

Part I - Know What You Are Getting Into

Dear Reader:

The following document was created from the MTAS website ([mtas.tennessee.edu](https://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,

The University of Tennessee
Municipal Technical Advisory Service
1610 University Avenue
Knoxville, TN 37921-6741
865-974-0411 phone
865-974-0423 fax
www.mtas.tennessee.edu

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Before Agreeing to an Interview Request

Municipalities have an obligation to provide requested information to the news media. This does not mean, however, that city officials have to submit themselves for every interview request they receive. Before agreeing to give an interview, you have a right to know what you're getting into and how the interview will be used. Here's a checklist of questions for which you should know the answers before you agree to sit down and talk to a reporter:

1. Who is conducting the interview? At what media source do they work?

You have a right to know with whom you'll be talking and for whom they work.

2. What topics are to be discussed in the interview? Will the interview be limited to these topics or will others be introduced?

It is generally a good idea to limit the topics of an interview to one or two subjects. This will let you better prepare for the interview and avoid discussions of subjects for which you may not be fully prepared.

3. Why was this particular topic chosen? What prompted the request for an interview?

You should be aware of the context in which the interview will be taking place, the incidents or developments that may have prompted the interview request. This will let you address these specific incidents or developments and avoid speaking in more general or hypothetical terms.

4. Am I the right person for this interview? Are there other city officials who could more properly respond to the interviewer's questions?

You should give interviews only on those subjects with which you have considerable familiarity. When dealing with technical information, legal issues, or other complicated subjects, it may be best to refer the reporter to someone on the city staff having special expertise on the subject. Alternately, you may ask the reporter if you can have one of these staff members sit with you during the interview. Be careful if the reporter is reluctant to allow you this opportunity.

5. Who else will be present at the interview?

You should always know the names of other people who will join you in the interview. While it is normal for a reporter to interview others for a story, having a third party present during your interview could lead to on-camera debates, confrontations, etc. If a reporter wants to bring a third party to your interview, find out what the purpose is—and be careful.

6. When will the interview take place?

You are entitled to be interviewed at a reasonably convenient time. Try to be flexible and take into account the reporter's availability and deadlines, but avoid giving late-night interviews. Keeping in mind the subject matter to be discussed, insist on having sufficient time to prepare for the interview.

7. Is the interview going to be conducted in person or over the telephone? If the interview is to be in person, where will it occur?

Try to hold the interview on your turf: in your office or in some other area of city hall offering a friendly, dignified environment. It may be appropriate at times to meet on the reporter's turf—in the studio or at the newspaper office—depending upon your comfort level with the environment. It is generally a good idea to avoid giving interviews in public places (i.e., restaurants, coffee shops, and other locations where onlookers cannot be controlled) or where the surroundings could be misinterpreted or misleading.

8. Will the interview be live or on tape?

A live interview is like tightrope walking without a net. The opportunity to pause before responding to a question is limited, as are the chances to glance at notes. This is not to say that you should avoid live interviews at all costs, but understand that a live interview requires more preparation than one that is taped. For live interviews, some reporters may give you the questions in advance to avoid delays in answers on camera.

9. How much time is thought to be needed for the interview?

Is the reporter asking for 15 minutes of your time? Or several hours?

10. When will the story run?

News stories usually run within a day or two of your interview meaning information you provide to the reporter is likely to be relatively fresh when the story appears. However, you should realize magazine articles and certain newspaper and television feature stories might not be released for weeks or even months after the interview. By the time the story appears, the facts surrounding your story may have changed making it appear you are either poorly informed or, worse, lying. Be careful about accepting interviews that will not be aired or printed until far into the future. Ask that your interview be conducted closer to the release date. Or, request a brief follow-up interview close to the release date so you can verify that the information is still up to date.

Sometimes you may be called by a reporter who wants an immediate interview with you by telephone with no other warning or appointment. If you are familiar with the reporter, it may be best to ask for a few minutes to prepare yourself, returning his call a short time later after you have had time to prepare. If you are not familiar with the reporter, explain that you will be busy for a few minutes and that you will call back. Not only will this give you a few minutes to prepare, but your call back will help determine if the "reporter" is legitimate.

To help maintain good relations with the news media, and as a matter of courtesy, city officials should respond promptly to a reporter's request for an interview. If any of the answers to the above questions are not satisfactory, it may be best to decline the request or to suggest changes.

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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