

Civic Agencies Training

Plain Language Module



Welcome to the City of Vancouver's Civic Agencies!

The slides that follow are in “plain language,” which means they are easy to understand. Government officials sometimes use language that is hard to understand, especially if you're new to the English language. That's why we created this guide to give you the important information you need to participate in a Civic Agency.

Let's get started!

Civic Agencies are volunteer groups who help the City of Vancouver listen to residents and work on important issues. They share their ideas and opinions with City Council and staff.

Civic Agencies can offer advice, but they usually can't make official decisions for the City. City Council and staff can choose whether or not to follow their advice, unless the law says they have to.

Civic agency members are mostly volunteers picked by City Council. They might work with different groups like Council, the Park Board, the Police Department, the Public Library, and the School Board, as well as with City staff.

Different types of Civic Agency can give advice to Council and staff, or specific groups like the Library or PNE. This advice could be about lots of different things, like accessibility, rules for building construction, or including Indigenous Peoples' perspectives in City decisions.

How do members join Civic Agencies?

To find new Civic Agency members, we use social media, newspapers, and the City's website. Non-profit organizations help spread the word too. **We want diverse applicants with many different views.**

City staff check if applicants meet the requirements, and then **City Council picks the members.** They make sure to include groups who face unfair treatment, like Women, 2SLGBTQ+ People, People with Disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, and People of Colour.

How much of my time will this take?

Different Civic Agencies take different amounts of time. Members usually spend around **5 to 10 hours each month** going to meetings, reading reports, and answering emails.

Some Civic Agencies might need more of your time. For example, the Vancouver Heritage Commission meets for three hours every three weeks, and the Urban Design Panel has monthly meetings that can last up to six hours.

What does the City do?

In Canada, there are three levels of government: **Federal, Provincial, and Municipal**. The Federal Government handles things like taxes, the military, and citizenship. The Provincial Government takes care of things like hospitals, schools, and social services.

The City of Vancouver is a Municipal Government, and is responsible for things like roads, parks, police and firefighters, and utilities. It also makes rules about building construction and safety.

Who decides what happens in the City?



The City has **elected officials** who are in charge of making decisions for the Community. Every four years, residents vote to choose these officials.

City Council has a **Mayor and 10 Councillors**. They make decisions about most things in the City.

There are also **7 Park Board Commissioners** who make decisions about parks, and **9 School Board Trustees** who make decisions about schools.

Does the City work with Indigenous Peoples?



Vancouver is on the traditional lands of the **Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Peoples**, who have their own governments. Together, they are called the **Host Nations**.

The Host Nations never agreed that the City could be here, and it is important that the City work together with them, and always show respect and gratitude.

There are also Indigenous People in Vancouver who live away from their traditional lands, called **Urban Indigenous Peoples**. It is also important for the City to include their perspectives when making decisions.

How is the City Organized?

When City Council decides something, **City staff** makes sure it happens. Staff in different **departments**, led by **General Managers**, work together under the **City Manager**.

For example, if Council wants a new traffic light at an intersection, the General Manager of the Engineering Department makes sure there's enough money, and then Engineering staff install the light. Then, staff come back and tell Council that the work is done.

City Council listens to many people before they make decisions for Vancouver. They hear from residents, the Host Nations and other Indigenous Peoples, government officials, civic agencies, and staff.

After learning about different options and hearing different opinions, Council members talk about the decision at a **Council Meeting**. If most Council members agree, the decision becomes a plan and staff start to work on it.

As a Civic Agency member, your **main responsibilities** are:

Come to meetings and talk about issues that are important to your Civic Agency.

Help your Civic Agency outside of meetings by doing research or talking to community members.

Follow the City's rules about being respectful and honest, and protecting people's privacy.

What do others do on the Civic Agency?



The **Chair** of the Civic Agency is chosen by the other members to lead the meetings and make sure everyone is treated fairly.

The **Council Liaison** is a Councillor who shares updates from Council meetings.

External Liaisons are officials from other organizations who share updates on their work.

The **Staff Liaison** helps the Civic Agency with advice and information.

The **Clerk** organizes meetings and takes notes.

What are the different kinds of meetings?



At **Regular Meetings**, members can give advice to City Council and staff, and the public can watch.

If there is an urgent matter, members can hold a **Special Meeting** to give advice to Council and staff, and the public can watch.

Some Civic Agencies have **Working Sessions** or **Subcommittee Meetings** to learn or talk about specific topics. Members can not give advice in these meetings, and the public does not watch unless invited.

What happens during a meeting?

A Civic Agency needs to have **quorum** to start a meeting, which means that more than half of the members are there.

The group follows an **agenda**, which is a list of topics to discuss. If someone wants to suggest something or make a decision, there is a **vote**.

When the meeting is over or all the topics are discussed, members vote to **adjourn**, or end the meeting. After than, they can't talk about the agenda topics or make more decisions together.

What is a Land Acknowledgment?

At the start of a meeting, we give a **Land Acknowledgement** to show respect for the traditional lands of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. It should be thoughtful and planned.

If there are Indigenous People at the meeting, they shouldn't be expected to give the Land Acknowledgement, unless they have agreed to do so before the meeting.

Keep your Land Acknowledgement sincere, respectful, and simple, and speak from the heart.

For example: “We recognize that we are on the traditional lands of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Peoples. We thank them for caring for the lands and waters that sustain us, and we commit to building good relationships with them.”

Who creates the meeting agenda?

The Chair, with help from the Staff Liaison and Clerk, makes the **agenda** for the meeting by adding topics suggested by members, liaisons, and staff.

The agenda is shared with members on the City's website, so they can prepare for the meeting.

For Working Sessions or Subcommittee Meetings, members make their own agenda without staff help, and it's not shared on the website.

During the meeting, members can change the agenda if at least two-thirds agree. This might happen if some members need to leave early, or if members want more information on an agenda topic.

If new topics come up after the agenda is created, the group can talk about them at the end of the agenda, under an item called **New Business**.

How is the meeting recorded?

In a meeting, the Clerk takes short notes called **minutes** to show what happened. Members can also take their own notes.

The Clerk reviews the minutes with the Chair and Staff Liaison, then shares them on the City website and sends them to Mayor and Council, liaisons, staff, and members.

At the next meeting, members vote to approve the minutes and make changes if needed. Notes from Working Sessions or Subcommittee Meetings don't need approval, but members should give a summary during a Regular Meeting.

What if I need to miss a meeting?

Tell the Clerk and Chair ahead of time if you know you'll miss a meeting, and they'll put a **leave of absence** request on the meeting agenda. The group will decide whether to approve your request. This also helps them make sure the meeting will still have quorum.

If you're sick, you don't need to ask for a leave of absence, but do tell the Clerk and Chair ahead of time.

Missing three consecutive meetings without an approved leave of absence can result in losing your membership. Remember that just asking for a leave of absence isn't enough, since the group also needs to approve it during the meeting.

What if I need to miss a meeting?

If you need to miss a meeting, tell the Clerk and Chair beforehand. They'll put a request for a **leave of absence** on the agenda, and the group will decide if to approve it.

You don't need a leave of absence if you're sick, but still tell the Clerk and Chair. This helps make sure the meeting will have enough members.

If you miss three meetings without an approved leave of absence, you can lose your membership.

How can I be respectful in meetings?

Share your pronouns when introducing yourself. Give others a chance to speak, and listen closely. Avoid interrupting or taking credit for other members' ideas, and if someone gets interrupted, make sure they can finish talking. Be polite when discussing ideas, even if you disagree. Try to avoid negative body language like eye rolling. If the meeting will cover upsetting topics, tell everyone ahead of time.

To make decisions, Civic Agencies use **motions**. These are like suggestions that the group talks about and votes on. Motions can only be decided on in Regular or Special Meetings.

Some Civic Agencies may use different ways to make decisions that aim to get everyone to agree. If your group wants to learn more about these methods, please talk to your Clerk.

What makes a good motion?

Motions should be **related** to the Civic Agency's purpose. With the help of your Staff Liaison, check if the Civic Agency or the City can act on your motion if it passes.

If the motion is long or important, **share it with the group before the meeting**. Ordinary motions like approvals for minutes or leaves of absence do not need to be shared in advance.

Keep motions **simple and straightforward**. Civic Agency motions are almost never legally binding, so they don't need to use complicated words or legal terms.

How do I make a motion?

Imagine you think your group should suggest the City should build a new wheelchair ramp on one of its buildings. When it's your turn to talk, say:

“I move that we recommend the City build a new wheelchair ramp on its building at 123 Fake Street.”

Another member needs to say **“I second the motion,”** which means they agree the group should talk about it. If no one seconds the motion, the group will move on to the next topic.

After the motion is seconded, the Clerk shows it on the screen, and the group talks about whether or not they agree with it.

How does a motion get approved?

The Chair makes sure that everyone gets a chance to talk about the motion, and then asks the group to **vote**.

If **more than half** of the members vote for the motion, it is **carried**, which means that it succeeds. In our example, the advice about the wheelchair ramp would then be sent to Council and staff.

If **less than half** of the members vote for the motion, it is **defeated**, which means that it does not succeed. The advice would not be sent to Council and staff, and no member could make the same motion again.

What happens after we give advice?

The City can use your Civic Agency's advice in a few ways. Council might tell staff to follow the advice, or staff might include it in a Council report.

It's important you remember that **Council and staff don't have to follow the advice**. Council members make decisions based on lots of different things, not just what Civic Agencies suggest.

Your Council Liaison also doesn't have to agree with the advice. If this is the case, you may want to ask for support from other Council members before passing motions.

What is the Code of Conduct?

The **Code of Conduct** is a set of rules for members of Council and Civic Agencies. It says they should be honest, fair, and respectful to others.

If you think that these rules are being broken, it's important to tell the City's **Integrity Commissioner**. They are responsible for making sure the rules are followed.

Staff members have their own Code of Conduct with their own rules. If you think that a staff member is not following the rules, you can tell the Manager of their department.

What is a Conflict of Interest?

The Code of Conduct says that members can't use their power to help themselves or people they know.

If a member has something happening in their life that makes it hard to be fair, it's called a "Conflict of Interest." For example, if a member owns a business, and their Civic Agency wants the City to make a deal with that business.

When a member has a conflict of interest, they have to tell everyone, especially if it's about money. To make sure nobody thinks they're using their power in a bad way, they also have to leave the meeting until the group is done talking about that topic.

What if I run in an election?

If you run for a government position in an election, you don't have to leave your Civic Agency unless you win. But, this can cause conflicts of interest, so it might be easier to take a break from your Civic Agency work during the election.

To keep things fair, members need to be careful not to use other members' contact information or any City resources to help with their election campaign.

The Civic Agency itself should not support individual candidates or political parties. They should avoid doing things like taking surveys or having meetings with candidates, so it doesn't seem like they're taking sides.

If you think a Council or Civic Agency member did something that goes against the Code of Conduct, you can write a letter about it to the Integrity Commissioner. If you want, they will keep your identity a secret.

The Integrity Commissioner will read your letter and decide if it's serious enough to look into.

If they decide to investigate, they will gather information and write a report that says whether or not rules were broken, and what should happen next.

How can I contact members and others?

You'll get a list of email addresses for your Civic Agency's members. Only use it for your group's work, and don't share it with others.

Your group can collaborate with other Civic Agencies and have meetings to find shared interests.

If your group wants to contact an outside group like a non-profit organization, they can write a letter and agree to send it during a meeting.

Do we have a webpage or social media?

Each Civic Agency has a page on the City's website with information about the group, members, and meetings.

If a Civic Agency wants to use social media to connect with the community, they can ask the City's Communications team for help. They can't create their own websites or social media accounts.

To make a social media account, members should read the City's Social Media Handbook, sign a form saying they understand the rules, and meet with the Communications team.

What do I do if a reporter wants to talk?

If a reporter asks to talk to you about your Civic Agency, you should tell them to talk to your Chair or someone else chosen to speak for the group.

The Chair should say they're not speaking for the City of Vancouver, and only talk about things the group has agreed on, not personal thoughts and ideas.

If you want to talk to a reporter about your own thoughts, you should tell them you're not speaking for your Civic Agency or the City.

It's important to tell the Communications team about your conversation with the reporter, by emailing media@vancouver.ca.

Do I need to keep personal information private?

A law called the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (FIPPA) lets people ask to see City of Vancouver records, including emails that are sent or received from personal email accounts.

FIPPA also says that Civic Agency members must keep personal information safe and private. This includes things like notes, emails, addresses, and phone numbers.

When their term ends, members need to delete any City records or information that they have saved on their computers or in their email.

If someone breaks the rules in FIPPA, they can be fined up to \$50,000.

- 1. How many elected officials are on Vancouver City Council?**
- A. 1 Mayor and 15 Councillors
- B. 7 Park Board Commissioners
- C. 338 Members of Parliament
- D. 1 Mayor and 10 Councillors

- 2. Which person leads Civic Agency meetings and makes sure everyone treats each other fairly?**
- A. The Staff Liaison
 - B. The Clerk
 - C. The Chair
 - D. The Council Liaison

- 3. If members want to talk about issues that weren't included in the meeting agenda, when is this allowed?**
- A. Before the Land Acknowledgment
 - B. Under "New Business"
 - C. After the Roll Call
 - D. It is not allowed

- 4. What is a good motion?**
- A. Simple and straightforward
 - B. Long and complicated
 - C. Kept secret from the group until the last second
 - D. Unrelated to the purpose of the Civic Agency

- 5. What should I do if I have a conflict of interest?**
- A. Keep it to myself and don't tell anyone
 - B. Write a letter to the Integrity Commissioner
 - C. Avoid the person or thing that is causing the conflict
 - D. Tell the other members and leave the meeting until they are done discussing the topic

Civic Agency Quiz Answers

1. D

2. C

3. B

4. A

5. D

Civic Agency Reflection #1

Why did you join your Civic Agency, and what do you want to achieve? Maybe you want make your neighbourhood's streets safer, or help with affordable housing. Whatever your goals are, write them down and bring them up when your group is talking about what to focus on during the term.

How can you make sure everyone in your group feels included, safe, and comfortable during meetings and other activities? Do you have any ideas for including everyone, and talking about different opinions in a polite and helpful way?

Module Complete