



Meeting Procedures – Making Motions and Voting

Q. Does our board have to follow “Robert’s Rules of Order” during our board meetings?

A. Rules of parliamentary procedure are used to ensure that your board’s decision making process is as democratic and civil as possible. You are not required to adopt one specific set of rules to guide your meeting procedures, such as Robert’s Rules, but you should have some local policies and procedures in place to ensure that your meetings are kept in order and are conducted consistently, efficiently, and fairly for all in attendance. Robert’s Rules is a good place to start, but some of the provisions in that book are not applicable to small governing bodies such as town and village boards. A sample parliamentary procedure ordinance specific to town boards is available in the Town Law Forms book, online here: [https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/statutes/townlaw/forms/ 28](https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/statutes/townlaw/forms/28). The responses to the questions in this article align with that sample ordinance’s guidelines.

Q. What is the proper procedure for making a motion so the board can take action on an issue?

A. The chair or presiding officer should facilitate discussion and keep the meeting in order as you move through the agenda at a properly noticed board meeting. After the chair announces an item on the agenda, discussion related to that item is allowed. A motion is required before the board can make any official decision related to the agenda item. Any board member can make a motion by stating, “I move that...” the board take a certain action. Avoid making “negative” motions asking the board *not* to take action, as this type of motion can easily lead to confusion when it comes time to vote yes or no. Note that motions should be as specific and precise as possible, and the exact wording of each motion should be recorded in the meeting minutes. This ensures that all board members know exactly what has been proposed.

Once a motion is made, another member may second the motion by stating, “I second the motion” or, “Second.” A second indicates that at least two members of the board think the proposed action is important enough to discuss and act upon. After a motion has been seconded, the chair should restate the exact wording of the motion, “Members have moved and seconded that we...,” and open the floor for debate. The chair typically invites the person who made the motion to speak in favor of the motion first, then invites other members to comment. A board member who wishes to change the wording of a motion may make a motion to amend, stating, “I move to amend the motion by...” adding or deleting specific words.

Q. Our board keeps discussing an issue but has never taken a vote. Once a motion is made, is the board required to vote on it?

A. The decision to end debate on an issue is up to the board as a whole. If discussion of a motion seems to be wrapping up, the chair can ask the group, “Are we ready to vote?” If the board *unanimously*

agrees, a vote can be taken. However, if any board member seeks to continue debate and discussion, the motion remains on the floor. If a board member wishes to “call the question” and force a vote, they can make a motion to end the debate, stating, “I move to call the previous question.” If the motion to end the debate passes by a 2/3 majority vote, the chair must put the motion in question to a vote.

A board member can also make a motion to delay action on an issue. A motion to postpone to a certain date gives the board more time to gather and consider information. This motion should specify the date and time when the board will revisit the proposal in question. A motion to postpone indefinitely should only be used when the intention is to kill the motion under consideration. Passage of a motion to postpone indefinitely equates to voting a proposal down without having to vote against the proposal.

Q. What are a board’s options for voting? Can we use secret ballots to vote on sensitive issues?

A. After debate on a motion has ended, the chair calls for a vote, restating the exact wording of the motion that the board will be deciding. The chair then tells the members what method of voting will be used. One option is to take a voice vote in which the chair asks, “All those in favor say aye,” followed by, “All those opposed say no.” Counted votes may also be taken, either by asking board members to raise their hands or respond to a roll call. Any board member may demand that the vote be taken in such a way that each member’s vote can be ascertained. Certain statutes also *require* a roll call vote on specific issues – for instance, a roll call vote must be taken before entering a closed session. See s. 19.85(1), Wis. Stat. Secret ballots are explicitly *prohibited* by Wisconsin law, except in instances when a body is voting to elect its own officers (for example, if a committee needs to select a chair). See s. 19.88(1). Written ballots may be used to ensure that no member’s vote is influenced by another, but once the vote is complete each member’s written response must be announced and recorded in the minutes. The chair should announce whether the motion passed or failed and the effect of the vote, stating, “We will (or will not)...” take the proposed action.

Q. What if I think the board should take a second look at an issue, but we already took a vote?

A. A few different motions may be used to revisit a board’s previous decision. A motion to rescind nullifies a previous vote to take a certain action or adopt a certain policy. This motion may be made by any board member at any time, except that a board may not act on such a motion if vested rights of the town or any person will be violated by rescinding the decision. For example, if your board has already entered into a contract as a result of a previous vote, the board cannot be released from its contractual obligations by a subsequent vote on a motion to rescind. A motion to renew can be used to request that the board vote again on a motion that previously failed. A motion to reconsider is meant to be used when new information presents itself that the board failed to take into account when making its decision. A motion to reconsider may only be made by a member who cast a vote on the prevailing side (a person who voted in favor on a vote that passed or vice versa), and the motion must be made either at the same meeting in which the original vote was taken or at the board’s next meeting. If a motion to reconsider passes, the previous action is reopened as if it had never been decided so that the board can continue its discussion, taking the new information into consideration. Note that the open meetings law requires the issue in question to be properly noticed in order for the board to address any of these motions.