

## CHAPTER 25A ALABAMA OPEN MEETINGS ACT

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### **SECTION 36-25A-1 PURPOSE; OPEN MEETINGS REQUIREMENT; SHORT TITLE.**

(a) It is the policy of this state that the deliberative process of governmental bodies shall be open to the public during meetings as defined in Section 36-25A-2(6). Except for executive sessions permitted in Section 36-25A-7(a) or as otherwise expressly provided by other federal or state laws or statutes, all meetings of a governmental body shall be open to the public and no meetings of a governmental body may be held without providing notice pursuant to the requirements of Section 36-25A-3. No executive sessions are required by this chapter to be held under any circumstances. Serial meetings or electronic communications shall not be utilized to circumvent any of the provisions of this chapter.

(b) This chapter shall be known and may be cited as the "Alabama Open Meetings Act."

(Act 2005-40, p. 55, §1; Act 2015-340, §1.)

### **SECTION 36-25A-2 DEFINITIONS.**

As used in and for determining the applicability of this chapter, the following words shall have the following meanings solely for the purposes of this chapter:

(1) **DELIBERATION.** An exchange of information or ideas among a quorum of members of a subcommittee, committee, or full governmental body intended to arrive at or influence a decision as to how any members of the subcommittee, committee, or full governmental body should vote on a specific matter that, at the time of the exchange, the participating members expect to come before the subcommittee, committee, or full body immediately following the discussion or at a later time.

(2) **EXECUTIVE SESSION.** That portion of a meeting of a subcommittee, committee, or full governmental body from which the public is excluded for one or more of the reasons prescribed in Section 36-25A-7(a).

(3) **GENERAL REPUTATION AND CHARACTER.** Characteristics or actions of a person directly involving good or bad

ethical conduct, moral turpitude, or suspected criminal activity, not including job performance.

(4) **GOVERNMENTAL BODY.** All boards, bodies, and commissions of the executive and legislative departments of the state or its political subdivisions or municipalities which expend or appropriate public funds; all multimember governing bodies of departments, agencies, institutions, and instrumentalities of the executive and legislative departments of the state or its political subdivisions or municipalities, including, without limitation, all corporations and other instrumentalities whose governing boards are comprised of a majority of members who are appointed or elected by the state or its political subdivisions, counties, or municipalities; all quasi-judicial bodies of the executive and legislative departments of the state; and all standing, special, or advisory committees or subcommittees of, or appointed by, the body. The term “governmental body” does not include any of the following:

a. Legislative party caucuses or coalitions.

b. Alabama appellate or trial courts, except as required by the constitution of this state or any body governed by rules of the Alabama Supreme Court.

c. Voluntary membership associations comprised of public employees, retirees, counties, municipalities, or their instrumentalities which have not been delegated any legislative or executive functions by the Legislature or Governor.

(5) **JOB PERFORMANCE.** The observed conduct or actions of a public employee or public official while on the job in furtherance of his or her assigned duties. Job performance includes whether a person is meeting, exceeding, or failing to meet job requirements or whether formal employment actions should be taken by the governmental body. Job performance does not include the general reputation and character of the person being discussed.

(6) **MEETING.** a. Subject to the limitations herein, the term meeting shall only apply to the following:

1. The prearranged gathering of a quorum of a governmental body or a quorum of a committee or subcommittee of a governmental body at a time and place which is set by law or operation of law.

2. The prearranged gathering of a quorum of a governmental body or a quorum of a committee or subcommittee of a governmental body during which the full governmental body, committee, or subcommittee of the governmental body is authorized, either by law or otherwise, to exercise the powers which it possesses or approve the expenditure of public funds.

3. The gathering, whether or not it was prearranged, of a quorum of a governmental body during which the members of the governmental body deliberate specific matters that, at the time of the exchange, the participating members expect to come before the full governmental body at a later date.

4. The gathering, whether or not it was prearranged, of a quorum of a committee or subcommittee of a governmental body during which the members of the committee or subcommittee deliberate specific matters relating to the purpose of the committee or subcommittee that, at the time of the exchange, the participating members expect to come before the full governmental body, committee, or subcommittee at a later date.

b. The term “meeting” shall not include:

1. Occasions when a quorum of a governmental body, committee, or subcommittee attends social gatherings, conventions, conferences, training programs, press conferences, media events, association meetings and events or gathers for on-site inspections or meetings with applicants for economic incentives or assistance from the governmental body, or otherwise gathers so long as the subcommittee, committee, or full governmental body does not deliberate specific matters that, at the time of the exchange, the participating members expect to come before the subcommittee, committee, or full governmental body at a later date.

2. Occasions when a quorum of a subcommittee, committee, or full governmental body gathers, in person or by electronic communication, with state or federal officials for the purpose of reporting or obtaining information or seeking support for issues of importance to the subcommittee, committee, or full governmental body.

3. Notwithstanding subparagraph 1., occasions when two members of a governmental body, including two members of a governmental body which has three members, gather for the sole purpose of exchanging background and education information or for the sole purpose of discussing an economic, industrial, or commercial prospect or incentive that does not include a conclusion as to recommendations, policy, decision, or final action on the terms or request or an offer of public financial resources.

c. Nothing herein shall restrict or prevent two members of the same full governmental body from talking together without deliberation, including two members of a full governmental body having only three members, and nothing herein shall restrict or prevent a mayor or executive director of a city or municipality who is not a voting member of the city or municipal council from talking or deliberating with a member of the city or municipal council.

(7) OPEN OR PUBLIC PORTION OF A MEETING. The open or public portion of a meeting is that portion which has not been closed for executive session in accordance with this chapter, for which prior notice was given in compliance with this chapter, and which is conducted so that constituents of the governmental body, members of the media, persons interested in the activities of the governmental body, and citizens of this state could, if they desired, attend and observe.

(8) PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE. The ability of an individual to practice a profession within the profession's acceptable standards of care and responsibility. A profession is a vocation requiring certification by the State of Alabama or passage of a state licensing examination that may only be granted to or taken by persons who have completed at least three years of college-level education and obtained at least a college-level degree.

(9) PUBLIC EMPLOYEE. Any person employed at the state, county, or municipal levels of government or their instrumentalities, including governmental corporations and authorities, who is paid in whole or in part from state, county, or municipal funds. A public employee does not include a person employed on a part-time basis whose employment is limited to providing professional services other than lobbying, the compensation for which constitutes less than 50 percent of the part-time employee's income.

(10) PUBLIC FUNDS. Taxes or fees charged or collected by a governmental body or from the sale of public property including, but not limited to, matching funds from the federal government or income derived from the investment of taxes or fees.

(11) PUBLIC OFFICIAL. Any person elected to public office, whether or not that person has taken office, by the vote of the people at state, county, or municipal levels of government or their instrumentalities, including governmental corporations, and any person appointed to a position at the state, county, or municipal levels of government or their instrumentalities, including governmental corporations.

(12) QUORUM. Unless otherwise provided by law, a quorum is a majority of the voting members of a governmental body. Except where a governmental body is prohibited from holding a non-emergency meeting as defined in subdivision (6) a.1. between the date of election of members and the date such members take office, any person elected to serve on a governmental body shall be counted in the determination of whether a quorum of that governmental body is present, except for any meeting as defined in subdivisions (6)a.1. and 2., beginning on the date of certification of the results of the general election. In the case of appointment to a governmental body, any person shall be counted in the determination of whether a quorum of that governmental body is present, except for any meeting as defined in subdivisions (6)a.1. and 2., from the date that the appointment is made or issued whether or not the appointment is effective on that date.

(13) SERIAL MEETING. a. The term serial meeting applies to any series of gatherings of two or more members of a governmental body, at which:

1. Less than a quorum is present at each individual gathering and each individual gathering is attended by at least one member who also attends one or more other gatherings in the series.
2. The total number of members attending two or more of the series of gatherings collectively constitutes a quorum.
3. There is no notice or opportunity to attend provided to the public in accordance with this chapter.

4. The members participating in the gatherings deliberate specific matters that, at the time of the exchange, the participating members expect to come before the subcommittee, committee or full governmental body at a later date.
  5. The series of gatherings was held for the purpose of circumventing the provisions of this chapter.
  6. At least one of the meetings in the series occurs within seven calendar days of a vote on any of the matters deliberated.
- b. The term serial meeting does not include:
1. Gatherings, including a gathering of two members of a full governmental body having only three members, at which no deliberations were conducted or the sole purpose was to exchange background and education information with members on specific issues.
  2. A series of gatherings related to a search to fill a position required to file a statement of economic interests with the Alabama Ethics Commission pursuant to Section 36-25-14 until the search has been narrowed to three or fewer persons under consideration.
  3. A gathering or series of gatherings involving only a single member of a governmental body.
  4. A series of gatherings by the trustees of an institution of higher education established by the Constitution of Alabama of 1901, as amended, any statutorily created four-year institution of higher education in the state, or Athens State University involving a search to fill a position that directs the institution or a department or major divisions thereof, including the position of president, vice president, provost, dean, department head, or athletic coach.
  5. A meeting in which a public official who is a member of a non-profit professional association comprised of members of the same profession discusses or participates in the formation of the policy or policies of the professional association of which the public official is a member. This exception shall apply to both legislative policies of the professional association and regulatory policies of the professional association of which the public official is a member, and regardless of whether a quorum of the members of the governmental body are members of the same professional association.

(Act 2005-40, p. 55, §2; Act 2015-340, §1; Act 2015-475, §1; Act 2016-401, §1.)

### **SECTION 36-25A-3 NOTICE REQUIREMENTS.**

(a) Unless otherwise specified by law and as provided herein, any governmental body subject to this chapter, except for an advisory board, advisory commission, advisory committee, task force, or other advisory body created solely to make recommendations on public policy issues and composed of persons who do not receive compensation for their service as members of the board, commission, committee, task force, or body from public funds, shall post notice of all meetings, as defined in Section 36-25A-2(6)a.1., at least seven calendar days prior to the meeting as follows:

(1) The Alabama Legislature is solely governed by the Alabama Constitution which establishes that the doors of each house of the Alabama Legislature shall be open to the public unless a vote is taken that secrecy is required under the circumstances. The respective houses of the Alabama Legislature shall develop rules consistent with the Constitution of Alabama of 1901, providing for access to and prior notice of all sessions and standing committee and standing subcommittee meetings and all meetings of permanent and joint legislative committees. Because the Alabama Legislature is solely governed by the Alabama Constitution and sets its own rules to ensure public access as guaranteed by the Constitution, no other provision of this chapter applies to the Alabama Legislature.

(2) Any governmental body with statewide jurisdiction shall submit notice of its meeting to the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State shall post the notice on the Internet for at least seven calendar days prior to the day of the meeting. The Secretary of State shall also send electronic mail notifications to anyone who has registered with the Secretary of State to receive notification of meetings. The Secretary of State may promulgate reasonable rules and regulations necessary for the uniform receipt and posting of notice and of registration for electronic mail notification. The Secretary of State shall provide

during regular office hours a computer terminal at a place convenient to the public in the office of the Secretary of State that members of the public may use to view notices of meetings posted by the Secretary of State. Any governmental body with less than statewide jurisdiction may also submit notice to the Secretary of State for posting on the website. Nothing shall prevent a governmental body subject to this subsection from posting notice in any additional manner.

(3) A municipal governmental body shall post notice of each meeting on a bulletin board at a place convenient to the public in the city hall, provided, however, that a corporation a majority of whose governing board is appointed or elected by a municipality and that has a principal office separate from the city hall may, in lieu of posting notice in the city hall, post notice of each meeting on a bulletin board at a place convenient to the public in the principal office of the corporation or other instrumentality.

(4) A local school board shall post notice of each meeting on a bulletin board at a place convenient to the public in the central administrative office of the board.

(5) Any other governmental body shall post notice of each meeting in a reasonable location or shall use a reasonable method of notice that is convenient to the public. Any change of the location or method for posting notices of meetings shall not take effect until the change has been approved at an open meeting by the members of the governmental body and announced to the public at an open meeting.

(6) If practicable, a governmental body other than those with statewide jurisdiction, in addition to the posting requirements, shall provide direct notification of a meeting, as defined in Section 36-25A-2(6)a., to any member of the public or news media covering that governmental body who has registered with the governmental body to receive notification of meetings. A governmental body may promulgate reasonable rules and regulations necessary for the uniform registration and payment for direct notice and for the distribution of the notices. The governmental body may choose to transmit a notice using electronic mail, telephone, facsimile, the United States Postal Service, or any other method reasonably likely to provide the requested notice. The actual cost of issuing notices, if there is one, may be required to be paid in advance by the person requesting notice by the governmental body. Direct notice to persons who have registered with the governmental body shall, at a minimum, contain the time, date, and place of the meeting.

(b) Unless otherwise specified by law directly applicable to the governmental body, notice of a meeting, as defined in Section 36-25A-2(6)a.2. and 3. as well as meetings called pursuant to Section 11-43-50 shall be posted as soon as practicable after the meeting is called and in no event less than 24 hours before the meeting is scheduled to begin, unless such notice (i) is prevented by emergency circumstances requiring immediate action to avoid physical injury to persons or damage to property; or (ii) relates to a meeting to be held solely to accept the resignation of a public official or employee. In such situations, notice shall be given as soon as practical, but in no case less than one hour before the meeting is to begin. At the same time general notice is given, special notice shall be directed to any person who has registered to receive direct notices pursuant to the provisions of subsection (a)(6).

(c) Posted notice pursuant to this section shall include the time, date, and place of meeting. If a preliminary agenda is created, it shall be posted as soon as practicable in the same location or manner as the notice given pursuant to this section. A governmental body may discuss at a meeting additional matters not included in the preliminary agenda. If a preliminary agenda is not available, the posted notice shall include a general description of the nature and purpose of the meeting.

(d) County commissions which provide proper notice in conformance with Section 11-3-8 shall not be required to comply with subsections (a), (b), and (c) of this section, nor shall committees or subcommittees of such commissions so long as the committees also comply with the notice procedures applicable to the full commission in Section 11-3-8.

(e) Governmental bodies may give, but shall not be required to give, notice of quasi-judicial or contested case hearings which could properly be conducted as an executive session under this chapter or existing state law.

(f) A governmental body is authorized, but not required, to provide notice in addition to that specified in this section and to provide notice for gatherings which are not meetings as defined in Section 36-25A-2(6).

(Act 2005-40, p. 55, §3; Act 2015-340, §1.)

## **SECTION 36-25A-4 MAINTENANCE OF RECORDS.**

A governmental body shall maintain accurate records of its meetings, excluding executive sessions, setting forth the date, time, place, members present or absent, and action taken at each meeting. Except as otherwise provided by law, the records of each meeting shall become a public record and be made available to the public as soon as practicable after approval.

(Act 2005-40, p. 55, §4.)

## **SECTION 36-25A-5 RULES OF PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURE; VOTING.**

(a) Unless otherwise provided by law, meetings shall be conducted pursuant to the governing body's adopted rules of parliamentary procedure not in conflict with laws applicable to the governmental body.

(b) Unless otherwise permitted by this chapter or directed by provisions in the Constitution of Alabama of 1901, or other existing state law applicable to the governmental body, all votes on matters before a governmental body, including, but not limited to, votes to appropriate or to authorize a governmental body's designated employee, within limits prescribed by the governmental body without further authorization of the governmental body, to spend public funds, to levy taxes or fees, to forgive debts to the governmental body, or to grant tax abatements, shall be made during the open or public portion of a meeting for which notice has been provided pursuant to this chapter. Voice votes may be allowed. Unless permitted by this chapter, existing statute, or constitutional amendment, no votes shall be taken in executive sessions. Unless otherwise directed by provisions in the Constitution of Alabama of 1901, or other existing state law applicable to a governmental body, a governmental body may not vote by secret ballot.

(Act 2005-40, p. 55, §5.)

## **SECTION 36-25A-5.1 PARTICIPATION BY ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS.**

(a)(1) Except as provided in subsection (d), members of a governmental body as defined in Section 36-25A-2, that is comprised of members from two or more counties, may participate in a meeting of that governmental body by means of telephone conference, video conference, or other similar communications equipment that allows all persons participating in the meeting to hear each other at the same time. Participation by these electronic means shall constitute presence in person at the meeting for all purposes; provided, that at least three members, or a majority of a quorum of members, whichever is less, are physically present at the physical meeting location required by subsection (b).

(2) If a member is participating in a meeting of a governmental body by electronic means as authorized in this section, the governmental body shall ensure that means of access to the electronic communication is published in the same manner as the notice of the meeting is published pursuant to this chapter.

(3) The means of access shall allow members of the public to hear the meeting. A governmental body is not required to allow the public to participate by electronic means to any extent beyond being able to hear the meeting.

(b) Every meeting shall have one physical location available for persons wishing to be physically present, at which any interested member of the public shall be able to hear all persons who are participating remotely, and that location shall be published in a manner consistent with this chapter.

(c) Except as otherwise provided by this section, use of electronic communication shall be done in a manner that complies with this chapter.

(d) The members of the following governmental bodies are prohibited from participating in meetings and deliberation via electronic communications as otherwise authorized by this section:

(1) The Board of Pardons and Paroles.

(2) The Public Service Commission.

- (3) Standing committees of the Legislature while the Legislature is in session.
- (4) A governing board taking any action under the Students First Act of 2011.
- (5) Any state board or agency acting in any quasi judicial capacity involving employment actions or the adoption of rules pursuant to statutory authority.
- (6) Any state board, agency, or other governmental body conducting a hearing that could result in loss of licensure or professional censure.
- (7) The Alabama Ethics Commission.
- (e) Any vote taken at a meeting utilizing the equipment contemplated by subsection (a) shall be taken as a roll call vote that allows each participant to vote individually in a manner audible to all persons participating or present at the physical location provided for in subsection (b).
- (f) A member participating in a meeting by means provided by this section may not claim any form of reimbursement for expenses relating to that meeting, including mileage and per diem.
- (g) If the electronic communications fail or are in any way interrupted during a meeting otherwise in compliance with this chapter, that failure shall not be grounds to challenge any action taken during the meeting.
- (h) Any governmental body comprised of members from two or more counties with specific statutory or constitutional authority to meet via electronic means under a procedure different than that set forth in this section may operate under the requirements of that specific authority or may adopt a resolution opting to come under the requirements of this section.

(Act 2015-526, 1st Sp. Sess., p. 1884, §1; Act 2022-421, §1.)

### **SECTION 36-25A-5.2 ELECTRONIC ATTENDANCE AT MEETINGS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTAL BODIES BY MEMBERS AND THE PUBLIC.**

- (a) Any governmental body as defined in Section 36-25A-2 that is of a county or a municipality or is an entity established by or whose members are appointed by a county or municipality may allow participation in a meeting of that governmental body by means of telephone conference, video conference, or other similar communications equipment that allows all participants to hear one another at the same time; provided, that both of the following are fulfilled:
  - (1) No less than a quorum of the members of the governmental body are physically present at the physical location required by subsection (d).
  - (2) The members of the body participating by electronic means as provided in this section are unable to be physically present at the meeting due to illness.
- (b) Participation by electronic means as authorized in this section shall constitute presence in person at the meeting for all purposes, except for the establishment of a quorum.
- (c) At least 45 days before the first meeting that a governmental body uses electronic means of communication as authorized by this section, the body shall adopt an electronic meeting policy detailing the procedures and communications equipment that will be used, how the public may access the meeting, and how voting will be conducted.
- (d) Each meeting in which members of a governmental body are participating by electronic means as authorized in this section shall be held at a physical location available for persons wishing to be physically present, at which any interested member of the public shall be able to hear all persons who are participating remotely.

(e) Any vote taken at a meeting utilizing the equipment authorized by subsection (a) shall be taken as a roll call vote that allows each participant to vote individually in a manner audible to all persons participating or present at the physical location provided for in subsection (d).

(f) A member participating in a meeting by electronic means as provided by this section may not claim any form of reimbursement for expenses relating to that meeting, including mileage.

(Act 2022-421, §2.)

## **SECTION 36-25A-6 RECORDING OF MEETING.**

A meeting of a governmental body, except while in executive session, may be openly recorded by any person in attendance by means of a tape recorder or any other means of sonic, photographic, or video reproduction provided the recording does not disrupt the conduct of the meeting. The governmental body may adopt reasonable rules for the implementation of this section.

(Act 2005-40, p. 55, §6.)

## **SECTION 36-25A-7 EXECUTIVE SESSIONS.**

(a) Executive sessions are not required by this chapter, but may be held by a governmental body only for the following purposes:

(1) To discuss the general reputation and character, physical condition, professional competence, or mental health of individuals, or, subject to the limitations set out herein, to discuss the job performance of certain public employees. However, except as provided elsewhere in this section, discussions of the job performance of specific public officials or specific public employees may not be discussed in executive session if the person is an elected or appointed public official, an appointed member of a state or local board or commission, or a public employee who is one of the classification of public employees required to file a statement of economic interests with the Alabama Ethics Commission pursuant to Section 36-25-14. Except as provided elsewhere in this section, the salary, compensation, and job benefits of specific public officials or specific public employees may not be discussed in executive session.

(2) When expressly allowed by federal law or state law, to consider the discipline or dismissal of, or to hear formal written complaints or charges brought against a public employee, a student at a public school or college, or an individual, corporation, partnership, or other legal entity subject to the regulation of the governmental body.

(3) To discuss with their attorney the legal ramifications of and legal options for pending litigation, controversies not yet being litigated but imminently likely to be litigated or imminently likely to be litigated if the governmental body pursues a proposed course of action, or to meet or confer with a mediator or arbitrator with respect to any litigation or decision concerning matters within the jurisdiction of the governmental body involving another party, group, or body. Prior to voting to convene an executive session under this exception the governmental body shall receive a written opinion or oral declaration reflected in the minutes from an attorney licensed to practice law in Alabama that this exception is applicable to the planned discussion. Such declaration shall not otherwise constitute a waiver of the attorney-client privilege. Notwithstanding the foregoing, if any deliberation begins among the members of the governmental body regarding what action to take relating to pending or threatened litigation based upon the advice of counsel, the executive session shall be concluded and the deliberation shall be conducted in the open portion of the meeting or the deliberation shall cease.

(4) To discuss security plans, procedures, assessments, measures, or systems, or the security or safety of persons, structures, facilities, or other infrastructures, including, without limitation, information concerning critical infrastructure, as defined by federal law, and critical energy infrastructure information, as defined by federal law, the public disclosures of which could reasonably be expected to be detrimental to public safety or welfare. Provided, however, that when the discussion involves critical infrastructure or critical energy infrastructure information, the owners and operators of such infrastructure shall be given notice and an opportunity to attend the session.



(5) To discuss information that would disclose the identity of an undercover law enforcement agent or informer or to discuss the criminal investigation of a person who is not a public official in which allegations or charges of specific criminal misconduct have been made or to discuss whether or not to file a criminal complaint. Provided, however, that prior to such discussions a law enforcement officer with authority to make an arrest or a district or assistant district attorney or the Attorney General or assistant attorney general shall advise the governmental body in writing or by oral declaration entered into the minutes that the discussions would imperil effective law enforcement if disclosed outside of an executive session.

(6) To discuss the consideration the governmental body is willing to offer or accept when considering the purchase, sale, exchange, lease, or market value of real property. Provided, however, that the material terms of any contract to purchase, exchange, or lease real property shall be disclosed in the public portion of a meeting prior to the execution of the contract. If an executive session is utilized pursuant to this exception in addition to the members of the governmental body, only persons representing the interests of the governmental body in the transaction may be present during the executive session. This real property discussion exception shall not apply if:

a. Any member of the governmental body involved in the transaction has a personal interest in the transaction and attends or participates in the executive session concerning the real property.

b. A condemnation action has been filed to acquire the real property involved in the discussion.

(7) To discuss preliminary negotiations involving matters of trade or commerce in which the governmental body is in competition with private individuals or entities or other governmental bodies in Alabama or in other states or foreign nations or to discuss matters or information of the character defined or described in the Alabama Trade Secrets Act. Provided, however, that prior to such discussions a person involved in the recruitment or retention effort or who has personal knowledge that the discussion will involve matter or information of the character defined or described in the Alabama Trade Secrets Act advises the governmental body in writing or by oral declaration entered into the minutes that the discussions would have a detrimental effect upon the competitive position of a party to the negotiations or upon the location, retention, expansion, or upgrading of a public employee or business entity in the area served by the governmental body if disclosed outside of an executive session, or would disclose information protected by the Alabama Trade Secrets Act.

(8) To discuss strategy in preparation for negotiations between the governmental body and a group of public employees. Provided, however, that prior to such discussions a person representing the interests of a governmental body involved in such negotiations advises the governmental body in writing or by oral declaration entered into the minutes that the discussions would have a detrimental effect upon the negotiating position of the governmental body if disclosed outside of an executive session.

(9) To deliberate and discuss evidence or testimony presented during a public or contested case hearing and vote upon the outcome of the proceeding or hearing if the governmental body is acting in the capacity of a quasi-judicial body, and either votes upon its decision in an open meeting or issues a written decision which may be appealed to a hearing officer, an administrative board, court, or other body which has the authority to conduct a hearing or appeal of the matter which is open to the public.

(b) A governmental body desiring to convene an executive session, other than to conduct a quasi-judicial or contested case hearing, shall utilize the following procedure:

(1) A quorum of the governmental body must first convene a meeting as defined in Section 36-25A-2(6)a.1. and 2.

(2) A majority of the members of the governmental body present must adopt, by recorded vote, a motion calling for the executive session and setting out the purpose of the executive session, as provided in subsection (a). If subsection (a) requires an oral or written declaration before the executive session can begin, such oral or written declaration shall be made, prior to the vote.

(3) The vote of each member shall be recorded in the minutes.

(4) Prior to calling the executive session to order, the presiding officer shall state whether the governmental body will

reconvene after the executive session and, if so, the approximate time the body expects to reconvene.

(Act 2005-40, p. 55, §7.)

### **SECTION 36-25A-8 IMMUNITY FROM SUIT.**

In addition to any existing applicable immunity, members of a governmental body and any of its employees participating in a meeting conducted in conformance with this chapter shall have an absolute privilege and immunity from suit for any statement made during the meeting which relates to an action pending before the governmental body.

(Act 2005-40, p. 55, §8.)

### **SECTION 36-25A-9 ENFORCEMENT; HEARINGS; PENALTIES AND REMEDIES.**

(a) This chapter is designed and intended to hold members of governmental bodies, and the bodies themselves, accountable to the public for violations of this chapter. Therefore, enforcement of this chapter, except a violation of Section 26-25A-3(a) (1), may be sought by civil action brought in the county where the governmental body's primary office is located by any media organization, any Alabama citizen impacted by the alleged violation to an extent which is greater than the impact on the public at large, the Attorney General, or the district attorney for the circuit in which the governmental body is located; provided, however, that no member of a governmental body may serve as a plaintiff in an action brought against another member of the same governmental body for an alleged violation of this chapter. The complaint shall be verified, shall state specifically the applicable ground or grounds for the complaint as set out in subdivisions (1) through (4) of subsection (b), and shall name in their official capacity all members of the governmental body remaining in attendance at the alleged meeting held in violation of this chapter. If filed by an Alabama citizen, the complaint shall state specifically how the person is or will be impacted by the alleged violation to an extent which is greater than the impact on the public at large. Members of a governmental body who are named as a defendant in a complaint under this chapter shall serve an initial response to the complaint within seven business days of personal service of the complaint. A preliminary hearing on the complaint filed shall be held no later than 10 business days after the date of the filing of the defendant or defendants' initial response to the complaint or, if no response is filed, no later than 17 business days after the filing of the complaint, or on the nearest day thereafter as the court shall fix, having regard to the speediest possible determination of the cause consistent with the rights of the parties.

(b) In the preliminary hearing on the complaint, the plaintiff shall establish by a preponderance of the evidence that a meeting of the governmental body occurred and that each defendant attended the meeting. Additionally, to establish a prima facie case the plaintiff must present substantial evidence of one or more of the following claims:

(1) That the defendants disregarded the requirements for proper notice of the meeting pursuant to the applicable methods set forth in Section 36-25A-3.

(2) That the defendants disregarded the provisions of this chapter during a meeting, other than during an executive session.

(3) That the defendants voted to go into executive session and while in executive session the defendants discussed matters other than those subjects included in the motion to convene an executive session as required by Section 36-25A-7(b).

(4) That, other than a claim under subdivisions (1) through (3), the defendants intentionally violated other provisions of this chapter.

(c) If the court finds that the plaintiff has met its initial burden of proof as required in subsection (b) at the preliminary hearing, the court shall establish a schedule for discovery and set the matter for a hearing on the merits. If, at the preliminary hearing, the plaintiff has presented its prima facie case that an executive session appears to have been improperly conducted as set out in subsection (b)(3), the defendants shall bear the burden of proof at the hearing on the merits to prove by a preponderance of the evidence that the discussions during the executive session were limited to matters related to the subjects included in the motion to convene an executive session required in Section 36-25A-7(a).

(d) During a proceeding involving claims brought under subsection (b)(3), the court shall conduct an in camera proceeding

or adopt another procedure as necessary to protect the confidentiality of the matters discussed during the executive session, and if there is a determination that the executive session was authorized by this chapter, the matters shall not be disclosed or utilized in any other legal proceeding by any individual or attorney who attends the in camera portion of the proceedings.

(e) Upon proof by a preponderance of the evidence of a defendant's violation of this chapter, the circuit court shall issue an appropriate final order including, if appropriate, a declaratory judgment or injunction. Prior to a final determination of the merits, temporary restraining orders or preliminary injunctions may be issued upon proper motion and proof as provided and required in the Alabama Rules of Civil Procedure. A final order on the merits shall be issued within 60 days after the preliminary hearing unless a longer period is consented to by all parties and the court.

(f) The court may invalidate the action or actions taken during a meeting held in violation of this chapter, provided that the complaint is filed within 21 days of the date when the action is made public, the violation was not the result of mistake, inadvertence, or excusable neglect, and invalidation of the governmental action taken would not unduly prejudice third parties who have changed their position or taken action in good faith reliance upon the challenged action of the governmental body; provided further, however, that any action taken at an open meeting conducted in a manner consistent with this chapter shall not be invalidated because of a violation of this chapter which occurred prior to such meeting.

(g) A final order issued against a defendant shall state specifically upon which claim or claims in subdivisions (1) through (4) the ruling is based. For each meeting proven to be held in violation of this chapter for one or more reasons, the court shall impose a civil penalty payable to the plaintiff(s). The maximum penalty for each meeting shall not exceed one thousand dollars (\$1,000) or one half of the defendant's monthly salary for service on the governmental body, whichever is less. The minimum penalty shall be one dollar (\$1). With regard to claims related to improper discussions during executive sessions, monetary penalties may only be assessed against defendant members of a governmental body who voted to go into an executive session and who remained in the executive session during a discussion determined by the court not to have been authorized by this chapter. Penalties imposed against a member of a governmental body found to have acted in violation of this chapter shall not be paid by nor reimbursed to the member by the governmental body he or she serves. If more than one cause of action is filed pursuant to this chapter, all causes of action based on or arising out of the same alleged violation or violations shall be consolidated into the action that was first filed and any party may intervene into the consolidated action pursuant to the Alabama Rules of Civil Procedure, and no member found to have acted in violation of this chapter by a final court order and assessed a penalty as authorized herein shall be subject to further liability or penalty to the same or different plaintiffs in separate causes of action for the same violation or violations.

(h) A governmental body is authorized to pay for or provide for the legal expenses of present or former members of the body named as defendants in a proceeding under this chapter.

(Act 2005-40, p. 55, §9; Act 2015-340, §1.)

### **SECTION 36-25A-10 LIMITATION PERIOD.**

An action under this chapter must be brought within 60 days of the date that the plaintiff knew or should have known of the alleged act which brings rise to the cause of action; provided, however, that any action under this chapter must be brought within two years of the alleged act which brings rise to the cause of action.

(Act 2005-40, p. 55, §11.)

### **SECTION 36-25A-11 REPEALER AND CONSTRUCTION.**

Section 13A-14-2, is repealed. All specific references in the Code of Alabama 1975 to Section 13A-14-2 shall be considered a reference to this chapter and where expressly excluded or included from application of Section 13A-14-2, the exclusion or inclusion from application shall remain as it applies to these new sections. The Code Commissioner, when appropriate, shall implement these changes in the Code of Alabama 1975. Nothing in this chapter shall be construed to repeal or amend any portion of the Code of Alabama 1975, in effect on October 1, 2005, except as expressly provided herein.

(Act 2005-40, p. 55, §10.)