

Commission Policy

Policy No.: 16-10

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Invocation

Purpose:

To solemnize Commission proceeding by allowing for an opening invocation before each meeting.

Policy:

It is the policy of Alachua County to maintain a tradition of solemnizing Commission proceedings by allowing for an opening invocation before each meeting, for the benefit and blessing of the Commission. The Commission intends, and has intended in past practice, to follow a policy that does not proselytize or advance any faith, or show any purposeful preference of one religious view to the exclusion of others.

In order to solemnize proceedings of the Commission, it is the policy of the Commission to allow for an invocation or prayer to be offered before its meetings for the benefit of the Commission. The invocation shall not be listed or recognized as an agenda item for the meeting or as part of the public business. No member or employee of the Commission or any other person in attendance at the meeting shall be required to participate in any invocation that is offered. The invocation shall be voluntarily delivered by an eligible member of the clergy, as specified below. The invocation speaker shall be selected from among a wide pool of local clergy, on a rotating basis using the following procedure.

Procedure:

The County Manager, or designee, shall compile and maintain a database of the religious congregations with an established presence in Alachua County (herein, the "Congregations List").

The Congregations List shall be compiled by referencing the listing for churches, congregations, or other assemblies in the annual Yellow Pages phone book(s) published for Alachua County, research from the internet, and consultation with local chambers of commerce. All religious congregations with an established presence in Alachua County are eligible to be, and shall be, included in the Congregations List. Any such congregation not otherwise identified for participation may request its inclusion by written communication to the County Manager.

This Policy is intended to be and shall be applied in a way that is all-inclusive of every diverse religious congregation in Alachua County. The Congregations List is compiled and used for

purposes of logistics, efficiency and equal opportunity for all of the community's religious leaders, who may themselves choose whether to respond to the Commission's invitation and participate. Should a question arise as to the authenticity of a religious congregation, the County Manager, or designee, shall refer to criteria used by the Internal Revenue Service in its determination of those religious organizations that would legitimately qualify for Section 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status.

The Congregations List shall be updated, by reasonable efforts of the County Manager, or designee, annually. The County Manager, or designee, shall invite the religious leader of each congregation listed on the Congregations List, in writing. The invitation shall read substantially as follows:

Dear Religious Leader,

The Alachua County Commission makes it a policy to invite members of the clergy in Alachua County to voluntarily offer an invocation before the beginning of its meetings, for the benefit and blessing of the Commission. As the leader of one of the religious congregations with an established presence in the local community, you are eligible to offer this important service at an upcoming meeting of the Commission.

If you are willing to assist the Commission in this regard, please send a written reply at your earliest convenience to the County Manager, or designee, at the address included on this letterhead. Clergy are scheduled on a first-come, first-serve basis. The dates of the Commission's scheduled meetings for the upcoming year are listed on the following, attached page. If you have a preference among the dates, please state that request in your written reply.

This opportunity is voluntary, and you are free to offer the invocation according to the dictates of your own conscience. To maintain a spirit of respect, the Commission requests only that the invocation opportunity not be exploited as an effort to convert others to the particular faith of the invocation speaker, nor to disparage any faith or belief different than that of the invocation speaker.

On behalf of the Alachua County Commission, I thank you in advance for considering this invitation.

Sincerely,

County Manager or designee

As the invitation letter indicates, the respondents to the invitation shall be scheduled on a first-come, first-serve basis to deliver the invocations.

No invocation speaker shall receive compensation for his or her service.

The County Manager, or designee, shall make every reasonable effort to ensure that a variety of eligible invocation speakers are scheduled for the Commission meetings. In any event, no invocation speaker shall be scheduled to offer an invocation at consecutive meetings of the Commission, or at more than three (3) Commission meetings in any calendar year.

Neither the Commission nor the County Manager, or designee, shall engage in any prior inquiry, review of, or involvement in, the content of any invocation to be offered by an invocation speaker.

Shortly before the opening gavel that officially begins the meeting and the agenda/business of the public, the Chairman of the Commission shall introduce the invocation speaker and the person selected to recite the Pledge of Allegiance following the invocation, and invite only those who wish to do so to stand for those observances of and for the Commission. Invocations shall be limited to five minutes or less. If an invocation speaker is unable to attend the meeting, the Clerk or any County Commissioner may provide the invocation.

This Policy is not intended, and shall not be implemented or construed in any way, to affiliate the Commission with, nor express the Commission's preference for or against, any faith or religious denomination. Rather, this Policy is intended to acknowledge and express the Commission's respect for the diversity of religious denominations and faiths represented and practiced among the citizens of Alachua County.

The following disclaimer shall be included in at least 10 point font at the bottom of any printed Commission meeting agenda:

"Any invocation that may be offered before the official start of the Commission meeting shall be the voluntary offering of, a private citizen, to and for the benefit of the Commission. The views or beliefs expressed by the invocation speaker have not been previously reviewed or approved by the Commission, and the Commission is not allowed by law to endorse the religious beliefs or views of this, or any other speaker."