decision itself, constitutes the consideration or transaction of public business.”).

omitted). The Court of Special Appeals upheld those findings of fact, and affirmed the trial court's judgment that the Council had not violated the Act.

Applying *Ajamian*, the Compliance Board has advised:

[M]embers of a public body do not violate the Act merely by attending a meeting of an entity that is not itself subject to the [Act], even if the topic of discussion relates directly to a matter before the public body. . . . The crucial point [of *Ajamian*] was that the Act applies only if the public body itself separately conducts public business, as distinct from the proceedings of the larger group. If interaction among the members of the public body does not occur, and the larger group is not a mere subterfuge to evade the law, no violation occurs.

1 *OMCB Opinions* 120, 121 (1995); *see also* 7 *OMCB Opinions* 105, 110 (2009). For example, the Compliance Board concluded that various election boards had not violated the statute when a quorum of each had attended a closed meeting of a private association of election personnel, because there was no evidence that any individual board had conducted public business at the meeting. *Id.* By contrast, the Compliance Board found that a public body “met” when a quorum of its members attended an event that the public body itself had organized for presentations on a matter that was then pending before the public body. 8 *OMCB Opinions* 19 (2012).

In short, as the Compliance Board put it, “When a quorum of a public body convenes and discusses public business within one of the functions covered by the Act, that gathering is deemed a meeting of the public body, even when the quorum was created accidentally or the discussions occurred in a meeting not called by the public body itself.” 8 *OMCB Opinions* 76, 79 (2012). *See also, e.g.,* 3 *OMCB Opinions* 30, 33-34 (2000) (concluding that the Act applied to an informal briefing when a quorum was created by the unexpected arrival of an additional member); 6 *OMCB Opinions* 155, 158 (2009) (concluding that a public body “met” under the Act when a quorum of its members attended a subcommittee meeting).

*Practice notes on the presence of a quorum.* • Members of public bodies should know how many members it takes to create a quorum so that they know when their discussions are subject to the Act • Near-simultaneous electronic discussions among a quorum raise questions as to whether the members are “meeting” as a quorum, and those discussions should be avoided. • The Act does not require public bodies to “meet,” but a public body that reaches decisions by other means might create a perception that it operates in the dark. • The quorum requirement might not provide a defense to a public body that has called a brief recess in the middle of its deliberations when a quorum departs together and comes back with a decision. • The quorum requirement also might not provide a defense to a public body that has intentionally evaded the Act.

***C. Is the meeting subject to the Act because the public body is performing a “function” subject to the Act, or instead exempt from the Act because the public body is performing one of the three “functions” expressly excluded from the Act? (Index topic #s 1(C) through (K))***

Even when a “public body” is “meeting,” the Act might not apply, because the Act applies to some “functions” that a public body might perform, but not others. The Act defines six “functions.” Meetings that fall within the definitions of the legislative, quasi-legislative, and advisory functions are subject to the Act. Generally, meetings that fall within the definitions of the administrative, judicial and quasi-judicial functions are not subject to the Act. § 3-103. However, the Act does apply when a public body meets to consider granting a license or permit or to consider various zoning matters. § 3-103(b). And, when a public body recesses an open meeting to carry out an administrative function in a closed session, it must make the disclosures specified by the Act. § 3-104.

The Compliance Board has interpreted the Act to apply to discussions that do not fall into any of the functions. That conclusion is supported by § 3-301, which requires a public body to meet in open session “[e]xcept as otherwise expressly provided” by the Act. If a meeting does not fall within an express exclusion, then the Act applies. *See also* 78 Op. Att’y Gen. 275, 278, n. 3 (stating, in effect, that the Act applies “if a public body is carrying out a function that cannot be categorized under any one of the six defined functions”).

To figure out what “function” the public body performed at a meeting, a person needs to gather the facts on what the members addressed there. The topic index provides useful examples of how the Compliance Board has characterized various discussions.

**1. The functions subject to the Act: advisory, legislative, quasi-legislative functions and licensing, permitting and land use deliberations**

*a. Advisory function (Index topic # 1(D))*

Public bodies perform “advisory” functions when they “stud[y] . . . a matter of public concern” or “mak[e] recommendations on the matter,” and are doing so under a “delegation of responsibility” by any of four authorities:

- “law”
- the Governor or someone subject to his “policy direction”
- the chief executive officer of a political subdivision or someone subject to that officer’s policy direction
- “formal action by or for a public body that exercises an administrative, judicial, legislative, quasi-judicial, or quasi-legislative function.”

§ 3-101(c)(4).

The advisory function is usually performed by task forces and commissions that have been appointed to study an issue and report back. For example, a standing committee created by a public body's bylaws to recommend changes to the public body's organizational structure performed an "advisory function" when it met to discuss that topic. 9 *OMCB Opinions* 1, 8 (2013).

*b. "Legislative function" (Index topic # 1(F))*

This definition extends to more than just acting on proposed legislation. Section 3-101(f) provides:

"Legislative function" means the process or act of:

- (1) approving, disapproving, enacting, amending, or repealing a law or other measure to set public policy;
- (2) approving or disapproving an appointment;
- (3) proposing or ratifying a constitution or constitutional amendment;
- or
- (4) proposing or ratifying a charter or charter amendment.

§ 3-101(f).

*c. Quasi-legislative function (Index topic #1(J))*

This provision also applies more broadly than its name might suggest. Section 3-101(j) provides:

"Quasi-legislative function" means the process or act of:

- (1) adopting, disapproving, amending, or repealing a rule, regulation, or bylaw that has the force of law, including a rule of a court;
- (2) approving, disapproving, or amending a budget; or
- (3) approving, disapproving, or amending a contract.

For example, a public body that approves a budget performs a quasi-legislative function (and a legislative function, if adoption is by ordinance), while a public body that is statutorily charged with recommending a budget for approval by another entity is performing an advisory function. Either way, the discussion is subject to the Act.

*d. Licensing, permitting, and land use matters (Index topic # #1(G))*

Section 3-103(b) provides that the Act applies when a public body "is meeting to consider: (1) granting a license or permit; or (2) a special exception, variance, conditional use, or zoning classification, the enforcement of any zoning law or regulation, or any other zoning

matter.” Until 1991, when the provision was added, proceedings on many licensing, permitting, and land use matters had been considered quasi-judicial or administrative in nature and hence not subject to the Act, which expressly excludes meetings held to perform those functions. The provision brings licensing, permitting, and various land use matters within the scope of the Act no matter what “function” the public body is performing.

The Court of Appeals has interpreted the catch-all phrase “any other zoning matter” to include development plan applications, usually considered to be a “planning” matter. *Wesley Chapel Bluemont Association v. Baltimore County*, 347 Md. 125, 137-50 (1997). After extensively reviewing the legislative history of the provision, the Court found “no evidence” that the General Assembly had incorporated into the Act the “technical distinctions that the courts had drawn between land use planning, zoning, and development control.” *Id.* at 144. The Court accordingly held that the Act applied to the hearings held by the county board of appeals on the development plan. *Id.* at 148. *See also* 100 Op. Att’y Gen 55, 68-70 (2015) (discussing the history of the provision). Other land use cases in which Open Meetings Act issues were raised include *Tuẏeer v. Yim, LLC*, 201 Md. App. 443 (2011) (use permit) and *Handley v. Ocean Downs, LLC*, 151 Md. App. 615 (2003) (special exception).

**2. The functions exempt from the Act: judicial, quasi-judicial, administrative—unless the public body is considering granting a license or permit or taking certain land-use actions**

*a. “Judicial Function”* (Index topic #1(E))

The judicial function is defined to mean “the exercise of any power of the Judicial Branch of the State government,” except for “the exercise of rulemaking power by a court.” § 3-101(e). The definition also includes the exercise of the powers delegated to juries and two courts-related commissions.

*b. “Quasi-judicial function”* (Index topic # 1(J))

As defined by the Act, the “quasi-judicial” function means the “determination” of a “contested case,” as defined by Title 10, Subtitle 2 of the State Government Article, or of a matter before an administrative agency for which judicial review would be governed by Title 7, Chapter 200 of the Maryland Rules. The “quasi-judicial function” also includes the Compliance Board’s determination of an open meetings complaint under the Act. § 3-101(i).

Many licensing and land-use matters that fall within this definition are nonetheless expressly subject to the Act under § 3-103(b). It provides that the Act applies when a public body “is meeting to consider: (1) granting a license or permit; or (2) a special exception, variance, conditional use, or zoning classification, the enforcement of any zoning law or regulation, or any other zoning matter.” *See* 1(d), above.

- c. “Administrative function”- the two-step analysis, plus the licensing/permitting inquiry (Index Topic #1(C))

The Act defines “administrative function” in both the negative—what an administrative function is *not*—and the affirmative—what it *is*. In an opinion approved by the Court of Special Appeals, this office explained the two-step analysis that the Compliance Board has used to determine whether a particular activity is an administrative function:

The first step is to evaluate whether the meeting falls within any other function defined in the statute. If it does, the analysis ends because, by definition, the meeting does not involve an administrative function. [§ 3-101(b)(2)]. If the session does not involve one of the other defined functions, the second step is to evaluate whether the public body is involved in the administration of an existing law, rule, or regulation (as opposed to the development of new policy). If it is, the meeting likely involves an administrative function and the [Act] does not apply; if not, the discussion is not an administrative function and the [Act] does apply.

95 Md. Op. Att’y Gen. 152, 155-56 (2010); *see also Dyer v. Board of Education*, 216 Md. App. 530, 537-38 (2014) (quoting the opinion and applying the Compliance Board’s two-step test).

A third inquiry, as with the quasi-judicial exclusion explained above, is determining whether the meeting, even though “administrative” in nature, is subject to the Act anyway as a licensing, permitting, or land-use matter under § 3-103(b).

1. The first step: A topic that falls within the advisory, legislative, quasi-legislative, judicial, and quasi-judicial functions does *not* fall within the administrative function.

If the topic of discussion falls into the definition of any other function, then it is not “administrative.” § 3-101(b)(2).

*Practice notes on the first step*: • Task forces that have been created to make recommendations seldom perform “administrative” functions other than choosing a presiding officer and meeting place and discussing logistical matters associated with the performance of their duties. • A legislative body that is approving an appointment is performing a quasi-legislative function and therefore not an administrative function. • The judicial and quasi-judicial functions are exempt from the Act anyway, so if the meeting in question involves a judicial or administrative body’s consideration of a particular case, it is usually easier to apply those definitions before analyzing the meeting under the administrative function exclusion. • A public body that prepares a budget to recommend to another public body performs an advisory, and thus not an administrative, function.

2. The second step: The “administration” of a law, rule, regulation, or bylaw *is* within the administrative function.

The second step is to apply the Act's definition of what an administrative function is. See § 3-101(b)(1). The definition is circular – “administrative” is defined only by reference to “administration” – and it can be hard to apply confidently. Section 3-101(b)(1) provides:

“Administrative function” means the administration of:

- (i) a law of the State;
- (ii) a law of a political subdivision of the State; or
- (iii) a rule, regulation, or bylaw of a public body.

The Compliance Board has construed § 3-101(b)(1) this way: “there [must be] an identifiable prior law to be administered, and the public body holding the meeting must be vested with legal responsibility for its administration.” 7 *OMCB Opinions* 131, 136 (2011) (quoting 5 *OMCB Opinions* 42, 44 (2006)).

One generalization that has emerged is that “administering” a law can include applying an existing provision to a set of facts, as when an ethics commission applies existing ethics regulations to a particular set of facts in order to resolve a complaint, *Dyer v. Board of Education*, 216 Md. App. 530, 538 (2014), or a medical review panel applies regulations to the facts of the cases before it. 7 *OMCB Opinions* 250, 254 (2011). Another generalization is that the development of new policy does not qualify as “administrative.” See *id.*; see also 9 *OMCB Opinions* 1, 8 (2013) (“discussions about prospective policies and recommendations of future actions on subjects of public concern very seldom, if ever, qualify for the administrative function exclusion”); 7 *OMCB Opinions* at 254 (medical review panel’s discussion of “what the standards should be” would not be “administrative”).<sup>10</sup>

The Compliance Board has repeatedly commented on the difficulty of applying the administrative function exclusion with confidence.<sup>11</sup> If in doubt, the public body should

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<sup>10</sup> The Compliance Board has given these examples of how it has applied the administrative exclusion:

When a public body met to dismiss an employee, 1 *OMCB Opinions* 166 (1996), evaluate an employee’s performance, 3 *OMCB Opinions* 218, 221 (2002), fill a vacancy, 1 *OMCB Opinions* 252 (1997), or make an appointment, 6 *OMCB Opinions* at 61, we have found those discussions to be administrative in nature. And, we have found that the wording of press releases and the procedures for issuing them are topics that fall within the exclusion. 1 *OMCB Opinions* 133 (1995) (discussion of press release by board of aldermen was not subject to the Act); 8 *OMCB Opinions* 89, 91 (2012) (county commissioners’ discussion of current press release procedures “fall easily into the administrative function exclusion as we have applied it”).

9 *OMCB Opinions* 110, 112- 113(2014). For examples of administrative, and non-administrative, functions performed by a Board of County Commissioners, see 7 *OMCB Opinions* 225 (2011).

<sup>11</sup> For example, in 9 *OMCB Opinions* 110 (2014), the Compliance Board commented on “the regrettable difficulty, for public bodies, the public, and representatives of the press alike, of applying the administrative function exclusion.” *Id.* at 113. As noted there, the Compliance Board had studied the issue in 2005. *Id.*, citing Use of the Executive Function Exclusion under the Maryland Open Meetings Act - Study and Recommendations by the Open Meetings Compliance Board (December, 2005). One confusing aspect of the administrative function exclusion noted in the study was that the exclusion might also apply to discussions that fall also within the “personnel matters” exception that permits a public body to close a meeting that is subject to the Act. *Id.*, citing Study p. 6. See also footnote 10, above, and Chapter 4, part A, below.

proceed on the assumption that the Act applies. If the public body wants to treat the matter as “administrative” because the topic is confidential, the public body should instead analyze whether the meeting may be closed under the “exceptions” in the Act that permit closed-door discussions of certain topics. *See* Chapter 4.

*Practice notes on the second step:* • A policy that has not yet been adopted is not susceptible to being “administered.” For example, a county council that had not yet adopted its position on legislation in the General Assembly could not claim that it was merely implementing that position when, before voting on the position, it held closed sessions to hire a lobbyist. *See* 7 *OMCB Opinions* at 137. • A public body is “administering” its bylaws when it elects its own officers under a bylaw requiring it to do so. *See* 9 *OMCB Opinions* at 9, 10 (“this part of the test is met when a public body elects its own officers”). • A discussion that begins as “administrative” in nature can easily stray into policy matters that may only be discussed in an open meeting. For that reason, many public bodies perform administrative functions in open meetings that satisfy the requirements for meetings subject to the Act. Otherwise, the discussion must be postponed until proper notice can be given.

## Chapter 2: Notice – For meetings subject to the Act, did the public body give “reasonable advance notice?”

(Index Topic #2)

**Chapter Summary:** The Act states the “public policy of the State that the public be provided with adequate notice of the time and location of meetings of public bodies, which shall be held in places reasonably accessible to individuals who would like to attend these meetings.” § 3-102(c). That policy is implemented by § 3-302, which sets the requirement that public bodies “give reasonable advance notice” before meeting in an open or closed session and then addresses the form, content, and method of giving notice. The Compliance Board has observed that a “deficiency in one regard may sometimes be ameliorated by the public body’s extra efforts in another, as when a public body takes extra measures to publish a last-minute notice of an urgently-called meeting.” 8 *OMCB Opinions* 76, 80 (2012). The Compliance Board has also emphasized that “[t]he notice provisions of the Act are not merely technical; a meeting held without notice to the public is a secret meeting.” *Id.* at 79. The failure to give notice thus also means that the public body has violated the Act’s default requirement that public bodies “shall meet in open session.” *See* § 3-301.

Section 3-302 requires public bodies to retain a copy of their meeting notices; that requirement is discussed in Chapter 6, below.

To figure out whether a public body gave proper notice, a person needs a copy of any notice that was posted online or published by other means, the date of the posting, and the date of the meeting. Also relevant might be the circumstances behind the scheduling of a meeting on short notice. Usually, the public body or its website is the best source of this information.

### ***A. Timing – did the public body post the notice “reasonably in advance” of the meeting?***

The Act states the policy that notice be “adequate,” § 3-102(c), and requires that “reasonable advance notice” be given. § 3-302(a). The Act does not specify how far in advance notice must be given; there is no requirement that notice be given “at least X days in advance.” The Compliance Board has explained:

As for timeliness, we have stated that “the touchstone of ‘reasonableness’ is whether a public body gives notice of a future meeting as soon as is practicable after it has fixed the date, time, and place of the meeting.” 5 *OMCB Opinions* 83, 84 (2006). A public body has not provided “reasonable advance notice” if it knew the deadline by which it needed to meet on a certain matter and delayed setting the date. 5 *OMCB Opinions* 139, 143 (2007). Put another way, when “a meeting is scheduled on short notice, as sometimes will be required by

unexpected developments, the person responsible for scheduling [it] must provide the best public notice under the circumstances.” 1 *OMCB Opinions* 38, 39 (1993). For example, notice of a meeting one day in advance is insufficient when a public body could have anticipated the need for the meeting earlier. See 5 *OMCB Opinions* at 143.

8 *OMCB Opinions* at 80. Most of the Compliance Board’s timeliness opinions address allegations that a public body waited until the last minute to give notice. One complaint, however, alleged that the public body posted notice too early. See 8 *OMCB Opinions* 125 (2013).

The Compliance Board has approved standing website notices of regularly scheduled meetings (“The Council meets on the third Wednesday of every month, at 3 p.m., in Room 12 at City Hall”). Public bodies must also post cancellation notices, 1 *OMCB Opinions* 183, 189 (1996)(No. 96-11), and changes to the required information. 3 *OMCB Opinions* 85, 87 (2001)(No. 01-3).

The Board has found that last-minute notices given on a website alone do not constitute “reasonable advance notice” because that method is effective only for members of the public who happened to check the website shortly before the meeting. For meetings held to address truly urgent matters, the Compliance Board has suggested the use of “save-the-date” type notices when the meeting details will not be known until shortly beforehand. In 9 *OMCB Opinions* 125 (2014), the Board addressed the meetings of an entity that had to address urgent matters on short notice. Noting that “it can be hard for a public body’s staff to publish timely notice when the members have not yet decided on the date, time, and place of the meeting,” the Compliance Board advised:

Two methods, when used together, will often suffice. First, as soon as a public body knows that it will need to meet urgently, it might post that expectation on its website and alert the public to watch the website for details. At the same time, the public body might send that message by e-mail or through social media to the representatives of the press who follow its activities. Public bodies that often must meet on short notice might also develop of list of members of the public who want to receive such notices.

*Id.* at 126. The Compliance Board itself has posted a notice on its webpage that it occasionally must meet on short notice during the General Assembly to address questions about its position on pending legislation and that the public should check the website frequently during the General Assembly’s session.

A meeting should not be held on short notice if the matters are not urgent. The Compliance Board has advised that a public body has two options when it discovers, shortly before a meeting, that it has not given notice: “(1) if there is no emergency that must be addressed that day, it may postpone the meeting and give proper notice for a meeting at a later time; or, (2), if the meeting must be held that day, the public body may make good-faith efforts

to reach its interested public by whatever method is likely to work.” 9 *OMCB Opinions* 199, 200 (2015). If the public body discovers at the meeting that notice was not given, it must adjourn the meeting and re-convene only after it has given adequate notice. These principles apply whether or not a meeting is a “continuance” of an earlier one; the Compliance Board has advised that a public body that “continues” a meeting to a different date must give notice of that date. *See, e.g.*, 5 *OMCB Opinions* 184, 186 (2007).

***B. Format and contents – was the notice written, and did it contain the required information?***

Section 3-302(b) provides that notice must, “whenever reasonable,” be “written” and specify the “date, time and place” of the meeting. When notice is given on a website, the public body should print out or save a screenshot. As discussed in Chapter 6, below, the Act requires public bodies to retain a copy of each meeting notice for one year, and more than one public body has had trouble retrieving a notice that was no longer posted. *See, e.g.*, 8 *OMCB Opinions* 188, 189-90 (2013). To establish the timeliness of notice given on a website, public bodies may also wish to include the posting date on the notice.

Additionally, under § 3-302(b)(3), the notice must, “whenever reasonable” and “if appropriate,” “include a statement that a part or all of a meeting may be conducted in closed session.” Read by itself, the provision seems to contemplate that a public body may post notice of an entirely closed session. However, if a meeting is subject to the Act, it may only be closed after the members have voted in public to do so. *See* § 3-305(d). The Compliance Board has therefore advised that the public body’s notice of a closed session must invite the public to an open meeting right before the anticipated closed session. *See, e.g.*, 8 *OMCB Opinions* 150, 158 (2013) (approving the public body’s notice that “The Board will meet in open session only for the purpose of voting to close its meeting to discuss matters that the Open Meetings Act permits it to discuss in closed session.”).

The Act does not require public bodies to provide an agenda before their meetings, although many public bodies do so. The Act also does not address the question of whether public notices may include a request that people interested in attending contact the public body in advance. The Compliance Board has approved such requests as a way to ensure that the meeting place can accommodate the attendees. *See* 9 *OMCB Opinions* 206, 209 (2015).

***C. Methods of posting notice - does the public body use methods that are reasonably likely to reach people who would be interested in attending its meetings?***

The Act gives public bodies considerable discretion on how to provide “reasonable advance notice.” Section 3-302 (c) provides:

A public body may give the notice under this section as follows:

- (1) if the public body is a unit of State government, by publication in the Maryland Register;
- (2) by delivery to representatives of the news media who regularly report on sessions of the public body or the activities of the government of which the public body is a part;
- (3) if the public body previously has given public notice that this method will be used:
  - (i) by posting or depositing the notice at a convenient public location at or near the place of the session; or
  - (ii) by posting the notice on an Internet Web site ordinarily used by the public body to provide information to the public; or
- (4) by any other reasonable method.

The Compliance Board has suggested that public bodies periodically revisit their choice of methods, as methods that once seemed adequate for a particular constituency might have become ineffective. *See 9 OMCB Opinions* 206, 209 (2015) (encouraging public bodies to “review their notice methods, to reasonably adapt them to the changing ways in which their interested public gets information, and, if possible, to use several methods”). Consistency is also important; a change in method should be posted the usual way before that way is abandoned. And, a public body that uses its website to post meetings of its committees should use that method for all of its committees. *See 8 OMCB Opinions* 76, 83 (2012) (remarking on the appearance created by the “public body’s failure to employ its usual method of giving notice, particularly when that method is seemingly easy and efficient”).

*Practice notes on notice:*

- Members of public bodies can avoid unintentional violations of the Act by asking, at the outset of each meeting, how and when notice was provided to the public and by getting a clear understanding of which staff member has lead responsibility for doing that.
- Public bodies that create citizen task forces should at the same time assign lead administrative staff.
- Public bodies that might have to meet on an emergency basis should consider developing procedures and email notification lists to use in those emergencies.
- Copies of meeting notices must be retained, as discussed also in Chapter 6, and screenshots of notices given online should be printed out, with a notation of the posting date.

## Chapter 3: Open meeting requirement – will the meeting in fact be open to the public?

(Index Topic #3)

**Chapter summary:** Section 3-102(c) states the policy that public bodies' meetings must be held "in places reasonably accessible to individuals who would like to attend these meetings." Section 3-102(b) states that the ability of the public, its representatives, and the media to attend, report on, and broadcast . . . ensures the accountability of government to the citizens of the State."

The Act does not define what the right to "attend" a meeting entails. Two sections touch on the subject: § 3-303 requires public bodies to adopt rules of conduct and addresses the role of the presiding officer, and § 3-304, applicable only to State public bodies, addresses the provision of interpreters. The Compliance Board has elaborated on logistical questions such as the size of the meeting room and the handling of videotaping. The circumstances under which a public body may meet in closed session are discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

While this Manual does not address a public body's duties under the Americans with Disabilities Act and analogous state and local laws, those duties should be considered when the public body is choosing a meeting place.

To figure out whether a particular meeting met this requirement, a person needs facts on the public body's arrangements for the meeting and what occurred there.

### **A. *The right to "attend" a meeting***

Section 3-303(a) provides: "Whenever a public body meets in open session, the general public is entitled to attend." That means that members of the public may come to a meeting and observe it. With one exception pertaining to the closing of a meeting (see Chapter 5), it does not mean that they are entitled to speak. *See City of New Carrollton v. Rogers*, 287 Md. 56, 72 (1980) ("While the Act does not afford the public any right to participate in the meetings, it does assure the public right to observe the deliberative process and the making of decisions by the public body at open meetings."). So, unless the public body is governed by laws that require the particular public body to receive public comment, the decision of whether to allow members of the public to speak is up to the public body. Ordinarily, the management of the public comment period is up to the presiding officer. *See, e.g., 9 OMCB Opinions* 232, 233 (2015) (stating that the Act does not regulate the presiding officers' decisions on whether to allow a member of the public to speak). Complaints about the manner in which a presiding officer conducts a public comment period thus do not state Open Meetings Act violations. *8 OMCB Opinions* 84, 85 (2012).

The ability to "observe" does not mean that the public body must provide to the audience copies of the documents being reviewed by the members. However, the public must

be given a grasp of what is being discussed and acted on. The Compliance Board has advised that an oral summary or general description of the documents in question will ordinarily serve this purpose. *See, e.g.* 9 OMCB *Opinions* 206, 212-13 (2015). Requests for records fall under the Public Information Act, with the exception of the meeting documents discussed in Chapter 6.

### ***B. Size of the meeting space***

Providing a “place reasonably accessible” to people who would like to attend the meeting includes holding the meeting in a room large enough to hold them. 3 OMCB *Opinions* 118, 120 (2001). The Compliance Board has stated that “a public body would violate the Act if it had reason to expect a large crowd but nevertheless deliberately chose to meet in too small a space when a suitable, larger space was available.” *Id.* Public bodies may include in their meeting notices a request that members inform staff of their intention to attend the meeting, and the Compliance Board has recommended that practice for public bodies without regular access to large meeting rooms. 9 OMCB *Opinions* 206, 211 (2015).

### ***C. Access to the meeting space***

As explained by this office and the Compliance Board, the public must be provided with access to the meeting. A public body thus may not meet in a juvenile detention center that does not permit the general public to enter, *see* 78 Op. Att’y Gen. 240 (1993), or at a private business that likewise is closed to the public. *See* 8 OMCB *Opinions* 188 (2013), *cf.* *WSG Holdings, LLC v. Bowie*, 429 Md. 598 (2012) (in applying open meetings provisions of a land-use law, holding that members of the public were improperly excluded from site visit to private property). A meeting may be held at a restaurant so long as the public is provided with places to sit and the members’ discussion is audible. *See* 8 OMCB *Opinions* 111, 114 (2012) (“the Act does not prohibit a public body from having a meal during a meeting; does not prohibit a public body from meeting in a private meeting space to which there is access to members of the public at no cost to them; and does not regulate the members’ choices of food and drink”). Members of the public who attend public meetings may be required to cooperate with the security procedures for the building in which the meeting is held. 9 OMCB *Opinions* 296 (2015).

The ability to gain access to the meeting space must be provided to all who wish to attend. Thus, “a public body may not deny, through its choice of meeting site, the right of a person with a disability to observe an open meeting,” 1 OMCB *Opinions* 237, 239 (1997), may not restrict attendance to people who pay an admission fee, 8 OMCB *Opinions* 18, 25 (2012), may not restrict attendance to people on an invitation list, 7 OMCB *Opinions* 49 (2010), and may not exclude the press. 2 OMCB *Opinions* 67 (1999); *see also* 9 OMCB *Opinions* 290, 291 (2015) (meetings to be open to press and public “on equal terms”). The Court of Appeals has explained that “any action taken by the public body which discourages public attendance at

the meeting to any substantial degree would likely violate the Act's provisions.” *City of New Carrollton v. Rogers*, 287 Md. 56, 69 (1980).

When the meeting “place” is a conference call, the public may be provided access either via a call-in number or by access to a meeting room with a speakerphone. 8 *OMCB Opinions* 111, 113 (2012). Some states limit public bodies’ use of conference call meetings; for example, California law requires at least one member to be present in a meeting room. *See* Cal Gov’t Code § 11123(b)(1)(F). Maryland does not limit the use of conference-call meetings. Still, the members of public bodies that meet by teleconference should identify themselves and speak audibly so as to assure that the meeting is in fact “open” to the public. It may also be advisable for each member to tell the group whether anyone is with the member at the time.<sup>12</sup>

The only Maryland case relevant to teleconferences is *Tuzzeer v. Yim, LLC*, 201 Md. App. 443, 468 (2011). There, the court held that the presence of one member by telephone counted towards a quorum and that the meeting met the Act’s “accessibility” requirement because “there was no indication that anyone was unable to hear her comments.” *Id.* at 471. Not at issue, and not discussed, was the question of whether a meeting conducted entirely by telephone meets the Act’s requirement that the public be “allowed to observe” the conduct of public business. *See* § 3-102(a) (2).

#### ***D. Regulation of videotaping and recording; meeting rules***

Section 3-303 requires public bodies to “adopt and enforce reasonable rules regulating the conduct of persons attending its meetings and the videotaping, televising, photographing, broadcasting, or recording of its meetings.” The Compliance Board has found that a prohibition on videotaping is not a “reasonable rule” and that public bodies violate the Act when they refuse to permit videotaping. 3 *OMCB Opinions* 356 (2003). The Compliance Board has also found that public bodies may not prohibit the videotaping of members of the public who are at the meeting. *See* 1 *OMCB Opinions* 137, 140 (1995) (“There is no right to be protected against the gaze of an observer in a public forum, or against the lens of the observer’s camera.”).

The Compliance Board deems a rule on the use of video recording equipment “reasonable” if the rule “(1) is needed to protect the legitimate rights of others at the meeting; and (2) does so by means that are consistent with the goals of the Act.” 5 *OMCB Opinions* 22, 24-25 (2006). An example of a rule found “reasonable,” if adequately posted beforehand, is a

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<sup>12</sup> The California open meetings statute sets several ground rules to ensure that members of the public can truly “attend” teleconference meetings. Votes must be by roll call, agendas must be provided in the room provided to the public, and the discussion must be “audible” to members of the public who listen in on the meeting. Cal Gov’t Code § 11123(b)(1). The Texas open meetings law requires that minimum standards be set for the audio signal and requires that it be of “sufficient quality” that the public can “hear the voice of each participant.” Tex. Gov’t Code Ann. § 551.127 (West). Only regional or statewide governmental bodies may meet by teleconference, and, even then, one member must be present at a meeting room open to the public. *See id.* (“A meeting of a state governmental body or a governmental body that extends into three or more counties may be held by videoconference call only if the member of the governmental body presiding over the meeting is physically present at one location of the meeting that is open to the public during the open portions of the meeting.”).

requirement that people wishing to videotape a meeting check in with staff before the meeting so that staff may tell them where they may stand. *Id.* Public bodies must afford members of the public and reporters access to an open meeting on equal terms. *Id.*, citing 2 *OMCB Opinions* 67 (1999).

For the Compliance Board’s summary of the principles applicable to videotaping, along with citations to its opinions on the subject, see 8 *OMCB Opinions* 128, 131-33 (2013).

Model rules are posted under “Sample Forms and Checklists” at [www.oag.state.md.us/Opengov/Openmeetings/index.htm](http://www.oag.state.md.us/Opengov/Openmeetings/index.htm). Public bodies that allow public comment may wish to include additional rules about such matters as time limits, advance registration if required, and the presiding officer’s conduct of the session. The Open Meetings Act, however, does not require public comment periods and does not regulate them.

### ***E. Role of the presiding officer; disruptions***

Under § 3-303(c)(1), the public body may “have [an] individual removed” if the “presiding officer determines that the behavior of [the] individual is disrupting an open session.” *Id.* The Compliance Board has also noted that the presiding officer has the discretion to ask that videotaping be done from an unobtrusive location. *See* 8 *OMCB Opinions* at 133 (“A presiding officer thus has the authority to determine that a person’s conduct is disruptive and, by implication, to address that problem by asking her to move.”). A person making a presentation to the public body does not have the authority to order photographers to move. *Id.*

As above, the presiding officer ordinarily manages the meeting and any public comment period. *See also* Robert’s Rules of Order (10<sup>th</sup> ed.), p. 434 (describing presiding officer’s duties).

## Chapter 4: Permissibility of closed sessions – will the discussion fall within one of the 14 “exceptions” that permit the public body to exclude the public?

(Index topic #4)

**Chapter summary:** When a public body holds a meeting subject to the Act, the meeting must be open to the public unless the topic of discussion falls within one of the fourteen exceptions that allow a public body to exclude the public. *See* §§ 3-301, 3-305. Before closing an open meeting under one of the statutory exceptions, the public body must disclose the particular exception that permits the closed session. Then, in the closed session, the attendees may discuss only matters within the scope of that exception. § 3-305(b), (d); *see also* 7 *OMCB Opinions* 125, 127 (2011) (“discussions at closed meetings must fall within the scope of the exception claimed by the public body in advance”).

For the most part, the decision to invoke an exception to close a meeting is discretionary. Although other laws, such as medical privacy laws, might require a public body to discuss a topic in a closed session, the Act itself does not mandate closed sessions; instead, it provides that the public body “may” meet in closed session to discuss an excepted topic. § 3-305(b). As noted below, two exceptions, the procurement and public security exceptions, may only be invoked after the public body finds that a public discussion of the matter would cause certain types of harm.

The Act does *not* authorize public bodies to close meetings for discussions that fall outside of the exceptions. *See* § 3-305(b) (providing that a public body may close a meeting “only” to discuss one of the fourteen topics). Although the Act once permitted public bodies to close a meeting for “an exceptional reason” that was “so compelling” as to override the public interest in open meetings, that exception was repealed in 1991. *See* 1991 Laws of Md. ch. 655. The exceptions now reflect the General Assembly’s efforts to balance the public’s need to know with public bodies’ need to address certain specific topics in private. A local government with home rule powers may enact an open meetings ordinance with fewer exceptions—that is, a law that more stringently requires openness—but it may not add exceptions. *See* § 3-105 (“Whenever [the Act] and another law that relates to meetings of public bodies conflict, [the Act] applies unless the other law is more stringent.”).

This chapter discusses the scope of the fourteen exceptions, which, under the Act, must be “strictly construed in favor of open meetings.” § 3-305(a). The exceptions should also be read in light of the stated policy of the Act that public bodies’ meetings are to be open “except in special and appropriate circumstances.” *See* § 3-102(c).

It is important to note that no exception authorizes a closed session unless the public body has disclosed its reliance on the exception *before* the closed session. Put another way, if the public body has not cited the exception before it excludes the public, the exception does not apply. The preconditions that the Act places on closing a session—that the presiding officer make written disclosures about the upcoming session and conduct a motion on a vote

to close—are discussed in Chapter 5, as are the disclosures that must be made after a closed meeting and the members’ duty to confine the discussion to the matters disclosed on the closing statement.

To figure out whether a closed-session discussion fell within an exception, a person should gather the public body’s written disclosures about the session, as well as any other facts that have emerged about it. The Compliance Board’s opinions on each exception can be found under Topic 4 in the index, in the order in which they appear here and in the Act.

#### ***A. The “personnel matters” exception: § 3-305(b)(1)***

This exception allows a public body to close a meeting to discuss various personnel actions with regard to, or the evaluation of, “an appointee, employee, or official over whom it has jurisdiction” or “any other personnel matter that affects one or more specific individuals.” The Compliance Board has explained that the discussion must involve individual employees, as opposed to an entire class of employees. *See, e.g., 7 OMCB Opinions* 131, 134 (2011).

Similarly, the Compliance Board has explained that a discussion about the “‘elimination of a position,’ while it is vacant, likely involves the setting of policy, rather than the discussion of information specific to a particular individual.” *7 OMCB Opinions* 216, 220 (2011). The discussion about the elimination of a position or department must be open “[e]ven where the discussion involves a position held by so few employees that everyone knows whose positions are being discussed, . . . unless it involves the performance or other attributes of those individual employees.” *3 OMCB Opinions* 335, 337 (2003). This exception thus “does not apply where anyone in the position would be affected by the action being considered.” *Id.* It also does not extend to policy issues such as the method of making the appointment. *See, e.g., 3 OMCB Opinions* 67, 69 (2000).

A discussion of another entity’s employee, appointee, or official would not fall within the exception unless the public body was considering appointing or employing that individual. *See, e.g., 9 OMCB Opinions* 132, 136 (2014) (“[A] discussion that involves a vendor’s performance of its contract to supply people to provide services would likely exceed the exception.”).

The Compliance Board has found that some discussions about particular employees or appointees also fall within the administrative exclusion. *See* notes 9 and 10, above. In that case, the Act would not apply, with exception of the disclosure requirements applicable when a public body closes an open meeting to address administrative matters. *See* § 3-104. If in doubt, the public body should proceed on the assumption that the Act applies, for multiple practical reasons: the courts have not addressed this point, so the law is not settled; a public body that convenes behind closed doors to address administrative matters invites suspicion that its members are secretly conducting more substantive business; the disclosure requirements that attach to meetings closed under the Act give the public some assurance that the closed session is legal and some information about it; and, though the Act’s requirement that public bodies

prepare minutes is regarded by some as a nuisance and a reason to treat a discussion as “administrative,” memorializing the events of a meeting is one of the basics of efficient meetings practices.

***B. The “privacy or reputation” exception: § 3-305(b)(2).***

This exception allows a public body to close a meeting to “protect the privacy or reputation of an individual with respect to a matter that is not related to public business.” The Compliance Board has seldom addressed it, probably because most discussions about a person’s private matters would not likely relate to public business, and many others would fall instead into the personnel exception. In 9 *OMCB Opinions* 71 (2013), a university board cited the exception as a basis for closing a meeting to discuss possible honorees. The Compliance Board found that the exception applied to the discussion of “the personal and non-University related reputations of [the] potential honorees.” *Id.* at 77. A discussion of public information about an individual would not fall within the exception, as the closed session would not be necessary to “protect” that information. The Compliance Board has suggested that a discussion about honorees’ personal attributes might also fall within the exception for the discussion of personnel and appointees. 8 *OMCB Opinions* 166, 167-68 (2013).

***C. The “real property acquisition” exception: § 3-305(b)(3)***

This exception allows a public body to close a meeting to “consider the acquisition of real property for a public purpose and matters directly related to the acquisition.” Within the exception are discussions about acquiring interests in real property, whether by purchase, lease, or easement. *See, e.g., 7 OMCB Opinions* 225, 233 (2011) (easement). The purpose of the exception is to protect the public body’s bargaining power.

The exception does not extend to discussions about selling or renting out the public body’s own property. *See, e.g., 9 OMCB Opinions* 29, 34 (2013) (“Th[e] exception does not apply to discussions about real property the public body already owns.”). It also does not apply to acquisitions of personal property. *See 1 OMCB Opinions* 73, 77 (1994) (No. 94-5) (council’s discussion about selling the city’s junk-grade cars did not fall within the exception because it involved neither an acquisition nor real property).

In the one reported case on the application of the exception, the Court of Appeals held that the exception applied to a closed meeting at which a board of town aldermen voted to condemn some land for a town parking garage. The Court held that the exception permitted the aldermen to discuss and vote on the matter, an action that the Court deemed legislative in nature. The Court emphasized the evidence that the aldermen had held multiple public hearings on the matter and had included the garage in the budget. After reviewing Open Meetings Act cases in which public bodies had clearly intended to evade the Act, the Court noted that “no such evasive devices have been exploited by the Aldermen in a very public

campaign to construct a new parking deck.” *J.P. Delphey Ltd. P’ship v. Mayor & City of Frederick*, 396 Md. 180, 201 (2006).<sup>13</sup>

#### ***D. The “business location” exception: § 3-305(b)(4)***

This exception allows a public body to close a meeting to “consider a matter that concerns the proposal for a business or industrial organization to locate, expand, or remain in the State.” The Compliance Board has noted that the General Assembly added the exception on the basis of its “understanding that some businesses might be deterred from making proposals about relocation, expansion, or retention of an existing facility if all such discussions were open to public view.” 7 *OMCB Opinions* 148, 159-63 (2011) (summarizing the prior Compliance Board opinions on the exception). The Compliance Board therefore has interpreted the exception “to address the business’s interest in protecting its own identity and information,” *id.* at 163, and not to apply to discussions of information that does not belong to the business or plans that the business itself has disclosed in earlier public meetings. *See* 9 *OMCB Opinions* 15, 25 (2013).

Noting that the Act requires that the exceptions be construed strictly, the Compliance Board has stated that it does “not construe [§ 3-305(b)(4)] broadly to apply every time a property owner, its developer, or a coordinating agency seeks legislation to enable a land use or financing that might in turn generate proposals from new businesses.” *Id.* at 27. The Compliance Board thus does not construe the exception to extend to “steps in the legislative process.” *Id.*; *see also, e.g.*, 7 *OMCB Opinions* at 163 (declining to extend the exception to “closed-session discussions on generally applicable land-use legislation”).

#### ***E. The “investment of public funds” exception: § 3-305(b)(5)***

This exception pertains to the use of public funds for investment purposes and not to the expenditure of public funds. The Compliance Board has instructed generally that the discussion must be “sufficiently related to a concrete investment possibility as to justify invoking the exception.” 4 *OMCB Opinions* 114, 117 (2005). The Compliance Board has declined to extend the exception to a public body’s discussions about whether to donate funds to a charity. 7 *OMCB Opinions* 195, 203-05 (2011). Also not within the exception was that

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<sup>13</sup> The *Delphey* opinion adds a little uncertainty to the application of § 3-105, which requires that, when the Act and “another law that relates to meetings of public bodies conflict, [the Act] applies unless the other law is more stringent.” The Court found that the real property exception, which the Court construed to permit the aldermen to vote on the real estate matter in closed session, conflicted with Article 23A, § 8 (now § 4-104 of the Land Use Article), which prohibits municipal legislative bodies from adopting ordinances and resolutions in closed sessions. 396 Md. at 198-99. Under § 3-305, it would seem that Article 23A, § 5, as the more stringent provision, would have taken precedence. However, without mentioning § 3-105 (then § 10-504 of the State Government Article), the Court applied the common-law canon of statutory construction that resolves conflicts between statutes by preferring the more specific provision. The Court then decided that the real property acquisition exception, as the more specific provision on the topic under discussion, prevailed. *Id.* However, the opinion contains no indication that the Court intended to modify *City of College Park v. Cotter*, 309 Md. 573 (1987), (see note 4, above), and the Court’s application of § 3-105 in *Cotter* is probably still good law. *See* 94 Op. Att’y Gen. 161, 172, n. 20 (2009) (noting that neither party in *Delphey* “focus[ed] on” the provision in their briefs).

public body's meeting to approve a governing document of a corporation owned by the public body. *Id.* at 204-05.

After the funds have been invested, the public body must unseal the minutes of the closed meeting. § 3-306(c)(5).

***F. The “marketing of public securities” exception: § 3-305(b)(6)***

This exception shields a public body's discussions about the terms on which to issue bonds. After the bonds have been issued, the public body must unseal the minutes of the closed meeting. § 3-306(c)(4).

The Compliance Board has construed this exception in a matter that involved the issuance of tax increment financing (“TIF”) bonds for which the sole buyer was to be the developer of the project that was to be financed through the bonds. *See* 9 *OMCB Opinions* at 27-28. The Compliance Board questioned whether that “market” of one would be adversely affected by public disclosure of the discussion and found that, in any event, discussions about the developer's site plans and whether to approve legislation for the TIF did not fall within the exception. *Id.*

***G. The “legal advice” exception: § 3-305(a)(7)***

The original version of this exception was known as the “legal matters” exception and broadly permitted public bodies to “consult with counsel on a legal matter.” The General Assembly narrowed the exception in 1991 to apply only when the public body wishes to “consult with counsel to obtain legal advice.” *See* 1991 Md. Laws, ch. 655. Thus, as explained by the Compliance Board, the exception “is to be narrowly construed to cover only the interchange between the client public body and its lawyer in which the client seeks advice and the lawyer provides it.” 1 *OMCB Opinions* 1, 5 (1992) (No. 92-1). The exception “does not allow for closed discussion among members of the public body merely because an issue has legal ramifications.” 1 *OMCB Opinions* 53, 54 (1993) (No. 93-11).

The Compliance Board has concluded that a city council exceeded the “legal advice” exception when it discussed the need to have an ordinance drafted, “however brief and devoid of substantive discussion.” 1 *OMCB Opinions* 145, 149 (1995). The Compliance Board instructed: “Once the advice has been sought and provided, the body must return to open session to discuss the policy implications of the advice it received or anything else about proposed legislation.” *Id.* Likewise, two public bodies violated the Act when, in a joint closed session, the conversation “strayed away from advice from [counsel] and instead became a government-to-government discussion.” *See* 1 *OMCB Opinions* at 55.

The exception does not apply to a discussion between the public body and anyone other than its lawyer. *See* 1 *OMCB Opinions* at 3. To close a session on the theory that the discussion will involve “legal advice,” the public body must either consult with counsel to

receive legal advice under this exception, or, under the exception provided by § 3-305(b)(8), consult with others about pending or potential litigation.

#### ***H. The “pending or potential litigation” exception: § 3-305(b)(8)***

This exception authorizes a public body to “consult with staff, consultants, or other individuals about pending or potential litigation.” Counsel need not be present; this exception contemplates, for example, that staff may brief the public body on the progress of settling a particular claim before suit is filed. *See, e.g.* 1 *OMCB Opinions* 38, 41 (1993) (93-7).

The Compliance Board has explained that “potential” litigation means more than a theoretical possibility: “Strict construction of the “litigation” exception means that the exception may be invoked regarding “potential litigation” only when suit has been threatened or a realistic possibility of a suit is otherwise obvious.” 1 *OMCB Opinions* 38, 41 (1993) (No. 93-7). For example, a public body “may not discuss budgetary or related matters in a closed session merely because someone speculates that a lawsuit is possible if funds are not spent for some purpose.” *Id.* By contrast, the exception does permit a public body to close a meeting to discuss options for settling a particular claim before suit is filed. *Id.*

As with the “legal advice” exception, the pending or potential litigation exception “may not be used as a pretext for engaging in closed discussions concerning an underlying policy issue that, though related to the litigation, can reasonably be discussed separately.” 7 *OMCB Opinions* 148, 152 (2011); *see also* 1 *OMCB Opinions* 56, 60-61 (1994) (while city council could discuss in closed session possible ways to avert a lawsuit related to alleged zoning violation by a day care center, its discussion of alternative locations for the day care center exceeded the scope of the exception).

The exception does not apply after the “pending litigation” has been settled or otherwise concluded. *See* 8 *OMCB Opinions* 42, 44 (2012).

#### ***I. The “collective bargaining” exception: § 3-305(b)(9)***

Under this exception, a public body may close a meeting to “conduct collective bargaining negotiations or consider matters that relate to the negotiations.” The Compliance Board has concluded that this exception applies to a public body’s discussions about whether to approve collective bargaining agreements that are not deemed final without that approval. 9 *OMCB Opinions* 71, 76 (2013).

For other applications of this exception, see 7 *OMCB Opinions* 58, 61-62 (2009).

**J.     *The “public security” exception: § 3-305(b)(10)***

Added to the Act after 9/11, this conditional exception permits public bodies to close a meeting to discuss “public security, including (i) the deployment of fire and police services and staff; and (ii) the development and implementation of emergency plans.” Before closing a meeting under this exception, the public body must first “determine that public discussion would constitute a risk to the public or to public security.”

It is unclear whether the General Assembly intended this exception to shield discussions about the security of data systems that contain personal information. The Public Information Act, however, requires records custodians to “deny inspection of the part of a public record that contains information about the security of an information system,” § 4-338, and a discussion that would result in the disclosure of that information will potentially fall under the “other law” exception provided by § 3-305(b)(13), discussed in Part M, below.

The public body should document its “public risk” finding in the minutes of the public body’s proceedings on a motion to close a meeting under § 3-305(b)(14), in the presiding officer’s written statement of the reasons for closing the session, or both. For an application of this exception, see 7 *OMCB Opinions* 225, 229 (2011).

**K.     *The “scholastic, licensing, and qualifying examination” exception: § 3-305(b)(11)***

Boards that “prepare, administer, or grade a scholastic, licensing, or qualifying examination” may perform those duties in closed session.

The Compliance Board has applied this exception once, in a matter involving a county board of electrical examiners. See 1 *OMCB Opinions* 13 (1992) (No. 92-4).

**L.     *The “investigative proceeding regarding criminal conduct” exception: § 3-305(b)(12)***

A public body may close a session to “conduct or discuss an investigative proceeding on actual or possible criminal conduct.”

The Compliance Board found that this exception permitted a town council to close a session to discuss efforts to prompt the State prosecutor to conduct a criminal investigation of the mayor’s conduct. 1 *OMCB Opinions* 50 (2000) (No. 00-11). The town council in 5 *OMCB Opinions* 42 (2006) failed to properly invoke the exception before holding a closed-door session with the State’s Attorney to discuss an investigation into the misappropriation of town funds. Had the town cited the exception as a basis for closing the meeting, the exception would have applied to the session. *Id.* at 45.

When a “criminal conduct” discussion involves the public body’s own employee, the discussion might also fall within the personnel exception discussed in Part A, above.

***M. The “other law” exception § 3-305(b)(13)***

The Act contains a catch-all exception that permits a public body to close a meeting to “comply with a specific constitutional, statutory, or judicially imposed requirement that prevents public disclosure about a particular proceeding or matter.” Examples of laws that might prevent public disclosure are the State procurement laws, which govern the disclosure of offers and offerors’ names before bids or proposals are opened, *see* St. Fin. & Proc. § 13-210, federal laws that prevent the disclosure of various types of personal information, *see, e.g.*, Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (“HIPAA”), 42 U.S.C. § 1320d *et seq.* (2012), and provisions of the Public Information Act (“PIA”) that require a governmental unit to deny requests for certain records or types of information. *See* §§ 4-304 through 326 (specifying records that may not be inspected); §§ 4-328 through 355 (specifying the types of information that may not be inspected).

For example, as explained by the Compliance Board, a provision of the PIA, § 4-335,

prevents public disclosure of confidential commercial or financial information contained in documents possessed by a State agency. Therefore, under exception 13 of the Act, a public body is permitted to close a meeting when public discussion of that information would compromise its confidentiality.

8 *OMCB Opinions* 137, 142, n. 4 (2013). The Act itself prevents a public body from disclosing closed-session minutes until they are unsealed, so a public body may invoke this exception to meet in closed session to discuss those minutes. *See* 9 *OMCB Opinions* 160, 164 (2014) (“Public bodies must adopt minutes of their closed sessions, and those minutes, by law, ‘shall be sealed and may not be open to public inspection.’”).

***N. The “procurement” exception: § 3-305(b)(14)***

The procurement exception is conditional. It allows a public body to close a meeting to “discuss, before a contract is awarded or bids are opened, a matter directly related to a negotiating strategy or the contents of a bid or proposal”—but only “if public discussion or disclosure would adversely impact the ability of the public body to participate in the competitive bidding or proposal process.” The Compliance Board has explained that “a public body may close a meeting to hear competing offerors’ presentations of their proposals, because that information, if made public, would give an advantage to the offerors who have not yet presented their proposals and would thereby compromise the process.” *See* 7 *OMCB Opinions* 1, 3 (2010).

Several criteria for the procurement exception have emerged from the Compliance Board's opinions. First, the discussion must involve "a pending procurement or an impending procurement that is actually in the works." 9 *OMCB Opinions* 132, 137 (2014). This criterion is not met by "the possibility that a public body might decide to initiate a competitive procurement process in the future." *Id.* A general discussion about procurement procedures thus exceeds the scope of the exception. *Id.*

Second, § 3-305(b)(14) protects the competitive procurement process and does not shield discussions about other contract matters. Discussions about sole-source contracts and modifications of a contract that has already been awarded thus seldom fall within the exception. The Compliance Board has posited that the discussion might apply when a public body is awarding a sole-source "gap" contract for services needed while a competitive procurement for those services is pending, but only "if the public body can establish that the disclosure of the discussion about the gap contracts would affect the public body's leverage in the competitive procurement." 8 *OMCB Opinions* 8, 15 (2012).

Third, the public body must find that public discussion of the matter would "adversely impact the ability of the public body to participate in the competitive bidding or proposal process." § 3-305(b)(14). The public body should document that finding in the minutes of the public body's proceedings on a motion to close a meeting under § 3-305(b)(14), in the presiding officer's written statement of the reasons for closing the session, or in both. *See, e.g.,* 8 *OMCB Opinions* 63, 66 (2012).

*Practice notes on the exceptions:*

- None of the exceptions applies to a meeting that was closed without a public vote to close and a closing statement (see Chapter 5).
- Ideally, the need for a closed session will be identified before the meeting, so that counsel (or, if counsel is not available, an officer, member, or employee who has taken training on the Act), can assess whether the discussion will fall within an exception.
- If, during the meeting, a member of the public body unexpectedly requests a closed session, the member must disclose enough information for the presiding officer to complete the closing statement and the other members to hold an informed vote on whether to exclude the public.
- If a public body expects to close part of a meeting, it must include that expectation on its meeting notice (see Chapter 2, Part B).

## Chapter 5: Conditions for closing a meeting – Did the public body take the necessary steps before, during, and after the closed session?

(Index topic #5)

**Chapter summary:** The Act imposes four conditions on a public body’s exercise of its discretion to close a meeting to discuss one of the topics listed in § 3-305. Two of those conditions must be met *before* the meeting is closed and thus must be accomplished in open session. First, the presiding officer must “make a written statement of the reason for closing the meeting.” § 3-305(d). In that statement, often called a “closing statement,” the presiding officer must also disclose the “topics to be discussed” and the statutory exception relied upon as authority for closing the meeting. Second, the presiding officer must conduct a recorded vote—a vote for which each member’s vote is specified—on a motion to close the meeting to the public. § 3-305(d)(1).

The third condition, applicable during the closed session, is that the members of the public body confine the discussion to the topics and the scope of the exception disclosed on the closing statement. *See* Chapter 4, Chapter Summary. The presiding officer’s closing statement thus effectively serves as a set agenda for the closed session. So, during a closed session, members of the public body may not add “new business” items to the agenda for that session. *See, e.g., 9 OMCB Opinions* 46, 50 (2013) (rejecting the public body’s argument that it was not required to specify the topics to be discussed on its closing statement because, at the time of the vote, the members did not yet know what topics might come up in the closed session).

Fourth, after the meeting, the public body must disclose, in the minutes of the next open session, information that discloses what was actually discussed, who attended the closed meeting, and what actions the public body took. *See* § 10-509(c)(2). Disclosure requirements also apply when a public body has closed a meeting to perform an administrative function. § 3-104.

To figure out whether a public body complied with the disclosure requirements, a person should inspect the open-session minutes for the session that was closed and for the next open session, as well as the closing statement.

### ***A. Before the closed session: closing statement and recorded vote***

The closing statement must contain three items of information: the “topics to be discussed” in the closed session, a citation to the exception applicable to each topic, and “the reason for closing the meeting.” § 3-305(d). Once adopted by the members’ recorded vote, the closing statement is the public body’s representation to the public that the closed session will comport with the Act. In fact, members of the public are entitled to a copy of the closing statement when the meeting is closed. *See 7 OMCB Opinions* 5, 6 (2010) (“[T]he statement is a matter of public record that must be available at the time a public body concludes its public session immediately before the start of the closed meeting.”). Further, if a member of the

public objects to the closing, the public body must send a copy of the closing statement to the Compliance Board. § 3-305(d)(3).

The Compliance Board has explained the purposes to be served by closing statements:

As might be inferred from the fact that the General Assembly assigned to the presiding officer the duty to make the written statement, the performance of that duty is not a mere formality. A properly-completed written statement serves to prompt each member of the public body, before voting, to consider whether the reason is sufficient to depart from the Act's norm of openness. It helps members of the public who will be barred from the closed session to understand that this exception to the principle of openness is well-grounded. It serves as an accountability tool, because it enables the public to compare the pre-meeting disclosures with the minutes summarizing the actual conduct of the meeting and thereby to assess whether the discussion stayed within the exceptions that the public body had claimed. And, in the event that a complaint is filed, it tells us that the members of the public body considered the legality of closing the meeting and gives us their reason at the time for doing so. An after-the-fact justification for closing a meeting is not a good substitute for that information.

9 *OMCB Opinions* 15, 22-23 (2013) (citing and quoting 4 *OMCB Opinions* 46, 48 (2004) (quotation marks omitted)). *See also* 8 *OMCB Opinions* 166, 168 (2013) (“[T]he public body’s objective should be to treat each decision to exclude the public as a substantive decision for which each member of the public body is accountable and to demonstrate that fact to the public in the ways required by the Act.”).

Closing statements that merely parrot the words of the statutory exception rarely convey enough detail about the topics to be discussed and the reason for excluding the public. Particularly, the text of the claimed exception does not tell the public why the closed session was necessary; after all, the exceptions allow, but do not require a public body to close a meeting.<sup>14</sup> For example, a closing statement that merely states the words of the business relocation exception, which allows the public body to exclude the public from its discussion of a proposal for a business to locate in the public body’s jurisdiction, does not tell the public anything about why the discussion has to be secret, especially when the identity of the business has already been made public. *See, e.g.*, 9 *OMCB Opinions* 46, 50 (2013).

In most cases, a description of the topic alone also does not convey why the public body needs to exclude the public. Occasionally, though, the Compliance Board has found that a description of the topic to be discussed adequately conveyed the public body’s reason for closing a meeting, as when the public body has described the topic as discipline matters

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<sup>14</sup> For a list of the opinions in which the Compliance Board has found that a public body violated the Act by adopting a closing statement that contained only “uninformative boilerplate,” see Topic 5(C)(3) in the topical index. [www.oag.state.md.us/Opengov/Openmeetings/OMCB\\_Topical\\_Index.pdf](http://www.oag.state.md.us/Opengov/Openmeetings/OMCB_Topical_Index.pdf).

respecting individual employees. *See, e.g., 4 OMCB Opinions* 188, 196 (2005). The better practice is to state the citation, topic, and reason for closing as separate pieces of information.

*Practice notes on avoiding closing statement violations:*

- Closing statements must be prepared and adopted *before* the public body closes the meeting. That means that the public must be given notice of an open meeting. If the only public portion of a meeting will be the motion and vote to close, the meeting notice should say so. § 3-202(b)(3); *see also 8 OMCB Opinions* 150, 158 (2013) (suggesting wording for notices of such meetings).
- Public bodies may use the model closing statement forms, one with instructions for the presiding officer and one without, that are posted at [www.oag.state.md.us/OpenGov/Openmeetings/index.htm](http://www.oag.state.md.us/OpenGov/Openmeetings/index.htm) under the link for “Sample Forms and Checklists.” Use of the forms is not mandatory, but they prompt the presiding officer to provide all of the required information. *8 OMCB Opinions* 166, 168 (2013).
- Public bodies may use a closing statement pre-prepared by staff, so long as it remains accurate when the members vote to close the meeting. *9 OMCB Opinions* 1, 6 (2013). To ensure that, it is a good practice for the presiding officer to read the closing statement out loud, entertain a motion to adopt it, and then conduct the recorded vote.
- When someone other than the presiding officer has prepared the closing statement, it is a good idea for the presiding officer to sign or initial it to show compliance with the Act’s requirement that the presiding officer “make” the statement. *See 8 OMCB Opinions* 166 168 (2013) (stating that although a “public body may record the presiding officer’s acknowledgment of the written statement in its minutes if it prefers,” the “better practice is to include it in the written statement, which is immediately available to the public”).
- The presiding officer should take a copy of the closing statement into the closed session as a reminder of the permissible scope of the discussion. The original, as adopted before the closed session, should be left outside with staff in case a member of the public requests a copy and also as a record of the disclosures made before the closed session. *8 OMCB Opinions* 182 (2013).
- Topics should be described as fully as possible without compromising the confidentiality of the discussion. *See, e.g., 9 OMCB Opinions* 71, 75 (2013) (finding the description of the topics as “institutional strategic, budgetary and administrative matters” to be “so vague as to be insufficient”).

- A “public body may close a meeting to discuss several topics—if each topic falls within an exception and if each is clearly traceable to the relevant statutory exception and reason for closing.” 9 *OMCB Opinions* 1, 3 (2013).
- Ideally, the need for a closed session will be anticipated beforehand so that the presiding officer, staff, and counsel, as appropriate, can evaluate whether the Act authorizes excluding the public from the particular discussion.
- When a member calls for a closed session during the open session, and the presiding officer does not know what the discussion will entail or whether an exception applies, the presiding officer must gather the information necessary to prepare a proper closing statement and to ensure that the other members know why they are voting to close the meeting. One way to achieve those goals is to briefly recess the meeting to confer separately with the member who wants to close the meeting and counsel, if counsel can be reached. If counsel is present, another way is to entertain a motion to close the meeting to receive legal advice under § 3-305(b)(7), consult with counsel on whether the session may be closed, and then reconvene in open session to present a written statement and conduct a vote on whether to close. *See* 9 *OMCB Opinions* 46, 51 (2013) (“The Act neither requires nor permits members of a public body to vote to exclude the public from a meeting without information on the merits of that action.”)

***B. During the session, the duty to discuss only the disclosed topics, only within the scope of the claimed exception***

As discussed in Chapter 4, the public body’s discussion in a meeting closed under § 3-305 must stay within the confines of the exception or exceptions that the presiding officer disclosed on the closing statement. For example, the discussions about an individual employee in a meeting properly closed under the personnel exception may not stray into discussions of more general employment matters. *See, e.g.,* 6 *OMCB Opinions* 180, 185 (2009). In that example, the topic identified, such as “retirement benefits of specific employee,” might seem to include policy matters on the provision of retirement benefits generally, but a discussion of those matters would not fall within the personnel exception.

When the discussion begins to stray beyond the topics and exceptions claimed beforehand, the presiding officer must stop the discussion so that it may be conducted in the open. *See, e.g.,* 9 *OMCB Opinions* 195, 196 (2014) (“Whether or not a topic falls within one of the fourteen exceptions, it may not be discussed in a closed session if it has not been disclosed beforehand on the written statement.”). If the closed session was the last item on the agenda of the public body’s meeting, the public body may not immediately return to an open session because the public would have had no notice of the session.

***C. After the closed session, the disclosure of the events of the session***

After meeting in a closed session under § 3-305, the public body must disclose what actually transpired in the closed session in as much detail as it can without disclosing the information that the claimed exception permitted the public body to keep confidential. The requirements for post-session disclosures are discussed in Chapter 6, Part B(4), below.

## Chapter 6: Meeting Documents – Did the public body prepare and retain the required documents?

(Index topic #6)

**Chapter summary:** The Act requires public bodies to prepare and retain, for one year, the following documents for each meeting: a meeting notice, minutes of the meeting and sealed minutes for any part of the meeting that was closed, a closing statement for any closed session, and, as a component of the minutes of the next open meeting, a summary of the closed session. *See* §§ 3-302, 3-305, 3-306, 3-104.

Ordinarily, open-session minutes and closing statements should be produced for inspection, at no cost, when a member of the public comes to the public body’s office and asks to see them, though the Compliance Board has recognized that a public body might not be able to grant immediate access to documents more than a year old. The Act does not require public bodies to send copies of minutes to members of the public at no charge.

The Act’s documents requirements can pose challenges for unfunded task forces that have not been assigned administrative staff and do not have any members employed by the parent public body. *See, e.g., 8 OMCB Opinions* 188, 189 (2013). The Compliance Board has “urge[d] officials and government bodies that create task forces to provide a level of staffing that will enable the members to do their work without violating the Act.” *Id.*; *see also 7 OMCB Opinions* 121, 122-23 (2011) (“Where, as here, a local government structures an unfunded advisory committee of citizens as a public body subject to the Open Meetings Act, we suggest that measures be taken to provide that body with a repository for minutes and with a means of providing citizens with access to them.”).

### A. *Written meeting notice*

The Act requires public bodies to issue their meeting notices “in writing” “[w]henver reasonable,” § 3-302(b), and then to “keep a copy” for at least one year after the date of the meeting. § 3-302(d). Only rarely will a meeting occur on such an emergency basis that the only feasible way of giving notice is to telephone members of the press, and, even then, it is likely that the message could be conveyed “in writing” by text messaging or e-mail. So, the public body will almost always have a written notice to copy or print out and keep for a year.

Public bodies that post (and cancel) their meeting notices online have sometimes had trouble establishing later that they gave proper notice of a meeting. In one matter, for example, a city task force’s only evidence that it gave notice online was the work orders that its staff sent to the city’s website staff. *See 8 OMCB Opinions* 188, 189 (2013). The Compliance Board found that the task force had violated the one-year retention requirement and advised the task force to “ensure that staff print out a screenshot of the written notice and of any e-mailed notice given to the media, record the date of the print-out, and retain it.” *Id.* at 190. In another matter, the Compliance Board found that a county committee had complied with the retention

requirement after the county's information technology staff was able to recover a notice that the committee had posted online. 9 *OMCB Opinions* 175, 176 (2014).

Public bodies are not required to continue to post outdated notices on their websites. 9 *OMCB Opinions* 151, 154 (2014). They are also not required to include on the notice the date on which they posted it, but providing that information to the public might guard against suspicion that the public body posted the notice after the fact.<sup>15</sup>

For a discussion of the required content of meeting notices, see Chapter 2.

### ***B. Meeting minutes – open and closed sessions***

Generally, “as soon as practicable after a public body meets, it shall have written minutes of its session prepared.” § 3-306(b)(1). There are two exceptions to that rule: first, a public body need not prepare written minutes for an open session if “live and archived video or audio streaming of the open session is available,” and, second, “the public body votes on legislation and the individual votes taken by each member of the public body who participates in the voting are posted promptly on the Internet.” § 3-306(b)(2).<sup>16</sup>

Closed-session minutes are ordinarily sealed and thus not available for public inspection. They are available to the public body itself and, when there has been a complaint that the public body violated the Act by holding a closed session, to the Compliance Board. §§ 3-306(c)(3), 3-206(b)(2),(3). Generally, a public body that has not closed a session to discuss a confidential topic may not later redact the confidential material from its open-session minutes. 7 *OMCB Opinions* 64 (2010) (“If a matter was discussed in an open session governed by [the Act] – even if the meeting could have been closed under [§ 3-305], but the public body did not elect to do so – the minutes of that meeting are available to the public.”). So, although it might not occur to a public body to vote to close a meeting when no members of the public are present, the minutes of the discussion will not be sealed unless the meeting has been closed.

Public bodies must keep a copy of the written minutes and any tape recording of the session for at least one year, and written minutes must be “open to public inspection during ordinary business hours.” § 3-306(e), (d). Problems sometimes arise when someone asks for old minutes that are no longer retained in the public body's main office. The Compliance Board has “generally recognized that public bodies do not necessarily keep older records handy for inspection upon demand.” 9 *OMCB Opinions* 218, 224 (2015). It has “encouraged

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<sup>15</sup> As explained in 6 *OMCB Opinions* 164, 167 (2009), the Compliance Board recommended, in its 2008 annual report to the Governor and General Assembly, “legislation that would have required meeting notices provided on a website reflect the date the notice was posted.” See Sixteenth Annual Report of the Open Meetings Compliance Board, pp. 5-6 (October 2008). No such legislation has been enacted.

<sup>16</sup> Some public bodies keep written minutes as well as audio or video minutes. Written minutes provide a more compact summary of each meeting, serve as a backup in case of technology failures, and, in any case are required by some public bodies' bylaws. Written minutes may be handwritten, so long as they are legible. See 7 *OMCB Opinions* 121, 123 (2011), 1 *OMCB Opinions* 63, 64 (1994).

members of the public to recognize that reality, and public bodies to agree to retrieve [minutes] within a ‘reasonable period.’” *Id.*

As to open-session written minutes, the complaints before the Compliance Board generally fall into four categories: insufficient content generally; insufficient disclosures about closed sessions; belated adoption; and problems with providing members of the public with access. For closed-session minutes, questions sometimes arise as to a public body’s duties to unseal them. These issues usually do not arise for minutes kept as “live and archived video or audio streaming,” though questions are sometimes raised about the quality of the audio and the public’s ability to identify the speakers. When a public body relies on audio streaming for its minutes, the presiding officer should take special care to recognize the speakers by name.

### **1. Content of written minutes, generally**

Under the Act, written minutes must “reflect” three types of information: “each item that the public body considered,” “the action that the public body took on each item,” and “each vote that was recorded.” § 3-306(c). As to written minutes for an open session, the Compliance Board has explained that “[e]ach item must be described in sufficient detail so that a member of the public who examines the minutes can understand the issue under consideration.” 3 *OMCB Opinions* 164, 166 (2001) (citing the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of this Manual).

Closed-session minutes, which are initially sealed, should also meet these standards. The minutes of meetings closed under two of the fourteen exceptions must be unsealed at certain times,<sup>17</sup> and the minutes of meetings closed under the other exceptions are subject to unsealing if a majority of the members of the public body votes to do so, whether on its own initiative or in response to a person’s request. § 3-306(c)(4)(iii). Additionally, closed minutes must be provided to the Compliance Board upon its request, and implicit in that requirement is the assumption that closed-session minutes will enable the Compliance Board to determine whether the discussion exceeded the bounds of the disclosures on the closing statement. *See* § 3-206(b)(2).

Otherwise, the contents of a public body’s minutes are a matter for the public body’s regulation, as permitted by other laws that might apply to its governance.

### **2. Audio or Video Streaming**

“Audio or video streaming” may only be substituted for minutes if it is live and archived. § 3-306(b)(2)(i). If a public body elects either of these two methods of keeping minutes, it should take steps to ensure that the video or audio has captured at least the content that would be available had written minutes been prepared. For example, streaming should be designed in such a way as to capture the identities of speakers and of those voting to close a meeting. And, in cases of technological difficulty, the public body will need to prepare written

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<sup>17</sup> Under § 3-306(c)(4), the minutes of meetings closed to discuss the marketing of public securities and the investment of public funds, § 3-305(b)(5) and (6), “shall be unsealed” when the securities have been marketed or the funds invested.

minutes in order to comply with § 3-306. 9 *OMCB Opinions* 256 (2015). Because written minutes serve many functions in addition to those required by the Act, most public bodies will likely continue the practice.

### **3. Internet Posting of Votes on Legislation**

When a public body has met to vote on legislation, it may, instead of preparing written minutes recording that vote, “promptly” post each member’s individual vote on the internet. § 3-306(b)(2)(ii). As a practical matter, few public bodies other than the General Assembly meet exclusively to hold a vote on legislation.

### **4. Disclosure, in open-session minutes, of events of prior closed session**

After a public body has met in a session closed under § 3-305, it must include a summary of the session in the minutes of its next public meeting. *See* § 3-306(c)(2). Public bodies may instead include the summary in the minutes of the public meeting held that day—that way, the public will see the summary sooner—but should follow a consistent practice or a cross-reference in the later set of minutes so that the public knows where to look.

The summary must include: (1) the time, place, and purpose of the closed session; (2) each member’s vote on the motion to close the session; (3) the statutory exception claimed as a basis for excluding the public; and (4) a list of the topics discussed, persons present, and actions taken in the closed session. *Id.*

As with closing statements, the public body is only required to disclose as much information as it can without compromising the confidentiality of the session. For example, if a public body closes a meeting under the personnel exception to discuss with an employee a disciplinary matter involving that employee, the list of “persons present” may refer to the employee generically. The “persons present” disclosure may also pose a challenge for closed meetings held by teleconference. For those closed meetings, each member should disclose whether there is anyone else in earshot and take the call out of the presence of any member of the public who would not have been admitted to an actual meeting room.

The closing statement does not serve as a substitute for the post-session disclosures, even when the closed session has gone as predicted on the closing statement. As explained by the Compliance Board, “a statement prepared before the meeting cannot report on the actions taken during the meeting, and a prediction as to the topics to be discussed during the closed session will not reflect the actual event . . . .” 9 *OMCB Opinions* 160, 161 (2014). As discussed in part C below and in Chapter 5, the second section of the model closing statement, labeled “for use in the minutes of the next regular meeting,” is there to prompt the person keeping the minutes of the closed session to gather the information that the public body must include in the minutes of the next open meeting. That section is not part of the closing statement, and the notes made on it do not constitute the public body’s summary of the session until the public body adopts it as part of the minutes of its next open session. *Id.*

The closed-session summary “serves as the members’ representation of what occurred out of the public’s view.” *Id.* at 162.

## 5. Timing of written minutes

The Act requires public bodies to “have written minutes prepared” “as soon as practicable” after their meetings. § 3-306(b). As explained by the Compliance Board, a draft summary of a meeting does not become a set of “minutes” until the public body has adopted it as minutes. *See* 6 *OMCB Opinions* 187, 190 (2009) (“To qualify as minutes of the public body, the public body must approve them.”).

The Compliance Board has stated that the “[a]s soon as practicable” requirement “requires us to strike a balance between, on the one hand, the goal of promptly informing members of the public who cannot attend a meeting of the events that occurred there, and, on the other, the practical constraints faced by the public body that must prepare and adopt the minutes.” 8 *OMCB Opinions* 150, 159 (2013). Given that the General Assembly chose not to quantify what is “practicable” for the wide variety of entities subject to the Act, the Compliance Board has seldom pronounced generally how long is too long. *See, e.g.*, 3 *OMCB Opinions* 85, 89 (2001) (“The Act allows practical circumstances to be considered and does not impose a rigid time limit”) (citation and quotation marks omitted).<sup>18</sup> The Compliance Board instead has stated that, as “a general rule,” “minutes are to be available on a cycle paralleling a public body’s meetings” and has recognized that “special circumstances might justify a delay.” 6 *OMCB Opinions* 164, 169 (2009) (citations to other opinions omitted).

Not included in that general rule are public bodies that meet only a few times a year. In 6 *OMCB Opinions* 85, 88 (2009), for example, the Compliance Board advised that “routine delays of several months would be unlawful” and found that a “nearly four-month delay”

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<sup>18</sup> The circumstances addressed by the Compliance Board in 8 *OMCB Opinions* 173 (2014) illustrate the difficulty of setting a “rigid time limit” to be met by all of the public bodies subject to the Act. The advisory council there, comprised of 34 members, had a 3% share (less than 2 hours per week) of an administrative staffer’s time. The staffer prepared detailed draft minutes within two to three weeks for review by the officers and then adoption at the next meeting, about eight weeks later. The council’s policy was to provide the draft to people who asked for them. Although a copy of the draft was provided promptly to complainant, she complained to the Compliance Board that the council had not adopted minutes in a timely manner.

The Compliance Board found that, given the circumstances, the council did not violate the “as soon as practicable” standard. The Compliance Board observed:

Of course, in an ideal world, every public body would be sufficiently funded and staffed and thus able either to stream its meetings online or to produce and adopt written minutes quickly. When the ideal fails to materialize through no fault of the public body, we suggest accommodations.

*Id.* at 174-75.

violated the Act. 8 OMCB Opinions 173 (2013).<sup>19</sup> For public bodies that meet rarely, the Compliance Board has approved, albeit with a caution, the practice of adopting minutes by circulating copies among the members.<sup>20</sup> The Compliance Board has also encouraged public bodies to make draft information available, when possible, and members of the public to accept it, pending the adoption of the final set. *See, e.g.*, 8 OMCB Opinions 173, 174-75 (2013). There, for example, staff had sent detailed draft minutes to the complainant three days after she requested them. Noting that it was “not at all clear” that the complainant had been denied timely access to meeting information, the Compliance Board advised that members of the public who want to “know quickly what happened at a meeting might attend the meeting, or accept draft minutes, or ask a participant for details.”

## 6. Inspection of written minutes by the public

The Act requires public bodies to retain for one year a copy of their written minutes and any tape recordings of the meeting. Written minutes and tape recordings of open sessions “are public records and shall be open to public inspection during ordinary business hours.” § 3-306(c),(d). The Compliance Board has opined that written closing statements are also to be available for inspection by the public, not only at the meeting that was closed, but also “as a matter of course to any requester for at least the one-year period during which the statement must be kept.” 5 OMCB Opinions 184, 187 (2007); *see also* § 3-305(d)(5) (requiring that closing statement be retained for one year).

The Act does not require public bodies to maintain a website and thus does not require public bodies to post their minutes online.<sup>21</sup> The Act also does not require public bodies to

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<sup>19</sup> *See also* 8 OMCB Opinions 176, 177 (2013) (“Public bodies that routinely only meet quarterly, we have stated, should find an alternative way of adopting minutes so that people who could not attend the meeting do not have to wait three months to find out what the public body did. That is the only objective standard we have set in our interpretation of the minutes requirement.”)

<sup>20</sup> In 8 OMCB Opinions 125 (2013), for example, the Compliance Board stated:

[O]ur encouragement, only to public bodies that meet infrequently, to adopt minutes by e-mail should not be taken either as an encouragement to regularly-meeting public bodies to adopt minutes that way or as our approval of any more general practice of taking actions by e-mail. As we have stated before, the practice of taking actions by e-mail does not serve the goal of the Act that public business be conducted publicly. The distinction between the adoption of minutes by e-mail when a public body meets rarely and any broader use of the practice is simple: the prompt availability of minutes serves the interest of transparency, though at some sacrifice to the ability of the public to observe the public body’s discussion of the draft, while the discussion of other issues by e-mail serves no goal of the Act.

*Id.* at126-27; *see also* 8 OMCB Opinions 150, 159 (2013) (same); 8 OMCB Opinions 176, 177 (2013) (“[W]e have very expressly stated that the adoption of minutes [other than in an open meeting] is the rare exception to the principle that public business should be conducted in the open.”).

<sup>21</sup> In 9 OMCB Opinions 218 (2015), the Compliance Board stated:

either mail hard copies of minutes to members of the public or scan minutes and send them electronically. A request for scanned or copied minutes is instead a request for records under the Public Information Act (“PIA”), which states the deadlines applicable to responses to such requests and permits government bodies to recoup copying costs. The Compliance Board has explained:

[A] person who wants to see meeting documents has two separate options: either go to the public body’s place of business and inspect them for free, as the Open Meetings Act provides, or, instead, ask the public body to send copies in accordance with the Public Information Act, wait for the public body’s response under the timetable provided by that law, and pay such costs as the public body may charge, again under that law.

9 *OMCB Opinions* 218, 220 (2015). Thus, the Compliance Board explained, “the fact that a request for copies includes a request for meetings documents does not mean that the requester may jump in front of the line of other [PIA] requesters whose requests the public body might be processing.” *Id.*

The expectation set by the Act for public access—that public bodies should be able to produce minutes for inspection by anyone who comes to the public body’s office and asks for them—is workable for the public bodies, such as many municipalities, that maintain minutes binders in an office staffed for in-person inquiries from members of the public. *See, e.g.* 8 *OMCB Opinions* 122, 123 (2012). That expectation is harder to achieve for the many task forces and commissions without a central place of business, without dedicated staff, without any other function requiring in-person availability to the public, or with competing deadlines that staff must meet when the requester appears. Problems have arisen when the public body is a task force that has no assigned office space, *see* 7 *OMCB Opinions* 121 (2011) (minutes retained by chair of citizen task force without staff); when a member of the public asks for years’ worth of minutes and the public body maintains minutes in the file for each meeting, *see* 8 *OMCB Opinions* 1 (2012) (member of the public came to office and requested minutes for the prior six years); when the public body’s sole employee cannot leave the requester alone while she goes into the file room where the minutes are kept, *see id.*, or when the minutes that the person wants to see are with staff in another office at the time, as might happen if someone has requested copies of them under the Public Information Act and staff are preparing them for production that way, or the requester arrives on a day when staff have other pressing demands,

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Of course, public bodies that have websites do well to post meeting materials there; that way, the members of their interested public with access to the internet can inform themselves on how the public body conducts the public business without attending its meetings, or sending in written requests for copies of minutes, or traveling to the public body’s office to inspect them. However, . . . a public body that has created a website does not violate the Act by posting some documents and not others. There, we stated the truism that a “public body does not violate the Act by trying to provide additional access.”

*Id.* at 223.

or the minutes are those of a task force with which staff are unfamiliar. *See, e.g.* 9 *OMCB Opinions* 218 (2015).

The Compliance Board has encouraged public bodies, when they have the resources, to avoid many of these problems by routinely and consistently posting their minutes online. Otherwise, the Compliance Board has set a general rule of reasonableness and good faith for both the members of the public who seek the minutes of a public body and the public body's staff. *See, e.g.*, 8 *OMCB Opinions* 1.

### **C. Closing statement**

For an explanation of the written disclosures (“closing statement”) that a public body must make before closing a session under the Act, see Chapter 5, Section A. Closing statements must be kept for one year, are a matter of public record, and, the Compliance Board has stated, must be available for inspection, at the time of closing, by members of the public who so request. *See* § 3-305(d), 5 *OMCB Opinions* 184, 187 (2007). If a member of the public objects to the closing of a session, the public body must send a copy of the closing statement to the Compliance Board.

Of the two parts to the closing statement form posted on the Attorney General's website, only the first part, when completed, is the closing statement itself. The second part, with spaces for the information that must be disclosed in subsequent open-session minutes, is a worksheet for the use of the person who is recording the events of the closed session and is not a public record unless that part of the document is incorporated into the open-session minutes. The closing statement does not serve as a substitute for the post-session disclosures that must be made in the minutes of the next open session. *See* Part B(4) above and 9 *OMCB Opinions* 160, 161 (2014).

## **Chapter 7: Guidance, judicial enforcement, and training – What roles does the Act assign to the Compliance Board, the courts, and the Office of the Attorney General?**

(Index topic #7)

**Chapter summary:** The Act assigns separate roles to the Compliance Board, the courts, and the Office of the Attorney General. The Compliance Board is an independent State agency and is not part of either the Office of the Attorney General or any other unit of State government. The Act spells out the Compliance Board’s duties. Broadly described, those duties are to issue advisory opinions in response to complaints that the Act has been violated, to recommend legislation to improve the Act, to receive certain documents, and to develop and conduct educational programs, in conjunction with the Office of the Attorney General, for public bodies’ attorneys and staff. Although the Compliance Board may request certain documents from public bodies, it does not have the power to compel compliance with the Act, to subpoena documents, to administer oaths, or to issue orders.

Only courts may enforce the provisions of the Open Meetings Act. To seek judicial enforcement of the Act, a person must file a lawsuit in the circuit court for the county in which the public body is located. During that process, a person may request that representatives of the public body give sworn testimony and produce documents. The Compliance Board and its staff from the Attorney General’s Office have no role in this process.

The Office of the Attorney General shares the Compliance Board’s educational duties and provides staff and counsel for the Compliance Board. The Attorney General is the legal advisor of the State, charged with representing, and performing the legal work for, State officers and State government units. The lawyers in the Attorney General’s Office are not authorized to either advise or represent individual members of the public.

### **A. *The Compliance Board***

The Act creates the Compliance Board as a three-member public body comprised of members who are appointed by the Governor and serve as volunteers. The Compliance Board has no budget of its own. Its duties include: issuing advisory opinions in response to complaints that a public body has violated the Act; recommending legislation; submitting an annual report to the Governor and the General Assembly; receiving copies of certain documents; and developing and conducting training, in conjunction with the Office of the Attorney General and others, for the “staffs and attorneys” of public bodies, the Maryland Municipal League, and the Maryland Association of Counties. §§ 3-204 through 213. The Compliance Board may also attempt to resolve a prospective complaint that a meeting that the Act requires to be open will be closed. § 3-212. The Office of the Attorney General provides the Compliance Board with staff.

## 1. The complaint process

The Compliance Board complaint process provides the public with a way to raise concerns about a possible violation with regard to a particular meeting without hiring a lawyer and without waiting for the matter to make its way through the courts. The process also provides public bodies with relatively quick guidance on how to comply with the Act. The process is streamlined by design; when the Act was amended to create the Compliance Board, the Act had been in effect for 14 years, and it had become apparent that public bodies needed educational programs and guidance on compliance, and members of the public needed a way to submit complaints without having to sue.

The trade-off for the State's provision of a free and straightforward complaint mechanism is that the Compliance Board's opinions are "advisory only." § 3-209. Although the Act authorizes the Compliance Board to request certain documents and requires public bodies to comply with those requests, the Act does not empower the Compliance Board to issue orders enforceable by a court. § 3-210. And, the Compliance Board does not conduct investigations in the usual sense of the word; it cannot subpoena documents, summon witnesses, or administer oaths, and it thus is not set up to take testimony. *See* 3-210; *see also* 8 *OMCB Opinions* 170, 171 (2013) (explaining that the Board is "an advisory board, not a fact-finding tribunal").

The complaint process is simple and much more informal than litigation. As described in the "Complaint Procedures" posted on the Open Meetings page of the Attorney General's website, any person may submit to the Compliance Board a written complaint that a public body has violated the Act on a particular occasion. *See* § 3-205. Complaints must "identify the public body," and "describe the action of the public body" and the date and circumstances of the action. § 3-205(b)(1), (2). Complaints must also be signed and thus may not be submitted anonymously. *See* § 3-205(b)(3).

The Compliance Board has not expected complaints to recite all the facts that would prove a violation. "After all," the Compliance Board has explained, "it normally is the public body, not the complainant, that has the information, including the actual date a specific action might have taken place, that is necessary to allow us to fully evaluate whether or not a violation occurred." 6 *OMCB Opinions* 69, 72 (2009). And, in contrast to a plaintiff who files suit in court, a complainant in the Compliance Board process "need not satisfy any particular burden of proof." *Id.* Nonetheless, the Compliance Board expects complaints to be founded on a "good-faith belief that the Act was indeed violated, based on a reasonable inquiry into the available facts." 8 *OMCB Opinions* 99, 101 (2012). There, the Compliance Board declined to address a "speculative allegation" and "mere surmise" that the public body "probably discussed public business during the lunch recess disclosed in its minutes." Noting that there was no evidence that the members of the public body were even together during the recess, the Compliance Board stated that it did not "construe the Act to require us to address complaints that mention no indicia of the alleged violation – indicia such as errors in documents required to be kept under the Act, comments or actions by members of the public

body or staff evidencing improper conduct, or an apparently rubber-stamped decision suggesting an improper closed meeting, to name a few.” *Id.*

The Compliance Board also encourages complainants to contact the public body with questions before filing a complaint. In 8 *OMCB Opinions* 170, 172 (2013), for example, the complainant alleged, apparently without looking into the matter, that a county council had not given any notice of a meeting. The response showed that notice had been given by several methods. The Compliance Board, finding that the “allegations had no basis in fact,” stated: “A ‘reasonable inquiry’ often yields the citizen a faster answer than we can provide, sometimes serves to avoid an unnecessary complaint and unnecessary expenditure of the public body’s resources, and, otherwise, enables the complainant to provide us with more information.” *Id.*

The Act requires the Compliance Board to send the complaint to the public body, which then must respond within 30 days of its receipt of the complaint. § 3-206.<sup>22</sup> Just as there is no set format for a complaint, a response may take the form of a simple letter to the Compliance Board. The response should include the relevant meeting documents and explains any relevant circumstances. The Act does not require public bodies to submit sworn testimony, but they may. When the matter involves a complaint that a meeting was improperly closed, the Compliance Board may ask the public body to include the sealed minutes of the closed session. § 3-206(b)(2). The Compliance Board keeps the contents of those minutes confidential. § 3-206(b)(3).<sup>23</sup> A public body’s failure to respond to the Compliance Board’s request for documents “is itself a violation” of the Act. 5 *OMCB Opinions* 14, 21 (2006).

Although the Act contemplates no role for a complainant beyond the filing of the complaint, *see* § 3-207, the Compliance Board permits the complainant to reply to the public body’s response when the reply would add factual information. The public body may then have the last word. Replies that merely reiterate the complaint are not encouraged, because they delay the Compliance Board’s issuance of guidance on whether the public body has violated the Act and what it should do to comply. *See* Complaint Procedures.

Usually, the submissions and the meetings documents—written notice, closing statement, minutes, sealed minutes—provide the Compliance Board with the information it needs to resolve the complaint quickly so that the public body can correct any practices that violate the Act. Sometimes, however, the written submissions of complainant and a public body reflect factual disputes that are not resolved by the meeting documents, such as a dispute over whether the public body unreasonably delayed giving notice of a meeting or adopting minutes. The Act accounts for this possibility in two ways: first, the Compliance Board may state its inability to resolve an issue, § 3-207(c)(2), and, second, the Compliance Board may

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<sup>22</sup> Occasionally, people submit complaints about matters that clearly do not lie within the Compliance Board’s authority, as when a person has only alleged violations of other laws. When no reading of the complaint would bring it within the Compliance Board’s authority, the complainant is informed by letter that the Compliance Board will not address it.

<sup>23</sup> In addressing allegations that a public body’s discussion strayed beyond the scope of the claimed exception, the Compliance Board preserves the confidentiality of the closed-session minutes by referring to the events of the session only generically and then only as needed to resolve the complaint. *See, e.g.,* 9 *OMCB Opinions* 44 (2013).

conduct an “informal conference” with the public body or anyone else if more information is needed. § 3-207(b)(1). In the interest of providing prompt advice, the Compliance Board has usually found it most useful to give guidance on the most likely scenarios. In 9 *OMCB Opinions* 171, 173 (2014), for example, where the meeting in question had occurred over two years earlier and differing inferences about a closed-meeting discussion could be drawn from the available information, the Compliance Board addressed “some possibilities in the alternative.”

After considering the submissions, the Compliance Board issues a written advisory opinion within 30 days, or, if it has stated its inability to meet that target, within 90 days. § 3-207(a),(c). Staff then send copies of the opinion to the public body and the complainant and post it online with headnotes keyed to the online index to the Compliance Board’s opinions.

## **2. Announcement and acknowledgment of violations**

If the Compliance Board has found a violation, a member of the public body must summarize the opinion at the public body’s next open meeting, and a majority of the members of the public body must sign a copy of the complaint and submit it to the Compliance Board. § 3-211(a),(b). The members’ signatures signify their acknowledgment that they have received the opinion, not an admission that they have violated the Act. § 3-211(c). Compliance Board opinions are potentially admissible in court; in 2013, the General Assembly repealed the Act’s broad prohibition on the admission of a Compliance Board opinion in a case brought under the Act to enforce the Act. *See* 2013 Acts of Md. ch. 612. However, the evidentiary rules applicable to actions in circuit court do not apply to submissions to the Compliance Board, and a Compliance Board opinion would not necessarily be admissible in circuit court as proof that a violation did or did not occur.

## **3. The Compliance Board’s annual reports to the Governor and General Assembly, and its meetings**

The Act requires the Compliance Board to report annually to the Governor and General Assembly on its activities, its opinions, and the complaints it received that a public body failed to give reasonable notice of a meeting. The annual report must also “recommend any improvements’ to the Act. § 3-204(e). The report is due by October 1 of each year. The Compliance Board usually meets in late summer to discuss the activities of the year and to hear and consider comments from the public, representatives of the media, public bodies, and representatives from the Maryland Association of Counties and the Maryland Municipal League. When the Compliance Board decides at an annual meeting to propose legislative changes, those are included in the annual report.

The Compliance Board sometimes meets during the General Assembly’s session to consider commenting on pending Open Meetings Act legislation. And, the Compliance Board members gather as needed to deliberate on complaints. Section 3-101(i) of the Act defines those deliberations as a quasi-judicial function, exempt from the Act under § 3-103(a), and they are not open to the public.

#### 4. The Board's receipt of documents; the training requirement

Public bodies submit three types of documents to the Compliance Board: closing statements, when a member of the public has objected to the closing of a session (see Chapters 5, Part A and 6, part C, above); a signed copy of the Compliance Board's opinion, if the Compliance Board has found that the public body violated the Act (see ¶ 2, above); and the public body's designation of an employee, officer, or member to take training on the Act. §§ 3-305(d)(3), 3-211, 3-213.

The training requirement, enacted in 2013, requires every public body in the state to designate an employee, officer, or member to "receive training on the requirements of the meeting law" and to forward a list of its designees to the Compliance Board. § 3-213.

The training must be taken in one of two ways: the online class "offered by the Office of the Attorney General and the University of Maryland's Institute for Governmental Service and Research," or "a class on the requirements of the Open Meetings law offered by the Maryland Association of Counties or the Maryland Municipal League through the Academy for Excellence in Local Governance." The online class is free and available to everyone. The two local-government organizations offer the Academy class at their conferences, so the designees of State public bodies usually take the online class. The Compliance Board does not have the authority to approve other forms of training. *See 9 OMCB Opinions 218, 222-23 (2015)* (finding that training taken by school board, although extensive and more focused on issues pertinent to the school board, did not qualify as training under § 3-213). Training received before October 1, 2013, also does not satisfy the requirement. Newly-created public bodies are not expected to designate a trainee before their first meeting. *9 OMCB Opinions 268 (2015)*.

The Compliance Board does not monitor compliance with the requirement. As with the rest of the Act, the requirement applies to every entity in the State that meets the Act's definition of a public body, and thus to every ad hoc task force that includes two members of the public and appointed by local and State government executives, or by people "subject to the control" of those officials, § 3-101(h)(2) and every committee created by a resolution, rule, bylaw, law, or ordinance, to name a few. The Compliance Board, a body of three volunteers with no budget of its own, has noted that it would not be able to monitor compliance. *See, e.g., Minutes of January 29, 2013 meeting of Compliance Board.*

Details on complying with the requirement are posted on the Open Meetings page of the Attorney General's website.

## 5. Members of the Compliance Board

The Compliance Board members are appointed by the Governor to three-year terms on a staggered basis. Although they may not serve more than two consecutive terms, their service continues until a successor has been appointed. As of the date of this Manual, the Compliance Board has had only four chairs: Walter Sondheim, who served from 1992 until his death in 2007, Elizabeth Nilson, Esq., who served from February 2007 until June 1, 2014, Monica J. Johnson, Esq., who served as a recess appointee from June 1, 2014 to April 13, 2015, and the current chair, Jonathan A. Hodgson, Esq., who was appointed on August 14, 2015.

The longest-serving Compliance Board member, Courtney McKeldin, served from 1992 until May 2014. Other members of the public appointed to take on this volunteer work include past members Tyler G. Webb, Esq., Julio Morales, Esq., Wanda Martinez, Esq., and Mamata Poch, Esq. The current members are Rachel Grasmick Shapiro, Esq. and April Ishak, Esq., both appointed in June 2015.

### ***B. The courts - judicial enforcement of the Act***

The enforcement provisions of the Act are set forth in §§ 3-401 and 3-402. They do not apply to the actions of “appropriating public funds,” imposing a tax, “or providing for the issuance of bonds, notes, or other evidences of public obligation.” Otherwise, they apply when a public body has failed to comply with five provisions of the Act: § 3-301, which requires generally that public bodies meet in the open unless the Act expressly permits otherwise; § 3-302, which requires public bodies to give notice of their meetings, § 3-303, which states the public’s right to attend open meetings; § 3-305, which regulates closed sessions; and § 3-306(c), which addresses the contents of minutes. See § 3-401(b).

For those types of violations, any person may file in the appropriate circuit court a petition that asks the court to determine whether those provisions apply to the circumstances, to require the public body to comply with them, or, subject to § 3-401(d)(4), to “void the action of the public body.” The 45-day limitation period is triggered by various events, depending on the type of violation alleged, and is extended by the filing of a complaint with the Compliance Board. § 3-401(b). The petitioner need not file a complaint with the Compliance Board before filing suit. § 3-401(e).

Section 3-401 provides that the Acts’ judicial enforcement provisions do “not affect or prevent the use of any other available remedies.” In applying that section, the Court of Special Appeals has held that Act’s judicial remedy is not exclusive and that the statute of limitations for actions under the Act does not apply to an open meetings claim in an action for judicial review brought under other laws. *Handley v. Ocean Downs, LLC*, 151 Md. App. 615, 636-39 (2003).

The enforcement provisions set a presumption “that the public body did not violate any provision of [the Act],” and they assign the burden of proof to the petitioner. § 3-401(c). A court may only declare void a final action of the public body “if the court finds that the public body willfully failed to comply with § 3-301, § 3-302, § 3-303, or § 3-306(c) [of the Act] and that no other remedy is adequate.” § 3-401(d)(4). The remedy thus is not available for violations of § 3-305 alone.

Courts may order other forms of relief, such as an injunction and counsel fees, without finding willfulness. See § 3-40(d) 1), (2), (3), and (5); *see also* *Armstrong v. Mayor & City Council of Baltimore*, 409 Md. 648, 694 (2009). Section 3-402 authorizes the court to impose a civil penalty on a “public body that willfully meets with knowledge that the meeting is being held in violation of [the Act].” After considering the public body’s financial resources and ability to pay the fine, the court may impose a fine of up to \$250 for the first violation and \$1,000 for each subsequent violation within three years. *Id.*

### ***C. The Office of the Attorney General***

The Office of the Attorney General is required to provide staff for the Compliance Board and to work “in conjunction” with the Compliance Board on training for the staffs and attorneys of public bodies and the two local government associations. §§ 3-203, 3-204(d). The Act does not confer any other authority on the Office of the Attorney General.

The duties of the Office of the Attorney General are set forth in the Maryland Constitution and the Maryland Code. As described on the Attorney General’s website, “The Attorney General’s Office has general charge, supervision and direction of the legal business of the State, acting as legal advisors and representatives of the major departments, various boards, commissions, officials and institutions of State Government.”<sup>24</sup>

The Office of the Attorney General provides the Compliance Board with administrative staff and counsel, both traditionally housed in the Opinions and Advice division of the Attorney General’s Office, and hosts an open meetings webpage, maintained with the assistance of Fritz Schantz, the Office’s director of multimedia services. Since the Compliance Board was first constituted in 1992, it has had only two administrators: Kathy Izdebski, who served from 1992 to 2012, and Deborah Spence. Its counsel, and the authors of successive versions of this Manual, have been former Assistant Attorneys General Jack Schwartz and William Varga and Assistant Attorney General Ann MacNeille, with the guidance of the Chief Counsel of Opinions and Advice at the time, variously Jack Schwartz, Robert N. McDonald, and Adam D. Snyder. Andrew Gear, a summer intern in the division, helped prepare this edition, and David Nitkin, director of communications, provided valuable perspective.

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<sup>24</sup> [www.oag.state.md.us/about.htm](http://www.oag.state.md.us/about.htm).