



FOR THE GOOD OF THE ORDER

Parliamentary Procedure: A Few Fundamentals

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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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