Parliamentary procedure is a common source of questions and confusion. A periodic refresher on some of the fundamentals is helpful.

Making a Motion
Motions are made using a two-step process. First, the chair recognizes the person seeking to make a motion, unless it is the chair making the motion (which is permitted). Second, the member or chair makes a motion beginning with “I move…” and followed by the substance of the motion. For example, a plan commission member might state: “I move that we grant a conditional use permit for 123 Main Street to operate a day care facility for 30 children.” Once made, another member may second the motion. After the motion is seconded, the chair restates the motion and indicates it’s open for debate. (“It is moved and seconded that __. Is there any discussion?”) The motion may then be debated, subject to any debate limits set by rule.

Amending a Motion
A member who wishes to change a basic motion currently before the body may move to amend it. A motion to amend changes the motion before the body by either adding, deleting, or substituting words. For example, a motion to amend might be: “I move to amend the motion to grant a conditional use permit for 123 Main Street to operate a day care facility by striking out 30 and inserting 20.”

Voting
Once debate is complete, the chair calls for a vote. In small bodies, this is usually done by voice vote. Although Robert’s Rules of Order states that either the chair or a majority of the members may order a counted or roll call vote, Wisconsin’s Open Meetings law provides that any member of a governmental body may require that a vote be taken at any meeting in such manner that the vote of each member is ascertained and recorded. Wis. Stat. § 19.88(2). Wisconsin prohibits voting by secret ballot unless it is to elect an officer of the body. Wis. Stat. § 19.88(1). Voting requirements may vary. Usually, a simple majority is sufficient. However, state law, local ordinance or local rule may require a super majority vote depending on the subject matter. For example, a budget amendment requires a vote of two-thirds of the entire membership of the governing body. Wis. Stat. § 65.90(5)(a).

Other Procedures
Often there is a need to immediately address a matter to protect a member’s right to participate. Although Robert’s refers to them as “Incidental Motions,” they are not ordinary motions – they don’t require a second, they may interrupt other speakers, and usually must be addressed immediately. These procedures help ensure each member’s right to fully participate in the business taking place.

Point of Order - The most common tool is the point of order. If a member feels the body’s rules are not being observed (e.g., speaking on a matter unrelated to the motion before the body), the member may “raise a point of order.” This requires the chair to respond with a ruling on whether the point is “well taken” or “not well taken.” If the member disagrees with the chair’s decision, the member may appeal. The appeal requires a second, and a majority opposed to the chair’s decision will reverse it.

Point of Information - If a member wants to get information (i.e., to ask a question), the member raises a point of information. The chair then directs the appropriate person to answer the question.

Parliamentary Inquiry - A member needing help with parliamentary procedure may raise a point of parliamentary inquiry. The chair then attempts to help the member do what he/she wishes to do.

Question of Privilege - If a member feels that the comfort of the assembly or anything else is interfering with the decision-making process (e.g., too hot, can’t hear, belligerent member), the member may raise a question of privilege and ask the chair to correct the situation.

Conclusion
A basic understanding of these fundamental parliamentary procedures will allow local officials to be well on their way to understanding the basic process for conducting local government business. As a result, business may be handled in a manner that is orderly and efficient, respects minority interest, and enforces the will of the majority.

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