



Vancouver school board meets with minimal public notice

Some wonder if district violated spirit of open meetings law

By **Susan Parrish**, Columbian education reporter
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When Vancouver Public Schools called Monday's special board meeting to discuss communications, it was unusual in a number of ways.

First, the Monday morning meeting was announced via an email issued at 8:36 on Sunday morning. Second, the meeting venue was not at the school district's administrative offices, nor at any of its more than 20 schools, but at the home of a school board member.

Now some are questioning whether the district violated the spirit, if not the letter, of the state law requiring governments to hold open public meetings.

Why the district decided over the weekend to meet on Monday morning to discuss its communications wasn't clear. The district wasn't talking Monday afternoon, after the meeting came to light.

The board work session began at 8:30 a.m. at the home of Mari Greves, 4506 Oregon Drive. The meeting apparently lasted for four hours.

"Scheduling last-minute board meetings at an elected official's house, with one weekend day's notice, isn't really conducive to transparent government," said Eric Stahl, media and intellectual property lawyer with the firm Davis Wright Tremaine in Seattle. "It certainly isn't consistent with the spirit of Washington's public meetings law."

Stahl's clients include The Columbian and other media organizations.

The Open Public Meetings Act allows for special meetings with 24 hours' notice. But the agency has to comply strictly with the notice requirements, the notice has to specify the business to be transacted, and board members can't take final action on anything not in the notice.

So what was so urgent that forced officials to announce a meeting on a Sunday morning, when district offices are closed?

The district did not return phone calls from The Columbian asking for an explanation.

Tom Hagley Jr., the district's chief of staff, sent an email response: "Vancouver Public Schools complied with the 24-hour notice requirement to advertise special meetings of the board of directors. The work session topic was board communication and was part of ongoing professional development for the board and the superintendent. The discussion focused on how they can communicate more effectively with one another as members of a governance team. Periodically in the past, work sessions of a similar nature have been held at the homes of individual board members. Any member of the public who wanted to attend this work session was welcome."

However, it was unlikely that many of the public knew about the meeting in advance.

Among the requirements of the state law regarding special meetings, the district must notify parties on file with the governing body, which in Vancouver's case includes The Columbian; the district must prominently display the notice on the main entrance of the agency's principal location or the meeting site if it is not held at the agency's principal location; and post the meeting agenda on the district's website. Such notice must be delivered or posted, as applicable, at least 24 hours before the time of such meeting, as specified in the notice.

The district did post the special meeting agenda on its website, although it is unclear when. It is unclear whether the district posted the meeting notice on the door of the district office and on Greves' front door.

Also Monday, a closed-door executive session was held regarding real property. It is unclear whether the district followed the letter of the law. Real property can be discussed in executive session only in a few specific cases, and a specific reason must be cited as to why the discussion was held in executive session.

In response to a follow-up email asking for more clarity about the meeting, Hagley responded that district administrators were very busy on Monday.

"Among other commitments for today, we are hosting two researchers from the Urban Institute. They are writing a case study about our (Family and Community Resource Centers) and our partnership with Vancouver Housing Authority. We are one of three cities in the U.S. to be spotlighted at a national summit meeting in February," Hagley wrote.

He did not say why busy administrators would also schedule a four-hour special school board meeting on the same day.

The school board next meets at 4 p.m. Tuesday for a work session in the Jim Parsley Center board room, 2901 Falk Road, and at 5:15 p.m. for a regular meeting at the Bates Center for Educational Leadership, 2901 Falk Road.



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What really surprises me is that the story is about how little notice was given, but there is no information about the meeting. Why? Because, despite the fact that the Columbian could easily deduce that something was off with the timing, no one was there to report on it. And no one was there to report today either, where this issue was further discussed in an open meeting that's been on the calendar for months. That's a serious problem.

This is an issue I've been dealing with for quite awhile with this district, but there is no real reason for the district to change because no one attends school board meetings to hold them accountable. (Although, it seems worth noting the VEA has been consistently sending Representatives for the past couple months and has committed to continue to do it! Go TEACHERS!)

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Bruce Samuelson · Top Commenter · Vancouver, Washington

And when we get behind closed doors...

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Carolyn Crain · Top Commenter · John Adams High School

If this were the county commissioners the whole community would be up in arms!

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Loren Lee · Top Commenter

Carolyn Crain@there are plenty of citizens up in arms over the antics of our current county commissioners, Madore and Mielke, if you hadn't noticed:-)

Reply · Like · October 14 at 8:39am

Christian Bullock · Top Commenter · Vancouver, Washington

Ridiculous. This just smells like there's something brewing in the background. "ongoing professional development..." - wonder if someone had to get some professional dev hours logged in a very quick manner.?

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Nick Ruark · Top Commenter · Vancouver, Washington · 134 followers

I wonder if any discussion took place on another form of communications, specifically, the use of cellular telephones by the pupil transportation department to dispatch the district's fleet of school buses? Just curious. Perhaps someone at the Columbian could make an inquiry as to the Districts' policy on this to verify whether the policy complies with Washington State laws regarding the use of cellular telephones while operating a motor vehicle on public roads and streets.

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