

Chapter 6: Meeting Documents

Chapter 6: Did the public body prepare and retain the required documents and post its minutes online?

(Index Topic 6)

Chapter summary: The Act generally requires that public bodies prepare minutes “as soon as practicable” after they meet unless “live and archived video or audio streaming of the open session is available” or “the public body votes on legislation and the [members’] individual votes” are “posted promptly on the Internet.” § 3-306(b).²⁴ Public bodies must retain meeting minutes and recordings for five years and, “[t]o the extent practicable,” must “post online the minutes or recordings” that they are required to retain. § 3-306(e). Meeting notices and closing statements for closed sessions must be retained for three years. *See* §§ 3-302(d), 3-305(d)(5). Additionally, public bodies must make an agenda available before they meet. For that requirement, see Chapter 2, Part D.

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.

A draft set of minutes does not constitute “minutes” until “the public body itself has had an opportunity to review and correct the work of whoever prepared the draft minutes.” 7 *OMCB Opinions* 83, 84 (2011); *see also, e.g.*, 14 *OMCB Opinions* 49, 55 (2020) (“[I]t is the public body’s members who vote to adopt minutes, including closed-session summaries, as complete and accurate.”). Minutes are the public body’s own representation of the events of a meeting, and so the public body’s members, not staff, are accountable for omissions and other inaccuracies. *See, e.g., id.* at 58 (in finding that the public body violated § 3-306, noting that there was “no indication that the Council members hesitated to adopt minutes that omitted the substantive actions they took, whether by consensus or otherwise, in closed session”).

²⁴ Section 3-307, which applies only to nineteen entities, sets forth its own rules for videorecording meetings and preparing minutes. *See* § 3-307(b), (d), (e) (requiring, with limited exceptions, that bodies subject to 3-307 prepare minutes in “a timely manner” and post minutes and videos of meetings online).

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) (“urg[ing] 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”). 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]henever reasonable,” § 3-302(b), and then to “keep a copy” for at least three years 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 call members of the press on the telephone, and, even then, it is likely that the message could be conveyed “in writing” by social media or e-mail. So, the public body will almost always have a written notice to copy or print out and keep for three years.

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 was only able to prove that it had posted notice online by locating 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 retention requirement (which, at that time, required a public body to retain the notice for one year) 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).

Although public bodies must keep a copy of their meeting notices, they are not required to continue to post them on their websites after the meeting date. 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. If a public body posts a meeting date on an events calendar that links to a page with the rest of the required information, the public body must keep copies of both pages.

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

B. Meeting minutes – open and closed sessions

The Act provides generally that, “as soon as practicable after a public body meets, it shall have minutes of its session prepared.” § 3-306(b)(1). Minutes may be handwritten, so long as they are legible. *See 7 OMCB Opinions* 121, 123 (2011); *1 OMCB Opinions* 63, 64 (1994).

There are two exceptions to the rule requiring a public body to prepare minutes: First, a public body need not prepare 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).²⁵

Closed-session minutes are ordinarily sealed and thus not available for public inspection. § 3-306(c)(3)(ii). 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. § 3-206(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, 67 (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 minutes and any tape recording of the session for at least five years, must post them online “[t]o the extent practicable,” and must make them “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 members of the public to recognize that reality, and public bodies to agree to retrieve [minutes] within a ‘reasonable period.’” *Id.*

As discussed further below, complaints to the Compliance Board about open-session minutes usually fall into four categories: insufficient content generally; insufficient

²⁵ 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.

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 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.

C. Content of minutes, generally

Under the Act, 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)(1). As to minutes for an open session, the Compliance Board has explained that “each 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 fourth edition of this Manual); *see also Floyd v. Mayor and City Council*, 241 Md. App. 199, 218-20 (2019) (applying § 3-306(c)). Also, a public body that conducts a vote to close a meeting, in the absence of a member designated to take training on the Act, must complete the Compliance Checklist that is posted on the Attorney General's website and include that document in the minutes. § 3-213(d)(3)(ii).

Closed-session minutes, which are initially sealed, must also meet the § 3-306(c) standards. The minutes of meetings closed under two of the fifteen exceptions must be unsealed at certain times.²⁶ The minutes of meetings closed under the other exceptions will be unsealed only 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).

As detailed below, the Act addresses various aspects of the content and format of minutes.

1. 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 designates either of these two substitute methods as the format of its official minutes, it should take steps to ensure that the video

²⁶ 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.

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. *See, e.g., 14 OMCB Opinions 111, 112 (2020)* (citing measures that the presiding officer took to ensure that observers of a virtual meeting could identify the speakers). And, in cases of technological difficulty, the public body will need to prepare written minutes in order to comply with § 3-306. *See 9 OMCB Opinions 256, 258 (2015)*.

Many public bodies that stream audio or video of their meetings also keep written minutes, both because written minutes serve many functions in addition to those required by the Act (for example, the public body's actions on a matter are often found more quickly in minutes than by listening to the meeting) and because a public body's own governing laws might require the adoption of written minutes. When a public body uses multiple formats, it should decide which method to use for its official minutes and make sure to include all of the required information in that version.

2. 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.

3. Disclosure, in open-session minutes, of events of prior session closed under § 3-305

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 include 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. § 3-306(c)(2). The closed-session summary "serves as the members' representation of what occurred out of the public's view." *9 OMCB Opinions 160, 162 (2014)*. A template for use in preparing a closed-session summary can be found on the Attorney General's website.

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* at 161. As discussed in Part C of this Chapter and in Chapter 5, the bottom section of the model closing statement, labeled “Worksheet for Optional Use in Closed Session,” 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 them as part of the minutes of its next open session. *Id.* A template for the requisite closed-session summary is posted at <https://www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/Pages/OpenGov/Openmeetings/default.aspx>.

4. Disclosure, in open-session minutes, of events of prior closed session, when held during a recess, to perform an administrative function

When a public body has recessed an open session to perform an administrative function in closed session, it must include in the minutes of its next meeting a “statement of the date, time, place, and persons present at the administrative function meeting” and “a phrase or sentence identifying the subject matter discussed” there. § 3-104. Otherwise, as discussed in Chapter 1, a meeting at which a public body solely performs an administrative function is not subject to the Act.

5. Timing and adoption of minutes

The Act requires public bodies to “have minutes . . . prepared” “as soon as practicable” after their meetings. § 3-306(b); *see also* § 3-307(d)(1) (providing that the nineteen public bodies subject to § 3-307 “shall approve meeting minutes in a timely manner”). 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.”); *see also* 14 *OMCB Opinions* 3, 3-4 (2020) (concluding that computer-generated “notes” of a meeting did not constitute minutes because they had not been reviewed and adopted by the members of the public body). Section 3-306(b)’s timeliness

requirement does not pertain to the posting of minutes online; that separate requirement is set by § 3-306(e). *See* item 6, below; *see also* 13 *OMCB Opinions* 18, 19 (2019) (discussing the two separate requirements).

The Compliance Board has stated that the “[a]s soon as practicable” requirement for adopting minutes “requires [the Board] 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 declined to pronounce a bright-line rule for how long is too long in every instance. *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).²⁷ But, absent special circumstances, the Board has cautioned that “the Act generally does not permit a public body three months or more to prepare minutes.” 17 *OMCB Opinions* 24, 27 (2023) (citing 16 *OMCB Opinions* 110, 113 (2022) and 8 *OMCB Opinions* 111, 111-12 (2012)). The “general rule,” the Compliance Board has said, is that “minutes are to be available on a cycle paralleling a public body’s meetings,” though “special circumstances might justify a delay.” 6 *OMCB Opinions* 164, 169 (2009) (citations to other opinions omitted). And, for the nineteen entities subject to § 3-307, the Act expressly contemplates approval of minutes at the next meeting (except in cases of emergency meetings). *See* § 3-307(d)(2), (3) (“Each open meeting agenda shall include consideration of the meeting minutes from the most recent meeting,” except when the agenda is for an emergency meeting).

Not included in the general rule that minutes should be approved on a cycle paralleling a public body’s meetings are bodies that meet only a few times a year. In 6 *OMCB Opinions* 85 (2009), for example, the Compliance Board advised that “routine delays of several months would be unlawful.” *Id.* at 88. For public bodies that meet only

²⁷ 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. *Id.* at 174. 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. *Id.* The council’s policy was to provide the draft to people who asked for it. *Id.* Although a copy of the draft was provided promptly to the complainant, she complained to the Compliance Board that the council had not adopted minutes in a timely manner. *Id.* at 173-74. The Compliance Board found that, given the circumstances, the council did not violate the “as soon as practicable” standard. *Id.* at 174-75. 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.

quarterly, the Compliance Board has suggested finding “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.” 8 *OMCB Opinions* 176, 177 (2013). One such alternative, albeit one that the Compliance Board has suggested with caution, is the practice of adopting minutes by circulating copies among the members. 8 *OMCB Opinions* 125, 126 (2013). The Compliance Board has said:

[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. at 126-27; *see also* 8 *OMCB Opinions* at 177 (“[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.”).

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, 175 (2013). There, for example, staff had sent detailed draft minutes to the complainant three days after she requested them. *Id.* at 173 n.1. Noting that it was “not at all clear” that the complainant had been denied timely access to meeting information, *id.*, 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,” *id.* at 175.

6. Inspection of minutes by the public

The Act requires public bodies to retain a copy of their minutes and any recordings of the meeting for five years. § 3-306(e)(1). Minutes and 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 . . . period during which the statement must be kept.” 5 *OMCB Opinions* 184, 187 (2007); *see also* § 3-305(d)(5) (requiring that closing statements be retained for three years).

As noted above, most public bodies must post minutes or recordings of meetings online only “[t]o the extent practicable.” § 3-306(e)(2). The nineteen entities subject to § 3-307, however, are *required* to post minutes and recordings online. *See* § 3-307(b)(2) (requiring a subject body’s minutes of open sessions to be posted online, “not more than 2 business days after the minutes are approved”); § 3-307(e)(2) (requiring most bodies subject to § 3-307 to post to their websites “complete and unedited archived video recording[s] of each open meeting . . . for a minimum of 1 year after the date of the meeting”).

The Act does not require public bodies either to mail hard copies of minutes to members of the public or to 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. Thus, “the fact that a request for copies includes a request for meeting 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.” 9 *OMCB Opinions* 218, 220 (2015).

As for making minutes available for inspection, as required by the Open Meetings Act, the Compliance Board has said:

A public body may elect to make its minutes “open to public inspection” by posting them online. Indeed, doing so may be preferable when a public body does not, for example, have a physical office, when the office is not open to the public (as was the case for many public bodies early in the COVID-19 pandemic), or when the public body cannot maintain ordinary business hours because of staffing issues. *See* 8 *OMCB Opinions* [1,] 4 [(2012)] (commending the practice of making minutes available online when a public body “has a limited ability to maintain regular business hours during which minutes may be inspected”); 6 *OMCB Opinions* [164,] 168 [(2009)] (observing that “making minutes available online appears an appropriate” practice when a public body “has no central office”). But a public body that does have an office open to the public and also posts minutes online must still ensure that a member of the public who comes in person to the body’s place of business “during ordinary business hours” has a means of reviewing the minutes. For a member of the public with internet access, this may be as simple as telling the person that they can review the minutes online. But because not every member of the public will have access to the internet, a public body that posts minutes online should establish a protocol for permitting members of the public to view the minutes in person in the body’s place of business—whether by providing access to a computer in the public body’s office, by printing out the minutes from the internet, or by some other method.

17 *OMCB Opinions* 47, 52 (2023). Of course, being able to produce minutes for inspection by anyone who comes to the public body's office and asks for them is easier for the public bodies, such as many municipalities, that maintain minutes in 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, sometimes resulting in violations, 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, 2-3 (2012) (involving a member of the public coming to the public body's office and requesting 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 not immediately available, as might happen if someone has requested copies of them under the Public Information Act and staff are preparing them for production that way, 9 *OMCB Opinions* at 223-24, or the requester arrives on a day when staff have other pressing demands, *id.*

The Compliance Board has explained that the "to the extent practicable" standard that § 3-306(e) sets for most public bodies to post minutes online is not as stringent as the "as soon as practicable" standard that § 3-306(b) sets for the public body's adoption of minutes. 13 *OMCB Opinions* 18, 19 (2019). Section 3-306(b), the Compliance Board explained, "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." *Id.* (internal quotation omitted). However, for the online posting requirement, § 3-306(e),

the balance is different [because] the public has access to the minutes by other methods. Therefore, the balance that we strike here is between, on the one hand, the goal of providing seamless access to those members of the public who have access to the internet and, on the other, the practical constraints on the particular public body's ability to do so.

Id. The inquiry is "fact-dependent." *Id.*

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, 3 (2012); 14 *OMCB Opinions* 3, 4 (2020).

D. For sessions closed under § 3-305, the 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, Part A. Closing statements must be kept for three years; are a matter of public record; must, “[t]o the extent practicable,” be posted online; and, as 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 person objects to the closing of a session, the public body must send a copy of the closing statement to the Compliance Board. *See* § 3-305(d)(3).

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 itself does not serve as a substitute for the post-session disclosures that must be made in the minutes of the next open session. *See* Parts B and C of this chapter and 9 *OMCB Opinions* 160, 161 (2014). A template for the closed-session summary can be found on the Attorney General’s website.