



# San Rafael's Guide to Public Meetings

We've heard from many members of the community that the City process can be confusing, and we agree! In response we've put together some tips & tricks for effectively participating in the public process. Please note that this is not a comprehensive guide to all City processes.

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## Some Basic Things to Know

- The City Council meets the first and third Mondays every month at 7 p.m. in the City Hall Council Chambers (1400 Fifth Ave). In addition to their regular meetings, they occasionally hold special study sessions on certain topics. If Monday is a holiday, the meeting is held on the following Tuesday. All of these meetings are open to the public and information about them can be found at [www.cityofsanrafael.org/meetings](http://www.cityofsanrafael.org/meetings).
- Boards and Commission meetings are also open to the public. For a list of these groups, visit [www.cityofsanrafael.org/cityclerk-boards](http://www.cityofsanrafael.org/cityclerk-boards).
- 72-hours prior to any public meeting, the agenda and any applicable staff reports are made available to the public via our website at [www.cityofsanrafael.org/meetings](http://www.cityofsanrafael.org/meetings).
- All public meetings are subject to the Brown Act. For more information on this, visit [www.cacities.org/resources/open-government](http://www.cacities.org/resources/open-government).
- City Council, Planning Commission, and Design Review Board meetings are televised on Channel 27 and also available to watch online at [www.cityofsanrafael.org/meetings](http://www.cityofsanrafael.org/meetings).
- The City Manager provides information about upcoming topics on the City Council agenda via email. To receive this bimonthly update, sign up at [www.cityofsanrafael.org/snapshot](http://www.cityofsanrafael.org/snapshot).
- You can sign-up to receive email notifications when agendas get posted online as well as other City updates. Visit [www.cityofsanrafael.org/enotify](http://www.cityofsanrafael.org/enotify) for all the options.

# Frequently Asked Questions

## 1. I have a brand new idea or topic that I want to share with the City Council. How do I let the City Council know?

Answer: You have a few options in this scenario. The easiest place to start is to email the City Council your idea or request. If they are interested, they will ask staff to look into the issue. Contact information is available online at <http://www.cityofsanrafael.org/council-home/>. You can also send a letter or call us at 415-485-3074.

You may also attend a City Council meeting (first & third Mondays at 7 p.m. at City Hall) and present your idea during “Open Time.” Fill out a Speaker Card, available at the entrance to the City Council Chambers and give it to the City Clerk. “Open Time” occurs at the beginning of the meeting and provides members of the public an opportunity to talk about a topic that is not otherwise found on the meeting agenda. You are afforded two minutes to present your idea or issue to the City Council. The Brown Act does not allow the City Council to discuss an item not on the agenda, but if they are interested in the topic they can ask staff to follow up with you afterward.

## 2. I don't have time to attend a meeting. How do I voice my opinion?

Answer: You can send your thoughts to the City Council by email or mail. Each member of the City Council has their own email account, but if you want to ensure your message is part of the public record please see Appendix A, “Guidelines for Correspondence on Agenda Items.”

## 3. How do I contact my elected officials?

Answer: There are several ways to contact elected officials. You can contact all of them at once, by using an [online Contact Form](#) that sends the message to all members of the City Council, including the Mayor. Depending on the nature of your email, the City Council will do one of the following:

- If your email contains any questions, they will forward it to the appropriate staff for follow-up.
- If the nature of your email is to register your opposition or support on a topic, they will note your comments and consider them as they weigh the issue. You may not receive an additional response from either the Staff or the City Council.

You can also email or call them individually. For a current list of their email addresses, visit [www.cityofsanrafael.org/council-home](http://www.cityofsanrafael.org/council-home). For their individual phone numbers, call the Mayor's office at 415-485-3074.

#### 4. Where do I find information about the topics I'm interested in?

Answer: The City website is a great resource for most topics. Most major projects and programs have webpages dedicated to them, with background information and links to related documents. If you have trouble finding the topic from the homepage or individual department pages, try the search function on the top right of the screen. Visit us online at [www.cityofsanrafael.org](http://www.cityofsanrafael.org).

Still can't find what you're looking for? Call us at 415-485-3070 and we will either help you navigate the website or connect you to the appropriate staff.

#### 5. How do I become a member of a board, commission, or advisory committee?

Answer: Serving on a board or commission is a very rewarding way to get involved in and serve your community. City boards and commissions provide advice to the City Council and the important work they do ensures citizen involvement and accountability in government operations. Vacancies are advertised in "Snapshot" and on the City Clerk's webpage. To apply, please fill out an application form and return it to the City Clerk by the posted deadline. The City Council interviews all applicants and then makes their final selection(s). Most seats on boards and commissions have four-year terms and members can serve up to two consecutive terms. Members of the Planning Commission and Design Review Board may serve up to three consecutive terms. For information about the various bodies, visit [www.cityofsanrafael.org/cityclerk-boards](http://www.cityofsanrafael.org/cityclerk-boards).

#### 6. I can't find the documents I'm looking for online. How can I access them?

Answer: First, make sure to try the search functions on the City's website. There are two main search functions to try:

- a. From any page, there is a search bar in the top right of the screen which searches the website for matching words.
- b. To search agendas and staff reports, use the "Search Archives" function at [www.cityofsanrafael.org/meetings](http://www.cityofsanrafael.org/meetings). This will bring up any City Council, Planning Commission, and Design Review Board agenda items that match, going back to

2011. For agendas prior to that, you'll need to access the archive found in the right-hand column of the meetings webpage.

Still can't find it? Call the City Clerk's Office at 415-485-3066 and they will help you find what you are looking for. You can also come by in person to Room 209 in City Hall.

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#### **7. How do I ensure that my comments are part of the "public record"?**

Answer: The best way to ensure your comments are part of the "public record" is to provide a copy of them to the City Clerk (see Appendix A). Aside from that, all comments made at public meetings are recorded and included as part of the public record. Depending on the nature of the project, staff compiles comments received and sometimes includes them as part of the staff report. If you have any questions about this, please contact the City Clerk's Office or the staff assigned to the project. Emailing your comments only to an individual member of the City Council may not ensure that the City Clerk or staff receives a copy.

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#### **8. How do I get something onto the City Council agenda?**

Answer: The City Council agenda is generally set by the City Manager in consultation with the Mayor. Certain agenda items are required by law, and others are selected based on the City Council's established goals. Members of the City Council can request items to be placed on future agendas upon consensus of at least three. As a member of the public, you can contact members of the City Council and ask them to make the request, however unless a consensus of three members is met the item may not be put on the agenda.

# What to Expect at a City Council Meeting

Smile – you’re on camera! All meetings are filmed and aired on Channel 27 as well as on the City website. City Council meetings are formal, although we do try to lighten the mood occasionally with a joke or two. The City Council sits at the dais with staff below, including the elected City Clerk and City Attorney. Members of the public are invited to sit in the audience.

City Council meetings are where decisions are made regarding all kinds of City business, from contracts to hire a consultant all the way to approving a major land use decision. There are several types of agenda items:

1. **“Open Time”** is a time where members of the public may speak on items that are not otherwise on the agenda. Speakers are asked to limit their remarks to 2 minutes.
2. The **“Consent Calendar”** is a list of regular orders of business that requires just one motion and vote to approve them all. This typically includes things like contracts, street closures, purchasing agreements, and other routine items. Members of the City Council or public may pull items off the Consent Calendar if they wish to discuss them in more detail before a vote.
3. A **“Public Hearing”** is a formality for certain proposed actions designed to allow the public to provide “testimony” on the issue. Their remarks are recorded for the public record. Sometimes public hearings are required by law, and other times the City Council may use them to gather information that will help them make decisions.
4. A **“Special Presentation”** is normally used when the City Council wishes to formally recognize a group or individual for their contribution in some way.
5. An **“Other Agenda Items”** are discussion items for the City Council. Many types of items can fall into this category, far too many to list. These items either require the City Council’s approval or can be informational reports on programs and projects.
6. The **“City Manager’s Report”** and **“Councilmember Reports”** are standing items in which the City Manager and members of the City Council can report out or provide brief updates from their work on other regional bodies and organizations.

Each agenda item typically includes the following steps:

1. First, staff makes a presentation that explains the topic and requested action by the City Council. Depending on the nature of the topic, other groups may make presentations as well such as project applicants or consultants.
2. Next, the City Council may ask questions of staff about the topic at-hand.
3. Following questions from the City Council, the Mayor will ask for Public Comment. Members of the public are invited to speak up at the podium for 2-minutes. Please start by stating your name for the record.

4. After Public Comment time concludes, the City Council may ask staff to answer any questions asked during Public Comment. It is at the discretion of the Mayor and/or City Council to decide whether the Council or Staff will respond to questions posed by the public.
5. The City Council then deliberates and votes on the item.

In addition to City Council Meetings, the City also convenes other types of public meetings, such as:

- ***Study Sessions*** – these are special meetings scheduled for the City Council to hear detailed information on a topic. The Council can ask questions and provide initial feedback to staff on a topic. The City Council does not make decisions at these meetings. Study Sessions are subject to the Brown Act and agendas are posted 72-hours prior. Although staff usually makes a presentation, they don't normally write staff reports.
- ***Community Meetings, Workshops, and Town Halls*** – the City will often host forums on large projects or important topics in order to solicit input from the public throughout the course of a project or provide information on an issue that impacts our community.

## Top 5 Tips

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1. Help us create and maintain a respectful and inclusive environment. Please do not applaud or “boo” other speakers. This can make some members of the public feel too intimidated to speak and public speaking is scary enough! Please don’t make personal attacks, and be civil and courteous.
2. If you are speaking at the podium, please address the City Council, or other Board or Commission, rather than staff or the audience.
3. Remember, your time allotment for speaking is 2 minutes – it can be helpful to practice your comments ahead of time.
4. You are welcome to bring copies of printed materials for the City Council to consider. Please provide them to the City Clerk.
5. Sometimes meetings can run late! Although food and beverages are not allowed in the Council Chambers, you may want to put some trail mix in your pocket to snack on in the lobby.

We are always here to help! If you have questions, call the City Manager’s Office at 415-485-3070 or the City Clerk’s Office at 415-485-3065.

# Appendix

## A. Guidelines for Correspondence on Agenda Items

Generally, the San Rafael City Council holds public meetings twice per month and considers various items of public interest. These issues are usually presented by means of a staff report or series of staff reports provided to the City Council as well as the public 72-hours in advance of the meeting in the Agenda Packet. Often, organizations and members of the public wish to include a letter to the City Council as part of the public record. The following are guidelines to best ensure your letter is included as such:

1. **Copy the City Clerk's Office** on your email or letter to the City Council.  
Email: [city.clerk@cityofsanrafael.org](mailto:city.clerk@cityofsanrafael.org)  
Mail: City Clerk's Office  
P.O. Box 151560  
San Rafael, CA 94915
2. Clearly indicate that you wish for this correspondence to be part of **the public record**.
3. Clearly indicate which **agenda item or topic** your letter refers to.
4. Be sure that the City Clerk receives your letter prior to 4 p.m. the day of the meeting, however the later the letter is received the less likely the City Council will have an opportunity to read and consider the contents. For a letter to be included in the posted agenda packet, it must be received one week in advance of the meeting date.
5. **Include contact information** so the City Clerk may contact you if there are any questions.