

Iowa Open Meeting and Open Record Laws

County extension councils, as governmental bodies created by state statute in Chapter 176A and as a board of a tax-supported district, are required to follow Iowa Code Chapter 21 and 22, Iowa Open Meeting and Open Records laws. Council members should become familiar with these code sections.

The intent of the Open Meetings Law is to invite the public to watch government in action. The law states: that “the basis and rationale of governmental decisions, as well as those decisions themselves, are easily accessible to the people.” Where ambiguities exist, they should be resolved in favor of openness. [The Iowa 4-H Youth Program Committee Handbook \(4-H 113\)](#) addresses open meeting guidelines for 4-H committees.

Open meetings apply if a majority of council members are present discussing or taking action on any matters within the scope of their decision making power. Open meetings can be formal or informal and in person or by electronic means. Gatherings that include a majority of members for ministerial or social purposes (no business discussion occurs) are exempt from the open meeting law. Examples of exemptions would include funerals, graduation parties or community social events.

Council meeting agendas must provide sufficient detail for the public to know specific actions to be taken and matters to be discussed. The date, time, place and agenda must be posted at least 24 hours before the meeting in a public place. Public places include a public accessible bulletin board or at the building where the meeting will be held. In addition, the agenda must be shared with the news media if they request it.

Minutes of meetings need to state the date, time and place, members present, action taken and results of each vote taken by the council. Minutes are public records and need to be shared with individuals upon request.

Members of the public can use cameras and recording devices at any open meeting session as long as they do not disrupt the meeting. The open meeting law does not entitle citizens to speak at the meetings. However, the council should establish reasonable rules of conduct to allow for citizen input and conducting the meeting in an orderly fashion.

There may be rare occasions where extension councils want or need to go into a closed session. Councils should contact their regional directors prior to taking any action toward going into a closed session. Specific reasons permissible for closed sessions are defined in the law.

When a closed session occurs, the council must publicly announce the reason for closing the meeting and record this in the minutes. Closed sessions require an affirmative public vote of either two-thirds of the members of the body or all of the members present at the meeting. Detailed minutes, attendance, all discussion and action taken in the closed session must be written and recorded. The minutes and recording are sealed and can only be opened under a court order. Discussion in a closed session must pertain to the reason cited. Any final action taken regarding the closed session must be taken in open session. A motion and vote on the closed session issue must be conducted in the open session.

The law also allows meetings to be conducted electronically “only in circumstances where such a meeting in person is impossible or impractical” and the meeting provides for public access and follows open meeting guidelines outlined. The minutes must contain a statement explaining why a meeting in person was not possible.

As a governmental body, all extension council records are subject to open records law according to Iowa Code Chapter 22. “Every person shall have the right to examine and copy a public record and to publish or otherwise disseminate a public record or the information contained in a public record”; however, Chapter 22 also outlines the process of accessing public records. Inquiries into public records should be made in writing, electronically, or by telephone. Written requests are the most helpful as they clarify the records sought. If you have a public record request, staff and extension councils should work closely with their regional director in responding to those requests.

Extension council members have a responsibility to follow the law. There are consequences, including fines, for violating the open meeting and open record laws.