

MASON COUNTY BOARDS and COMMISSIONS HANDBOOK

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Mason County's Mission

THE MISSION OF MASON COUNTY GOVERNMENT IS TO PROVIDE ESSENTIAL & MANDATED SERVICES WHICH WILL PRESERVE & BENEFIT THE HEALTH, SAFETY, & WELFARE OF THE GENERAL PUBLIC IN A PROFESSIONAL AND COURTEOUS MANNER THROUGH THE EFFECTIVE AND EQUITABLE MANAGEMENT OF AVAILABLE PUBLIC RESOURCES.

MASON COUNTY GOVERNMENT RECOGNIZES THAT ITS EMPLOYEES & VOLUNTEERS ARE THE FOUNDATION UPON WHICH THESE SERVICES ARE PROVIDED.

Welcome to Mason County

This information has been provided for you, the advisory group member, to give you the foundation, philosophies and policies that make Mason County a wonderful place to volunteer and work. Please remember that this is a general overview and does not take the place of each group's by-laws and procedures.

Your input enables the county to maintain and improve programs and services and we invite you to offer your ideas and suggestions. Volunteers are a vital part of government's existence and are deeply appreciated. We wish you success in your volunteer experience and hope this information will be helpful to you as a volunteer for Mason County.

Advisory Groups

As an advisory group member you join many people in Mason County who serve as volunteer members of advisory groups. Advisory bodies provide guidance to decision-makers and bring public participation into the process of government. Members are appointed by the Board of Commissioners to serve a term, which vary in length depending on the board.

A citizen may serve on more than one advisory committee concurrently only if the committees on which they serve are unrelated in both subject matter and mission. Preference will be given to those applicants who do not already serve on a Mason County advisory board. A reasonable effort will be made to ensure there is an equitable balance of representation of business and community interests.

Each board, council, committee or commission serves a different mission, with the advisory group members functioning as a team. Each group functions differently as directed by the governing statute. The information in this handbook is intended to assist new advisory group members as they acquaint themselves with the functions and processes of the group they have joined.

Being an Effective Advisory Group Member

Members are appointed to Mason County advisory groups to represent the public at large. Many times appointments are made to reflect a geographic interest, an area of expertise, or to represent a special interest group or professional association. Keep this in mind as you become acquainted with your fellow advisory group members. Remember each member brings an important point of view. Listening to differing points of view produce fair solutions to problems. If you are unsure of the group's mission or the item under discussion, you may ask questions and seek information until you have a clear answer and good understanding of the expectations.

Members of advisory bodies provide an important link between the public and the Commissioners. The information that members provide about community needs and opinions can have a profound effect on policies and lead to improved service. Advisory group members play a very special role in creating recommendations on governmental issues.

If you are appointed as a member of an advisory group, you will be expected to:

- Interpret community opinions, attitudes, and needs to department staff and the Commission.
- Study programs and services, and analyze problems and needs.
- Offer new proposals and recommend changes in programs and policies.
- Provide fellow community members with information about County policies, programs and budgets.

Advisory groups support and provide counsel to department staff and the Commissioners. They make important recommendations about policy. Advisory groups, however, do not create or administer policy, programs, or services unless their governing statute grants this power to them.

When presenting recommendations to the Commissioners, it is essential that the advisory group members keep the following in mind:

- All recommendations should be in written form.
- All ideas should be expressed in clear and concise language.
- Proposed solutions should be viable and cost-effective.
- Recommendations should identify the reason for the changes suggested.
- The advice should reflect a consensus of a majority of the group members.

It is vital that all members attend meetings regularly and come to meetings prepared. It is important that you read all reports, proposals, and other documents prepared or distributed by staff or officers prior to meetings. You will find more information about meetings roles in this section.

Non-Discrimination*

It is our goal to create, foster and maintain an atmosphere of non-discrimination in all personnel and volunteer-related matters. This commitment will be supported by the positive, practical efforts of all county employees and volunteers.

It is the intent of Mason County that all employees and volunteers will work in an environment free from discrimination and/or harassment by another employee, supervisor, volunteer or non-employee for any reason. Discriminatory conduct in any form undermines morale and the integrity of employment or volunteer relationships, and interferes with the productivity of the group.

If, as a volunteer for Mason County you feel you may be the subject of discrimination or harassment, you may contact your advisory board staff person or the Human Resources Department. Mason County takes complaints of discrimination, harassment and retaliation seriously and will investigate and resolve such complaints in a timely manner.

Sexual Harassment*

Mason County is committed to eradicating sexual discrimination in the workplace and specifically condemns sexual harassment of county employees and volunteers by other county employees or volunteers. Watching and listening for indications from your peers that attention is unwelcome is the first step in preventing problems. Actively speaking up and supporting those who are victims shows that you take the problem of sexual harassment seriously.

If you believe that you have been subjected to sexual harassment, report it as quickly as possible. Do not suffer in silence. Report it to your advisory board staff person or the Human Resources Department.

Drug Free Workplace*

Mason County expects all employees and volunteers to report to their assignment free from drug and/or alcohol impairment and to remain in a condition that enables them to perform their duties in a safe, efficient, legal and professional manner. Mason County encourages employees and volunteers who may have an alcohol and/or drug use problem to voluntarily seek evaluation and treatment that will lead to successful rehabilitation. Volunteers must abide by the provisions of this policy as a condition of volunteer service.

***If you have further questions please ask your advisory board staff person for a copy of these County policies.**

Laws Affecting Advisory Group Activities

As an advisory group member appointed by the Mason County Board of Commissioners, you should be aware of certain restrictions and requirements that may affect you during your tenure as an advisory group member. Advisory group members must be familiar with and operate within their group's governing statutes and bylaws, and county, state and federal laws at all times.*

These laws assure that government operates properly. Fortunately, it is not difficult to comply with these laws. The first step is to know what is required. You will receive more detailed information from the staff supporting your advisory group. If you have questions, feel free to contact your advisory group staff person. They will assist you while you focus on the important service you are providing to the county.

Open Public Meetings Act (OPMA)

Washington's open meeting laws essentially require three things: notice must be provided for all meetings, meetings must be open to the public, and minutes must be created for each meeting. A "meeting" is defined to include not only formal gatherings of the advisory group but also any occasion, even subcommittee meetings, where a "quorum" (usually majority) of the advisory group members come together and discuss group issues. Electronic communications may constitute a meeting, which is subject to the OPMA if a majority of members discuss information, give input or take action via e-mail.

Most claims that the open meeting laws have been violated will be made against the public body itself. However, claims may be brought against the individuals (in this case volunteer board members); public officials may be sued personally for public meeting violations. In most of these circumstances, the county will represent or act in defense of an advisory group member who has acted in good faith. However, if it appears that a member has intentionally acted outside the law, the county will not assist with defense.

Public Disclosure

The Washington State Public Records Act requires that Mason County must allow public inspection of all records maintained by the County unless the law specifically exempts them. Public records may include advisory committee meeting minutes, agendas, meeting materials, correspondence, email and any other records, in any form, that relate to the conduct of government. All Mason County advisory groups should be in compliance with the law.

Ethics and Appearance of Fairness

Washington's ethics laws prohibit public officials from gaining financially as a result of his or her position. Also, public officials must declare any conflicts of interest at a public meeting. A conflict exists if a recommendation potentially could affect the finances of the group member or the finances of a family member. If a conflict exists, the member must declare this fact at a meeting

where the issue is discussed and may need to refrain from discussing or voting on the recommendation. If you are unsure whether a conflict exists, you should discuss this with the staff person assisting your committee.

Influencing Ballot Measures

RCW 42.17.130 strictly forbids the use of public facilities for the purpose of assisting a campaign for election of any person to any office or for the promotion or opposition to any ballot proposition unless they are activities that are a part of the normal and regular conduct of the office or agency. Members of advisory groups must take care when supporting or opposing a candidate or ballot measure that they are doing so in their individual capacities only and to ensure that they are not using any public facilities or resources in such activities. For example, Jane Doe, an appointed Planning Commissioner, cannot support a candidate by signing her name as “Jane Doe, Mason County Planning Commissioner”, but she can sign “Jane Doe.” John Doe, who is a member of an advisory group, cannot use the facilities or the forum of an advisory group meeting to publicly support a candidate or ballot measure but as an individual he can speak to individual members of the group to express his political opinions

Staff Support for Advisory Groups

County staff manages most Mason County advisory groups. The primary roles of staff are to represent the interests and needs of the county and facilitate two-way communication between the group and the Board of Commissioners or other county departments and/or offices. Staff coordinates the administrative activities for the group including maintaining minutes, forwarding recommendations or implementing actions, and ensuring compliance with applicable laws, such as the Open Public Meetings Act. Staff responsibilities include meeting arrangements, processing complaints, communication with members, and other administrative duties.

The Meeting

Members of a group have a responsibility for the content and productivity of meetings they attend. They should come prepared to take ownership for their contribution to the end result of the meeting. Meetings do matter. They are one of the easy ways in which groups produce a product and make a contribution.

- **ALL PARTICIPANTS ARRIVE PREPARED**
- **THERE ARE CLEAR GROUND RULES THAT ALL AGREE TO HONOR**
- **AGENDA IS WRITTEN AND SHARED**
- **PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT IS COMFORTABLE**
- **START AND END ON THE TIMES AGREED ON BY THE GROUP**
- **ALL PARTICIPANTS CONTRIBUTE**
- **PROCESS IS MOVED AND FOCUSED**
- **OUTCOME IS CLEAR TO ALL**
- **WORK TO BE ACCOMPLISHED IS DEFINED AND ASSIGNED**
- **LAUGHTER AND FUN ARE ENCOURAGED**

Group Decision Making

Just as the functions of Mason County's advisory groups are different, so are the ways in which each group reaches agreement. After a discussion, some groups may vote; others may prioritize and select the recommendation that emerged as a priority; and still others may use consensus as a way to reach a decision. It is important for volunteer advisory group members to be aware of and familiar with the type of decision-making process their group uses.

Ground Rules

Every group should establish ground rules on how meetings will run, how members will interact and what kind of behavior is acceptable. Because each group member is an individual, each has a different way of accomplishing tasks. At times these different ways can cause friction between members and slow down the process of the group as a whole.

Each member is expected to respect these rules, which usually prevents misunderstandings and disagreements. Three to five ground rules are sufficient for most groups. Some of the more important ground rules might include:

- **Attendance:** Groups should place a high priority on attendance at meetings. Talk about what would be legitimate reasons for missing a meeting, and establish a procedure for informing the group leader of a member's absence from a scheduled meeting.
- **Promptness:** Meetings should start and end on time.
- **Meeting place and time:** Specify a regular meeting time and place, and establish a procedure for notifying members of meetings.
- **Participation:** Everyone's viewpoint is valuable. Every team member can make a unique contribution; therefore, emphasize the importance of both speaking freely and listening attentively.
- **Basic conversational courtesies:** Listen attentively and respectfully to others, do not interrupt, one conversation at a time, and so forth.
- **Breaks:** Decide whether there will be breaks, when and for how long.
- **Interruptions:** Decide when interruptions will be tolerated and when they will not.
- **Rotation of routine chores:** Decide who will be responsible for routine chores required of regular meetings and decide how to rotate these duties among the group members.
- **Agendas, minutes, and records:** Decide how the group will handle these issues.
- **Other norms or ground rules** that can be decided ahead of time by the group such as acceptable language, humor, jargon, etc.

Group Roles

By participating as a member of a group, each person makes a unique contribution with his or her presence alone, but some members may assume additional roles within the group. Each role that people may select within a group has guidelines that help ensure success. The following are general guidelines that may vary with the requirements or needs of each group.

Chair

- As group leader, the chair suggests group direction and options for setting goals.
- The chair provides a supportive environment for process, content, and group members.
- The chair coordinates activities of sub-committees.
- The chair sees that agendas are set.
- The chair sets the tone and pace for the group.
- The chair may share the role of meeting preparation with the advisory group staff person.
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- If there is no appointed facilitator, the chair serves as facilitator and while in that role, remains neutral on content and focuses on process.

Group Member

- Arranges adequate time to carry out responsibility as a group member.
- Comes to meetings prepared.
- Listens to other group members and follows the rules of the group.
- Participates in group discussion and decision-making.
- Keeps facilitator neutral and on track with the process.
- Serves on appropriate sub-committees.

Facilitator

- Guides the group through the agenda.
- Remains neutral in regard to content of the meeting.
- Encourages each member to participate fully.
- Keeps group energy positive and focused.
- Suggests methods to enable the group to clearly solve the problem so that everyone agrees with the outcome.

Recorder

- Records the group's ideas.
- Asks for clarification to ensure accuracy.
- Helps keep the facilitator and group focused.

Bylaws

Every advisory group should have a set of bylaws to direct and clarify its actions, procedures, and organization. Bylaws are the guidelines by which a group functions.

According to **Robert's Rules of Order**, bylaws define the primary characteristics of an organization, prescribe how it should function, and include rules that are so important that they may not be changed without prior notice to members and formal vote and agreement by a majority of members.

An organization's bylaws generally include the following:

1. Name of the group
2. Mission statement
3. Membership
4. Officers
5. Meetings
6. Executive board (if needed)
7. Committees; Subcommittees
8. Amendment procedures for making changes in the bylaws.

Bylaws should include exceptions as well as guideline for members. Issues such as attendance, responsibilities, and discipline should be addressed in the bylaws. Advisory Group members are expected to become familiar with and adhere to bylaws and all relevant statutes.