

Florida: can a county commission keep riff-raff from attending its public meetings?

(via Gemini)

Based on Florida law, the answer is ****no****. A County Commission cannot exclude members of the public from meetings based on a subjective label like "riff raff," nor can they exclude people based on their appearance, social status, or economic standing.

Florida has some of the strongest open government laws in the United States, collectively known as the ****"Sunshine Law."**** Under these laws, the default rule is broad public access.

Here is the legal breakdown regarding public attendance and the limitations on a commission's power to exclude people.

1. Florida's Sunshine Law (Section 286.011, Florida Statutes)

The Florida Sunshine Law explicitly states that all meetings of any board or commission of any state agency or authority (including counties) at which official acts are to be taken ****are declared to be public meetings open to the public at all times.****

The "Public" means everyone:****** The courts have interpreted "the public" to include all persons, regardless of their status, property ownership, or reputation.

No "Cooling Out": Officials cannot create a "chilling effect" that discourages specific groups of people from attending.

2. Florida Constitution (Article I, Section 24)

The Florida Constitution guarantees the public a right of access to meetings of any collegial public body of the executive branch of state government or of any local government (including counties).

3. Discrimination and Accessibility

A County Commission cannot limit attendance to "respectable" citizens or bar "riff-raff."

Arbitrary Exclusion: Excluding someone because board members simply dislike them or consider them "riff raff" would likely violate the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution and Florida law.

4. When Can Someone Be Removed?

While the Commission cannot ban "riff-raff" (a status), they ****can**** remove individuals based on ****conduct****.

****Disorderly Conduct:**** If an individual disrupts the meeting to the point where the business of the government cannot be conducted, the presiding officer (usually the Chair) can have them removed and potentially arrested.

Florida Statute ****871.01**** makes it a crime to willfully interrupt or disturb any lawful assembly of people.

Threats: Credible threats to the safety of the board or the public are grounds for removal.

Rules of Decorum: Commissions are allowed to adopt reasonable rules of decorum (e.g., time limits on speaking, prohibiting shouting). However, these rules must be content-neutral and cannot be used to discriminate against specific types of people.