

Effective Meeting Procedures & Techniques

A handbook for municipal elected officials



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Introduction

This handbook includes guidelines for rules of procedure for the conduct of meetings of the governing body. It is designed to describe the manner in which council members should treat one another, staff, constituents, and others they come into contact with in representing the municipality. It describes the behavior, manners and courtesies that are suitable for various occasions and is designed to make public meetings and the process of governance run more smoothly.

Every legislative body should adopt a set of rules by which to operate. These rules can be simple or detailed; they can incorporate Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, or another set of prepared rules. Alternatively, the council or board may establish their own rules. The goal is to (1) guide the council, (2) make the legislative process more efficient, stable and predictable, and (3) reduce disputes concerning correct procedure.

Rules of procedure can help reduce interpersonal friction, result in better decisions and add to the credibility of the council.

In addition, there are other practices and techniques that help the council operate more as a team, instill confidence in the municipal government and otherwise serve the public interest. Some of these suggested practices and techniques are included in this handbook.

Regardless of procedures used by a governing body, it is important that the procedures emphasize openness to the public, scrupulous fairness to all sides of the issues presented before the council, and consistency.

Finally, it is important to note that there is no single "right" way to conduct an effective meeting and, in some cases, the items discussed in this handbook may be legally prescribed in a municipality's ordinances or charter. This handbook is intended to provide a general snapshot of procedures and information that should be relevant and useful to many municipalities. When in doubt, elected officials are advised to consult with their municipal attorney to determine what legal requirements may be in place.



Overview of Roles & Responsibilities

All members of the governing body, including the mayor and president of the council, have equal votes and voice. With the exception of the mayor's veto power, no council member has more power than any other council member, and all should be treated with equal respect.

Presiding Officer

The mayor will chair official meetings of the governing body, unless the council president or another council member is designated in the mayor's absence.

The Mayor shall:

- * Maintain order, decorum and the fair and equitable treatment of all speakers.
- * Keep discussion and questions focused on specific agenda items under consideration.
- * Know and enforce the council rules of procedure and parliamentary law.

Council President

When the mayor is absent from a council meeting, the council president presides. The council president is a member of the council and has been elected or appointed to his or her position by the governing body.

Council Members

The corporate and legislative authority of all Wyoming municipalities is vested in a city or town council, which is generally composed of between five and nine representatives chosen by the electorate for fixed terms of office. As previously discussed, the presiding officer is a member of the council.

All members of the municipal governing body have the right to full participation in the proceedings. That is, a member has the right to make motions,

to speak in debate on motions and to vote on all questions put before the council.

Professional respect and courtesy are of the utmost importance to elected officials, and it is imperative that elected officials serve as a model representative of their community at all times. Not only will composure and professionalism enhance the quality and effectiveness of meetings, but it also will earn respect and attentiveness from colleagues, municipal staff, the media and the public.

Here are just a few basic professional responsibilities of elected officials:

1. Be prepared for each meeting, read the agenda and other advance materials thoroughly, and arrive at the meeting by the specified time.
2. Strive to contribute relevant information and opinions to the council's proceedings within the framework of proper procedure, avoid "grandstanding" or repetitive speech.
3. Confine remarks and questions to matters before the governing body as specified by the agenda format or order of business.
4. Listen to and refrain from private conversation when citizens or other members of the council are speaking.
5. Accord courtesy to council members, to municipal officials and employees, and to citizens appearing before the governing body.
6. Refrain at all times from rude and derogatory remarks, reflections as to the integrity of others and statements as to the motives and personalities of others.
7. Work toward consensus whenever possible, recognizing and respecting the strengths, knowledge and opinions of fellow council and board members.

Council Conduct with the Public

Making the public feel welcome is an important part of the democratic process. No signs of partiality, prejudice or disrespect should be evident on the part of individual council members toward an individual participating in a public forum. Every effort should be made to be fair and impartial in listening to public testimony.

- Be welcoming to speakers and treat them with care and gentleness. The way that council treats people during public meetings can do a lot to make them relax or to push their emotions to a higher level of intensity.
- Give the appearance of active listening. It is disconcerting to speakers to have council members not look at them when they are speaking.
- Ask for clarification, but avoid debate and argument with the public. Only the chair, not individual council members, should interrupt a speaker during a presentation. However, a council member can ask the chair for a point of order if the speaker is off the topic or exhibiting behavior or language a council member finds disturbing.
- If speakers become flustered or defensive by council questions, it is the responsibility of the chair to calm and focus the speaker and to maintain the order and decorum of the meeting. Questions by council members to members of the public testifying should seek to clarify or expand information. It is never appropriate to belligerently challenge or belittle the speaker. Council members' personal opinions or inclinations about upcoming votes should not be revealed until after the public hearing is closed.
- No personal attacks of any kind, under any circumstance. Council members should be aware that their body language and tone of voice, as well as the words they use, can appear to be intimidating or aggressive.

- Make no promise on behalf of the council. Council members will frequently be asked to explain a council action or to give their opinion about an issue as they meet and talk with constituents in the community. It is appropriate to give a brief overview of city policy and to refer to city staff for further information. It is inappropriate to overtly or implicitly promise council action, or to promise city staff will do something specific. (Fix a pothole, plant new flowers, etc.)
- Make no personal comments about other council members. It is acceptable to publicly disagree about an issue, but it is unacceptable to make derogatory comments about other council members, their opinions and actions.



Council Conduct with Staff

Governance of the city relies on the cooperative efforts of elected officials, who set policy, and staff, who implements and administers the council's policies. Therefore, every effort should be made to be cooperative and show mutual respect for the contributions made by each individual for the good of the community.

- Treat all staff as professionals. Clear, honest communication that respects the abilities, experience and dignity of each individual is expected.
- Questions of staff and/or direction to staff should be directed to the appropriate supervisor, rather than directly to the staff member. When in doubt about what staff contact is appropriate, council members should ask the mayor or

professional administrator for direction. Materials supplied to a council member in response to a request will be made available to all members of the council so that all have equal access to information.

- Never publicly criticize an individual employee. Council should never express concerns about the performance of a city employee in public, to the employee directly or to the employee's supervisor. Comments about staff performance should be made to the mayor or administrator through private correspondence or conversation.

Council Conduct with Boards and Commissions

A municipality may establish boards and commissions as a means of gathering more community input. These citizens are a valuable resource to the governing body and should be treated with appreciation and respect.

- If attending a board or commission meeting, be careful to only express personal opinion. Council members may attend any board or commission meeting, which are always open to any member of the public. However, they should be sensitive to the way their participation could be viewed as unfairly affecting the process. Any public comments by a council member at a board or commission meeting should be clearly made as individual opinion and not a representation of the feelings of the entire council.
- Limit contact with board and commission members to questions of clarification. It is inappropriate for a council member to contact a board or commission member to lobby on behalf of an individual, business or developer. It is acceptable for council members to contact board or commission members in order to clarify a position taken by the board or commission.
- Remember that boards and commissions serve

the community, not individual council members. Board and commission members do not report to individual council members, nor should council members feel that they have the power or right to threaten board and commission members with removal if they disagree about an issue. Appointment and reappointment to a board or commission should be based on such criteria as expertise, ability to work with staff and the public, and commitment to fulfilling official duties.



Council Conduct with the Media

Council members may be contacted by the media for background and quotes.

- The best advice for dealing with the media is to never go "off the record". Most members of the media represent the highest levels of journalistic integrity and ethics, and can be trusted to keep their word. But one bad experience can be catastrophic. Words that are not said cannot be quoted.
- The mayor or administrator is typically the official spokesperson representing the municipality's position. The mayor or administrator is designated to present and speak on the official city position. If an individual council member is contacted by the media, the council member should be clear about whether their comments represent the official city position or a personal viewpoint.
- Choose words carefully and cautiously. Comments taken out of context can cause problems. Be especially cautious about humor, sardonic asides, sarcasm, or word play.

Meeting Preparation & Procedures

Meeting Routine

The meeting routine or the established order in which various categories of business are to be considered by the governing body differs somewhat from one municipality to another. Despite variations in arrangement, most agenda formats may be divided into two categories: (1) procedural items of business that occur at most meetings, including the roll call, opening ceremonies, reading and approval of minutes, etc.; and (2) substantive items of business that may vary from meeting to meeting and include public hearings, ordinances, resolutions, etc.

There is no single correct order of business for municipalities to follow and state law does not require any particular order. Many cities and towns, however, have prescribed an order by charter, ordinance, resolution or the body's rules of procedure.

While variations on the order of business abound, a fairly common order might look like this:

1. *Call to order*
2. *Opening ceremonies, presentations and proclamations (pledge of allegiance, invocation, special citations and awards)*
3. *Roll call*
4. *Reading and approval of minutes*
5. *Public comments*
6. *Public hearings*
7. *Action items – ordinances, resolutions, contracts, etc.*
8. *Reports from staff, boards, committees, etc.*
9. *Adjournment*

The Role of the Agenda

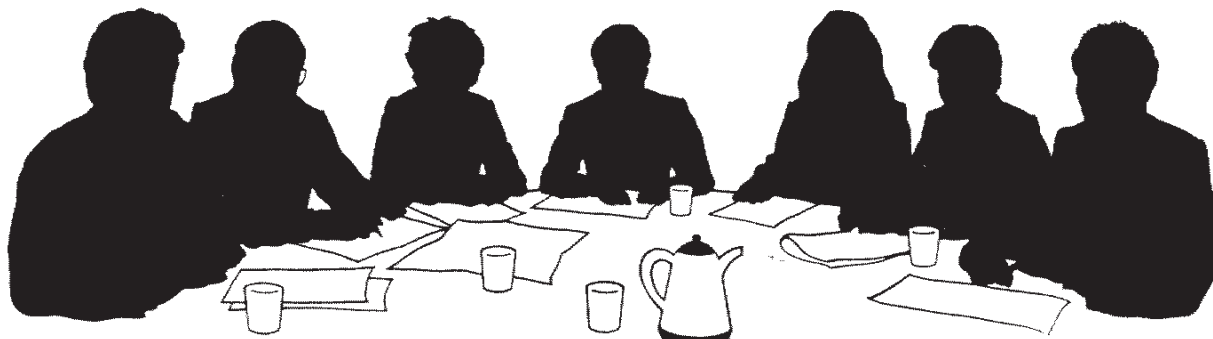
Meetings normally have a written, published agenda, which constitutes the body's agreed-upon road map for the meeting. A written copy of the agenda is therefore prepared in advance and distributed to council members, citizens, the media and other interested persons to inform them of the items of business to be considered.

The municipal clerk or manager/administrator often prepares the agenda. This responsibility varies and is usually set by the governing body. In addition, the clerk or manager/administrator follows the appropriate public notification procedures as outlined in state statute.

Agenda Format

While there are several approaches to agenda item discussion and no single "right" way to conduct the discussion, one possible format follows:

1. The presiding officer or chair (normally the mayor) should announce the agenda item and briefly describe the subject to be discussed.
2. The chair should invite the appropriate people to report on the item and provide recommendations. The appropriate people may be a member of the governing body, a committee chair, or a staff person responsible for providing information to the body.
3. The presiding officer should then open the agenda item to the council to ask questions.



4. If appropriate, the presiding officer may invite public comments after the council has had the opportunity to ask their questions about the agenda item.
5. Once the public comment period (if applicable) is over, the presiding officer can request a motion to be made from the governing body. A second is typically required to ensure that more than one person on the council is in agreement with the motion before the question is posed to the rest of the body for vote. The presiding officer may wish to announce who made the motion and the second for purposes of meeting minutes.
6. Once the motion has been made and seconded, the presiding officer can entertain debate from the council. If little or no discussion takes place, the presiding officer can proceed directly to the vote. If the discussion is more lengthy, the presiding officer may wish to restate the motion to be sure that everyone understands the question before them before taking a vote.
7. After closing the discussion, the presiding officer calls for a vote. The vote typically involves asking for the “ayes” and then the “nays”. Unless specific legal provisions require a super majority, a simple majority is all that is needed to pass a motion. The presiding officer announces the results of the vote and may note the dissenting votes for the purpose of meeting minutes.



Motions in a Nutshell

Motions are vehicles for decision-making. There are three basic types of motions:

1. *The basic motion.* The basic motion is the one that puts forward a decision for consideration. A basic motion might be: “I move that we approve the conditional use permit for the operation of a home day care for up to six children at 123 Main Street.”
2. *The motion to amend.* If a member wants to change a basic motion under discussion, he or she would move to amend it. A motion to amend might be: “I move that we amend the motion to allow up to five children.”
3. *The substitute motion.* If a member wants to completely do away with the basic motion under discussion and put a new motion before the governing body, he or she would “move a substitute motion.” A substitute motion might be: “I move a substitute motion that we prepare a study on day care needs in the community.”

Motions to amend and substitute motions are often confused. They are very different, and so is their effect, if passed.

- A motion to amend seeks to retain the basic motion on the floor, but to modify it in some way.
- A substitute motion seeks to throw out the basic motion on the floor and substitute a new and different motion for it.

Agenda Efficiency

An agenda should include only as many items of business as can be considered in the time allotted for the meeting. If there are 32 items on the agenda and each item is estimated to take “only” 10 minutes, the council is in store for a six-hour meeting. Some method to eliminate or consolidate the agenda items should be considered.

Reducing the number of items placed on the agenda is often a difficult task, especially when certain decisions must be made by the governing body, and when citizens have a right to know the reasons behind decisions. In such a case, some ideas to eliminate or consolidate agenda items are:

Time-Saving Ideas

1. The council may establish policies to handle recurring decisions, then direct staff members to follow the policy.
2. Items may be handled by a committee or focus group, which does the initial gathering of opinion and facts, organizes the information and recommends a course of action to the council.
3. The council should evaluate whether items are being postponed to future meetings when they could be dealt with at the present meeting. While decisions should not be made in a casual or hasty manner, council members should resist postponing items in the hope that, at the next meeting, a whole new set of facts will surface and make the decision easier. The “new set of facts” may make the decision more difficult and “perfect” solutions rarely materialize. Delay, when it results in a better decision, is commendable; but delay so that an official does not have to act on a sticky question may be inefficient and irresponsible.
4. The council may set definite times for the meeting to come to order and to adjourn. Few council meetings achieve much of value after four hours, and three to four hours is usually enough time to allocate for most meetings. Time limits also may be set for special hearings that are not required

by law, for citizen participation periods and for the debate by council members.

5. Establish a consent agenda.

Consent Agenda

A consent agenda allows the council to approve several items of routine business with one vote. Considered to be one category of business, the consent agenda contains routine items that are not controversial in nature and do not require further discussion.

Each governing body can determine which items of business are routine and can be placed on a consent agenda. Typical consent agenda items might include:

- *Approving minutes*
- *Receiving and filing reports*
- *Receiving, filing or referring communications*
- *Approving license applications and permits*
- *Approving authorization to execute contracts*
- *Reading of resolutions or second reading of ordinances deemed non-controversial*
- *Approving finance warrants*

It also is important to note that items can be removed from the consent agenda, often at the request of a single council member or member of the public, for consideration by itself.

Citizen Participation in a Meeting

How the governing body handles citizen participation can affect the meeting and the impression citizens have of their municipal government. For example, if the council has made no specific provisions for citizen participation, any item of business may be sidetracked by a citizen who wishes to speak. It is, therefore, important that the governing body decide how and when citizens may participate, and adopt or amend rules of procedure accordingly.

Public Hearings vs. Public Comment

The method by which citizens are allowed to speak at a council meeting varies from community to community, and the procedures may be established by ordinance, resolution, rule or tradition.

Basically, however, there are four methods of placing citizen participation on the agenda. It is important that regardless of the method used to involve the public, citizens attending the meeting should have a clear idea of where in the agenda their comments will be heard before the meeting begins.

1. Citizens are recognized throughout the meeting.

The council recognizes citizens and allows them to speak at any time throughout the meeting, as long as their comments are restricted to the agenda item currently under consideration.

2. Citizens are invited to be heard. During this period, the council recognizes citizens and allows them to speak only on matters of business listed on the agenda. This method may be used exclusively or in addition to the public comment described below.

3. Public comment. During this period, the council recognizes citizens and allows them to speak on any matter other than those listed for the governing body's consideration. This method is used most often in combination with the previous two methods. When a council holds a public-comment period, it must consider certain issues: How quickly will council respond to a citizen's request? Will any discussion be allowed? For example, if a citizen brings a request for drainage improvements on his or her property, will discussion of this concern occur?

4. Public hearings. Under the agenda category "public hearings," citizens are allowed to speak only on matters listed for hearing. The public hearings category is usually a necessary agenda item for all cities and towns on certain subjects and may be used in addition to any other method.

A public hearing is any meeting or portion of a meeting of the municipal governing body at which members of the public are given the opportunity to speak on specific matters on the agenda for hearing. As such, public hearings are distinguished from citizen participation or public comment.

Public Hearings

Public hearings are held to allow citizens in the community and other interested persons to speak to the council about certain specific subjects. Often, public hearings are required by law. The council does not make a decision until it has closed such hearings.

No public hearing can be successful unless the people attending the hearing understand the issues to be discussed. It is just as important for citizens to understand the issues as it is for council members. Little true headway can be made at a public hearing if there are already misconceptions about either the issues or the council's intentions for dealing with them, and such misconceptions can cause substantial harm.

When citizens understand the issues, they are more likely to make intelligent and worthwhile comments about the advantages or drawbacks of the plan under consideration. Even when citizens oppose the government's position on a particular issue, it is still better if they accurately understand the facts.

Council members should not express opinions during the public hearing portion of the meeting, except to ask pertinent questions of the speaker or staff. "I think" and "I feel" comments by council members are not appropriate until after the close of the public hearing. Council members should refrain from arguing or debating with the public during a public hearing and shall always show respect for different points of view.

Procedures to Promote Orderly Public Comment

- Establish rules of procedure before the hearing and read them at the beginning of the hearing so that everyone understands how the hearing will be conducted.
- Set time limits on how long speakers can talk.
- Be fair and equitable in allocating public hearing time to individual speakers. Allow each person who wishes to speak a chance to do so before allowing a second round of comments.
- Ask each speaker to begin by stating his or her name, the group being represented, (if any) and how many people he or she represents.
- State that disruptive behavior will not be tolerated.
- When a large number of citizens attend a meeting to speak about an issue, there are a number of strategies to ensure that everyone's opinion is heard without unduly lengthening the meeting. First, the presiding officer can ask the citizens to sign in either "for" or "against" the particular issue at hand, and then request a representative from each group to speak on behalf of the others. The body also may simply ask members in the audience who are in agreement with the speaker to stand and acknowledge that fact in lieu of speaking.

Study Sessions

Study sessions are a common way for councils to manage the time of formal meetings more effectively. Study sessions are meetings held outside of the regular council meeting primarily for educational purposes. Certain issues before the council are more complicated than others, and therefore require extra time and depth that is difficult to accommodate in a regular council meeting. Many councils choose to have study sessions on a regularly scheduled basis, while others opt to have study sessions on an as-needed basis.

By conducting the majority of the in-depth discussion at a study session, time allotted during the regular council meeting can be reserved for public input and formal decision-making.

Executive Sessions

State Law, statute 16-4-405, specifies in detail subjects that can be considered in executive sessions and procedures for calling and conducting executive session. These legal requirements should be carefully adhered to and, when in doubt, the municipal attorney should be consulted.

Sanctions

- *Public Disruption.* Members of the public who do not follow proper conduct after a warning in a public meeting may be barred from further testimony at that meeting or removed from the council chambers.
- *Inappropriate staff behavior.* Council members should refer to the mayor or administrator any city staff who do not follow proper conduct in their dealings with council members, other city staff or the public. These employees may be disciplined in accordance with standard personnel policies for such action.
- *Council members behavior and conduct.* Council members who intentionally and repeatedly do not follow proper conduct may be reprimanded by the council. Serious infractions could lead to conflict of interest violations, as defined by Wyoming State Statutes.

