

PROJECT NO. 55307

**REVIEW OF CHAPTER 27 – RULES
FOR ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES**

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**PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION
OF TEXAS**

**PROPOSAL FOR PUBLICATION OF RULE AMENDMENTS TO CHAPTER 27 -
SUBSTANTIVE RULES APPLICABLE TO ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES**

The Public Utility Commission of Texas (commission) proposes rule amendments to multiple sections of its Chapter 27 Substantive Rules, Applicable to Administrative Services for consideration at the April 11, 2024 Open Meeting. The specific proposed amendments are detailed below.

Rule Review Stakeholder Recommendations

On August 4, 2023, commission staff filed a preliminary notice and request for comments in this project. No comments were received in response to the preliminary requests for comments. Based upon an internal review by commission staff, the commission proposes the following rule changes.

The Public Utility Commission of Texas (commission) proposes amendments to 16 Texas Administrative Code (TAC) §§27.21, relating to Commission Employee Training; 27.31, relating to Historically Underutilized Business Program; 27.65 relating to Definitions; 27.69 relating to Sovereign Immunity; 27.81 relating to Notice of Claim of Breach of Contract; 27.83 relating to Agency Counterclaim; 27.85 relating to Request for Voluntary Disclosure of Additional Information; 27.87 relating to Duty to Negotiate; 27.89 relating to Timetable; 27.91, relating to Conduct of Negotiations; 27.93 relating to Settlement Approval Procedures; 27.97, relating to

Costs of Negotiation; 27.99, relating to Request for Contested Case Hearing; 27.111, relating to Mediation Timetable; 27.113, relating to Conduct of Mediation; 27.115, relating to Agreement to Mediate; 27.117, relating to Qualifications and Immunity of Mediator; 27.121, relating to Costs of Mediation; 27.123, relating to Settlement Approval Procedures; 27.125, relating to Initial Settlement Agreement; 27.127; relating to Final Settlement Agreement; 27.143, relating to Factors Supporting the Use of Assisted Negotiation Processes; 27.145, relating to Use of Assisted Negotiation Processes; 27.161, relating to Procedures for Resolving Vendor Protests.

Growth Impact Statement

The agency provides the following governmental growth impact statement for the proposed rules, as required by Texas Government Code §2001.0221. The agency has determined that for each year of the first five years that the proposed rules are in effect, the following statements will apply:

- (1) the proposed rules will not create a government program and will not eliminate a government program;
- (2) implementation of the proposed rules will not require the creation of new employee positions and will not require the elimination of existing employee positions;
- (3) implementation of the proposed rules will not require an increase and will not require a decrease in future legislative appropriations to the agency;
- (4) the proposed rules will not require an increase and will not require a decrease in fees paid to the agency;
- (5) the proposed rules will not create a new regulation;
- (6) the proposed rules will not expand, limit, or repeal an existing regulation;

(7) the proposed rules will not change the number of individuals subject to the rule's applicability;
and

(8) the proposed rules will not affect this state's economy.

Fiscal Impact on Small and Micro-Businesses and Rural Communities

There is no adverse economic effect anticipated for small businesses, micro-businesses, or rural communities as a result of implementing the proposed rules. Accordingly, no economic impact statement or regulatory flexibility analysis is required under Texas Government Code §2006.002(c).

Takings Impact Analysis

The commission has determined that the proposed rules will not be a taking of private property as defined in chapter 2007 of the Texas Government Code.

Fiscal Impact on State and Local Government

Mr. Jay Stone, Program Administrator, Budget & Fiscal Oversight Division, has determined that for the first five-year period the proposed rules are in effect, there will be no fiscal implications for the state or for units of local government under Texas Government Code §2001.024(a)(4) as a result of enforcing or administering the sections.

Public Benefits

Mr. Stone has determined that for each year of the first five years the proposed sections are in effect the public benefit anticipated as a result of enforcing the section will be enhanced clarity on rules applicable to contracts and administrative services, and the amendment of rules that have become outdated. There will not be no probable economic cost to persons required to comply with the rules under Texas Government Code §2001.024(a)(5).

Local Employment Impact Statement

For each year of the first five years the proposed sections are in effect, there should be no effect on a local economy; therefore, no local employment impact statement is required under Texas Government Code §2001.022.

Costs to Regulated Persons

Texas Government Code §2001.0045(b) does not apply to this rulemaking because the commission is expressly excluded under §2001.0045(c)(7).

Public Hearing

The commission staff will conduct a public hearing on this rulemaking if requested in accordance with Texas Government Code §2001.029. The request for a public hearing must be received by Friday, May 17, 2024. If a request for public hearing is received, commission staff will file in this project a notice of hearing.

Public Comments

Interested persons may file comments electronically through the interchange on the commission's website. Comments must be filed by Friday, May 17, 2024. Comments should be organized in a manner consistent with the organization of the proposed rules. The commission invites specific comments regarding the costs associated with, and benefits that will be gained by, implementation of the proposed rule. The commission will consider the costs and benefits in deciding whether to modify the proposed rules on adoption. All comments should refer to Project Number 55307.

Each set of comments should include a standalone executive summary as the last page of the filing. This executive summary must be clearly labeled with the submitting entity's name and should include a bulleted list covering each substantive recommendation made in the comments.

Statutory Authority

The amendments are proposed under Public Utility Regulatory Act (PURA) §14.001, which grants the commission the general power to regulate and supervise the business of each public utility within its jurisdiction and to do anything specifically designated or implied by this title that is necessary and convenient to the exercise of that power and jurisdiction; §14.002 and §14.052, which authorizes the commission to adopt and enforce rules reasonably required in the exercise of its powers and jurisdiction, including rules of practice and procedure; § 14.0025, which requires the commission to develop and implement a policy to encourage the use of alternative dispute resolution;

Amended §27.21 is proposed under Texas Government Code Chapter 656, Subchapter C. §§656.041–656.104 which requires the commission to adopt rules relating to the eligibility of the commissioners and commission employees for training and education supported by the commission, and the obligations assumed by the commissioners and commission employees on receiving the training and education.

Amended §27.31 is proposed under Texas Government Code §2161.003, which requires the commission to adopt the Comptroller of Public Accounts rules for Historically Underutilized Businesses.

For rules relating to Negotiation and Mediation of Certain Contract Disputes under Chapter 27, Subchapter C

Texas Government Code Chapter 2260 and 2261, which relates to state agency contracting standards and oversight; Texas Government Code §2260.052(c) which requires each unit of state government with rulemaking authority to develop rules to govern the negotiation and mediation of a claim under this section which relates to the resolution of certain contract claims against the State of Texas; Civil Practices and Remedies Code Chapter 107 which governs resolutions granting permission to sue the State of Texas or a unit of state government; and Civil Practice and Remedies Code Chapter 154 which governs alternative dispute resolution procedures.

Amended §27.161 is proposed under Texas Government Code §2155.076, which requires the commission to develop and adopt protest procedures for vendors' protests concerning purchases

that are consistent with the Texas Building and Procurement Commission rules on the same subject.

Cross Reference to Statute: Public Utility Regulatory Act §§14.001, 14.002, 14.0025, and 14,052; Texas Government Code §2155.076, §2260.052(c), and §2161.003; Texas Government Code Chapter 656, Subchapter C, §§656.041–656.104; Texas Government Code Chapters 2260 and 2261; and Civil Practice and Remedies Code Chapters 107 and 154.

§27.21. Commission Employee Training.

(a) “Training,” as used in this section, means instruction, teaching, or other education received by a commission employee that is not normally received by all commission employees and that is designed to enhance the ability of the employee to perform the employee’s job.

(1) The term includes a course of study at an institution of higher education, as defined by Texas Education Code §61.003(8), if the commission spends money to assist the employee to meet the expense of the course of study or pays salary to the employee to undertake the course of study as an assigned duty.

(2) The term does not include instruction, teaching, or other education that is required either by state or federal law or that is determined necessary by the commission and offered to all commission employees performing similar jobs.

(b) The commission may make public funds available to its employees for training in accordance with the State Employees Training Act, Texas Government Code §§656.041 – 656.104. The State Employees Training Act allows the commission to spend public funds to pay the salary, tuition and other fees, travel and living expenses, training stipend, expense of training materials, and other necessary expenses of an instructor, student, or other participant in a training program.

(c) Training paid for, in part or in whole, by the commission, or training undertaken by an employee of the commission as an assigned duty, must be related to the duties or prospective duties of the employee.

- (d) Employees may be required to complete training related to the employee's duties or prospective duties.
- (e) Requirements for eligibility and participation in training ~~must~~shall be in accordance with this section and the commission's current employee handbook.
- (f) Permission to participate in training, including commission-sponsored training, ~~must~~shall not in any way affect an employee's at-will status or constitute a guarantee of continued employment, nor ~~will~~shall it constitute a guarantee or indication of future employment in a prospective position.
- (g) Permission to participate in any training may be denied or withdrawn at the discretion of the commission's executive director for any reason, including, ~~but not limited to,~~ a determination that participation may negatively impact the employee's job duties or performance.
- (h) Permission to participate in any training may be contingent upon reasonable requirements set in writing in advance by the employee's supervisor. If pre-determined requirements are not met:
- (1) Permission to participate or continue participating in the training may be denied or withdrawn; ~~or~~and/or
 - (2) The employee may be, at the discretion of the commission's executive director, required to repay the commission any amounts paid toward the training.

- (i) For an authorized training program offered by an institution of higher education or a private or independent institution of higher education: the commission ~~will~~shall only reimburse the tuition expenses for ~~each~~ program course~~(s)~~ successfully completed by the employee at an accredited institution of higher education (including online courses or courses not credited towards a degree); and the commission's executive director must authorize the tuition reimbursement payment before the employee may be reimbursed.
- (j) An employee who does not perform the employee's regular duties for three or more months as a result of training paid for by the commission must:
- (1) work for the commission following the training for at least one month for each month of the training period; or
 - (2) repay the commission for all the costs associated with the training that were paid during the training period, including any amounts of the employee's salary that were paid for time spent on training and were not accounted for as paid vacation or compensatory leave, and any reasonable expenses the commission incurs in obtaining restitution, including reasonable attorney's fees.
- (k) The commission's executive director may require an employee who requests full or partial payment or reimbursement of tuition for training necessary to obtain a degree or certification to agree in writing before payment or reimbursement is made to pay the commission for any amounts paid if the employee voluntarily leaves employment with the commission within one year after the training is completed.

- (1) Amounts paid by the commission ~~will~~shall be prorated to credit any full calendar month of employment following completion of the training.
 - (2) This subsection only applies to an employee to whom subsection (j) of this section does not apply because the employee either continued to perform the employee's regular duties during training or did not perform the employee's regular duties for a period of time during training that was less than three months.
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- (l) The commission may waive the requirements prescribed under subsection (j) of this section by an order adopted in a public meeting if the commission finds that such action is in the best interest of the commission or is warranted because of an extreme personal hardship suffered by the employee.
 - (m) Before an employee receives training that will be paid for by the commission and during which the employee will not be performing the employee's regular duties for three months or more, the employee must agree in writing to comply with the requirements prescribed under subsection (j) of this section.
 - (n) All materials received by an employee through commission-funded training are the property of the commission.

§27.31. Historically Underutilized Business Program.

The commission adopts by reference the rules of the Comptroller of Public Accounts in 34 Texas Administrative Code (TAC) §§~~20.282, 20.284, 20.285, 20.296, and 20.297~~~~20.11, 20.13, 20.14, 20.26 and 20.27~~, relating to the Historically Underutilized Business Program.

§27.65. Definitions.

The following words and terms, when used in this subchapter, ~~shall~~ have the following meaning, unless the context clearly indicates otherwise:

- (1) **Chief administrative officer** -- The executive director of the commission or his or her/his/her designee.
- (2) **Claim** -- A demand for damages by the contractor based upon the commission's alleged breach of the contract.
- (3) **Contract** -- A written contract between the commission and a contractor by the terms of which the contractor agrees either:
 - (A) to provide goods or services, by sale or lease, to or for the commission; or
 - (B) to perform a project as defined by Texas Government Code, §2166.001.
- (4) **Contractor** -- Independent contractor who has entered into a contract directly with the commission. The term does not include:
 - (A) the contractor's subcontractor, officer, employee, agent or other person furnishing goods or services to a contractor;
 - (B) an employee of the commission; or
 - (C) a student at an institution of higher education.
- (5) **Counterclaim** -- A demand by the commission based upon the contractor's claim.
- (6) **Day** -- Calendar days, not working days, unless otherwise specified by this chapter.~~A calendar day. If an act is required to occur on a day falling on a Saturday, Sunday, or holiday, the first working day which is not one of these days should be counted as the required day for purpose of this subchapter.~~

(7) **Event** -- An act or omission or a series of acts or omissions giving rise to a claim.

The following list contains illustrative examples of events, subject to the specific terms of the contract:

(A) Examples of events in the context of a contract for goods or services

include:

- (i) the failure of the commission to timely pay for goods and services;
- (ii) the failure of the commission to pay the balance due and owing on the contract price, including orders for additional work, after deducting any amount owed the commission for work not performed under the contract or in substantial compliance with the contract terms;
- (iii) the suspension, cancellation, or termination of the contract;
- (iv) final rejection of the goods or services tendered by the contractor, in whole or in part;
- (v) repudiation of the entire contract prior to or at the outset of performance by the contractor; or
- (vi) withholding liquidated damages from final payment to the contractor.

(B) Examples of events in the context of a project:

- (i) the failure to timely pay the unpaid balance of the contract price following final acceptance of the project;
- (ii) the failure to make timely progress payments required by the contract;

- (iii) the failure to pay the balance due and owing on the contract price, including orders for additional work, after deducting any amount owed the commission for work not performed under the contract or in substantial compliance with the contract terms;
 - (iv) the failure to grant time extensions to which the contractor is entitled under the terms of the contract;
 - (v) the failure to compensate the contractor for occurrences for which the contract provides a remedy;
 - (vi) suspension, cancellation or termination of the contract, other than by the terms provided for in the contract;
 - (vii) rejection by the commission, in whole or in part, of the "work", as defined by the contract, tendered by the contractor;
 - (viii) repudiation of the entire contract prior to or at the outset of performance by the contractor;
 - (ix) withholding liquidated damages from final payment to the contractor; or
 - (x) refusal, in whole or in part, of a written request made by the contractor in strict accordance with the contract to adjust the contract price, the contract time, or the scope of work.
- (C) The lists in subparagraphs (A) and (B) of this paragraph should not be considered exhaustive but are merely illustrative in nature.

(8) Mediation -- A voluntary form of dispute resolution in which an impartial person facilitates communication between parties to promote negotiation and settlement of disputed issues.

(9) Working day -- A day on which the commission is open for the conduct of business.

(108) Goods -- Supplies, materials or equipment.

(119) Parties -- The contractor and the commission that have entered into a contract in connection with which a claim of breach of contract has been filed under this subchapter.

(1240) Project -- As defined in Texas Government Code §2166.001, a building construction project that is financed wholly or partly by a specific appropriation, bond issue or federal money, including the construction of:

(A) a building, structure, or appurtenant facility or utility, including the acquisition and installation of original equipment and original furnishing; and

(B) an addition to, or alteration, modification, rehabilitation or repair of an existing building, structure, or appurtenant facility or utility.

(1344) Services -- The furnishing of skilled or unskilled labor or consulting or professional work, or a combination thereof, excluding the labor of an employee of the commission.

(1412) Unit of state government or unit -- The state or an agency, department, commission (including the Public Utility Commission), bureau, board, office, council, court, or other state entity that is in any branch of state government that is

created by the Texas Constitution, or statute of this state, including a university system or institution of higher education. The term does not include:

- (A) a county;
- (B) municipality;
- (C) court of a county or municipality;
- (D) special purpose district; or
- (E) other political subdivision of the state.

§27.69. Sovereign Immunity.

This subchapter does not waive the commission's sovereign or governmental immunity to suit or liability.

§27.81. Notice of Claim of Breach of Contract.

- (a) A contractor asserting a claim of breach of contract under the Texas Government Code, Chapter 2260, ~~must~~shall file notice of the claim as provided by this section.
- (b) The notice of claim ~~must~~shall:
- (1) be in writing and signed by the contractor or the contractor's authorized representative;
 - (2) be delivered by hand, certified mail return receipt requested, or other verifiable delivery service, to the officer of the commission designated in the contract to receive a notice of claim of breach of contract under the Texas Government Code, Chapter 2260; if no person is designated in the contract, the notice ~~must~~shall be delivered to the commission's chief administrative officer, and
 - (3) state in detail:
 - (A) the nature of the alleged breach of contract, including the date of the event that the contractor asserts as the basis of the claim and each contractual provision allegedly breached;
 - (B) a description of damages that resulted from the alleged breach, including the amount and method used to calculate those damages; and
 - (C) the legal theory of recovery, *i.e.*, breach of contract, including the causal relationship between the alleged breach and the damages claimed.

- (c) In addition to the mandatory contents of the notice of claim as required by subsection (b) of this section, the contractor may submit supporting documentation or other tangible evidence to facilitate the commission's evaluation of the contractor's claim.
- (d) The notice of claim ~~must~~shall be delivered no later than 180 days after the date of the event that the contractor asserts as the basis of the claim; ~~provided, however, that a contractor shall deliver notice of a claim that was pending before the commission on August 30, 1999, to the commission no later than February 26, 2000.~~

§27.83. Agency Counterclaim.

- (a) The commission asserting a counterclaim under the Texas Government Code, Chapter 2260, ~~will~~ file notice of the counterclaim as provided by this section.
- (b) The notice of counterclaim ~~will~~:
- (1) be in writing;
 - (2) be delivered by hand, certified mail return receipt requested or other verifiable delivery service to the contractor or representative of the contractor who signed the notice of claim of breach of contract; and
 - (3) state in detail:
 - (A) the nature of the counterclaim;
 - (B) a description of damages or offsets sought, including the amount and method used to calculate those damages or offsets; and
 - (C) the legal theory supporting the counterclaim.
- (c) In addition to the mandatory contents of the notice of counterclaim required by subsection (b) of this section, the commission may submit supporting documentation or other tangible evidence to facilitate the contractor's evaluation of the commission's counterclaim.
- (d) The notice of counterclaim ~~will~~ be delivered to the contractor no later than 90 days after the commission's receipt of the contractor's notice of claim.

- (e) Nothing herein precludes the commission from initiating a lawsuit for damages against the contractor in a court of competent jurisdiction.

§27.85. Request for Voluntary Disclosure of Additional Information.

- (a) Upon the filing of a claim or counterclaim, ~~a party~~parties may request to review and copy information in the possession or custody or subject to the control of the other party that pertains to the contract claimed to have been breached, including, ~~without limitation~~:
- (1) accounting records;
 - (2) correspondence, including ~~communications, without limitation, correspondence~~ between the commission and outside consultants ~~the other party~~# utilized in preparing its bid solicitation or any part thereof or in administering the contract, and correspondence between the contractor and its subcontractors, materialmen, and vendors;
 - (3) schedules;
 - (4) ~~any relevant internal memoranda of the other party~~the parties' internal memoranda;
 - (5) documents created by the ~~other party~~contractor in preparing its offer to the commission and documents created by the commission in analyzing the offers it received in response to a solicitation.
- (b) Subsection (a) of this section applies to all information in the parties' possession regardless of the manner in which it is recorded, including, ~~without limitation~~, paper and electronic media.
- (c) The contractor and the commission may seek additional information directly from third parties, including, ~~without limitation~~, the commission's third party consultants and the contractor's subcontractors.

- (d) Nothing in this section requires any party to disclose the requested information or any matter that is privileged under Texas or federal law.
- (e) Material submitted ~~underpursuant to~~ this subsection and claimed to be confidential by the contractor ~~mustshall~~ be handled in accordance with~~pursuant to~~ the requirements of the Public Information Act, Texas Government Code, Chapter 552.

§27.87. Duty to Negotiate.

The parties ~~must~~^{shall} negotiate in accordance with the timetable ~~established by~~^{set forth in} §27.89 of this title (relating to Timetable) to attempt to resolve all claims and counterclaims. No party is obligated to settle with the other party as a result of the negotiation.

§27.89. Timetable.

- (a) Following receipt of a contractor's notice of claim, the chief administrative officer of the commission or other designated representative ~~will~~shall review each claim of the contractor and each counterclaim of the commission ~~the contractor's claim(s) and the commission's counterclaim(s);~~ if any, and initiate negotiations with the contractor to attempt to resolve each the claim and counterclaim ~~claim(s) and counterclaim(s).~~
- (b) Subject to subsection (c) of this section, the parties ~~must~~shall begin negotiations within a reasonable period of time, not to exceed 60 days following the later of:
- (1) the date of termination of the contract;
 - (2) the completion date, or substantial completion date in the case of construction projects, in the original contract; or
 - (3) the date the commission receives the contractor's notice of claim.
- (c) The commission may delay negotiations until ~~after~~ the 180th day after the date of the event giving rise to the claim of breach of contract by:
- (1) delivering written notice to the contractor that the commencement of negotiations will be delayed; and
 - (2) delivering written notice to the contractor when the commission is ready to begin negotiations.

- (d) The parties may conduct negotiations according to an agreed schedule as long as they begin negotiations no later than the deadlines ~~prescribed by set forth in~~ subsections (b) or (c) of this section, whichever is applicable.
- (e) Subject to subsection (f) of this section, the parties ~~must shall~~ complete the negotiations that are required by this chapter as a prerequisite to a contractor's request for contested case hearing no later than 270 days ~~from the date after~~ the commission ~~received receives~~ the contractor's notice of claim.
- (f) The parties may agree in writing to extend the time for negotiations on or before the 270th day after the commission receives the contractor's notice of claim. The agreement ~~must shall~~ be signed by representatives of the parties with authority to bind each respective party and ~~must shall~~ provide for the extension of the statutory negotiation period until a date certain. The parties may enter into a series of written extension agreements that comply with the requirements of this section.
- (g) The contractor may request a contested case hearing before the State Office of Administrative Hearings (SOAH) ~~in accordance with pursuant to~~ §27.99 of this title (relating to Request for Contested Case Hearing) ~~270 days from the date after the 270th day after~~ the commission ~~received receives~~ the contractor's notice of claim, or the expiration of any extension agreed to under subsection (f) of this section.

- (h) The parties may agree to mediate the dispute at any time before 270 days from the date~~the 270th day after~~ the commission ~~received~~receives the contractor's notice of claim or before the expiration of any extension agreed to by the parties in accordance with~~pursuant to~~ subsection (f) of this section. The mediation ~~must~~shall be governed by Division 3 of this subchapter (relating to Mediation of Contract Disputes).
- (i) Nothing in this section ~~prohibits~~is intended to prevent the parties from agreeing to commence negotiations earlier than the deadlines established in subsections (b) and (c) of this section, or from continuing or resuming negotiations after the contractor requests a contested case hearing before SOAH.

§27.91. Conduct of Negotiation.

- (a) Negotiation is a consensual bargaining process in which the parties attempt to resolve a claim and counterclaim. A negotiation under this subchapter may be conducted by any method, technique, or procedure authorized under the contract or agreed upon by the parties, including, ~~without limitation,~~ negotiation in person, by telephone, by digital or physical mail correspondence, by video conference, or by any other method that permits the parties to identify their respective positions, discuss their respective differences, confer with their respective advisers, exchange offers of settlement, and settle.
- (b) The parties may conduct negotiations with the assistance of one or more neutral third parties. If the parties choose to mediate their dispute, the mediation ~~must~~shall be conducted in accordance with Division 3 of this subchapter (relating to Mediation of Contract Disputes). Parties may choose an assisted negotiation process other than mediation, including ~~without limitation,~~ processes such as those described in Division 4 of this subchapter (relating to Assisted Negotiation Processes).
- (c) To facilitate the meaningful evaluation and negotiation of each claim and, as applicable, each counterclaim~~the claim(s) and any counterclaim(s),~~ the parties may exchange relevant documents that support their respective claims, defenses, counterclaims or positions.
- (d) Material submitted ~~underpursuant to~~ this subsection and claimed to be confidential by the contractor ~~must~~shall be handled in accordance with~~pursuant to~~ the requirements of the Public Information Act, Texas Government Code, Chapter 552.

§27.93. Settlement Approval Procedures.

The parties' settlement approval procedures ~~must~~ be disclosed prior to, or at the beginning of, negotiations. To the extent possible, the parties ~~must~~ select negotiators who are knowledgeable about the subject matter of the dispute, who are in a position to reach agreement, and who can credibly recommend approval of an agreement.

§27.97. Costs of Negotiation.

Unless the parties agree otherwise, each party ~~is~~ shall be responsible for its own costs incurred in connection with a negotiation, including, ~~without limitation,~~ the costs of attorney's fees, consultant's fees and expert's fees.

§27.99. Request for Contested Case Hearing.

~~(a) If a claim for breach of contract is not resolved in its entirety through negotiation, mediation or other assisted negotiation process in accordance with this subchapter on or before the 270th day after the commission receives the notice of claim, or after the expiration of any extension agreed to by the parties pursuant to §27.89(f) of this title (relating to Timetable), the contractor may file a request with the commission for a contested case hearing before the State Office of Administrative Hearings (SOAH).~~

(a) A contractor may file a request with the commission for a contested case hearing before the State Office of Administrative Hearings (SOAH) if a claim for breach of contract is not resolved in its entirety through negotiation, mediation or other assisted negotiation process in accordance with this subchapter 270 days from the date:

(1) the commission receives the notice of the claim; or

(2) the expiration of any extension agreed to by the parties in accordance with §27.89(f) of this title (relating to Timetable).

(b) A request for a contested case hearing ~~must~~shall state the legal and factual basis for the claim, and ~~must~~shall be delivered to the chief administrative officer of the commission or other officer designated in the contract to receive notice within a reasonable time after the 270th day or the expiration of any written extension agreed to ~~in accordance with~~pursuant to §27.89(f) of this title.

- (c) The commission ~~must~~shall forward the contractor's request for contested case hearing to SOAH within a reasonable period of time, not to exceed thirty days, after receipt of the request.
- (d) The parties may agree to submit the case to SOAH 270 days from the date~~before the 270th day after~~ the notice of claim is received by the commission if they have achieved a partial resolution of the claim or if an impasse has been reached in the negotiations and proceeding to a contested case hearing would serve the interests of justice.

§27.111. Mediation Timetable.

- (a) The contractor and commission may agree to mediate the dispute at any time 270 days from the date~~before the 270th day after~~ the commission receives a notice of claim of breach of contract, or before the expiration of any extension agreed to by the parties in writing.
- (b) A contractor and the commission may mediate the dispute even after the case has been referred to the State Office of Administrative Hearings (SOAH) for a contested case. SOAH may also refer a contested case for mediation in accordance with~~pursuant to~~ its own rules and guidelines, regardless of whether ~~or not~~ the parties have previously attempted mediation.

§27.113. Conduct of Mediation.

- (a) Mediation is a consensual process in which an impartial third party, the mediator, facilitates communication between the parties to promote reconciliation, settlement, or understanding among them. A mediator may not impose ~~their~~his/her own judgment on the issues for that of the parties. The mediator must be acceptable to both parties.
- (b) The mediation is subject to the provisions of the Governmental Dispute Resolution Act, Texas Government Code, Chapter 2009. ~~For purposes of this subchapter, "mediation" is assigned the meaning set forth in the Civil Practice and Remedies Code, §154.023.~~
- (c) To facilitate a meaningful opportunity for settlement, the parties ~~must~~shall, to the extent possible, select representatives who are knowledgeable about the dispute, who are in a position to reach agreement, or who can credibly recommend approval of an agreement.

§27.115. Agreement to Mediate.

- (a) Parties may agree to use mediation as an option to resolve a breach of contract claim at the time they enter into the contract and include a contractual provision to do so. The parties may mediate a breach of contract claim even absent a contractual provision to do so if both parties agree.
- (b) Any agreement to mediate ~~must~~should include consideration of the following factors:
- (1) The source of the mediator. Potential sources of mediators include governmental officers or employees who are qualified as mediators under Civil Practice and Remedies Code, §154.052, private mediators, the State Office of Administrative Hearings (SOAH), the Center for Public Policy Dispute Resolution at The University of Texas School of Law, an alternative dispute resolution system created under Civil Practice and Remedies Code, Chapter 152, or another state or federal agency or through a pooling agreement with several state agencies. Before naming a mediator source in a contract, the parties ~~must~~will contact the mediator source to be sure that it is willing to serve in that capacity. In selecting a mediator, the parties ~~must~~will use the qualifications set forth in subsection §27.117 of this title (relating to Qualifications and Immunity of the Mediator).
 - (2) The time period for the mediation. The parties ~~must~~will allow enough time in which to make arrangements with the mediator and attending parties to schedule the mediation, to attend and participate in the mediation, and to complete any settlement approval procedures necessary to achieve final settlement. While this time frame can vary according to the needs and schedules of the mediator and parties, it is important that the parties allow adequate time for the process.

- (3) The location of the mediation, including whether the mediation will be held in-person or through a digital medium.
- (4) Allocation of costs of the mediator.
- (5) The identification of each representative~~representatives~~ who will attend the mediation on behalf of the parties, if possible, by name or position within the commission or contracting entity.
- (6) The settlement approval process in the event the parties reach agreement at the mediation.

§27.117. Qualifications and Immunity of the Mediator.

- (a) The mediator ~~must~~ possess the qualifications required under Civil Practice and Remedies Code, §154.052, be subject to the standards and duties prescribed by Civil Practice and Remedies Code, §154.053, and have the qualified immunity prescribed by Civil Practice and Remedies Code, §154.055, if applicable.
- (b) The parties ~~must~~ decide whether, and to what extent, knowledge of the subject matter and experience in mediation would be advisable for the mediator.
- (c) The parties ~~must~~ obtain from the prospective mediator the ethical standards that will govern the mediation.

§27.121. Costs of Mediation.

Unless the contractor and the commission agree otherwise, each party ~~is~~ shall be responsible for its own costs incurred in connection with the mediation, including costs of document reproduction for documents requested by such party, attorney's fees, and consultant or expert fees. The costs of the mediation process itself ~~must~~ shall be divided equally between the parties.

§27.123. Settlement Approval Procedures.

The parties prior to the mediation ~~must~~shall disclose the parties' settlement approval procedures.

To the extent possible, the parties ~~must~~shall select representatives who are knowledgeable about the subject matter of the dispute, who are in a position to reach agreement, and who can credibly recommend approval of an agreement.

§27.125. Initial Settlement Agreement.

Any settlement agreement reached during the mediation ~~must~~shall be signed by the representatives of the contractor and the commission, ~~and~~ The agreement must describe any procedures required to be followed by the parties in connection with final approval of the agreement.

§27.127. Final Settlement Agreement.

- (a) A final settlement agreement reached during, or as a result of mediation, that resolves an entire claim or any designated and severable portion of a claim ~~must be:~~~~shall~~
- (1) ~~be~~ in writing; and
- (2) signed by representatives of the contractor and the commission who have authority to bind each respective party.
- (b) If the settlement agreement does not resolve all issues raised by ~~each~~~~the~~ claim and, as applicable, each counterclaim, the agreement ~~must~~~~shall~~ identify each issue that is~~the issues that are~~ not resolved.
- (c) A partial settlement does not waive a contractor's rights under the Texas Government Code, Chapter 2260, as to the parts of the claim that are not resolved.

§27.143. Factors Supporting the Use of Assisted Negotiation Processes.

The following factors may help parties decide whether one or more assisted negotiation processes could help resolve their dispute:

- (1) The parties recognize the benefits of an agreed resolution of the dispute.
- (2) The expense of proceeding to contested case hearing at the State Office of Administrative Hearings ~~(SOAH)~~ is substantial and may outweigh any potential recovery.
- (3) The parties seek an expedited resolution of the dispute.
- (4) The ultimate outcome of the dispute is uncertain.
- (5) There exists factual or technical complexity or uncertainty that would benefit from expertise of a third-party expert for technical assistance or fact-finding.
- (6) The parties are having substantial difficulty communicating effectively.
- (7) A mediator third party could facilitate the parties' realistic evaluation of their respective cases.
- (8) There is an existing relationship ~~that exists~~ between the parties.
- (9) The parties want to retain control over the outcome.
- (10) There is a need to develop creative alternatives to resolve the dispute.
- (11) There is a need for flexibility in shaping relief.
- (12) The other side has an unrealistic view of the merits of their case.
- (13) The parties ~~(or aggrieved persons)~~ need to hear an evaluation of the case from someone other than their lawyers.

§27.145. Use of Assisted Negotiation Processes.

Any of the following methods, or a combination of these methods, or any assisted negotiation process agreed to by the parties, may be used in seeking resolution of disputes or other controversy arising under Texas Government Code, Chapter 2260. If the parties agree to use an assisted negotiation procedure, they ~~must~~should agree in writing to a detailed description of the process prior to engaging in the process.

- (1) Mediation. (See Division 3 in this subchapter (relating to Mediation of Contract Disputes)).
- (2) Early evaluation by a neutral third-party ~~neutral~~.
 - (A) This is a confidential conference where the parties and their counsel present the factual and legal bases of their claim and receive a non-binding assessment by an experienced neutral with subject-matter expertise or with significant experience in the substantive area of law involved in the dispute.
 - (B) After summary presentations, the third-party neutral identifies areas of agreement for possible stipulations, assesses the strengths and weaknesses of each party's position, and estimates, if possible, the likelihood of liability and the dollar range of damages that appear reasonable to him or her.
 - (C) This is a less complicated procedure than the mini-trial~~;~~ described in paragraph (4) of this section. It may be appropriate for only some issues in dispute, for example, where there are clear-cut differences over the appropriate amount of damages. This process may be particularly helpful when:
 - (i) The parties agree that the dispute can be settled;

- (ii) The dispute involves specific legal issues;
 - (iii) The parties disagree on the amount of damages;
 - (iv) The opposition has an unrealistic view of the dispute; and
 - (v) The neutral is a recognized expert in the subject area or area of law involved.
- (3) Neutral fact-finding by an expert.
- (A) In this process, a neutral third-party expert studies a particular issue and reports findings on that issue. The process usually occurs after most discovery in the dispute has been completed and the significance of particular technical or scientific issues is apparent.
 - (B) The parties may agree in writing that the fact-finding will be binding on them in later proceedings ~~(and, if the matter proceeds to contested case hearing, entered into as a stipulation in the dispute ~~if the matter proceeds to contested case hearing~~)~~, or that it will be advisory in nature, to be used only in further settlement discussions between representatives of the parties. This process may be particularly helpful when:
 - (i) Factual issues requiring expert testimony may be dispositive of liability or damage issues;
 - (ii) The use of a neutral is cost effective;
 - (iii) The neutral's findings could narrow factual issues for contested case hearing.
- (4) Mini-trial.

- (A) A mini-trial is generally a summary proceeding before a representative of upper management from each party, with authority to settle, and a third-party neutral selected by agreement of the parties. A mini-trial is usually divided into three phases: a limited information exchange phase, the actual hearing, and post-hearing settlement discussions. No written or oral statement made in the proceeding may be used as evidence or an admission in any other proceeding.
- (B) The information exchange stage should be brief but it must be sufficient for each party to understand and appreciate the key issues involved in the case. At a minimum, parties should exchange key exhibits, introductory statements, and a summary of witness's testimony.
- (C) At the hearing, representatives of the parties present a summary of the anticipated evidence and any legal issues that must be decided before the case can be resolved. The third-party neutral presides over the presentation and may question witnesses and counsel, as well as comment on the arguments and evidence. Each party may agree to put on abbreviated direct and cross-examination testimony. ~~The hearing generally takes no longer than one two days.~~
- (D) Settlement discussions, facilitated by the third-party neutral, take place after the hearing. The parties may ask the neutral to formally evaluate the evidence and arguments and give an advisory opinion as to the issues in the case. If the parties cannot reach an agreed resolution to the dispute, either

side may declare the mini-trial terminated and proceed to resolve the dispute by other means.

(E) Mini-trials may be appropriate when:

- (i) The dispute is at a stage where substantial costs can be saved by a resolution based on limited information gathering;
- (ii) The matter justifies the senior executive time required to complete the process;
- (iii) The issues involved include highly technical mixed questions of law and fact;
- (iv) The matter involves trade secrets or other confidential or proprietary information; or
- (v) The parties seek to narrow the large number of issues in dispute.

§27.161. Procedures for Resolving Vendor Protests.

- (a) **Definitions.** The following words and terms, when used in this subchapter, ~~shall~~ have the following meaning unless the context clearly indicates otherwise.
- (1) **Commission** -- The Public Utility Commission of Texas.
 - (2) **Purchasing officer** -- A commission employee who has received certification as a Texas Public Purchaser and who is responsible for assisting with commission purchases, and who has been designated the purchasing officer for the purchase in question.
 - (3) **Interested parties** -- All vendors who have submitted bids or proposals for the provision of goods or services in accordance with~~pursuant to~~ a solicitation for a contract with the commission.
- (b) **Protest procedures.** Any actual or prospective bidder, ~~offeror~~~~offerer~~, proposer or contractor who considers himself to have been aggrieved in connection with the commission's solicitation, evaluation, or award of a contract may formally protest to the purchasing officer. Such protests must be made in writing and received by the purchasing officer within ten working days after the protesting party knows, or should have known, of the occurrence of the action that is protested. Protests must conform to the requirements of this subsection and subsection (d) of this section, and ~~must~~~~shall~~ be resolved through use of the procedures that are described in subsections (e) -- (j) of this section. The protesting party ~~must~~~~shall~~ mail or deliver copies of the protest to the purchasing officer and other interested parties.

- (c) **Stay of contract award.** In the event of a timely protest under this section, the commission ~~will~~shall not proceed further with the solicitation or award of the contract unless the executive director, after consultation with the purchasing officer and the general counsel, makes a written determination that the contract must be awarded without delay, to protect the best interests of the commission.
- (d) **Protest requirements.** A protest must be sworn and contain:
- (1) a specific identification of the statutory or regulatory provision that the protesting party alleges has been violated;
 - (2) a specific description of each action by the commission that the protesting party alleges to be a violation of the statutory or regulatory provision that the protesting party has identified ~~in accordance with~~pursuant to paragraph (1) of this subsection;
 - (3) a precise statement of the relevant facts;
 - (4) a statement of any issues of law or fact that the protesting party contends must be resolved;
 - (5) a statement of the argument and authorities that the protesting party offers in support of the protest; and
 - (6) a statement that copies of the protest have been mailed or delivered to the commission and all other identifiable interested parties.
- (e) **Purchasing officer's role and responsibilities.** The purchasing officer ~~will~~shall conduct a review of issues raised by the protesting parties and ~~will~~shall have the following role and responsibilities in resolving the protest issues among the parties:

- (1) The purchasing officer may settle and resolve the dispute over the solicitation or award of a contract at any time before the matter is submitted on appeal to the executive director.
- (2) The purchasing officer may solicit written responses to the protest from other interested parties.
- (3) If the protest is not resolved by mutual agreement, the purchasing officer will issue a written determination on the protest. The purchasing officer will consult with the general counsel in preparing a written determination.
- (4) If the purchasing officer determines that no violation of statutory or regulatory provisions has occurred, then the purchasing officer ~~must~~ inform the protesting party, the executive director, and other interested parties by letter that states the reasons for the determination.
- (5) If the purchasing officer determines that a violation of any statutory or regulatory provisions may have occurred in a situation in which a contract has not been awarded, then the purchasing officer ~~must~~ inform the protesting party, the executive director, and other interested parties of that determination by letter that states the reasons for the determination and the appropriate remedy.
- (6) If the purchasing officer determines that a violation of any statutory or regulatory provisions may have occurred in a situation in which a contract has been awarded, then the purchasing officer ~~must~~ inform the protesting party, the executive director, and other interested parties of that determination by letter that states the reasons for the determination. This letter may include a declaration that the contract is void.

- (f) **Appeal from purchasing officer determination.** The protesting party may appeal a determination of a protest by the purchasing officer to the executive director of the commission. An appeal of the purchasing officer's determination must be in writing and received in the executive director's office no later than ten working days ~~from~~after the date ~~on which~~ the purchasing officer ~~issued~~has sent written notice of his determination. The scope of the appeal ~~is~~shall be limited to a review of the purchasing officer's determination. The protesting party ~~must~~shall mail or deliver to the purchasing officer and all other interested parties a copy of the appeal, which must contain a certified statement that such copies have been provided.
- (g) **Executive director review or reference of appeal.** The executive director ~~will~~shall confer with general counsel in the review of the matter appealed. The executive director may consider any documents that the commission staff or interested parties may have submitted. At the discretion of the executive director, the matter may be referred to the commissioners for their consideration in a regularly scheduled open meeting or the executive director may issue a written decision on the protest.
- (h) **Appeals referred to commission.** The following requirements ~~shall~~ apply to a protest that the executive director has referred to the commissioners:
- (1) The executive director ~~will~~shall deliver copies of the appeal and any responses by interested parties to the commissioners.

- (2) The commissioners may consider any documents that commission staff or interested parties have submitted.
 - (3) The commissioners may confer with general counsel in their review of the matter appealed.
 - (4) The commissioners' determination of the appeal ~~will~~shall be made on the record and reflected in the minutes of the open meeting, and ~~will~~shall be final.
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- (i) **Written determination of appeal.** A determination issued either by the commissioners in open meeting, or in writing by the executive director, ~~will~~shall be the final administrative action of the commission.
 - (j) ~~**Protest or appeal**~~**Protest/appeal not timely filed.** A protest or appeal that is not filed timely ~~will~~shall not be considered unless good cause for delay is shown or the executive director determines that an appeal raises issues that are significant to commission procurement practices or procedures in general.
 - (k) **Document retention.** The commission ~~will~~shall maintain all documentation on the purchasing process that is the subject of a protest or appeal in accordance with the commission's retention schedule.

This agency hereby certifies that the proposal has been reviewed by legal counsel and found to be within the agency's legal authority to adopt.

**ISSUED IN AUSTIN, TEXAS ON THE 11th DAY OF APRIL 2024 BY THE
PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION OF TEXAS
ADRIANA GONZALES**