

The Newbie's Guide to the Garland Council



One of our logos.



Also one of our logos.



GARLAND
TEXAS MADE HERE

This one too.



Yup.

Foreword

You've just been elected. It's time to drink from the firehose of knowledge of Garland's municipal government. This guide has been put together by those that came before you in the hopes that we can save you some of the hard-earned knowledge that comes along with the office.

You are about to use every piece of knowledge that you've ever learned to try and move the city forward. Many times, you will still find that you don't know enough to make the right call. Do your best and leverage the knowledge of your colleagues and the staff.

None of this should be considered a replacement for reading Robert's Rules, Council Policy, The City Charter, and City Ordinances. This is a quick start guide to functioning from day to day as a council member.

Good luck, have fun, and remember: this is what you signed up for.

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Meetings

We meet regularly four times a month. We have two work sessions and two formal meetings.

Agendas

The meeting agendas are published on Thursday, but that's only a draft. The finalized agendas are posted by Friday at 5pm. Don't make the mistake of downloading/printing it on Thursday and not using the 'official' copy. Your colleagues will stare at you oddly when you start making motions that aren't on the agenda.

Attire

Default dress is business casual. Formal events and Tuesday night council meetings are business formal. (Coat and tie, dress, pants suit). The mayor may deviate from this at their discretion.

Breaks

In general, the Mayor will call for a recess every 90 minutes or so depending on the agenda. But if you need to use the bathroom, just get up and go. Try not to miss a vote if possible.

Work Sessions

The work sessions are used to have in-depth policy discussions, introduce new items, allow for periodic review of various programs, listen to committee reports, or give staff instructions to go in a particular direction. We meet in the work session room to dial down the formality and have a more conversational atmosphere. Work sessions are usually on the Monday night right before the Tuesday meeting. Dinner is at 5pm in the room next door, and the meeting starts at 6pm. These meetings usually go longer than the main council meetings, because we explore every part of an issue. If we expect the meeting to go long (11pm+), we'll have additional snacks available later on. Avoid the squash.

If you want the council to tackle a new item, find a council member willing to 2nd the proposed item and refer it at the end of the work session. Generally, we refer things straight into the appropriate committee. Don't worry at first about which committee it should go to- the Mayor will direct it to the right place.

Council Meetings

Tuesday night council meetings are usually more formal, and typically shorter. Dinner is at 6pm, and the meeting starts at 7pm.

We start with a prayer and the pledge. We rotate through each of the council districts in order, so you'll have that responsibility every eighth meeting. If you mess this part up, you'll probably insult everyone belonging to the predominant religion in the city, so try not to do that. When it is your turn to do the prayer and pledge, you also become the 'motion maker' for the night. That means when we need to make a motion to approve the consent agenda, or if there are general motions that aren't district specific, the Mayor will look to you to make the motion. For specifics of motion-making, refer to Robert's Rules of Order or official council policy.

The Mayor will read the proclamations at the start of the meeting, then read through the consent agenda. After that we get into the individual cases. Citizen comments are at the end of the meeting. When you are on the dais, read the little bronze plaque in front of you. Re-read it as the years roll by. It contains a lot of wisdom.

Special Meetings / Retreats

During budget season, bond elections, charter reviews, etc., the Mayor or any two members can call for a special meeting. We also traditionally have a summer and winter retreat to set council priorities.

Committee Meetings

At the beginning of your term, the Mayor will assign you to one or more standing council sub-committees. These are used to do heavy research and provide a recommendation back to the council. If the mayor wants to punish you, you'll be asked to chair the Administrative Services Committee.

Boards and Commissions Appointments

Every August we appoint people to the various boards and commissions. Generally, we respect each other's selections and most nominees are approved without comment. The council is there to act as a check against overly toxic personalities, etc., and to ensure that they meet the qualifications for the board if applicable. Try to be considerate of your colleagues, however. If you appoint someone whose life mission has been to criticize a member of the council, you'll probably get some pushback.

Budgeting

The budget is split into Operations and Maintenance (cash) and the Capital Improvement Program (debt). We work on the O&M in August/September. We do CIP in January/February. CIP is a five-year plan, so the likelihood of you making a large impact on the CIP in your first year is very low. The longer you're on council, the more sway you'll have with it. Try not to get frustrated; you'll probably be carrying out the legacy of your predecessors for a few years before you see your own initiatives gain traction. If there's a bond program in the mix, you'll have even less room for creativity. O&M is a little more flexible. There's a lot of non-discretionary funding, so you will usually only truly control the tax rate and any new revenue. Just remember, it's an \$800 million budget and there are more needs than you'll ever have the chance to fully learn. Just do your best and try to get better at the job each budget cycle.

CDBG – Community Development Block Grants

Each spring the Feds hand us a large bucket of money. We are supposed to divvy a lot of that up between different non-profits based on HUD rules. You'll get a presentation, a spreadsheet, and lots of public testimony asking for a cut of the money. Our staff has to track the use of that money, so we generally only take the larger requests seriously to make it worth the time. We will also have money that can be put into certain eligible census tracts (areas of land defined by HUD that are reasonably uniform in demographics and economics). Often that money is used to augment community centers, spruce up older neighborhoods, and remove blighted structures.

Computer Equipment

I.T. will issue you a tablet for emails and agendas. Everything you do on it is subject to the city's I.T. policies.

Constituent Complaints

Handling constituent needs is a significant part of the job. Figuring out where to send those complaints and the best way to handle them is a tough job.

Reporting Structure

The City Charter tells us that everything should go to the city manager unless the manager decides otherwise. Currently, the City Manager allows us to work with managing directors and department heads as needed. But if you are uncertain or there's a major problem, direct the complaint to the city manager.

E-Assist

Encourage your constituents to report issues directly to the city, using the mobile E-assist app as the primary tool. But if they aren't getting a response or if the response confuses or angers them, then by all means get involved.

Caution

Some of the complaints that you get are 'neighbor feuds'. There may be a long history of neighbors trying to target each other using police/code/EWS/etc. It's easiest to ask for a case history if you have a questionable report, so you can figure out what mess you've just inherited. Work forward from there and try and ensure that the law is being applied reasonably to all parties involved.

Outside of Your District

Generally, Council Members are expected to either forward issues to other Members or loop them in on issues out of courtesy. Some members of the public may decide to go around their council member because they didn't like the answer they were given. All council members are public servants, and all members can assist the public; however, keep in mind that ultimately the council for a district is responsible to their constituents.

Council Assistant

The council shares an assistant who works for the city secretary's office. Different council members rely on the assistant for different things and at different levels. Talk to the assistant early on to figure out how to help each other. The assistant also manages the council calendar.

Council Leadership Positions

When there's a new council seated (after the last of the runoff elections are over), the council elects a Mayor Pro Tem (and optionally a Deputy Mayor Pro Tem) to back up the Mayor in case they are away. You usually want to select someone that knows how to run a meeting, is comfortable running the voting system, and that the council generally trusts not to make a mess of things in the Mayor's absence. No member is entitled to a leadership role, either by virtue of desire or seniority.

The mayor will appoint committee chairpersons each year as well. Your job as a chair is to manage incoming referrals from the council, hear things in a timely manner, work with staff, report progress back to the referrers, and eventually give a committee report back to the council during work session.

Developers and Applicants

Developers are going to contact you from time to time. They may want to build a project in your district or might be looking for your support on an upcoming vote. Here are a few tips to avoid conflicts:

- Buy your own coffee. They'll want to pay, but that's why you get a council paycheck. It's best never to accept anything from an applicant or give anything to them to avoid any impropriety.

- Don't meet with them alone. Get a member of staff to join you and try to meet on city property if convenient.
- Never promise your vote.
- Never promise an outcome.
- Never predict an outcome publicly.
- Never push for an outcome without first considering how your constituency will feel about the result.
- Don't support tax-credit projects in areas that aren't zoned for them unless you're really, REALLY certain that your constituents are on board.
- We zone land, not people. Ask stupid questions and you get stupid lawsuits. Any question that might be considered prejudicial in any way should never be asked. Stick to considering the activity ONLY.
- Always consider the land use both for the current applicant and future owners that might take the project over.
- Don't make, discuss, or consider personal business arrangements with applicants or developers before all formal action has been taken and council votes are done.
- Don't sign anything, including letters of support, for developments. There's a process for formal council support, so stick to that process.

District Updates

Every November, we record a report for each district with the public relations department. The update is posted to our council webpages and is aired on CGTV.

Email

You'll have two email accounts. One has your name, and the other is your district. For instance, rep 'John Doe' of District 9 may have idoe@garlandtx.gov and council9@garlandtx.gov. You can have the council assistant monitor the external inbox (council 9) and forward the relevant emails to you, or you can manage both yourself.

Informal Rules

Traditions can be vague, unenforceable, and are subject to the group dynamic. These are listed here so that you aren't surprised if you see them. They are probably tradition for good reasons, so abandon them only after very careful consideration.

- 1) Deferring to the Council Person: If a council person doesn't want a particular thing in their district, it raises the bar to voting to approve that item. We are all trying to do what is best for the city, but the council person has been elected specifically to represent their district. Take that strongly into account when voting.
- 2) Patience During Hearings: Other members may need to learn things you already know. Take their personal and professional backgrounds into consideration and give them deference to ask questions that teach them something. Something obvious to you may be mind-blowing to them, and vice versa.
- 3) There's a bronze plaque on the dais in the council chambers. Read it. Memorize it. Live it.

- 4) When the Mayor Pro Tem or Deputy Mayor Pro Tem is presiding over a meeting, it is appropriate to shorten the title to Mayor, since that is the capacity that they are serving in. It also helps speed the meeting along to shorten the title.
- 5) Unless your motion needs to be explained, avoid preambles if possible. You will have a chance for discussion after the motion is seconded and moves into discussion.
- 6) Step carefully when working in your colleague's district. Even if you are at odds on an issue, it is expected that they will be looped into your work.

Monthly Lunches

Once a month, you will sit and have lunch with the City Manager. There you'll have the chance to discuss issues in your district, strategic goals, issues, politics, and the finer points of extra value meals.

Neighborhood Night Out

The first Tuesday in October is Neighborhood Night Out. We reschedule our council meetings to free up the council for those events. Neighborhood associations traditionally hold blocks parties that night.

Other Board Memberships

Surprise! You didn't just run for council. You are now a proud member of the following boards of directors:
Garland Foundation for Development Inc
Garland Power and Light
Garland Public Facility Corporation

Parades and Concerts

Council Members are generally expected to participate in the MLK Day parade, the Labor Day Parade, and Christmas on the Square. You will usually have a vehicle with a driver for MLK, a golf cart for Labor Day, and walk from City Hall to the stage for Christmas on the Square.

Parking

You get to use any one of the nine reserved parking spaces in the parking garage. The numbered spaces do not correspond to your district number no matter what the distinguished member from District 2 would have you believe.

Paychecks

You get paid twice a month based on the amount that the charter states. You'll also get a cell phone allowance. We recommend that you get a separate council cell phone that you pay for with the stipend. If there's an open records request, it'll allow you to hand the phone over to legal and save yourself some time and effort.

Records Retention

It's the law that you save everything that you put into writing. Social media accounts are part of rapidly evolving laws, but in general if you can back it up, do it. Don't say or write anything that you would be ashamed for your favorite grandmother to read or hear. That's probably good general life advice too.

Tax Credit Projects

There's a type of apartment complex called a 'section 42' or tax credit project. Every November - December, developers come out of the woodwork and want you to support their project. There's a process for it. See 'Developers and Applicants' for the general rules, and otherwise get with the fair housing group for guidance.

Final Thoughts

- When in doubt, ask either staff or your colleagues.
- If it feels wrong, don't do it.

Good luck. We hope you're successful. Just do the best job you can and remember to take a break from time to time.