

House Bill 2840: Public Comment on Agenda Items
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What is H.B. 2840?

House Bill 2840 by Representative Terry Canales (D – Edinburg) is effective September 1, 2019. The bill amends the Texas Open Meetings Act to provide that “a governmental body shall allow each member of the public who desires to address the body regarding an item on an agenda for an open meeting of the body to address the body regarding the item at the meeting before or during the body’s consideration of the item.” Before the passage of the bill, the public had only the right to observe, rather than speak at, an open meeting of a governmental body.

What right does the public have to speak on a particular agenda item?

The public has the right to speak on each item on the agenda at an open meeting of all governmental bodies as defined by the Open Meetings Act, except for state agencies. Tex. Gov’t Code § 551.007(a).

When does the public have the right to speak on items on the agenda of an open meeting?

The governmental body must allow the public the right to speak on items on the agenda either at the beginning of the meeting or during the meeting when the agenda item is being considered by the governmental body. *Id.* § 551.007(b).

Is a governmental body allowed to adopt reasonable rules on the public’s right to speak?

Yes. A governmental body may adopt reasonable rules concerning the public’s right to speak at an open meeting. *Id.* § 551.007(c). The rules may include how long the person can address the governmental body on a given item. If the person addressing the governmental body needs a translator, the governmental body is required to allow at least twice the normal amount of time for the non-English speaker to address the body. *Id.* § 551.007(d).

May the governmental body still allow the public to ask questions about items not on the agenda?

The governmental body may decide to allow the public to ask questions about items not on the agenda. If the governmental body allows the public to ask questions about items not on the agenda, the governmental body can still apply reasonable rules regarding the number, frequency, and length of presentation, but it cannot discriminate against speakers. The governmental body will not be able to deliberate on any item that is not on the agenda. For such an item, the governmental body may either: (1) make a statement of fact regarding the item; (2) make a statement concerning the policy regarding the item; or (3) propose that the item be placed on a future agenda. *Id.* § 551.042.

May the governmental body prevent the public from criticizing the governmental body or actions of the governmental body?

A governmental body may not prohibit public criticism of the governmental body, including criticism of any act, omission, policy, procedure, program, or service. However, the bill “does not apply to public criticism that is otherwise prohibited by law.” *Id.* § 551.007(e). What public criticism is prohibited by law remains to be seen. Defamation would probably fall under that prohibition. In any case, a city should be able to enforce a decorum policy for public speakers, so long as it doesn’t prohibit criticism.