

Operations: Getting to Work

Once the seismic safety advisory board is established, it will hold meetings and hearings to act on seismic safety issues and problems. It will also set up committees and subcommittees to address topics that cannot or should not be handled by the full group. This section contains advice on holding meetings and hearings as well as creating and managing committees and subcommittees.

Planning Meetings

Meetings are important events that need to be properly planned and staged. Regular meetings will be the board's primary means for members to communicate with each other, gather information, and work with others in the public and private sectors. Such meetings will be the principal way of integrating both lay and expert perspectives on seismic safety issues. Meetings can also be a device for promoting communication between state and local governments, professional design and geotechnical organizations, and the private sector. These meetings also will be a primary means for exchanging information with the news media by providing a platform for individuals who are interested in and knowledgeable about seismic safety to promote, discuss, and analyze seismic safety programs and policies. The board can publicize meritorious seismic safety activities as well as inadequate ones.

The board should meet a minimum number of times each year. Nine meetings is the recommended minimum. Otherwise, it will be difficult to foster communication among earthquake-related disciplines, establish priorities, and ensure reasonable progress in board activities. The board should conduct business in a public forum with a

meeting structure that fosters a variety of viewpoints and allows public comment. Agendas should be arranged so that presentations do not squeeze out discussion. Good meetings do not just happen. A concentrated effort is needed to plan and run meaningful and successful meetings. Good meetings will attract and motivate good board members.

Conducting Meetings

Public participation allows members of the public to listen to the deliberations of the board and provides an opportunity for public comment. Periodic meetings can provide a public forum to reward deserving individuals and seismic safety activities, expose earthquake-related problems, and pressure responsible agencies and entities to take necessary action. Meetings also allow board members to interact with their constituency—the public.

To ensure the right of all interested parties to be heard, however, the board should be able to limit the time allowed for testimony on an issue or by an individual speaker. Despite the merits of public participation, the board should retain the right to exclude nonmembers who disrupt the normal progress of the meeting. Persons attending public meetings of a seismic safety advisory board should be permitted to record the proceedings on a video or audio recorder if done unobtrusively. The board also should be able to stop or prohibit such a recording if it disrupts proceedings.

Advertising forthcoming meetings and encouraging interested parties to attend is a good way to reach the media and expand the board's constituency. In addition, legislation in many states and local jurisdictions re-

quires that the balance between public access and the protection of sensitive information be struck in favor of public access. It is recommended that all aspects of the decision-making process—all discussion, debate, and information gathering—be conducted in public, open to scrutiny. Unscheduled or “informal” meetings in which a quorum of members “drop-in” should be avoided. Such meetings restrict the public’s ability to observe the deliberative process and contribute to, or monitor, the board’s decision-making process.

A “meeting” should be considered to be any gathering of a quorum of the board, no matter how informal, if the board’s business is discussed. However, this should not be construed to mean that board members should refrain from attending general conferences on issues directly or collaterally related to seismic safety. Such conferences, even if attended by a quorum of members, would not constitute a meeting so long as the members do not convene and discuss matters that are or may be before the board. When establishing meeting policies, consult the applicable open-meeting laws.

The minutes of a board’s meetings are valuable for informing interested parties as well as keeping a record of the proceedings. Widespread dissemination of minutes can serve to inform a broad constituency and encourage coordination. The minutes should be reviewed by the board and approved at the next meeting. The minutes should be kept on file and remain accessible as public record, as should any recordings.

Publishing the Agenda

To encourage public access and participation, the public must be given adequate notice of the time and place of the meetings as well as the topics to be discussed. This requires timely dissemination of an agenda containing a description of each item to be discussed and the time each item is

scheduled to be heard. Every agenda for a regular meeting should include adequate time for the public to address the advisory board. Even if the state’s open meeting laws do not specify a minimum number of days’ notice for meetings, set a minimum of ten days’ notice for any board meeting or hearing.

Planning a meeting agenda is an important exercise. Include the entire board when discussing possible topics, witnesses, and meeting formats. Above all, the agenda must call for action to be taken at each meeting. Taking reasoned, informed action—doing something—at every meeting is the key to an advisory board’s effectiveness and board members’ participation. Board decisions should never become mere “rubber stamping” of its staff’s work or the work of a committee.

Closed Sessions

Although the public should be able to observe the board’s entire deliberative process, the need for candor, discussion, and information gathering will occasionally justify closed sessions. Closed sessions are typically justified for the following reasons:

- Personnel matters that may cause undue publicity or embarrassment to public employees. Candid discussion of personnel matters may require closed meetings.
- Pending litigation and matters that are within the attorney-client privilege.
- Labor negotiations.
- National and public security matters.

The meeting agenda should indicate a closed session and give the reason for it. An accurate record of the proceedings at a closed session is a must, including confidential discussions and debates. The record should be kept confidential and made accessible only to the board itself or a court in connection with litigation. It should not be considered a public record. However, decisions (even roll-call votes) should be made public.

Hearings and Investigations

It is critical that seismic safety advisory boards conduct hearings to identify, investigate, study, or evaluate earthquake-related issues or problems and showcase noteworthy actions or events furthering seismic safety. Such hearings can provide for communicating among state and local governments, professional design and earth sciences organizations, and the private sector. That knowledge and increased public awareness can lead to expedited seismic risk management. Public hearings also afford an opportunity for both public and private-sector organizations to present testimony on seismic safety issues, providing the focus necessary to pull things together and arrive at consensus.

When a public agency is the subject of board hearings, the focus should be to assist it in addressing its seismic safety concerns, not embarrassing it. The hearing process should include the submission of concise reports, public comments at the hearing, board discussion, and preparation of a report on the findings. Such a report should not only evaluate the agency's seismic safety performance but also include the board's recommendations for improvement or compliance.

It is also important that a board be empowered to investigate any earthquake or any issue affecting seismic safety. As an example, a state-level board might be directed to determine what policy changes should be implemented by governmental agencies, how seismic safety programs have worked or not worked, and recommend legislation to ameliorate weaknesses

and expedite remedial action. The evaluation process would typically include submission of reports by those involved, public hearings, and preparation of a report by the board for submission to the governor, the legislature, or both. Such a report would typically include a number of recommendations for certain agencies the legislature and governor to follow to achieve an adequate degree of seismic safety.

Committees

The board should be empowered to appoint committees from its membership and from interested public and private groups. Such advisory committees can provide it with a broad base of representation and fresh ideas.

State and local representatives of disciplines such as science and engineering, emergency response, and governmental administration, drawn from both the public and the private sectors can integrate their fields of expertise into a

comprehensive seismic risk management program.

A chair who is willing and able to give strong leadership is essential to a committee's effectiveness and punctuality in meeting deadlines. Choice of the chair is thus an important decision, along with selection of other members who can be counted on to contribute to deliberations.

Initially, much of a board's work may be performed by committee members with interests in specific topics or concerns. Because of their expertise, members will almost certainly be busy with other professional commitments; therefore, it is imperative to use their time and expertise efficiently. However, if a board's responsibilities expand, it may become apparent that committee

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members cannot be asked to give specific issues or programs the time and effort that may be required. In such a case, adequate staff may have to be added to the board. (See Section 6 for information on staffing.)

At the outset, the board may find it advisable to form ad hoc committees to address issues that the board determines must be accorded the highest priority. These committees can write publications on key seismic risk reduction topics. By focusing on narrow topics or issues, committee members can efficiently translate their knowledge and expertise into usable information and effective government policy. This advice can be capsulated into policy reports and, if appropriate, draft legislation. Committees' activities should not fragment the board by isolating any one subject or issue; the integration of earthquake-related disciplines and issues must be preserved. Committees' products can be subjected to public hearings to gather perspectives and to give them greater visibility and media coverage.

An alternative is for the board to establish standing committees to coordinate the technical expertise available to the advisory board and translate their advice into policy recommendations. These are some of the more obvious standing committees, their makeup, and their responsibilities:

Executive Committee—Board operations require that decisions be made in between board meetings. They also raise a host of administrative matters which, although they do not merit the time of the full board, should be considered by more than the chair or staff director. Creating an executive committee to assist the board's chair, executive director, or program manager in formulating policy and procedures for the day-to-day management of the advisory board and its staff is recommended.

- *Seismic Hazards Committee*—This committee can review available scientific and engineering knowledge

on the earthquakes and related geological hazards.

- *Structural Vulnerability Committee*—The committee can review the existing building and infrastructure codes and enforcement and recommend improvements.
- *Emergency Planning Committee*—This committee would recommend and review plans to marshal human, physical, and economic resources to minimize losses after an earthquake and facilitate restoration of the normal life of the board's region. The committee would recommend pre-earthquake measures to help minimize human and material losses attending an earthquake.
- *Post-Earthquake Recovery Committee*—This committee would be responsible for recommending contingency measures to guide the long-term work of recovery, reconstruction, relocation, and redevelopment. Such plans should include variable courses of action based on the earthquake's location, duration, intensity, the soil conditions, and resulting damage.
- *Land-Use Planning Committee*—This committee would describe the limits that should be placed on the use of land subject to seismic hazards so that it is designated appropriately in state and local land-use plans.
- *Local Government Committee*—This committee would study the needs of local government to determine how the plans formulated by other committees to reduce risk may be best put into effect. It would recommend changes to policies and practices to help local government exercise the authority to manage earthquake risks effectively. It would also recommend new governmental institutions as necessary.
- *Earthquake Awareness Committee*—This committee would devise and promote programs that will keep the issue of earthquake safety and hazard reduction in the public eye.
- *Earthquake Prediction Committee*—This committee would devise and promote programs that will focus on the issue of earthquake warnings, advisories, and alert levels.