INTERNATIONAL MUNICIPAL LAWYERS ASSOCIATION

Work Session: Parliamentary Procedures And Other Rules of Procedure

Robert's and Why He Rules

by
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Order or Chaos

Most city councils or town assemblies eventually realize that they can't do it all - too much information, too many decisions, too much to sort out during that one weekly meeting. To help shoulder the burden, they create boards, commissions, ad hoc committees, blue ribbon committees and other entities to take on zoning, literacy, animal control, ethics, veterans and myriad other issues that the citizens expect their city to solve.

Citizens come forward to serve on these boards anticipating an enriching experience in which they use their life's work and expertise to help solve problems. They are excited to be working with others who share their passion and interests and thrilled for the chance to "give back to the community."

Unfortunately, many of these citizen volunteers discover a less exhilarating reality. They find themselves doodling as another member endlessly drones on about the same topic week after week. Some sneak peeks at their watches and fantasize about slipping away to feed the parking meter, while others worry about how much longer they can keep their babysitter waiting. They grow increasingly frustrated with the know-it-all who claims to have mastered rules of parliamentary procedure and then uses these rules to run roughshod over the other members. They wonder about the chair's selective enforcement the rules of procedure based on which side of the issue she favors.

At some point along the way, some of these members find it harder to get to the meetings - conflicts at work, vacations, child-care problems, lost their car keys, etc. Or could it be that they've grown weary of meetings that never seem to get to the point, debates where one member (or maybe an alliance of two!) drags everything out for hours, and personality conflicts that the chair seems unable or unwilling to manage. The board isn't getting much done and no one's having any fun, plus you've having a problem getting a quorum.

Boards Behaving Badly or "Can We Have Training on Robert's Rules?"

Things are out of hand and the chair contacts the Office of the City Attorney. "What can we do?" Madam Chair asks. "Our board's behaving badly and we need help! Some of our members want to vote other members off the board like on "Survivor!" Can we get some training on Robert's Rules?"

Sometimes, boards get along fine without formal rules of procedure, leaving it to a mutual understanding of some informal rules and a well-respected chair to keep things moving along. Besides, who has time to plow through the two-inch-thick Robert's Rules, 10th Edition? There may come a time, however, when things don't go so smoothly. In those cases, Robert's Rules or some other rules of procedure can help. It isn't necessary for the entire board to become certified parliamentarians, but it is helpful for the members to become familiar with some of the basics.

The Basics – "I'd Like to Make a Motion . . . "

Everyone knows what a motion is – it's a statement of the matter to be considered by the group. First, a member makes a motion, then others may offer short comments or friendly suggestions on how to best phrase the motion. Substantive discussion must be reserved until the motion is put on the floor. The motion is not on the floor for general consideration until the chair states the question, clearly restating the issue so all may understand exactly what is under consideration. The phrase "so moved" after a raucous discussion of what the motion is going to be may leave the board's secretary as well as the members confused as to what they are deciding upon.

"The Chair Recognizes Mr. Jones . . ."

The maker of the motion should be given the opportunity to speak first. Then each member who wishes to speak must be given a chance before anyone speaks a second time. The standard time for discussion is up to 10 minutes per turn, with a limit of two turns each. Altering the length of a turn or the number of turn requires a motion to limit or extend the time of debate. Ad hoc decisions by the chair to not impose these limits or to grant extensions or impose limits may lead to longer meetings and allegations of inconsistent (i.e. unfair) treatment of the members.

As the discussion moves along, members may want to offer amendments, may feel they need more information, or may want to take a bathroom break. Below is a menu of some of the more frequently used motions to obtain the action they desire:

Motions in order of Rank

1. Fix the time to adjourn (highest ranking)
2. Adjourn
3. Recess
4. Raise a Question of Privilege
5. Call for Orders of the Day

6. Lay on the Table
7. Move the Previous Question
8. Limit or extend time of debate
9. Postpone to another time
10. Refer to a Committee
11. Secondary amendment
12. Primary amendment
13. Postpose indefinitely

14. Main Motion (lowest ranking)

Motions for Whenever You Need Them

1. Point of Order
2. Appeal Chair's Ruling on Procedure
3. Suspend the Rules ($2/3^{rd}$ vote)
4. Object to Consideration of Question ($2/3^{rds}$)
5. Division of a Question
6. Parliamentary Inquiry
7. Point of Information

All is in Order – A Case Study of Moving through the Agenda with Grace

Madam Chair: I call to order the meeting of the City Literacy Commission. Madam Secretary, please call the roll.

Board secretary Ellen calls the roll.

Madam Chair: Thank you Ellen. Now, it looks like the most important item on our agenda tonight is the issue of whether to make funds available for the Library's Back-to-School Fair next month. We will also be swearing in our new member, David, and looking at our minutes from last month. OK – let's start with you, Ron, do you have any motions to make about the Back-to-School Fair?

Alex: Madam Chair, I like to make a point of order. It would seem to make sense to take the items on the agenda in order instead of skipping to the school fair issue. It seems appropriate that we swear in David, and look at the minutes from last month where we had a report from our treasurer on the amount of funds in our budget before we get to the school fair.

Madam Chair: Ah yes, good point. Ellen, will you go ahead and swear in David?

Board secretary Ellen swears David in.

Madam Chair: OK, Alex, would you like to make a motion?

Alex: Yes, I would like move to approve the minutes from our last meeting from July 18th.

Madam Chair: Any objections? No? Seeing none, the minutes are approved.

For short, non-controversial items, approving an item by acclamation is fine..

Madam Chair: All right, moving on to the school fair, which will take place on November 15th . . .

Linda: Point of information -- it will be later this month on August 15th, you know, before school gets started . . ."

Madam Chair: Thank you, yes, August 15th. Ok, now does anyone have a motion to make?

Ron: Yes, I'd like to move that we purchase a gift certificate for $750 to the book store for the Library to purchase books for the fair?

Rosa: A gift certificate? Why don't we just give them a check so they can buy other things besides books?

Ron: I don't trust them not to buy candy or things that aren't good for kids. We need to make sure they only buy things that are educational.

Susan: Well, what if they buy comic books? Are those educational?

Madam Chair: Order everyone, we don't have a motion on the floor yet and we're veering off into debate here. Do I hear a second for Ron's motion?

Ed: I'm with Ron, I don't trust them, and I think comic books are educational. I second the motion.

Madam Chair: So moved!

Susan: Wait a minute, what's the motion again?? I'm not sure the secretary here got this down.

Secretary Ellen and several members nod in agreement

Madam Chair: Right, sorry about that. The motion is to purchase a $750 gift certificate to the book store for the Library to purchase books for the Back-to-School Fair. The motion is now on the floor and open for discussion. Ron, since you made the motion, we'll start with you.

Ron: Well, like I said, I worry that if just give them a check, they'll buy all kinds of crazy stuff. The book store sells only books and that will ensure that only books get purchased with the money we're providing.

Madam Chair: Thank you Ron. Linda, would you like to say something?

Linda: I'm not sure about this gift certificate to just a book store. I'm thinking we should just give them a check so they can buy whatever they think they need. I think the Library's great and I don't think they'll buy candy. I would like move to amend the motion to just provide a check for $750 to the Library for the Back-to-School Fair.

Paul: I move that we just go buy some books and give them to the fair. As members of the Literacy Commission, I think we know better than anyone what people should read!

Madam Chair: Wait, Paul, I haven't recognized you yet, and besides there's already a motion and a motion to amend on the floor. All right, Linda has moved to amend the main motion to provide that this commission will give a check for $750 to the Library for the school fair, instead of a gift certificate to the book store. Second?

David: I second that motion.

Madam Chair: All right, it has been moved and seconded that the main motion be amended to read that a check for $750 will be provided to the Library for the Back-to-School Fair, instead of a gift certificate to the book store. The ranking motion at this time is Linda's motion to amend. Linda, you made the motion, so please begin.

Linda: I don't have anything more to say, I just don't like the gift certificate idea.

Paul shoots his hand up.

Madam Chair: Yes, Paul, I recognize you.

Paul: I move for a secondary amendment. I move that Linda's motion to provide a check to the Library for $750 be amended to a check for $25. I think we should be in charge of what gets purchased, not them. So if we're going to give them a donation, let's make it a lot smaller.

Madam Chair: Thank you Paul. All right, Paul has made a motion for a secondary amendment. He wishes to amend the amendment offered by Linda. Is there a second? Anyone? {Long pause}. Well, Paul, it appears no one wishes to second your secondary amendment.

Paul: Well, I call for the question! I want a vote on my secondary amendment.

Madam Chair: Paul, your motion is out of order. No one seconded your motion, and so it will not be discussed and it will not be put to a vote.

Paul: That's not right. My amendment is a great idea and I think we should at least discuss it.

Madam Chair: Paul, the motion before us at this time is Linda's motion to amend. If you wish to speak on that proposed amendment, please do. Otherwise, I will move on to the next member.

Paul: You know, you never want to hear what I say . . .

Madam Chair: Paul, you offered your secondary motion. I asked whether anyone wished to second it, no one did and so that is the end of that. I now recognize Liz.

Liz: I agree with Linda. The Library does great work and has always purchased books and school supplies with the money we've provided them in the past.

Linda: It's true. Last year they bought many classic novels . . .

Madam Chair: Linda, you've already had a turn to speak on your motion to amend. We will need to hear from everyone else who wishes to speak on your motion before you can have your second and final say on this. I now recognize Mark.

Mark: I wanted to say that I went to the school fair last year and was very impressed by the Library staff's work. . .

Mark goes on to talk for the next 10 minutes. As he moves into his 11th minute . . .

Madam Chair: Thank you Mark. You have now had 10 minutes to speak, which is the limit.

Mark: May I make a motion to extend the time to speak?

Madam Chair: Is there a second on Mark's motion to extend his time to speak? . . .
Hearing no second, we will move on to anyone else who has not yet spoken on Linda's motion to amend the main motion. Anyone else? . . . No one? All right, it looks like we're ready to vote. The motion that is pending at this time is whether to amend the main motion to read: the Literacy Commission will provide a check to the Library for $750 for the Back-to-School Fair. All in favor?

Eleven of the thirteen members say aye and nod that they are in favor of the motion to amend..

Madam Chair: All opposed?

Two of the members vote against the motion to amend.

Madam Chair: The motion passes. This means the main motion has been amended to read that the "Literacy Commission will provide a check to the Library for $750 for the Back-to-School Fair. We will now move on to the main motion as it has been amended.

Ed: I don't understand. Didn't we just vote to give the Library a check for $750?

Madam Chair: No. The ranking motion was Linda's motion to amend the main motion. The vote passed and so the main motion has been amended. Now we will vote on the main motion, as it has been amended. All right, the motion now under consideration is whether the Literacy Commission will give a check for $750 to the Library for its Back-to-School Fair.

Ten of the members say aye; three vote nay.

Madam Chair: The main motion, as amended, has passed. The commission will provide a check for $750 to the Library for the Back-to-School Fair.

Ed: Hey Rhonda, why did you vote for the amendment and then vote against the main motion when it got amended?

Rhonda: I'm with Paul. I didn't really like the idea of giving the Library anything. But between the two choices, I preferred the idea of just giving the Library a check. People lose gift certificates. That's why I voted for the motion to amend, and then voted against the main motion to give the Library a check.

Paul: I move to adjourn.

Madam Chair: Based on the nods I see around the table, we are adjourned.

David: Fantastic. I won't need to feed the parking meter!

Happy Endings or at Least Not Too Unhappy

Members like Paul and Mark illustrate the usefulness of having some rules of procedure in place. Paul may not be happy about the outcome, but he cannot say he did not have a chance to put his idea out for consideration. Mark may have wished he could have spoken for an hour, but he cannot say the chair gave other members more latitude. Whether a board uses Robert's Rules or some other set of set guidelines, rules that are fairly and consistently enforced allow all the members of boards and commissions to present their views and then bring matters to an end, regardless of how strongly some may feel about the outcome.