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GPAC MEMBERS RECEIVE ORIENTATION & BROWN ACT TRAINING

The General Plan Advisory Committee (GPAC) for the City of Twentynine Palms is one step closer to beginning the comprehensive update of the General Plan following Monday's orientation meeting at City Hall.

City Attorney Patrick Munoz gave a presentation to the newly appointed GPAC members, alternates, and several local citizens who attended the July 6 meeting, welcoming the volunteer board and briefing them on pertinent organizational and legal issues, primarily the Ralph M. Brown Act.

"This is the same presentation I give to planning commission and city council members," Munoz said, explaining the California open meeting law, which guarantees the public's right to attend and participate in meetings of local legislative bodies. "The Brown Act relates to meetings of any legislative body, and you are a legislative body," he told the advisory committee.

Munoz covered rules for creating agendas, quorums, properly noticed regular meetings (posted at least 72 hours in advance), emergency and special meetings, and provisions for public comment and input. "During every meeting, the public must be allowed to comment," he said, reminding the committee that comments can be limited to three minutes each for the sake of time constraints.

Munoz also advised the GPAC of potential Brown Act violations and instructed them to avoid informal discussions outside of meetings where a majority of the members (seven or more) might be present, such as social events, and "serial meetings" such as coffee shop conversations, telephone calls, or emails where a member's comments could be passed on to other members. Anything related to "all discussing and commenting on an issue without the public having an opportunity to comment," he said.

Munoz also addressed conflict of interest issues, reminding the GPAC that "You are here to serve the public, not yourself," and talked about the role of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) in the General Plan process.

“Tricky issues for the high desert include water supply, historical resources, archaeological and biological issues,” he noted, adding that night sky impacts are also important here.

As a final task, the GPAC will need to create a General Plan document that the public can read and understand. “You will be asked to edit it, so a common resident of Twentynine Palms can understand it,” he said. “And you need to be able to have substantial evidence in the record to support your decisions.”

Ten of the 13 GPAC members and three of the four alternates were present for the orientation, including Jim Ricker representing the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center and Jeff Ohlfs representing Joshua Tree National Park, as well as Community Development Director Charles LaClaire.

“Your role as GPAC members is to work cooperatively together for a common goal,” Munoz told them. “Treat everyone politely, even if you strongly disagree with them. You all have views, and we want you to share those views,” he said.

While there will be no actual voting in the meetings, Munoz explained, decisions will have to be made. “If a regular member is not available, we will draw straws and an alternate will vote for them.” He also suggested that the alternates be polled after a decision, to show the City Council what their thoughts were. “We don’t want the alternates to feel like second class citizens,” he said, stressing the importance of their participation in the meetings over the duration of the General Plan Update.

Selection of a chair and vice chair for the GPAC will occur at their next meeting, which is scheduled for Monday, July 20, at 6 p.m. at City Hall. This will be the first formal meeting with consultants from the planning firm Hogle-Ireland Inc., and the agenda will include a General Plan Update overview, GPAC Survey, and Issues Maps. The meeting will be open to the public.

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