

Having Their Say... Open Forum at Board Meetings

There is a thin line between opening Board meetings to guest members and having those members commandeer the show. While most members are content to sit back and listen, others feel it's their duty to pipe up on every subject and give their sage advice. You might even see their hand go up when the President asks for a vote. While maybe well intended (and maybe not), members need to remain just that when attending a Board meeting. This means only speaking when requested to speak or under the guidelines established by the Board or in compliance with statutes, if any.

One mechanism for letting members have their say is an Open Forum which is held either just prior to the meeting being called to order or after the business meeting has been adjourned. The Open Forum is not part of the organized meeting and the discussions are not part of the minutes of the meeting. The Open Forum is designed to allow guest members to express opinions, ask questions, and petition the Board in a civilized and orderly fashion. It's up to the Board President to lay down the rules in advance and cut folks short that violate the privilege.

A 15 minute Open Forum is usually adequate to accommodate the few guest members that attend. The President should ask upfront who would like to speak in the Open Forum. Not all do, so establishing the number is important. If 3 say "I do", then that means each is allotted 5 minutes. If there are 4, that means about 4 minutes. Announce the time limit and have a board members keep time. The message conveyed to the guest member speakers should be "Be Brief" and to the point. We want to hear what you have to say but have important board business on the agenda we also need to attend to".

The Open Forum is not designed to examine or debate complex issues or have the Board actually vote on a member guest's petition. If the member is bringing a matter of complexity to the Board, it should be put on the agenda and dealt with properly. By so doing, the member guest can have enough time to address the topic in the detail it merits and can expect a board verdict at the conclusion, in a stated period of time or that the issue will be tabled until the next meeting when more information can be obtained to properly provide the Board with all of the information allowing them to make an informed decision. Members need to understand this important difference. The Board cannot (or should not) be making shoot-from-the-hip decisions on any subject that cannot be thoughtfully considered. An owner showing up at the Open Forum with an Architectural Change Request he want approved so his contractor can start tomorrow is a prime example of something the Board should never act on. Complex issues take time to study and reflect upon.

An important component of allowing members to attend Board meetings is having enough room to actually have them attend. Holding Board meetings in someone's kitchen does not lend itself to guests. Hold them in a location that allows a reasonable number of guests and provide seating. Do not let them sit around the table since this blurs the Board authority and member guest functions. The Board should face each other, not the guests.

This configuration is important to maintain the Board nature of the meeting. A Board facing an audience invites continuing interaction with the member guests and makes it difficult to focus on the agenda.

The Open Forum is a privilege, not a bully pulpit. While a member should be able to speak freely, it should be done with civility. If not, he/she should be asked to leave the meeting. Letting community association members have their say is an extremely important facet of living in a community association. Even if they rarely show up, always keep the door open and be prepared to accommodate them.