City of China Grove, Texas

Alderman's Handbook

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Contents

Section 1: Role and Authority of Aldermen

Aldermen serve as the legislative body for the City of China Grove under the Mayor–Council form of government (Texas Local Government Code Chapter 22). Each Alderman represents the interests of the community and shares collective responsibility for passing ordinances, setting the budget, and overseeing city policy.

Aldermen are elected to serve the entire community and are obligated to represent the will of the majority of China Grove citizens, not to advance personal beliefs, ambitions, or outside influences.

It is essential that decisions be made in the broad public interest, based on facts, law, and long-term impact — not in reaction to short-term pressures or the voices of a small but vocal minority.

While public input is vital to democratic governance, individual complaints, personal grievances, or organized disruption must not divert the Council from its legal responsibilities or policy priorities.

Elected officials must listen, deliberate, and act in the best interests of the city as a whole.

Key Responsibilities:

- Attend all regular and special council meetings.
- Vote on ordinances, resolutions, and contracts.
- Approve the City's annual budget and tax rate.
- Provide oversight of City operations through policy decisions.
- Represent constituents and communicate community concerns to the Mayor.

Section 2: Legal and Ethical Responsibilities

Aldermen must comply with the following laws and standards:

- Texas Open Meetings Act (TOMA) – Chapter 55
- Texas Public Information Act (TPIA) – Chapter 552
- Conflicts of Interest – Chapter 171
- Nepotism – Chapter 573
- Ethics in Public Service – avoid using position for personal gain

Training Requirements:

- Open Meetings Act training (Gov't Code §551.005)
- Public Information Act training (Gov't Code §552.012)
- Cybersecurity training (annually) – (Gov't Code §2054.5191)

Section 3: Council Packet Review and Message Board Usage

Packets:

Aldermen are expected to thoroughly review their City Council meeting packets prior to each meeting. Preparedness ensures productive discussion and informed decision-making. In addition, the use of the official City message board is strongly encouraged as the primary tool for Aldermen to:

- Request clarification or additional documentation

- Share questions or concerns related to agenda items
- Provide updates or flag issues for staff review

Message Board:

Texas law (Government Code §551.006, the "Message Board" provision of the Texas Open Meetings Act) expressly allows councilmembers to exchange ideas on a city-hosted online message board without it counting as a "meeting" or "deliberation." The statute requires the board to be owned or controlled by the City, prominently linked within one click of the City's homepage, viewable and searchable by the public, with posts displayed in real time, kept visible for at least 30 days, and archived for six years. The message board is strictly for discussion—no votes or official actions may be taken there. China Grove's Message Board is in compliance with this law.

The board should be thought of as a standing workshop. Members are encouraged to share background, pose questions, and offer perspectives; outline options for policy; and request staff analysis or future agenda placement. It is acceptable to express agreement or disagreement, so long as it is phrased as discussion (for example: "I favor exploring Option A and would like it on a future agenda") rather than as action ("I move that we adopt this now"). To avoid any "walking quorum" violations, councilmembers should refrain from using email, text messages, or social media for policy discussions and instead use the City's public message board as the proper forum.

For quick reference, aldermen may find the following "dos and don'ts" helpful in making the most of our Council Message Board while staying within Texas law.

📌 Message Board Best Practices (Texas Gov't Code §551.006)

DO:

- When you post on the Message Board, send a quick text to all aldermen so everyone knows a new discussion has started (China Grove practice, since the system does not send automatic notices).
- Use the board like a workshop: share background, ask questions, and explore options.
- Phrase posts as discussion, not action. ("I'd like us to consider…" vs. "I move that…")
- Post your own viewpoint as a separate entry rather than replying directly to another member if offering a different perspective.
- Request staff research or placement of an item on a future agenda if you want to move discussion forward.
- Remember: all posts are public, visible for 30 days, and archived for six years.

DON'T:

- Use the board to call for a vote or make a final decision.
- Try to conduct deliberations by email, text, or social media.
- Worry about healthy debate—just keep it in the right forum and framed as discussion.

Section 4: City Meetings and Governance Procedures

Council Meetings:

- Regular meetings are held the first Thursday of each month at 7:00 PM.
- Any adjustment to the time or day of a regular meeting makes it a Special meeting requiring the presence of 4 council members.
- Agendas must be posted by 5:00 p.m. the Friday before the meeting (HB 1522).
- Aldermen may place items on the agenda by request to the Mayor or City Secretary. The deadline for requesting is the Tuesday in the week before the upcoming Council meeting.

Council Actions:

- Regular Meetings: a quorum (3 Aldermen) is required to conduct business.
- Special Meetings: a quorum (4 Aldermen) is required to conduct business.
- A majority vote of those **present** is required to pass a motion. If there is a tie vote, the Mayor breaks the tie (Local Gov't Code § 22.037).

Citizen Interaction and Alderman Conduct:

- Council meetings include a 'Citizens to Be Heard' section where members of the public may address the Council on any topic.
- Aldermen are permitted to ask clarifying questions in response to citizen comments during this portion of the meeting, as long as the topic is not also listed elsewhere on the agenda.
- Aldermen may not directly address citizens during Council meetings. However, if an Alderman wishes to hear input from a member of the public during discussion, they may request recognition from the Mayor, who may then choose to invite the citizen to speak, provided the topic is listed on the agenda. This process ensures orderly discussion, maintains compliance with the Texas Open Meetings Act, and upholds the principles of Robert's Rules of Order.

Section 5: Conduct at Meetings

The City of China Grove encourages productive, respectful, and transparent engagement in all City Council meetings. As elected officials, Aldermen are expected to model decorum and follow established procedures during all public meetings. While the tone and formality may vary depending on the meeting type, all meetings are governed by the Texas Open Meetings Act and the principles of Robert's Rules of Order (as modified for small boards).

General Expectations for All Meeting Types

- Maintain civility and professionalism in all interactions with fellow Council members, staff, and the public.
- Refrain from interrupting speakers and wait to be recognized by the presiding officer (usually the Mayor).
- Avoid personal attacks, sarcasm, or argumentative language during debate.
- Keep comments focused on policy, not personalities.
- Electronic devices should be silenced, and no private texting or emails should occur during meetings unless related to official business.

Regular and Special Council Meetings

These meetings are formal business sessions of the governing body.

Structure & Procedure:

- Governed by Robert's Rules of Order (adapted for small bodies).
- The agenda is strictly followed; only posted items may be discussed or acted upon.
- The Mayor presides, maintains order, and recognizes speakers.

Structure & Procedure *(continued):*

- Motions must be made and seconded before discussion begins.
- A majority vote of those present is required for passage of most motions.
- Exceptions requiring a supermajority of the full five-member governing body include:
    - Adoption of the annual budget, which requires at least 60% approval (i.e., 3 out of 5 votes).

- Adoption of the property tax rate above the voter-approval threshold, which requires a 75% vote of the full governing body, per Texas Tax Code § 26.05(a) (i.e., 4 out of 5 votes).
- Override of a Mayor's veto of an ordinance requires 75% (i.e., 4 out of 5 votes).

Quorum Requirements:

- A quorum is defined as three (3) members of the five-member Council.
- This quorum is based on a fully seated Council as defined by City ordinance, even when one or more seats are vacant.
- If the number of seated Aldermen drops below four (e.g., due to two vacancies or absences), the Council may be unable to conduct essential city business, particularly those requiring a supermajority vote.

Public Participation:

- Citizens may speak only during designated sections such as "Citizens to Be Heard" or when recognized by the Mayor.
- Aldermen may ask clarifying questions during citizen comments if permitted by the Mayor.
- Council discussion and deliberation are limited to posted agenda items only.

Action Items:

- Council may take official action, including adopting ordinances, approving contracts, and voting on policy matters.
- All actions must be properly noticed and comply with Open Meetings Act requirements.

Workshops

Workshops are informal, discussion-only sessions focused on a specific topic. No formal votes or actions may be taken.

Structure & Procedure:

- Workshops may be facilitated by the Mayor, City staff, or outside experts.
- The tone is more conversational and exploratory, with fewer formalities.
- No motions or votes are permitted.
- Agendas are still posted, and discussions must remain within the listed topics.

Citizen Participation:

- Citizens are encouraged to participate in workshops, especially when the topic directly impacts the community.
- The Mayor may invite public comment at any point during the discussion.
- Open dialogue is welcomed, but respectful conduct is still required.

Use of Workshops:

- Ideal for reviewing complex issues like budget planning, capital projects, and ordinance development.
- Allows detailed dialogue among Council members and the public without the pressure of decision-making.

Section 6: Budgeting & Tax Rate Responsibilities

Budget & Tax Rate — What Happens When (LGC Ch. 102; Tax Code Ch. 26)

Quick Reference for Aldermen

- **June:** Review draft budget (discussion only).
- **July:** Review final proposed budget (discussion only).
- **August:** Public hearing + **vote on Budget adoption**.
- **September:** Public hearing + **vote on Tax Rate adoption**.

Key Council Responsibilities by Month

May–June (Preparation and Discussion)

- Staff begins drafting the budget. Department heads submit requests, and the Mayor and City Secretary prepare the first draft.
- **Council Role:** At the **June Council Meeting (1st Thursday)**, you will have a **discussion-only review** of the budget draft. No action is taken yet, but this is your chance to ask questions, give feedback, and signal priorities.

July (Refinement and Filing)

- Staff finalizes the proposed budget and posts it online to meet the 30-day public posting rule (LGC §102.005).
- **Council Role:** At the **July Council Meeting (1st Thursday)**, you again review the proposed budget in a **discussion-only format**. This keeps you informed and prepares you for the August vote.
- A workshop may also be scheduled if the Council wants additional discussion time.

August (Budget Adoption)

- Staff publishes the required newspaper notice at least 17 days before the meeting.
- **Council Role:** At the **August Council Meeting (1st Thursday)** you must:
    - Hold the **Budget Public Hearing** (LGC §102.006).
    - **Vote to adopt the annual Budget** (LGC §102.009).
        - Quorum of 3: all 3 must vote yes.
        - Quorum of 4: a 3–1 vote carries.

September (Tax Rate Adoption)

- Staff publishes the required notice of the proposed tax rate (Tax Code §26.05).
- **Council Role:** At the **September Council Meeting (1st Thursday)** you must:
    - Hold the **Tax Rate Public Hearing**.
    - **Vote to adopt the property tax rate** (Tax Code §26.05).
        - A quorum of 4 is required.
        - 3–1 vote carries.
        - If the adopted rate exceeds the voter-approval rate, an election is required.

Post-Adoption (October and Beyond)

- Staff files the adopted budget and tax rate, updates systems, and notifies Bexar County and the Appraisal District.
- **Council Role:** No further votes are required at this stage, but you should be aware these filings close out the budget and tax cycle.
- Ongoing – If the City runs short on money in a particular area during the year, the Mayor will bring it to the Council. Council must then vote on an amendment to either increase or decrease the allocated GL amount before any change can take effect.

Legal Support References

LGC §22.039 – Quorum for governing body is majority of full membership, including vacancies.
LGC §102.005 – Filing requirement for proposed budget.
LGC §102.006 – Budget hearing and 10-day newspaper notice requirement.
LGC §102.009(a) – Budget must be adopted before start of fiscal year.

Tax Code §26.05 – Tax rate adoption and notice requirements.
Election Code §41.001 – Uniform election dates if quorum is lost and a special election is required.

Section 7: Reporting and Compliance Calendar

- The City maintains a master compliance calendar of deadlines, hearings, and reporting requirements.
- Responsibility for Updates: The Mayor is responsible for keeping the calendar current.
- Posting: The City Secretary is responsible for posting the updated calendar to the City website.
- Council Approval: Council approval is not required for this calendar.
- Use of the Calendar: For accuracy, employees, aldermen, and citizens should always rely on the version published on the website rather than printed copies, to ensure they are referencing the most up-to-date information.

Section 8: Communications and Conduct

- Use official channels (Message Board, City email, meetings) for city business.
- Avoid posting or commenting in ways that represent personal opinion as City policy.
- Do not direct or supervise city staff; communication goes through the Mayor.
- Maintain professionalism and confidentiality, especially in executive sessions. Texas Government Code § 551.146

  (a) A person commits an offense if the person without lawful authority knowingly discloses to a member of the public the certified agenda or tape recording of a meeting that was lawfully closed to the public under this chapter.

  (b) An offense under this section is a Class B misdemeanor.

Section 9: Time Commitment and Expectations

Aldermen are expected to commit an average of eight (8) hours per month to City governance activities. This includes attending City Council meetings, reviewing agenda packets, participating in training, and engaging with constituents.

Section 10: Emergency Succession Role – Mayor Pro-Tem

In accordance with the governance structure of the City of China Grove, the Mayor Pro-Tem is selected from among the Aldermen and shall assume the responsibilities of the Mayor in the event the Mayor recuses him/herself, is unavailable, incapacitated, or resigns. The Mayor Pro-Tem must be familiar with City operations and is required to be a signer on City financial accounts.

Section 11: Public Communication and Transparency

Aldermen shall use professional and transparent communication practices when engaging with the public. They are encouraged to respond to constituent concerns respectfully and use official City email accounts for City-related business. Public statements should reflect the official position of the Council unless explicitly stated as personal opinion.

Section 12: Training and Orientation

All newly elected Aldermen shall participate in a basic orientation within 90 days of taking office. Topics include the Texas Open Meetings Act, ethics, budgeting, and municipal governance. Continuing education through Texas Municipal League (TML) resources is encouraged.

Section 13: Committee Assignments

Aldermen may be assigned to serve on City committees or advisory groups as designated by the Mayor or Council. Participation should align with Council goals, and Aldermen are expected to report back on any committee activity or recommendations.

Section 14: Conflict of Interest

Aldermen are subject to Texas Local Government Code Chapter 171 regarding conflicts of interest. If a matter comes before the Council in which an Alderman has a financial or personal interest, the Alderman must file the required affidavit with the City Secretary and abstain from discussion or voting on the matter.

Annual Energy Reduction Goal & SECO Compliance

Council Role in Energy Reporting Compliance

As part of the City's responsibilities under **Texas Health & Safety Code §388.005**, the Council must vote annually to adopt a **5% electricity reduction goal** prior to the start of the State fiscal year (September 1). This goal is typically adopted during the **September Council meeting**, alongside other fiscal decisions such as budget and tax rate adoption. Although the Council does not complete the SECO report itself, it plays a critical role by setting the policy framework that enables staff to meet state reporting requirements before the **March 1** deadline.