

CITY CLERKS ASSOCIATION OF CALIFORNIA
GUIDELINES FOR
PREPARING MINUTES FOR GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES

PURPOSE

The City Clerks Association of California issues these guidelines as a tool for government agencies to transition to minutes styles that are efficient, succinct, cost-effective for staff to prepare, and more appropriately aligned with the intent of the Government Code.

FINDINGS

- Legislative bodies must act, and must be *seen* to act, within the laws of the State of California and local charters, if applicable. Being *seen* to act within the law is important, because the legislative body's decisions may be subject to external scrutiny by the public, auditors, or judicial inquiry. Minutes *testify* that the correct procedures for decision-making were followed.
- Legislative body minutes shall be prepared in a manner consistent with the intent of the Government Code. Relevant Government Codes are as follows:
 - Government Code 40801. The city clerk shall keep an accurate record of the proceeding of the legislative body and the board of equalization in books bearing appropriate titles and devoted exclusively to such purposes, respectively. The books shall have a comprehensive general index.
 - Government Code 36814. The council shall cause the clerk to keep a correct record of its proceedings. At the request of a member, the city clerk shall enter the ayes and noes in the journal.
 - Government Code 54953(c)(2). The legislative body of a local agency shall publicly report any action taken and the vote or abstention on that action of each member present for the action.
 - Government Code 53232.3(d). Members of a legislative body shall provide brief reports on meetings attended at the expense of the local agency at the next regular meeting of the legislative body.
- All components of minutes shall be for the primary purpose of memorializing decisions made by the *legislative body*. Any minute component that does not serve this primary purpose should be minimized or eliminated; this includes comments made by *individual* body members and members of the *public*.

GUIDELINES

- Minutes should provide a record of a) when and where a meeting took place, and who was present (including member absences, late arrivals, departures, adjournment time); b) type of meeting (Regular/Special/Adjourned Regular); c) what was considered; d) what was decided; and e) agreed upon follow-up action. Pursuant to Government Code 54953(c)(2), minutes shall report any action taken and the vote or abstention on that action of each member present for the action.
- Appropriate styles are *action* minutes or *brief summary* minutes. Verbatim style minutes should not be used, because verbatim or lengthy summary minutes do not serve the intent of the Government Code, which is to record the proceedings of the *legislative body*.
- *Action* minutes merely record final decisions made.

- *Brief summary* minutes, at a minimum, record the final decisions made; and, at a maximum, may record what advice the body was given to enable it to make its decisions, the body's thought process in making the decision, and the final decisions made. Emphasis is given on the body's thought process, not individual members' thought processes. The minutes should summarize only the main points which arose in discussion if and only if they are relevant to the decision.
- Comments made by members such as "for the record" or "for the minutes" have no bearing on the content of minutes and are given no greater and no lesser consideration than other comments made at the public meeting. Members seeking to memorialize comments should incorporate such verbiage into the language of the motion. As an alternative, members may submit written statements to be retained with the agenda item.
- Since the main purpose of minutes is to record the legislative body's decision, summary minutes should be brief. By concentrating on the legislative body's decision, brief summary minutes will provide only a select recording of what was discussed at the meeting. Brief summary minutes should not attempt to reproduce, however summarily, what every speaker said. It should only record the essence of the discussion and include the main threads that lead to the body's conclusion.
- To the fullest extent possible, brief summary minutes should be impersonal and should not attribute views to individual persons. Only the positions and decisions taken by the whole legislative body are relevant, not those of individual members. The passive voice is favored i.e. "It was suggested that...", "It was generally felt that...", "It was questioned whether...", "During discussion, it was clarified..."
- There are reasons for not attributing comments to specific speakers. First, it makes for brevity--a point can be recorded more concisely in impersonal form. Second, a point raised by one speaker will often be further developed by others—in impersonal brief summary minutes, only the fully-developed point is recorded in its final form. Third, points by several speakers can be consolidated into a single paragraph. Fourth, the impersonal style averts future corrections to minutes.
- While the primary purpose of minutes is to memorialize decisions made by the legislative body as a whole, under limited circumstances it is necessary and/or appropriate to attribute comments to individual members including:
 - Individual member's reports pursuant to Government Code 53232.3(d) (enacted by AB 1234, 2005). The minute record shall include the type of meeting attended at the expense of the local agency and the subject matter.
 - Individual member's reports on intergovernmental agencies. Brief summary minutes should include the type of meeting at a minimum, and, at the maximum, include the subject matter.
 - Individuals speaking under public comment. Brief summary minutes shall, at a minimum, list the public member's name (if provided); and, at a maximum, include the overall topic and stance/position. Such as Mr. Jones spoke in opposition to the Project X. Being mindful that the minutes are recordings of the legislative body's proceedings, it is not appropriate to include detail of individual comments. There is an exception for public testimony provided during public hearings, for which the minutes shall include the speaker's name (if provided) and a summary position of the speaker (i.e., supported or opposed).
- For purposes of meeting Government Code 36814 and/or 54953(c)(2), the city clerk should enter the ayes and noes in the minutes. For informal consensus (i.e. providing staff direction), it is appropriate to note the dissention of one or more members by, at a minimum, stating the dissenting member's name and dissention, such as "Mr. Jones dissented," and at a maximum to also include a brief reason, such as "Mr. Jones dissented citing budget concerns."

- While the primary purpose of legislative body meetings is for the legislative body to take legislative action and make decisions to advance agency business, it is acknowledged that agency meetings also serve as platforms for ceremonial presentations and reports on social and community events. At a minimum, brief summary minutes should identify that presentations were made and event reports were given; and, at a maximum, report only the subject matter of the presentation or event.
- For community workshops and town hall meetings subject to the Brown Act, brief summary minutes, at a maximum, record the overall topic, provided that no legislative actions were taken. It is advisable to note in the minutes that no legislative action was taken.
- The guidelines contained herein are applicable to committees and commissions subject to the Brown Act. It is acknowledged that many boards and commissions take few legislative actions, and the tendency is to include more detail in the minutes on event reports and planning. At a maximum, brief summary minutes may include key points of the final reports or determinations, and all comments shall be attributable to the entire body and not attributable to individual members.
- Brief summary minutes shall serve to clarify decisions taken and who is expected to execute the decisions. It is not necessary to write down all action points or all tasks identified. Minutes shall not serve as a substitute for task lists, and the focus shall remain on the final decisions made by the *legislative body*.
- The language of brief summary minutes should be relatively restrained and neutral, however impassioned the discussion. Brief summary minutes will record the substance of the point in an intemperate way.
- To the fullest extent possible, minutes should be self-contained to be intelligible without reference to other documents.
- As a general rule, individual member comments are not identified in the brief summary minutes of discussions, and minutes should concentrate on the collective body's thought process and the collective decisions made by the majority, not individuals.
- Brief summary minutes should concentrate on central issues germane to the final decision. The record of the discussion should be presented in a logical sequence, rather than reproduced in the actual order they were made in discussion.
- The legislative body may wish to choose more, substantive (summary) minutes if there's no archival audio/video backup recording available of its proceedings. If audio/video recording is available for future reference, minute notations can be more limited (action).