Non-Partisan Municipal Candidate Forums & Civic Participation

Detailed governance standard, broadcast protocol, and civic engagement framework. Companion to "Restoring Civic Dignity: Open, Non-Partisan Candidate Forums for Fountain Valley".
Prepared September 2026. Establishing independent, televised community debates under League of Women Voters standards, FCC § 315 bona fide debate exemptions, Ralph M. Brown Act open-government principles, and $0 General Fund public access financing.

Executive Summary

- **The Local Civic Deficit:** In municipal elections, voters frequently lack structured, non-partisan opportunities to hear all certified City Council candidates debate substantive policy issues face-to-face. Private political party endorsements and partisan PAC mailers have largely replaced open community deliberation.
- **Institutionalized City-Sanctioned Forums:** Establishing a permanent municipal policy: Fountain Valley will host two televised, open-access candidate forums during every municipal election cycle in the City Council Chambers, moderated by an independent, non-partisan organization (such as the League of Women Voters of Central Orange County).
- **FCC § 315 & FPPC Compliance:** Structuring forums under federal bona fide debate standards (47 U.S.C. § 315(a)(4)) and California Fair Political Practices Commission (FPPC) regulations, ensuring equal time, neutral criteria for candidate invitation, and zero public endorsement of any candidate.
- **100% Broadcast & Digital Reach:** Broadcast live on Fountain Valley Community Television (Spectrum Channel 3 / Frontier Channel 29) and streamed on YouTube, Facebook Live, and the city website with full multi-language closed captioning (English, Spanish, Vietnamese).
- **$0 General Fund Taxpayer Cost:** Utilizing existing City Council broadcast cameras and funded entirely through restricted Public, Educational, and Government (PEG) cable franchise fees (CA Gov. Code § 53088.2).

1. Legal & Regulatory Framework: FCC, FPPC & Brown Act

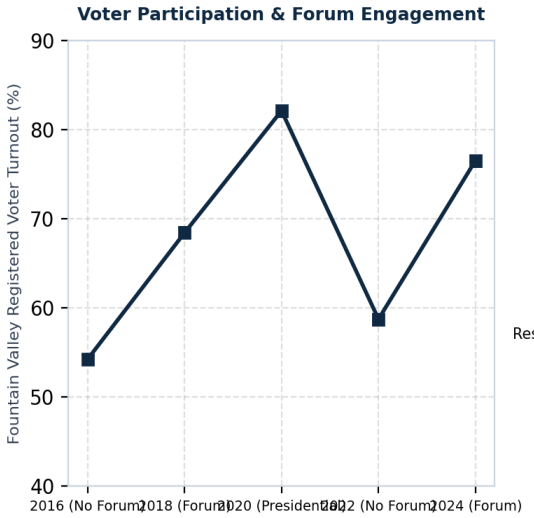
Municipal sponsorship of candidate forums must comply with strict statutory guardrails to ensure complete neutrality, prevent unlawful public resource campaign expenditures (CA Gov. Code § 54964), and preserve broadcast exemptions.

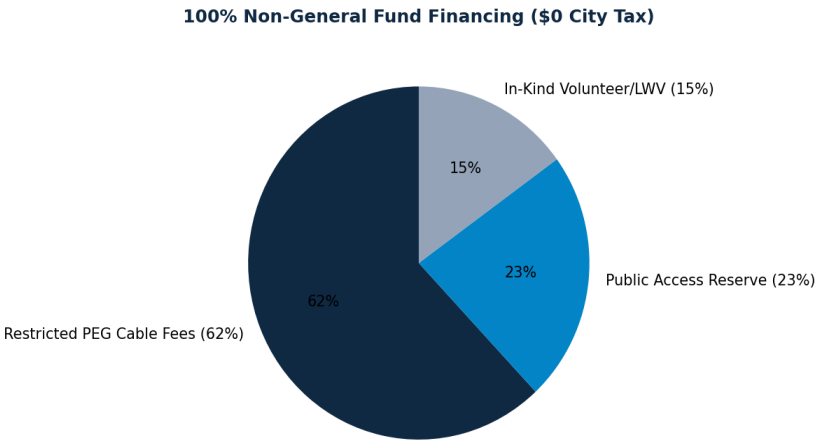
Statute / Regulation	Legal Mandate	Operational Forum Protocol	Neutrality Guarantee
CA Gov. Code § 54964 (Public Resources)	Strict ban on using city funds to support or oppose candidates	All qualified ballot candidates invited on equal terms; neutral questions	Independent third-party moderator with sole discretion over questions
47 U.S.C. § 315(a)(4) (FCC Equal Time)	Bona fide candidate debate exemption from equal time claims	Unedited, continuous broadcast of structured debate format	No candidate receives preferential airtime or question preview
CA Gov. Code § 81000 et seq. (FPPC)	Campaign contribution and public communication disclosure	Forums structured to avoid in-kind campaign contribution status	Clear disclaimer: City does not endorse any participating candidate
CA Gov. Code § 54950 et seq. (Brown Act)	Open meeting and public access principles	Free, open public seating in Council Chambers + live digital stream	Resident question submission portal open 14 days prior to event

2. Operational Debate Structure & Moderation Standard

To ensure substantive, respectful, and policy-focused dialogue, the forum adheres to the strict League of Women Voters debate format:

- **Opening Statements (2 minutes):** Each candidate outlines their core platform and vision for Fountain Valley.
- **Municipal Policy Rounds (6 rounds, 90 seconds each):** Structured questions covering Municipal Budget & Measure HH, Housing & RHNA, Public Safety & Traffic, Water Infrastructure, Senior Services, and Business Retention.
- **Rebuttal & Exchange Rounds (45 seconds):** Opportunities to address specific claims made by other candidates, strictly enforced by visual timer clocks.
- **Resident Question Segment (4 questions, 60 seconds each):** Questions selected by the independent moderator from vetted public submissions submitted via online portal and physical cards.





- **Closing Statements (2 minutes):** Final message to Fountain Valley voters.

3. Budget & PEG Franchise Fee Financing

Fountain Valley receives restricted Public, Educational, and Government (PEG) capital funds under California Public Utilities Code § 5840. These funds can only be spent on broadcast technology and public meeting transmission, requiring zero dollars from the city General Fund.

Expense Category	Unit / Service Description	Cost Allocation	Funding Source
AV Broadcast & Streaming Operations	City Council Chamber 4K PTZ camera crew (4 hours)	$1,200	Restricted PEG Capital Fund (Gov. Code § 53088.2)
Independent Moderator Stipend	League of Women Voters non-partisan debate team	$600	PEG Public Information Allocation
Multi-Language Live Captioning	Real-time AI/human captioning (Spanish & Vietnamese)	$450	PEG Technology Grant
Civic Auditorium Security & Setup	Public Works facility staging and basic event staff	$350	Routine municipal facility operations
Total Per-Forum Cost	**Complete Broadcast & Live Event**	**$2,600**	**100% Restricted Cable Franchise PEG Funds**

4. Legal Authorities & Governance Citations

1. California Government Code § 54964 (Prohibition on Use of Public Resources for Campaign Purposes).
2. Federal Communications Commission (FCC), 47 U.S.C. § 315(a)(4) (Bona Fide Candidate Debate Exemption). https://www.fcc.gov
3. California Fair Political Practices Commission (FPPC), Candidate Debates and Public Resource Guidelines (2024). https://www.fppc.ca.gov
4. League of Women Voters of California, Guidelines for State and Local Candidate Debates (2024). https://lwvc.org
5. California Government Code § 54950 et seq. (Ralph M. Brown Act - California Open Meeting Law).
6. California Public Utilities Code § 5840(q) (Digital Infrastructure and Video Competition Act - PEG Fee Utilization).
7. California Government Code § 53088.2 (Municipal Cable Television Franchise Standards).
8. City of Fountain Valley, Municipal Code Chapter 2.04: City Council Meetings & Public Broadcasts. https://www.fountainvalley.gov