

Before Creating an Advisory Committee

Dear Reader:

The following document was created from the MTAS website ([mtas.tennessee.edu](http://www.mtas.tennessee.edu)). This website is maintained daily by MTAS staff and seeks to represent the most current information regarding issues relative to Tennessee municipal government.

We hope this information will be useful to you; reference to it will assist you with many of the questions that will arise in your tenure with municipal government. However, the *Tennessee Code Annotated* and other relevant laws or regulations should always be consulted before any action is taken based upon the contents of this document.

Please feel free to contact us if you have questions or comments regarding this information or any other MTAS website material.

Sincerely,

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It has been said that “advice is what we ask for when we already know the answer but wish we didn’t.” Before creating an advisory committee and obligating local citizens to a significant commitment of their time, city officials should consider these questions:

- Is the issue already decided? Is the committee being created simply to validate a decision that has already been made? It is unethical to use citizens in this manner.
- Is the city governing board or staff uncomfortable with the issue at hand? Is the decision likely to be controversial? Is the committee being created simply to diffuse the anticipated public criticism? Never appoint a citizen committee to avoid responsibility for a difficult decision. The committee members will feel used and manipulated and are likely to say as much to the general public in the ensuing controversy.
- Does the city have all the information it needs to make a decision on the issue it is confronting? If not, would creating a citizen panel serve to better inform the city’s decision?
- Do city staff have the background and expertise necessary to process the available information? Would a citizen panel be useful to the city in digesting the available information?
- How much time will advisory committee members need to devote to the project? Is it reasonable to expect the members to dedicate this much time?
- Are there people in the community having knowledge of the issues involved? Or, is the issue so specialized or complex that it will be difficult finding a sufficient number of committee members to advise the city?
- Is the governing board or staff prepared to accept advice that may conflict with their long-held, established viewpoints? A Chinese proverb has it that “honest advice is unpleasant to the ears.” Before asking for citizens’ advice, the governing board must realize the truth inherent in this proverb. Cities should not ask for advice they have no intention of heeding.

DISCLAIMER: The letters and publications written by the MTAS consultants were written based upon the law at the time and/or a specific sets of facts. The laws referenced in the letters and publications may have changed and/or the technical advice provided may not be applicable to your city or circumstances. Always consult with your city attorney or an MTAS consultant before taking any action based on information contained in this website.

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