



# GUIDE TO PREPARING FOR COUNCIL MEETINGS

## ADVICE FOR NEW ALDERS WORKING THROUGH A COUNCIL AGENDA

One of your main tasks as an alder will be to participate in Common Council meetings. The Council meeting agenda is usually released on the Thursday or the Friday before the meeting. The agendas for these meetings are dense and long, with many pages of items for the Council to review and act on. We strongly recommend that you plan to dedicate several hours prior to the meeting day to reviewing the agenda and reaching out to relevant City staff with your questions. Remember that City business hours are 8-4:30 Monday through Friday, although agency heads try to be extremely responsive in the days immediately prior to a Council meeting.

*Never hesitate to ask questions of Council staff! We are here to assist you through the process.*

## REVIEWING AN AGENDA

The postage account covers mailings for neighborhood meetings that aren't reimbursable by a third party. If a meeting is for a development or alcohol license application, the Council Office will usually bill the developer or applicant to recover the cost of the mailing. Costs for these types of mailings are not deducted from the \$650 postage account if they are recouped from the developer or applicant. It's important to confirm with the third party that they understand and accept the cost of a mailing. Postage account funds can only be used for postage.

*The [Navigating a Council Agenda tutorial](#) will help orient you to the sections and items most commonly found on a Council agenda.*

Once the agenda is published (an email will be sent to all alders), do a priority review for the following things, including clicking on the file number for each item to familiarize yourself with it:

- Items you are sponsoring
- Items listing your district
- Items coming from a board, commission, or committee (BCC) of which you are a member
- New items being introduced for referral without debate (listed toward end of agenda).

Next, do a review of the rest of the agenda.



# GUIDE TO PREPARING FOR COUNCIL MEETINGS

## Tips:

- Since the turnaround time on the agenda is so brisk, we strongly recommend that you **review the new items listed for introduction** and **send your questions to the relevant City staff** at this time. This will give staff more time to research the answers to your questions, if necessary. Because Council meeting time is resource-intensive for staff and alders, we encourage any efforts to ask staff for assistance or clarification ahead of the meeting, if at all possible.
- This is also a good time to **ask staff to add you as a co-sponsor** of an agenda item.
- The **Drafter's Analysis** is a good place to start when familiarizing yourself with proposed ordinances.
- The **Fiscal Note** explains the financial impact of a legislative item.
- Write down the **Legistar file numbers** and the agenda number for each item you have questions about. If you have questions on any of these items for staff, send those questions as soon as possible. **Don't hesitate to ask questions!** You can also reach out to the **lead sponsor** of an item you have questions about.

*Review the **How to Find Files in Legistar** tutorial for more information on how to find files and file information.*

**Important Note:** Avoid a **walking quorum** of Council members by limiting your contact to the sponsoring alder only and not discussing your position with multiple alders (review the OCA Open Meetings tutorial for more information on walking quorum).

## **ASKING STAFF QUESTIONS ABOUT ITEMS ON THE AGENDA**

Luckily, technology has made it possible for most staff to attend Council meetings virtually. However, due to the length of many Council meetings, attending staff may wait many hours for their turn to address questions on an item. You are encouraged to reach out to staff early and often before the meeting with your questions, and also to attend or watch recordings of committee meetings where the item is discussed so that your discussions at the Council meeting builds on any previous committee discussions and you don't have to start from scratch when final action is being taken.

**Tip:** If you want members of the public to know about an answer you received from staff, consider blogging about it. Because your blog reaches a large number of constituents, this is an efficient way to educate the public while also conserving staff resources and alder time during a Council meeting.

*Review the **Finding City Staff Contact Information** tutorial to learn about how to find staff contact information.*



# GUIDE TO PREPARING FOR COUNCIL MEETINGS

## **EXCLUDING ITEMS FOR CONSENT AGENDA DOCUMENT**

Once you have reviewed the agenda and asked your questions, if you would like to exclude an item from the consent agenda for discussion or for adding additional committee referrals, contact Liz in the Council Office **before noon** on the Council meeting day.

**Note:** Items introduced for referral only without debate cannot be discussed at the Council meeting. Review the Understanding the Consent Agenda & Consent Agenda Document tutorial for more information on this document. You are also able to exclude an item from the floor by making that request when the Council president presents the consent agenda.

## **AT THE MEETING**

The format for upcoming Council meetings is listed on the agenda ahead of time, so you will know whether it is possible to join virtually or in person. If joining in person in CCB 201, the chamber is usually open shortly after 6 p.m. for you to find your seat. Your nameplate will indicate which seat is yours. At your place, you will find a paper copy of the consent agenda document. You will also find a folder that holds any mail from your alder mailbox. Please do not remove the folder from the chambers.

Bring your laptop so you can reference the agenda and materials, review the list of registered speakers, and send any emails as needed during the meeting.

*Review the **How to Find a Registrant Report for a Meeting** tutorial for instructions on how to access the registrant list.*

Please silence your laptop and phone during the meeting. Consider bringing hydration (reusable water bottle is recommended) and food since meetings may be several hours long. If a meeting is quite long, an alder can make a motion for the Council to take a 5- or 10-minute recess. You may leave the meeting/zoom room at any time, but you risk breaking quorum and/or missing votes.

Staff whose work relates to items on the agenda for action, usually agency heads, will be present at the meeting to make presentations and answer questions.

**Tip:** If you plan on asking staff questions during a meeting, it's always helpful to **give staff a heads-up beforehand** so they can be appropriately prepared.