



## City of Petaluma Decorum and Order Policy for Public Meetings

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“Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect to those that are present.”

- George Washington

“Laws alone cannot secure freedom of expression; in order that every man may present his views without penalty, there must be a spirit of tolerance in the entire population.”

- Albert Einstein

“Civility does not ...mean the mere outward gentleness of speech cultivated for the occasion, but an inborn gentleness and desire to do the opponent good.”

- Mahatma Gandhi

“You can disagree without being disagreeable. If you have a caring heart and a thoughtful mind, you can express a different opinion respectfully.”

- Ruth Bader Ginsburg

### **A. Purpose**

The City of Petaluma Decorum and Order Policy for Public Meetings aims to ensure orderly, respectful, and inclusive public meetings that facilitate civic participation while protecting the rights and safety of all participants, including legislative body members, City staff, and members of the public. Public meetings conducted in compliance with this Policy will provide all participants in the public process with an environment in which all members may be fairly heard, while ensuring actual and perceived integrity in the process and helping to ensure that Petaluma legislative bodies are able to conduct City business without interference or interruption.

Members of the City’s various public bodies, including the City Council, and the City’s appointed commissions, committees, and boards, are committed community members who serve in good faith to make Petaluma a better place, often as volunteers or for minimal compensation. Likewise, members of the public who participate in City meetings do so because they care about their city. While disagreement on issues is a natural and healthy part of democratic governance, the purpose of this Policy is to ensure that such disagreements are expressed respectfully and without disrupting the public’s business. Personal attacks and disparaging remarks are strongly discouraged in the

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interest of productive civic discourse. This Policy seeks to foster an environment where differing viewpoints can be expressed constructively in the shared pursuit of the betterment of Petaluma, so all can safely participate in Petaluma municipal affairs, and meetings of City bodies can effectively conduct the public's business. This Policy is intended to foster a constructive and respectful public forum for all participants. The City of Petaluma appreciates the civic engagement of its residents and encourages continued participation in the democratic process.

## **B. Applicability**

This Policy applies to all public meetings held by:

- The Petaluma City Council,
- Any Council-appointed commissions, committees, or boards,
- Any other public body under the jurisdiction of the City of Petaluma,
- Petaluma elected and appointed officials and City staff when representing the City at meetings of other bodies and organizations and other civic gatherings.

## **C. Guiding Principles for Civic Participation**

The City of Petaluma thrives on open, respectful, and inclusive public dialogue. Civic participation is a cornerstone of democracy, and City meetings are intended to foster thoughtful engagement on matters of public concern. To support this purpose, all City officials and employees subject to this Policy are expected, and all meeting participants are encouraged, to uphold the following principles:

- Treat all participants with courtesy and respect, including in moments of disagreement.
- Listen attentively and allow others to speak without interruption.
- Focus on issues, not individuals, and refrain from personal attacks or inflammatory language.
- Speak from personal knowledge and experience and be open to differing perspectives.
- Comply with the direction of the Presiding Officer in facilitating discussion and maintaining order.
- Embrace respectful disagreement as a vital part of healthy democratic decision-making.

These shared values and expectations for participation in City of Petaluma public meetings will help create a safe and constructive space for everyone to be heard and for the full range of views on the City's affairs to inform City decision makers.

**D. Decorum – All Meeting Participants**

All individuals present at City of Petaluma public meetings—including legislative body members, City staff, and members of the public—are expected to preserve decorum to ensure orderly, respectful, and productive proceedings. In keeping with the freedom of speech clauses in the U.S. and California constitutions, City of Petaluma public meetings are a limited public forum for civic expression, where all viewpoints related to the legislative body's subject matter jurisdiction may be expressed. In no event will this Policy be enforced so as to impermissibly burden protected speech, even when such speech is uncomfortable or unpopular. However, activity that unlawfully disrupts the conduct of City business, including, but not limited to, the following conduct, is prohibited:

- Interrupting others while speaking so as to prevent them from freely expressing their views;
- Loud, threatening, abusive, profane, or slanderous speech that disrupts the orderly conduct of a meeting;
- Speaking beyond the time allotted by the Presiding Officer;
- Boisterous behavior such as shouting, stamping, clapping, or other disruptions that interfere with conducting meeting business;
- Disregarding lawful directives from the Presiding Officer;
- Using signs, banners, or placards that obstruct the view of others or disrupt the orderly conduct of the meeting.

All remarks of meeting attendees shall be directed to the Presiding Officer of the legislative body through appropriate procedural channels and at times when attendee remarks are permitted and the Presiding Officer has recognized the speaker. Compliance with these rules is expected at all times from everyone in attendance.

**E. False, Defamatory, Discriminatory or Harassing Remarks Prohibited**

Consistent with Federal, State, and City laws and regulations, no City of Petaluma official, staff member, or meeting attendee may:

- Engage in discriminatory or harassing speech based on protected characteristics (such as race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation or identity, age, disability, religious belief, etc.),
- Create a hostile environment for City officials, staff or the public
- Make demonstrably false or defamatory statements about an individual, including false allegations of misconduct or attacks on character, when such statements are made with knowledge of their falsity or with reckless disregard for the truth.

**F. Enforcement of Decorum and Remedies**

- The Presiding Officer is responsible for enforcing decorum, with support from the Chief of Police or other City staff or designees.
- Another legislative body member or a staff member may propose enforcement of this Policy in the absence of an action by the Presiding Officer.
- All enforcement actions under this Policy shall be taken in a viewpoint-neutral manner consistent with applicable constitutional protections.

**Remedies:**

The following remedies may be employed at the discretion of the Presiding Officer or the legislative body, as appropriate:

- The Presiding Officer may read a statement of the City’s anti-discrimination policies or excerpts from this Policy into the record.<sup>1</sup>
- The Presiding Officer may call a brief recess to restore order before resuming the meeting.
- If discriminatory or harassing remarks warrant it, the Presiding Officer may initiate the removal process below.
- If discriminatory, harassing or disruptive remarks are made by a member of the legislative body, in addition to the Presiding Officer making a statement, calling a recess, or initiating removal, the member may be subject to censure at a subsequent public meeting, in accordance with applicable due process procedures.
- Any legislative body member who reasonably feels unlawfully discriminated against or harassed may excuse themselves from the meeting, and any City staff member who reasonably feels unlawfully discriminated against or harassed may be excused from the meeting.

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<sup>1</sup> The City’s policy prohibiting workplace harassment may be viewed here: [Prevention of Workplace Harassment Policy- FINAL Draft 1.2022.pdf \(storage.googleapis.com\)](#)

## **G. Meeting Disruption and Attendee Removal Pursuant to the Brown Act**

The Brown Act, California’s open meetings law, authorizes the removal of those who are disrupting meetings of legislative bodies.

### **Definition of Disruption**

The Brown Act defines “disrupting” behavior as behavior that:

- Actually disrupts, disturbs, impedes, or renders infeasible the orderly conduct of the meeting;
- Fails to comply with reasonable and lawful regulations adopted by a legislative body; or
- Constitutes the use of force or a “true threat of force”.<sup>2</sup>

### **Removal Process**

If a City of Petaluma meeting participant is disrupting a meeting, they may be removed pursuant to this process:

1. The Presiding Officer or designee shall warn the person that their behavior is disrupting the meeting and that if they do not cease, they may be removed.
2. If the disruptive behavior continues and does not promptly cease, the Presiding Officer or designee may order the individual removed.
3. If the disruption involves a true threat of force, then the Presiding Officer or designee may order the individual removed without first giving a warning.
4. Any person removed may be barred from re-entering the meeting during that session.

### **Clearing the Room**

If a group or groups of persons willfully disrupt a meeting, making the orderly conduct of the meeting infeasible, and order cannot be restored by removing those disrupting the meeting, the Presiding Officer or the legislative body, as appropriate, may have the meeting room cleared and continue the meeting. Only matters appearing on the meeting agenda may be considered after the room is cleared, and representatives of the press and

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<sup>2</sup> California Government Code § 54957.95. “True threat of force” means a threat that has sufficient indicia of intent and seriousness, that a reasonable observer would perceive it to be an actual threat to use force by the person making the threat.

other news media must be permitted to remain in the meeting, as long as they have not participated in the disruption.<sup>3</sup>

### **Readmission**

Once order has been restored, the Presiding Officer may choose to readmit members of the public who were not responsible for the disruption.

A violation of this Policy shall not invalidate any action taken by a Petaluma legislative body. If a City employee violates this Policy, applicable memoranda of understanding and personnel policies shall also apply, subject to relevant laws. These remedies are not exclusive and do not limit the City's ability to pursue any other lawful actions.

### **H. Public Accountability and the Right to Criticize**

The City of Petaluma, and all of its legislative body members and staff, understand that it is a privilege to serve the City and all its residents as their municipal government.

One of the important functions of City meetings is to permit members of the public to attend, participate, and exercise their oversight functions concerning how their government is conducting their business. Accordingly, all City officials and staff recognize that both at and away from City public meetings, they are subject to appraisals of their performance of their duties, both positive and negative.

Public criticism of City officials' and staff members' performance is a vital part of accountable local government. However, such criticism must not take the form of disrupting meetings, making knowingly false or defamatory claims, asserting unsupported allegations of misconduct, or engaging in unlawful discrimination or harassment. In accordance with the Brown Act, nothing in this Policy is intended to prohibit, nor does it prohibit, public criticism of the policies, procedures, programs, or services of the City, or of the acts or omissions of any of its legislative bodies.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> California Government Code § 54957.9.

<sup>4</sup> Government Code § 54954.3.