



Watching Your Government: What to Expect at a Meeting of Chicago's City Council

Description

For first-time watchers, Chicago's City Council can seem incomprehensible. Most of the business is done in a routine, rapid-fire succession of votes and gavel raps, punctuated by repetitions of the phrase, "hearing no objections, so ordered."

Following along and knowing when to watch for contested votes, floor debates and other things that impact the passage of laws takes practice. Here to help is the Better Government Association's guide to watching a City Council meeting, with a typical agenda broken down point by point, highlighting which important decisions and votes can happen at each step of the way.

How to Watch Chicago's City Council

Regular City Council meetings are currently held on the third Wednesday of each month, starting 10 a.m., at Chicago's City Hall, 121 N. LaSalle St. City Council can call special meetings as well, and will occasionally move the regular meeting time, so it's always best to check the [city clerk's legislative calendar](#) for upcoming council meetings.

City Council meetings are currently livestreamed on the city clerk's website. There is no dedicated URL for the stream. Links are posted on the front page at <https://www.chicityclerk.com/> after the stream starts, so viewers may have to refresh the page a few times if they're tuning in right at the start.

Past meetings of the council and its committees can be found at the clerk's video archives:

- [City Council meeting archive](#)
- [Committee meeting archives](#)

City Council also has limited gallery seating for in-person attendees. Currently, attendees enter through the City Hall's Washington Street entrance on the morning of a City Council meeting. There is a small security kiosk where the building's main north-south and east-west hallways intersect. Visitors

inform security that they are there to attend a City Council meeting and will be directed to the queue. Because many people frequently line up to attend, arriving at least an hour early is strongly recommended, especially for those wishing to give public comment.

Basic Rules • How Chicago's City Council Works

Rules of Order and Procedure

All business conducted at a meeting of City Council is governed by the body's [Rules of Order and Procedure](#). The rules are based on the parliamentary framework Robert's Rules of Order, which are occasionally referenced during procedural disputes, but a deep familiarity with Robert's Rules is usually not needed to follow the action at City Council.

Meetings are guided by • the chair, • which is the term the rules use for the presiding officer. By default, under the current rules, the mayor acts as chair. The chair has significant latitude to call on members in the order they please, which gives the mayor a great deal of control over the flow of conversation.

If the mayor is absent, the president pro tempore presides, and in the absence of both the vice-mayor presides.

Legislative and Committee Process

To be passed into law, any item before the council first needs to be introduced, also known as being • read into the record. • The body assigns each new submission to a committee for consideration, with the exception of a few items that can be considered immediately.

You will hear new items being read into the record at several points during the proceedings, described in detail below:

- Reports and Communications from the Mayor
- Communications from the City Clerk
- Agreed Calendar
- Presentation of Aldermanic Introductions
- Ordinance Setting the Next Regular Meeting

Items that have been voted on in a committee are reported back out for a final vote. In most cases, the vote is to • concur with the recommendation of the committee, • meaning that if the item received a favorable vote in committee it is passed, and if it was voted down by committee it fails to pass.

Most items are passed during the Reports of Committees sections on the agenda. However, items that were deferred at a previous meeting or that are being discharged from a committee are sometimes called for a vote during the *Unfinished Business and Miscellaneous Business* sections of the agenda, and the council can always temporarily suspend its rules for immediate consideration of an item at any point with a two-thirds majority vote.

Types of Voting

Motions and items before the body require affirmative votes to proceed, but City Council has a number of ways to take a vote and enter it into the record:

- **Roll Call Vote:** This is the most formal and time-consuming way to tally a vote. The chair or an assistant (typically staff from the city clerk's office) will call the wards in order, starting with the 1st Ward and going all the way to the 50th, with each member actively responding "aye" or "nay." Recently, City Council has begun using an electronic voting system that allows alderpersons to select their "aye" or "nay" vote on a tablet, with the results displayed on a large screen and on the livestream. The vote is tallied and the results are announced.
- **Voice Vote:** A less formal and quicker option is for the chair to call "all in favor, say aye," with a pause for replies, and then "all opposed, say nay," after which, the chair will state which side they believe had the majority. A typical phrasing is "in the opinion of the chair, the ayes have it and the motion carries." If there is significant dissension or an alderperson wants each vote to be on record, anyone can call for a roll call vote in place of a voice vote.
- **Unanimous Consent:** Sometimes not even a voice vote is required. If a member makes a motion and the chair says "hearing no objections, so ordered," the motion can be considered to have passed by unanimous consent. Alderpersons wishing to object or call for a more formal vote must do so quickly when motions are being passed in this manner.

Most business in City Council is passed unanimously. The city clerk's office maintains records of all items that were passed by a contested roll call vote as part of their [Council Meeting Reports archive](#).

Regular Meeting Agenda – Chicago's City Council

City Council meetings follow an agenda that is posted at least 48 hours ahead of time. Currently the [city clerk's Legistar](#) webpage is used to post agendas.

Members of the body can request a temporary suspension of the rules to go out of order, but otherwise business must follow the posted agenda. The temporary suspensions are most commonly used when members wish to speak on honorary resolutions, which are typically approved without discussion or debate during the "Agreed Calendar" section of the agenda.

Those honorary speeches can add unscheduled hours to a meeting – a [BGA analysis](#) found that on average, City Council spends one-third of its floor time discussing non-binding matters under suspension of the rules – but otherwise the meeting can be expected to follow the posted outline. Below is a breakdown of a typical agenda, with details on what to expect from each section.

Call to Order, Call of the Roll and Determination of Quorum

The first three items of business are often listed as separate items, but they are all handled in quick succession.

A "call to order" is simply the rap of the gavel and the declaration by the chair that council is "called to order." The clerk then calls the roll of alderpersons, starting with the 1st Ward and going all the way down to the 50th, with members responding "aye" if present.

If a majority of the body — at least 26 alderpersons — is present, the meeting is considered to have — quorum, — meaning the minimum number of members present to legally conduct business. Council cannot proceed or pass any items on the agenda without a majority of the members present.

Very occasionally, you may hear a member request a — quorum check — later in the meeting, which means a repeat of the roll call to confirm that 26 members are still present. This usually will only happen if a large number of members have left the room before the conclusion of the meeting.

Pledge of Allegiance and Invocation

These two items proceed as soon as quorum is established. The Pledge of Allegiance is a fixed speech with a known duration, but the invocation can vary in length and content.

The invocation can seem odd to some observers, since it is almost always religious in nature, and often explicitly sectarian. However, the Supreme Court in 2014 ruled in favor of public bodies conducting prayer at their public meetings, with only minimal restrictions, including prohibiting denigrating other religions, threatening damnation or seeking to convert non-adherents. Unless a majority of City Council decides to remove the item from the agenda, invocations will continue to be a part of the body's regular meetings.

Public Comment

Public comment is limited to a 30-minute timeslot, with each speaker allowed up to three minutes of speaking time.

Although no set agenda item specifies time for speeches on honorary resolutions, directly following the public comment period is a common time for alderpeople to request a suspension of the rules for purposes of hearing one or more honorary resolution. If this occurs, there may be a long delay between public comment and the next item on the agenda. (This is your chance for a bathroom break — [City Council spends a lot of time on honorary resolutions.](#))

Reports and Communications from the Mayor

This is the first agenda section in which new items are read into the record. Items introduced here will list the mayor as the lead sponsor, rather than an alderperson.

The clerk's staff may read off some of the mayoral introductions as — on the behalf of — followed by the name of a department head or other official. These items are proposed legislation from one of the city's administrative departments, but they will still be listed as mayoral introductions for tracking purposes.

Not all ordinances from the administration are introduced at City Council. Under council's rules, the mayor and the administrative department heads have the privilege of introducing new business directly into the relevant committee. So-called — direct introductions — are not part of City Council meetings, and only occur at committee meetings. They are a way of shortcutting the legislative process, and they often mean that items are debated and even voted on before the public has access to the text of the ordinance.

Communications from the City Clerk

This agenda item is often combined with mayoral introductions, with the clerk or a representative from the clerk's office reading off the mayoral introductions followed immediately by the clerk's communications.

Communications from the clerk typically include formal notices for financial instruments such as bonds, formal reports filed by the inspector general or administrative departments, and claims filed against the city. The clerk also formally confirms the publication of the Journal of Proceedings, which is the council's official public record.

These are mostly routine items, and there is very rarely any interruption or debate during the reading of the clerk's introductions.

This is also the point on the agenda at which any resident-introduced legislation read into the record as a miscellaneous transmittal. For an explanation of resident-introduced legislation, see our OpenGov article [How to Introduce Legislation to Chicago City Council: A Step-by-Step Guide](#).

Reports of Standing Committees

This is the main section of the agenda for final passage of legislative items.

Each committee reports out in the order they are listed on the published agenda. The committee chair or their designated substitute will read each item that was voted on in the committee between the previous City Council meeting and the current one. Usually there will only have been one meeting, but committees will sometimes meet multiple times between Council sessions if they have a large amount of business to cover, or if the committee is recessed and reconvened.

The vast majority of committee items are passed unanimously and without debate using a legislative maneuver known as a "previous roll call vote," which is a sort of copy-paste of the vote taken on a previous item. Here's how it works:

- The very first item of the very first committee to report (usually Finance) is called for a roll-call vote. Each alderperson will actively cast an "aye" or "nay" vote. Since the first item is typically a non-controversial approval of the previous month's minutes, that results in a unanimous roll call with no "nay" votes.
- Following the roll call vote, a member of the body makes a "motion to reconsider." This is a motion that can be made to re-take a vote later in the meeting, but it cannot be repeated, so by taking the motion to reconsider immediately, the vote is finalized.
- On each subsequent item for all of the committee reports, the member reading out the report moves that the item being read be passed "by the first favorable roll-call vote of the Committee on Finance and the associated unsuccessful measure to reconsider."
- After a very brief pause, the chair declares "hearing no objections, so ordered." At that point the record can officially reflect that the item under consideration was passed by the same unanimous roll call as the first vote in the finance committee.

The "previous roll call vote" tool allows City Council to speed through unopposed legislation very quickly. However, it leaves a very short window for alderpersons to interject if they do wish to debate an

item or call for a roll call vote.

Debate is unusual, and amendment of the ordinance on the floor basically unheard of. On some controversial items, a member might call for a roll call, rather than passage by the unanimous “previous roll call” motion.

Ending debate and taking a roll call vote technically requires what’s called a motion to “call the previous question,” but in practice the chair usually proceeds immediately with a roll call vote as soon as a member shouts “roll call.” Once the roll call vote has started, no further motions or debate can be heard.

On rare occasions when at least some members of the body wish to oppose or delay a measure, they may make a motion to “defer and publish,” which requires the final vote to be deferred until the next scheduled meeting of City Council. While most motions on the floor require a majority, state law allows any two alderpersons to defer and publish a committee report, making it the easiest tool for a discontented majority to slow down an item’s passage.

Reports of Special Committees

This section of the agenda proceeds exactly as the “Reports of Regular Committees” section above, but for any joint or specially-convened committees. It follows the same floor rules and voting conventions as the regular committee reports.

Agreed Calendar

City Council passes an enormous number of honorary, non-binding resolutions. Tributes to birthdays, retirements, work/business anniversaries, and deaths are all common subjects.

Approval of the agreed calendar, also called the consent calendar, is a single vote taken to pass all honorary resolutions without debate.

Alderpersons will sometimes rise and request suspension of the rules to speak on their honorary resolutions during this part of the agenda.

Presentation of Aldermanic Introductions

This is the section of the agenda where ordinances and other items introduced by alderpersons are read into the record, making them official pieces of Council business. The introductions are done in ward order, alternating at each meeting between starting with the 1st Ward and starting with the 50th Ward.

Introductions are usually done by the city clerk or a member of the clerk’s staff, and they are read very quickly. For each item, the presenter will recite the name and ward of the lead sponsor, a very brief description of the item’s topic, and the requested committee referral.

Introductions are sometimes interrupted by alderpersons invoking council’s Rule 42, which instructs that, if two different committee assignments are requested, the item shall be sent to the Committee on

Committees and Rules, which will determine which committee ultimately hears the item.

Sending an item to Rules is widely used as a delaying tactic. The committee does not meet on any regular schedule, and only convenes when the chair puts out a specific committee agenda. That effectively means that items cannot advance beyond being sent to the rules committee unless the chair is willing to call a meeting to re-refer the item to another committee.

Because Rule 42 does not specify any process for “calling” a committee, alderpersons who want to shuffle an item off to the Rules committee often do so by simply shouting “Rules!” from the floor. Since the Committee on Committees and Rules is a standing committee, that counts as two committees being called, and the item is sent to rules.

Correction and Approval of the Journal of Proceedings

The Journal of Proceedings is the official legal record of City Council. An item does not technically become law until it has been passed by Council and the Journal of Proceedings in which that action is recorded is approved by the Council.

At each Council session, the body approves the Journal of Proceedings from the previous regular session, as well as any special sessions that were called between the two regular meetings. This is also an opportunity to correct any errors found in items contained in the Journal. Corrections are relatively rare, and are typically introduced by the city clerk’s staff.

Approval of the journal is usually a brief, routine vote with no discussion or debate.

Unfinished Business

Items that were deferred or tabled at a previous City Council meeting can be called up during the unfinished business section.

Alders wishing to call a deferred matter during the unfinished business section must provide written notice to the city clerk and all alders at least 48 hours in advance of doing so. While uncommon, items of unfinished business will occasionally be challenged and ruled out of order (and therefore not heard) due to failure to provide the required notice.

Miscellaneous Business

The miscellaneous business section is used for items which have been held in a committee without action for at least 60 days, and which a sponsor wishes to discharge under council’s Rule 41. The motion to discharge requires a majority vote to proceed, after which the item is business before the body and can be voted up or down.

Invoking Rule 41 to move to discharge an item from committee requires written notice delivered to the city clerk and all alders no later than by the close of business on the fifth business day prior to the City Council meeting.

Because it is not a report of a committee, items brought to the floor under the miscellaneous business section of the agenda are not subject to the two-person defer-and-publish tactic.

Ordinance Setting the Next Regular Meeting

Per the municipal code, unless otherwise specified in ordinance, City Council has its regular meetings on the second and fourth Wednesday of each calendar month at 10 a.m.

In practice for more than a decade, the council has met only once a month. Currently the third Wednesday of the month is the most common default day for Council meetings.

To avoid having to meet in the times specified in the municipal code, Council passes an ordinance at each meeting setting the date and time of the next regular meeting.

A member of the body may occasionally suggest ordinance setting the date and time of the next regular meeting sooner, typically when a matter has been deferred and published. The state's Open Meetings Act requires that meetings of a public body give public notice with a posted agenda at least 48 hours before meeting, and it is not uncommon when an item has been deferred and published for City Council to schedule its next meeting two days from the deferral.

Roll Call on Omnibus

The omnibus is a catch-all parliamentary procedure for any items not voted on separately or approved by reference to another vote. It is not normally needed — in a typical meeting of City Council, every item will either be voted on or will be passed by a previous roll call — but it provides a sort of legislative backstop to ensure that all matters of business were legally concluded.

Although the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably, the omnibus is not the same thing as the agreed calendar, and the agreed calendar is usually approved by its own roll call vote.

Adjournment

Rarely requiring a roll call vote, adjournment at the conclusion of other business is typically done by a motion to adjourn from one of the alderpersons, followed by either a voice vote or a simple —hearing no objections, so ordered— and a rap of the gavel. At that point City Council's official business has concluded.

The mayor often offers press availability after a City Council meeting, usually in a smaller room to the side of the council chambers. Those availabilities are not open to the public and typically require press credentials to attend.