

Sunshine Act amended

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Aug. 21—Local municipal and county governments, agencies, and school boards, along with bodies all across Pennsylvania, will soon need to follow new amended Sunshine Act guidelines.

The modifications, effective Aug. 29, require that organizations now:

—post an agenda at the meeting's location and on a website (if applicable) at least 24 hours in advance,

—make agendas available to anybody attending a meeting and

—describe on the agenda — in plain language — any matter on which the board will or may deliberate or take official action.

Boards will only be able to vote on matters that are listed on the agenda, with a few exceptions:

—real or potential emergencies where an immediate danger exists to life or property,

—subjects that can be proven to have arisen within the previous 24 hours, as long as they do not involve expenditure of funds or entering into a contract or agreement,

—issues raised by a resident or taxpayer during the meeting, but only to refer the matter for future action or discussion, and

—small matters.

"Our public is more engaged in how we craft our laws these days, especially how we're conducting our meetings," said state Sen. Patrick Stefano, R-Fayette, 32nd Senatorial District, who sponsored the bill that amended the Sunshine Act. "They want to be more involved, especially with all the online access they have."

Pennsylvania NewsMedia Association said the changes are a "positive move for government transparency and should foster more public attendance and participation at public meetings."

Boards have been quickly educating themselves about the changes that were signed into law on June 30.

"Different municipal solicitors around the county have been discussing this back and forth with email," said William Barbin, solicitor for numerous groups, including Cambria County, Johnstown Redevelopment Authority and Greater Johnstown Water Authority.

"I'm reasonably certain at least the governmental organizations that regularly work with a solicitor are going to be able to roll this out pretty smoothly on time. Nobody likes being told what to do. Nobody likes being told to do extra things, but it's not that hard. The evidence of that is that quite a few municipalities around here have been doing almost everything that's required by this new law all along for other reasons."

Some boards, such as Johnstown City Council, will need to only make slight changes.

Council's agendas are currently posted online, but not at the meeting site, which is the Public Safety Building. And, in the past few months, the agendas have included plain text explanations of ordinances and resolutions thanks to new interim City Manager Dan Penatzer.

"I've always thought that an agenda that just lists subjects, while everybody on the board, or the council or the authority knows what those issues are, anybody sitting in the audience has no idea what's going on," Penatzer said.

"You just can't give somebody a list of topics, saying, 'we're voting yes' or 'we're voting no.' ... The agenda really should explain to everybody that's reading it what's actually going on here, what's being considered."

Others, such as 1st Summit Arena @ Cambria County War Memorial Authority, will need to expand their agendas to now include information about voting matters.

"Now we're going to make any effort to make sure that any items like that are specifically identified as being the subject of either deliberation or potential vote," Michael Parrish, the authority's solicitor, said.

"Obviously, the purpose behind that is to let everybody in the general public or any interested parties know what we're going to be talking about in advance."