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IPIB Monthly Column

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Q&A from the Iowa Public Information Board

By Margaret E. Johnson, Executive Director

Question: Can a citizen record an open meeting? What does Iowa law say about allowing citizens to speak at meetings? Has the Governor restricted citizen access to public meetings?

Answer: Iowa Code section 21.7 states: *The public may use cameras or recording devices at any open session. Nothing in this chapter shall prevent a governmental body from making and enforcing reasonable rules for the conduct of its meetings to assure those meetings are orderly, and free from interference or interruption by spectators.*

While the open meetings act does not mandate that a governmental body provide meeting time to any citizen with something to say, many governmental bodies set aside time for a “public forum” or an “open forum.” Even when discussing a controversial item on its agenda, the governmental body does not have to provide time to each person at the meeting.

Governor Reynolds has acknowledged that governmental bodies may need to adopt policies to protect against the spreading of COVID-19. Her most recent proclamation states, in part: *I also temporarily suspend those statutes to the extent they could be interpreted to prevent a governmental body from limiting the number of people present at an in-person location of the meeting, provided that the governmental body provides a means for the public to participate by telephone or electronically as provided in this section.*

Did You Know that the Iowa Public Information Board staff is available to assist you with questions or problems involving open meetings and public records in Iowa? During the month of July 2020, 68 contacts were made with the Iowa Public Information Board office.

Board Members

Joan Corbin • E. J. Giovannetti • Keith Luchtel • Monica McHugh
Frederick Morain • Julie Pottorff • Suzan Stewart • Stan Thompson

TYPE	July 2020
Formal complaints	13
Advisory opinions	1
Declaratory orders	0
Informal complaints	5
Informal requests	36
Miscellaneous	13
TOTAL:	68

Who can contact the IPIB and how long does it take? Any person can contact the IPIB for assistance by telephone (515-725-1781), by email, or on the IPIB website. In 2020, 499 identifiable people have contacted the IPIB. Of these, 224 were private citizens, 215 were government officials or employees, and 60 were members of the media. In 2020, 71% of the incoming contacts were resolved the first day, 12% were resolved in one to five days, and 17% were resolved in six or more days. Opinions, rulings, FAQs, reports, and training documents are available on the IPIB website – www.ipib.iowa.gov.