



## Putnam County Board of County Commissioners Citizen Board Member Handbook

Dear Board Member:

Thank you for taking the time to volunteer to serve the citizens of Putnam County on a citizen board. Your willingness to donate your time and energy is appreciated by County elected officials, County Staff and citizens.

As a volunteer board member, you are to be congratulated for your desire to help others. Many people only wish they could make this a better community, but you have taken the step to turn wishes into action.

Your responsibility is to conduct the people's business in an open, mindful and fair manner by listening to all parties interested in the issue before you and making good decisions that serve the community.

When people come together to work on an issue, there is a great sense of power. Making things happen to help people is perhaps the most satisfying part about belonging to a citizen board. When you work to enrich the lives of others, you enrich your own life.

The issues and personalities involved in doing the people's business are complex and challenging. Don't let frustrations get you down as you serve on this board. Our mission cannot be accomplished in a day or a year.

Your commitment however can help you through any difficult times. A committed board is essential to the success of the organization. With your commitment, we will make a real difference in the lives of the people we serve - the citizens of Putnam County.

Thank you for providing this service to Putnam County.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Terry K. Suggs".

Terry K. Suggs  
County Administrator

# INTRODUCTION

At the heart of local government is Home Rule, which calls for local self-government by the citizens. This means that, ideally, local public policies and the resulting decisions are a product of the input from citizens of the community, i.e., true democracy. A quality County government, and thus the quality of life in the community, can only be obtained through having knowledgeable citizens who actively participate in their local government.

If a citizen wishes to participate directly in County government, one means is to serve on a local board or committee. These boards are sometimes assigned significant powers of policymaking and/or administration. Advisory committees also serve an important function in providing expertise in certain areas of county concern. Advisory committees lack the power to make or administer policy on their own. Instead, advisory committees take up matters that deserve the extra attention and consideration that only a group of interested, concerned citizens can render.

Putnam County has a County Commission/County Administrator form of government. The Commission exercises power and control via decision making and establishing policy. The County Administrator has the responsibility for ensuring that those decisions and policies are carried out.

Putnam County is pleased to provide the “Putnam County Citizen Board Member Handbook” as our way of increasing citizen knowledge and awareness of County Government.

This Handbook was prepared for use by all of the committees and boards of Putnam County.

## BOARD PROCEDURES AND PROPER DECORUM

- a. **Board Chair Conducts the Meetings.** Each board must elect a chair and a vice chair. The board chair conducts the meetings generally in accord with Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised.
- b. **Recording of Meetings and Meeting Minutes.** Each meeting is generally tape recorded. These recordings are generally kept for approximately two years. Each board keeps minutes of its proceedings, indicating the attendance of each member, and the decision on every question. The minutes also indicate if a member is absent for a vote or disqualified from voting. The minutes become part of the County’s permanent records.
- c. **Proper Decorum.** Any comments made while the meeting is in session may be recorded and made part of the record. Thus, any comments or statements made during formal proceedings should be limited to consideration of the matter before the board at the time such comments are made. Personal comments or attacks must be avoided.
- d. **Attendance and the Need for a Quorum.** *A quorum is required in order to conduct the business of the board.* A majority of the members of the board being present and qualified to vote constitutes a quorum. (For example, if it is a nine member board, a minimum of five members must be present to conduct the business of the board). As a member of a citizen board, being in attendance at every meeting is very important in order to ensure that a quorum is met and official business of the board can take place. Attendance at board meetings will be monitored and reported to the Board of County Commissioners. Board members which do not regularly attend meetings may be removed in order to provide opportunities for other interested citizens to serve.
- e. **Voting.** Each decision of a board, whether a final decision or a recommendation, must be approved by a majority vote of the members present at a meeting in which a quorum is in attendance and voting. All members must vote on all matters before the board, unless absent or otherwise prohibited by law from voting.

Decisions of the Board are presented in the form of a motion by any voting member, which is then seconded by another voting member. The motion should not be discussed, unless clarification of the motion is required, until the motion receives a proper second. Upon a second, the motion is opened for board discussion and upon completion of the discussion, the motion is put to a vote.

Illustration of a typical voting scenario:

**Board Member Smith:** “I move we approve/disapprove the proposal as presented by Citizen Kane.”

**Board Member Jones:** “I second the motion.”

**Chairman:** “There being a motion and a second, the matter is open for Board discussion”

[Board discussion of the matter takes place, at which time the Board can further debate the proposal and even ask clarifying questions of Staff, legal counsel and citizens in attendance. The discussion will be closed at the discretion of the Chair or when a member “calls for question”, which is a request that the vote be held.]

**Chairman:** “The discussion is closed and the Chair will entertain a vote, all those in favor please signify by saying “Aye”

[Each Board member in favor responds]

**Chairman:** “All those opposed, like sign”

[At this time all those opposed to the motion signify by saying “Aye”]

- f. **Tie Votes.** A tie vote is considered a denial of the motion. After a tie vote, the chair will attempt to get the membership to resolve the matter by further motion(s). If no further motion is made and seconded, the matter is concluded. If a subsequent motion(s) is made and the vote results in another tie, the chair shall declare the tie vote(s) a denial of the motion.
- g. **Open Meetings.** All citizen board meetings are open to the public and shall comply with the Sunshine Law, which is summarized in the next section.
- h. **Basic Principles of Conduct.** In carrying out the procedures and decorum as described above, the following principles should be observed:
  - Consider one matter at a time.
  - Make informed decisions.
  - Respect the right of majority rule.
  - Respect the right of the minority view to be heard.
  - Allow free and impartial debate of the relevant facts.
  - Conduct business in a reasonable length of time.
  - Navigate difficult issues fairly and judiciously.
  - Be courteous and respectful of fellow board members and the citizens in attendance.
  - Never exercise authority as a board member except when acting in a meeting with the full board or when acting as delegated by the board.

## **THE SUNSHINE LAW**

The Sunshine Law provides a right of access to governmental proceedings at both the state and local levels. The law is equally applicable to elected and appointed public bodies and has been applied to any gathering of two or more members of the same board or committee to discuss some matter which may foreseeably come before that board or committee for action.

There are three basic requirements:

1. meetings of public boards/committees must be open to the public;
2. reasonable notice of such meetings must be given; and
3. minutes of the meetings must be taken.

The Sunshine Law extends to discussions and deliberations of, as well as the formal action taken by, a public body. The Sunshine Law is applicable to all functions of the public body, whether formal or informal, which relate to the affairs and duties of the public body. The fact that the meeting is characterized as “non-substantive” does not remove it from the coverage of the Sunshine Law. If the “non-substantive” business requires the approval or consideration of the entire public body, or concerns matters which should appropriately be considered and discussed by the entire public body, such meeting must be conducted in the Sunshine. The fact that a quorum is not present at a particular meeting or that “official” action is not taken at such meeting, does not remove the meeting from the requirements of the Sunshine Law.

The use of a telephone to conduct such discussions does not remove the conversation from the requirements of the Law. Members of a Board are not prohibited from meeting together socially; however, matters that may come before their board/committee must not be discussed.

Any person who knowingly violates the Sunshine Law is guilty of a second degree misdemeanor, which is a criminal offense punishable by a term of imprisonment not to exceed 60 days and/or a fine not to exceed \$500.00. The person may also be removed from office and subjected to civil penalties.

## **PUBLIC RECORDS**

The Public Records Law, a part of the Sunshine Law, generally provides that all documents, records or other materials made or received in connection with public business which are used to preserve, communicate or formalize knowledge are open for public inspection, unless specifically exempted by statute. You should assume that all documents or records that you make or receive that relate in any manner to the business of your board/committee are open for inspection by anyone that requests. Accordingly, you should be careful not to mix public business with your private affairs in the same document or record, unless you have no objection to your private affairs becoming a part of the public record and available for inspection/copying. E mail messages made or received in connection with official business are public records to the same extent that a written document is.

Requests for the inspection/copying of public records will be handled by the County Department Head that is responsible for your board as specified above. If you receive a request for public records, please contact that Department Head promptly. The Department Head will consult with the County Attorney if needed.

## FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE

Conflicts of interest may occur when public officials are in a position to make decisions which affect their personal financial interests. This is why certain public officers and employees are required to publicly disclose their financial interests. The disclosure process serves to remind officials of their obligation to put the public interest above personal considerations. It also helps citizens to monitor those who spend their tax dollars and participate in public policy decisions or administration.

Members of the following boards are required to file Form 1 - Limited Financial Disclosure:

1. Planning Commission;
2. Zoning Board of Adjustment; and
3. Codes Enforcement Board.

The FORM 1 requirements are set forth fully on the form. A Form 1 must be filed by July 1 of each year with the Supervisor of Elections. In general, this includes the reporting person's sources and types of financial interests, such as the names of employers and addresses of real property holdings. NO DOLLAR VALUES ARE REQUIRED TO BE LISTED. In addition, the Form requires the disclosure of certain relationships with, and ownership interests in, specified types of businesses such as banks, savings and loans, insurance companies, and utility companies.

If you have questions regarding the filing of this form, please contact the Supervisor of Election's office at 326-7151.

Even if you are not required to file Form 1, you must abstain from voting on a matter that would result in a "special private gain or loss" to you, to any principal by whom you have been retained or to any business associate or relative (father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, brother, sister, father-in-law, mother-in-law, son-in-law or daughter-in-law). The term "special private gain or loss" almost always refers to a financial interest; however, there could be other circumstances that would create a possible conflict of interest. If you do not believe in good conscience that you could render a fair and impartial decision, you should abstain and avoid even the appearance of impropriety.

## **LIABILITY INSURANCE**

You are provided insurance coverage through the Florida Association of Counties Trust on the same basis as regular County employees as long as you are acting within the scope of your duties as a board member. This coverage is generally limited to \$100,000 per person/\$200,000 per occurrence and covers liability for such things as negligence, errors and omissions and violation of civil rights claims.

If you have questions regarding this coverage, or if you become aware of a potential claim against you or your board, please contact Barbara Shepherd of the Human Resources Department at 329-1270.