

POLICY TITLE: Board/Staff Communications
POLICY NUMBER: 1030

Objectives: Effective governance of the District relies on the cooperative efforts of the agency’s elected Board, who set policy and priorities, and the District’s staff members, who analyze problems and issues, to make appropriate recommendations, and implement and administer Board policies. It is the responsibility of District staff to ensure Board members have access to information and to ensure such information is communicated completely and with candor to those making the request. However, Board members should avoid intrusion into those areas that are the responsibility of District staff. Individual Board members must avoid intervening in staff decision-making, the development of staff recommendations, scheduling of work, and executing department priorities without the prior knowledge and approval of the Fire Chief and Board as a whole. This is necessary to protect District staff from undue influence and pressure from individual Board members and to allow staff to execute priorities given by management and the Board without fear of reprisal.

Role of the Board: As the legislative body for the agency, the Board is responsible for approving the District’s budget, setting policy goals and objectives and adopting strategic plans. The primary functions of the District staff members are to execute Board policy and other Board actions and to keep the Board well informed.

Individual members of the Board should not make attempts to pressure or influence staff decisions, recommendations, workloads, schedules, and department priorities, without the prior knowledge and approval of the Board as a whole. If a Board member wishes to influence the actions, decisions, recommendations, workloads, work schedule, and priorities of staff, that member must prevail upon the Board to do so as a matter of Board policy.

Board members also have a responsibility of information flow. It is critical that they make extensive use of staff and agency reports and Board meeting minutes. Board members should come to meetings prepared; having read the agenda packet materials and supporting documents, as well as any additional information or memoranda provided on agency projects or evolving issues. Additional information may be requested from staff, if necessary.

Individual Board members, as well as the Board as a whole, are permitted complete freedom of access to any information requested of staff and shall receive the full cooperation and candor of staff in being provided with any requested information. The Fire Chief or Legal Counsel will pass critical information to all Board members.

There are limited restrictions when information cannot be provided. Draft documents (e.g., staff reports in progress, etc.) are under review and not available for release until complete and after review by District staff. In addition, there are legal restrictions on the agency’s ability to release certain personnel information even to members of the Board. Any concerns Board members may have regarding the release of information or the refusal of staff to release information, should be discussed with Legal Counsel for clarification.

Policies: There shall be mutual respect from both staff and Board members of their respective roles and responsibilities at all times. There is a need for access to staff by Commissioners and at the same time, unlimited access could result in work priority conflicts for staff.

Purpose: The purpose of the policies listed below is to facilitate Board/staff communications consistent with these principles.

1030.1 All requests for information or questions by the Board to staff outside of a Board or Committee meeting, shall be directed to the Fire Chief, Legal Counsel, or the Secretary of the Board as appropriate and shall include the desired time and date for receiving the information. Staff will confirm the date they can provide the information. So that all Board members are equally informed, all written informational material requested by any Commissioner shall be submitted by staff to all Board members with the notation indicating which Board member requested the information. If a Board member requests information from any other member of the staff, staff may either direct the matter to the Fire Chief or may ask the Board member to contact the Fire Chief directly.

1030.2 Individual Commissioners cannot directly assign work to staff members. Board initiated projects will follow organizational channels, through the Fire Chief, unless there is an emergency. As no formal procedure will answer all cases, the following should be considered as a guide and used with restraint and judgment:

- a. Commissioners should clear all short-term requests of staff with the Fire Chief prior to contacting individual members of the staff and, in most cases, the Fire Chief should direct and handle the request for the Commissioner.
- b. For long-term, involved studies or where the matter includes confidential material, the Fire Chief should be contacted and the subject matter discussed with the full Board at a Board meeting prior to staff working on the assignments.
- c. In the event that staff is a participant or representative of a Committee or Work Group of the Board, the Board may contact the staff member directly to request or provide information or confer regarding matters of the Committee or Work Group.

1030.3 At Board meetings and other public meetings, respectful communication is expected. Staff is encouraged to give their professional recommendations, and the Board should recognize that staff may make recommendations that could be viewed as unpopular with the public and with individual Board members. Board members may request clarification and ask questions of staff at public meetings, and Commissioners are encouraged to participate in healthy discussions amongst each other regarding items under discussion on the Agenda. However, Commissioners should refrain from debate with staff at Board meetings about staff recommendations or other items being discussed. Staff must recognize that the Board, as the decision maker, is free to reject or modify a staff recommendation and that the Board’s wishes will be implemented by staff even if it was contrary to a staff recommendation.

1030.4 Commissioners shall not attempt to coerce or influence staff, included in the making of recommendations, the awarding of contracts, the selection of consultants, the processing of any projects or applications, or the granting of permits. Commissioners shall not attempt to change or interfere with the operating policies and practices of any district department through interaction with staff. Individual Commissioners may discuss these items with the Fire Chief to get clarification or raise concerns.

1030.5 Board members should not make public comments critical of the performance of a District staff member. Any concerns by a Commissioner over the behavior or work of a district employee during a Board meeting should be directed to the Fire Chief privately to ensure the concern is resolved. All complaints about employees from Commissioners should be submitted privately to the Fire Chief or, if a complaint concerns the Fire Chief, to Legal Counsel.

1030.6 Staff will respect the right of Commissioners to refuse to provide information or answers to staff and recognize that Commissioners may be bound by other rules of law or procedure that do not permit the Commissioner to speak about the subject matter presented. If a Commissioner violates any of the policies regarding communications as stated in this policy, any member of staff has the right to request that the Commissioner speak directly with the Fire Chief about the subject matter presented without any fear of reprisal.