

# Harris County Emergency Services District #9

## Code of Conduct

### For

## Commissioners

### All Commissioners Should

- Fully participate in ESD board meetings and other public forums while demonstrating respect, kindness, consideration and courtesy to others
- Prepare in advance of meetings and be familiar with issues on the agenda
- Represent the district as needed at the request of the President or a member of the department
- Be respectful of other people's time. Stay focused and act efficiently during public meetings
- Serve as a model of leadership and civility to the community
- Inspire public confidence in the ESD governance
- Demonstrate honesty and integrity in every action and statement
- Participate in scheduled activities

### Policies & Protocol Related To Conduct

**Representing The District** – Commissioners, as public officials, cannot be prevented from participating in public events. However, if a request is made for someone to represent the district, that request should be forwarded on to the Board President. If enough notice is given, the Board President should review the opportunity at the next board meeting to determine representation, otherwise, the President should determine who is best able to represent the district. If more than two Board members show up for an event, the members should coordinate in the most efficient manner to reduce representation to no more than two members.

**Dress Code** – Commissioners should dress appropriately for all public events. This should be interpreted to mean dress better than at least 50% of the people participating in the event. The intent is to insure that Commissioners are seen as leaders in the group rather than the opposite.

**Endorsing Candidates for Public Office** – Commissioners have the right to personally endorse candidates for public office. However, this personal endorsement should never be misinterpreted as coming from the district and should not be mentioned or discussed in ESD Board Meetings.

## Commissioner Conduct with One Another

Commissioners are composed of individuals with a wide variety of backgrounds, personalities, values, opinions, and goals. Despite this diversity, all have chosen to serve in public office in order to preserve and protect the present and the future of our community. In all cases this common goal should be acknowledged even as Commissioners may “agree to disagree” on contentious issues.

### IN PUBLIC MEETINGS

- **Practice civility, professionalism and decorum in discussions and debate**

Difficult questions, tough challenges to a particular point of view, and criticism of ideas and information are legitimate elements of a free democracy in action. This does not allow, however, Commissioners to make belligerent, personal, impertinent, slanderous, threatening, abusive, or disparaging comments. No shouting or physical actions that could be construed as threatening will be tolerated. Council members should conduct themselves in a professional manner at all times, including dress.

- **Honor the role of the President in maintaining order**

It is the responsibility of the President to keep the comments of Commissioners on track during public meetings. Commissioners should honor efforts by the President to focus discussion on current agenda items. If there is disagreement about the agenda or the President’s actions, those objections should be voiced politely and with reason, following procedures outlined in Robert’s Rules of Order.

- **Avoid personal comments that could offend other Commissioners**

If a Commissioner is personally offended by the remarks of another Commissioner, the offended Commissioner should make notes of the actual words used and call for a "point of personal privilege" that challenges the other Commissioner to justify or apologize for the language used. The President will maintain control of this discussion.

- **Demonstrate effective problem-solving approaches**

Commissioners have a public stage to show how individuals with disparate points of view can find common ground and seek a compromise that benefits the community as a whole.

- **Be punctual and keep comments relative to topics discussed**

Commissioners have made a commitment to attend meetings and partake in discussions. Therefore, it is important that Commissioners be punctual and that meetings start on time. It is equally important that discussions on issues be relative to the topic at hand to allow adequate time to fully discussed scheduled issues.

### IN PRIVATE ENCOUNTERS

- **Continue respectful behavior in private**

The same level of respect and consideration of differing points of view that is deemed appropriate for public discussions should be maintained in private conversations.

- **Even private conversations can have a public presence**

Elected officials are always on display – their actions, mannerisms, dress and language are monitored by people around them that they may not know. Lunch table conversations will be eavesdropped upon, parking lot debates will be watched, and casual comments between individuals before and after public meetings noted.

## **Commissioners with Fire Department and EMT Staff**

Governance of an ESD relies on the cooperative efforts of elected officials, who set policy, and Department staff and volunteers, who implement and administer the ESD's policies. Therefore, every effort should be made to be cooperative and show mutual respect for the contributions made by each individual for the good of the community.

- **Treat all staff as professionals**

Clear, honest communication that respects the abilities, experience, and dignity of each individual is expected. Poor behavior towards the department volunteers and staff is not acceptable.

- **Do not disrupt City staff from their jobs**

Commissioners should not disrupt the department while they are in meetings, on the phone, or engrossed in performing their job functions in order to have their individual needs met.

- **Never publicly criticize an individual employee**

Commissioners should never express concerns about the performance of a department employee in public, to the employee directly, or to the employee's manager. Comments about staff performance should only be made to the Fire Chief and/or the President of the Department through private correspondence or conversation.

- **Do not get involved in administrative functions**

Commissioners must not attempt to influence Department on the making of appointments, awarding of contracts, or selecting of consultants. Do not get involved in administration functions of the ESD either.

## **Commissioners with the Public**

### **IN PUBLIC MEETINGS**

Making the public feel welcome is an important part of the democratic process. No signs of partiality, prejudice or disrespect should be evident on the part of individual Commissioner toward an individual participating in a public forum. Every effort should be made to be fair and impartial in listening to public testimony.

- **Be welcoming to speakers and treat them with care and gentleness**

Speaking in front of the ESD can be a difficult experience for some people. Some issues the ESD undertakes may affect people's daily lives and homes. Some decisions are emotional. The way that ESD treats people during public hearings can do a lot to make them relax or to push their emotions to a higher level of intensity.

- **Be fair and equitable in allocating public hearing time to individual speakers**

The President will determine and announce limits on speakers at the start of the public hearing process.

No speaker will be turned away unless he or she exhibits inappropriate behavior. Each speaker may only speak once during the public hearing unless the ESD requests additional clarification later in the process. After the close of the public hearing, no more public testimony will be accepted unless the President reopens the public hearing for a limited and specific purpose.

- **Give the appearance of active listening**

It is disconcerting to speakers to have Commissioners not look at them when they are speaking. It is fine to look down at documents or to make notes, but reading for a long period of time gazing around the room gives the appearance of disinterest. Be aware of facial expressions, especially those that could be interpreted as "smirking," disbelief, anger or boredom.

- **Ask for clarification, but avoid debate and argument with the public**

Only the President – not individual Commissioners -- can interrupt a speaker during a presentation. However, a Commissioner can ask the President for a point of order if the speaker is off the topic or exhibiting behavior or language the Commissioner finds disturbing.

If speakers become flustered or defensive by Commissioner questions, it is the responsibility of the President to calm and focus the speaker and to maintain the order and decorum of the meeting. Questions by Commissioner to members of the public testifying should seek to clarify or expand information. It is never appropriate to belligerently challenge or belittle the speaker. Commissioner's personal opinions or inclinations about upcoming votes should not be revealed until after the public hearing is closed.

- **No personal attacks of any kind, under any circumstance**

Commissioners should be aware that their body language and tone of voice, as well as the words they use, can appear to be intimidating or aggressive.

- **Follow parliamentary procedure in conducting public meetings**

The ESD Attorney serves as advisory parliamentarian for the ESD and is available to answer questions or interpret situations according to parliamentary procedures. Final rulings on parliamentary procedure are made by the President, subject to the appeal of the full Board.

### **Commissioner Conduct with the Media**

Commissioners may be contacted by the media for background and quotes.

- **The best advice for dealing with the media is to never go "off the record"**

Most members of the media represent the highest levels of journalistic integrity and ethics, and can be trusted to keep their word. But one bad experience can be catastrophic. Words that are not said cannot be quoted.

- **The President is the official spokesperson for the representative on ESD position.**

The President is the designated representative of the ESD to present and speak on the official ESD position. If an individual Commissioner is contacted by the media, the Commissioner should be clear about whether their comments represent the official ESD position or a personal viewpoint.

- **Choose words carefully and cautiously**

Comments taken out of context can cause problems. Be especially cautious about humor, sardonic asides, sarcasm, or word play. It is never appropriate to use personal slurs or swear words when talking with the media.