By:  Huffman, et al. S.B. No. 494

(Walle)

A BILL TO BE ENTITLED

AN ACT

relating to certain procedures applicable to meetings under the open meetings law and the disclosure of public information under the public information law in the event of an emergency, urgent public necessity, or catastrophic event.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF TEXAS:

SECTION 1.  Section 551.045, Government Code, is amended by amending Subsections (a), (b), and (e) and adding Subsection (a-1) to read as follows:

(a)  In an emergency or when there is an urgent public necessity, the notice of a meeting to deliberate or take action on the emergency or urgent public necessity, or the supplemental notice to add the deliberation or taking of action on the emergency or urgent public necessity as an item to the agenda [~~of a subject added as an item to the agenda~~] for a meeting for which notice has been posted in accordance with this subchapter, is sufficient if the notice or supplemental notice [~~it~~] is posted for at least one hour [~~two hours~~] before the meeting is convened.

(a-1)  A governmental body may not deliberate or take action on a matter at a meeting for which notice or supplemental notice is posted under Subsection (a) other than:

(1)  a matter directly related to responding to the emergency or urgent public necessity identified in the notice or supplemental notice of the meeting as provided by Subsection (c); or

(2)  an agenda item listed on a notice of the meeting before the supplemental notice was posted.

(b)  An emergency or an urgent public necessity exists only if immediate action is required of a governmental body because of:

(1)  an imminent threat to public health and safety, including a threat described by Subdivision (2) if imminent; or

(2)  a reasonably unforeseeable situation, including:

(A)  fire, flood, earthquake, hurricane, tornado, or wind, rain, or snow storm;

(B)  power failure, transportation failure, or interruption of communication facilities;

(C)  epidemic; or

(D)  riot, civil disturbance, enemy attack, or other actual or threatened act of lawlessness or violence.

(e)  For purposes of Subsection (b)(2), the sudden relocation of a large number of residents from the area of a declared disaster to a governmental body's jurisdiction is considered a reasonably unforeseeable situation for a reasonable period immediately following the relocation. [~~Notice of an emergency meeting or supplemental notice of an emergency item added to the agenda of a meeting to address a situation described by this subsection must be given to members of the news media as provided by Section 551.047 not later than one hour before the meeting.~~]

SECTION 2.  Section 551.047(c), Government Code, is amended to read as follows:

(c)  The presiding officer or member shall give the notice by telephone, facsimile transmission, or electronic mail at least one hour before the meeting is convened.

SECTION 3.  Section 551.142, Government Code, is amended by adding Subsections (c) and (d) to read as follows:

(c)  The attorney general may bring an action by mandamus or injunction to stop, prevent, or reverse a violation or threatened violation of Section 551.045(a-1) by members of a governmental body.

(d)  A suit filed by the attorney general under Subsection (c) must be filed in a district court of Travis County.

SECTION 4.  Subchapter E, Chapter 552, Government Code, is amended by adding Section 552.233 to read as follows:

Sec. 552.233.  TEMPORARY SUSPENSION OF REQUIREMENTS FOR GOVERNMENTAL BODY IMPACTED BY CATASTROPHE. (a)  In this section:

(1)  "Catastrophe" means a condition or occurrence that interferes with the ability of a governmental body to comply with the requirements of this chapter, including:

(A)  fire, flood, earthquake, hurricane, tornado, or wind, rain, or snow storm;

(B)  power failure, transportation failure, or interruption of communication facilities;

(C)  epidemic; or

(D)  riot, civil disturbance, enemy attack, or other actual or threatened act of lawlessness or violence.

(2)  "Suspension period" means the period of time during which a governmental body may suspend the applicability of the requirements of this chapter to the governmental body under this section.

(b)  The requirements of this chapter do not apply to a governmental body during the suspension period determined by the governmental body under Subsections (d) and (e) if the governmental body:

(1)  is currently impacted by a catastrophe; and

(2)  complies with the requirements of this section.

(c)  A governmental body that elects to suspend the applicability of the requirements of this chapter to the governmental body must submit notice to the office of the attorney general that the governmental body is currently impacted by a catastrophe and has elected to suspend the applicability of those requirements during the initial suspension period determined under Subsection (d). The notice must be on the form prescribed by the office of the attorney general under Subsection (j).

(d)  A governmental body may suspend the applicability of the requirements of this chapter to the governmental body for an initial suspension period. The initial suspension period may not exceed seven consecutive days and must occur during the period that:

(1)  begins not earlier than the second day before the date the governmental body submits notice to the office of the attorney general under Subsection (c); and

(2)  ends not later than the seventh day after the date the governmental body submits that notice.

(e)  A governmental body may extend an initial suspension period if the governing body determines that the governing body is still impacted by the catastrophe on which the initial suspension period was based. The initial suspension period may be extended one time for not more than seven consecutive days that begin on the day following the day the initial suspension period ends. The governing body must submit notice of the extension to the office of the attorney general on the form prescribed by the office under Subsection (j).

(f)  A governmental body that suspends the applicability of the requirements of this chapter to the governmental body under this section must provide notice to the public of the suspension in a place readily accessible to the public and in each other location the governmental body is required to post a notice under Subchapter C, Chapter 551. The governmental body must maintain the notice of the suspension during the suspension period.

(g)  Notwithstanding another provision of this chapter, a request for public information received by a governmental body during a suspension period determined by the governmental body is considered to have been received by the governmental body on the first business day after the date the suspension period ends.

(h)  The requirements of this chapter related to a request for public information received by a governmental body before the date an initial suspension period determined by the governmental body begins are tolled until the first business day after the date the suspension period ends.

(i)  The office of the attorney general shall continuously post on the Internet website of the office each notice submitted to the office under this section from the date the office receives the notice until the first anniversary of that date.

(j)  The office of the attorney general shall prescribe the form of the notice that a governmental body must submit to the office under Subsections (c) and (e). The notice must require the governmental body to:

(1)  identify and describe the catastrophe that the governmental body is currently impacted by;

(2)  state the date the initial suspension period determined by the governmental body under Subsection (d) begins and the date that period ends;

(3)  if the governmental body has determined to extend the initial suspension period under Subsection (e):

(A)  state that the governmental body continues to be impacted by the catastrophe identified in Subdivision (1); and

(B)  state the date the extension to the initial suspension period begins and the date the period ends; and

(4)  provide any other information the office of the attorney general determines necessary.

SECTION 5.  As soon as practicable after this Act becomes law as provided by Section 2001.006, Government Code, the office of the attorney general shall prescribe the form of the notice required by Section 552.233(j), Government Code, as added by this Act.

SECTION 6.  Sections 551.045 and 551.047, Government Code, as amended by this Act, apply only to a meeting held on or after the effective date of this Act. A meeting held before the effective date of this Act is governed by the law in effect immediately before the effective date of this Act, and the former law is continued in effect for that purpose.

SECTION 7.  This Act takes effect September 1, 2019.