

**The choices that make a significant difference in our lives are the tough ones.
They're not often fun or easy, but they're the ones we have to make.**
– Alexandra Stoddard, writer, political commentator

Open Meetings Open Records

Attorney General Drew Edmondson hosted a seminar on the Oklahoma Open Meetings and Open Records Acts last week in Ponca City. Assistant Attorney General Gay Tudor, one of the state's foremost authorities on the openness laws assisted in presenting the seminar and answering questions.

This seminar was conducted in partnership with the Oklahoma Press Association, Oklahoma Newspaper Foundation and FOI Oklahoma. The Oklahoma Press Association distributed the "Oklahoma Open Meeting & Open Records Book" to everyone who attended the meeting.

The class was well attended by officials from all over northern Oklahoma. I will elaborate a little on some areas that I found interesting as well as some items that have been questioned in the past.

The Open Meeting Act states, "It is the public policy of the State of Oklahoma to encourage and facilitate an informed citizenry's understanding of the governmental processes and governmental problems." The entire text of the Open Meeting Act can be found in Oklahoma Statute Title 25 § 301-314.

First of all a "meeting" means the conduct of business of a public body by a majority of its members. The Public Body is the members of the board. Meetings do not include informal gatherings of a majority of the members of the public body when no business of the public body is discussed. Members may all attend church together, go to ballgames together and even eat meals together without breaking the law.

Open Meetings are a meeting of the Public Body and not the meeting of the public. The public is invited and welcome to attend, listen and learn. The public may only participate in the meeting if the Chair recognizes and allows such input. The reasoning is to maintain order while following the posted agenda and to conduct business in a professional manner and in a reasonable time-frame. This is by law not by choice.

Agendas must be posted prior to meetings and must contain sufficient information for the public to understand. Comments from the public are not required to be on the agenda but may be added and regulated at the discretion of the Public Body. If comments are allowed during the Open Meeting, the Public Body may not act on any comments because such item and action has not been specifically listed in nature on the posted agenda. It is recommended, not law, that sign-in sheets be placed at the door for guests to sign-in when attending the meeting.

Two meetings may take place at the same time at the same place. Individual cell phone calls may be taken and said calls are not part of the open meeting, they are private.

A roll call vote must be taken and recorded for each action voted on by each individual member of the Public Body. Minutes must reflect members present as well as members absent. Parliamentary procedures suggest that visitors also be listed in the minutes.

According to the Open Records Act, "Thus, it is the public policy of the State of Oklahoma that the people are vested with the inherent right to know and be fully

informed about their government. ...The purpose of this act is to ensure and facilitate the public's right of access to and review of government records..." The entire text of the Open Records Act is in Oklahoma Statute Title 51 § 24A.1-29.

Records are open to the public just as soon as they are created. They are to be made available upon request; however, some records may take longer to obtain. Copies of such records can be made to take out of the offices but a small fee will be charged. Fees may include the cost of the copy and in some cases a search fee may apply.

Each time I attend a seminar, class or meeting I learn something. This class was no exception. In fact, I will be attending another Open Meetings Open Records workshop in November during the Association of County Commissioners of Oklahoma (ACCO) Fall Conference.

In my opinion the Grant County Board of Commissioners does an outstanding job following the Open Meetings and Open Records Acts. However, by continuously attending seminars, workshops and training, I can be better educated and informed which helps me to make better decisions.

If you have any questions concerning the Open Meetings and Open Records Acts you may contact me at the District 2 Shop located at 524 N. Front Street in Medford or by telephone at 580-395-2859. You may also contact me on my cell phone at 580-395-2859 for any county or District 2 concerns. Robert Moss, Foreman, may be reached at 580-541-8953.