

Keys to Effective Board Meetings

With so many new Board members joining their Board, some perhaps without any real experience in this process, but willing to do their civic duty by volunteering, we'd like to present a revision of an article that was done a couple of years ago. We think these tips and information are always timely and may help make the job of being a board member easier and less stressful. Certainly, board volunteers want to make the most of their time and accomplish the most they can during their term.

In 20 years of community association management, I have either attended organized, participated in, or spoken at over 2,000 board meetings. Calm, orderly, effective business meetings are the general rule; however, I have witnessed elderly gentlemen in fistfights. I have also witnessed two board meeting heart attacks ("Call 911 immediately"); one sadly, resulting in death of the homeowner. Meetings which have lasted five or six hours have ended with no visible accomplishment, while one-hour meetings have accomplished a great deal.

Drawing from those experiences, we attempt to lead our managers and board members through the key steps of setting up effective board meetings.

1. Preparation: Seventy percent of the success or failure of a meeting lies in its preparation. From the management side, we stress that an organized meeting agenda be established. The manager discusses the upcoming meeting with the Board, or president of the association, and a determination is made of what items will appear on the agenda. It might even be a good idea to formulate an operational policy that will provide the guidelines for exactly how the agenda items are to be determined and who has the last say in what goes on the agenda. The agenda has become the focal point for most meetings, as many states now recognize with statutes that requires the board to strictly adhere to the posted agenda (with some exceptions), while not all states have such strict requirements, it is still a good practice to use the agenda as the guide for the meeting and base the motions for action on the items that have been researched, reviewed and discussed. As members are

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permitted to attend the Board meetings, it is advisable to either post the agenda prior to the meeting (as required in Florida) or to provide it to attendees as they come into the meeting as it provides a reasonable opportunity for communication between the board and its membership.

After the agenda is established, the manager prepares the meeting packet for the board. The packet contains the agenda, minutes of the previous meeting (if not already distributed), a written manager's report, current financial statement, bid specifications and proposals, all organized for ease of review by the Board. This package is distributed in advance of the meeting.

Board members then have the responsibility of preparing themselves for the meeting by reviewing the agenda, written reports, specifications, bids and other written material in advance of the meeting.

It is also recommended that board members visit the specific homes, condominiums or units or area of common property that will be discussed at the meeting in order to familiarize themselves with the area to allow an informed decision to be made on the issue at the meeting. Questions or concerns which can be clarified in advance should be addressed to the manager.

1. Leadership: The person chairing the meeting, usually the president of the association, fills the key leadership role in determining the success or failure of the board meeting. At the appointed hour, the chairperson calls the meeting to order, determines that a quorum is present, makes certain the secretary, manager or other designee is taking minutes and begins to address the agenda items.

Robert's Rules of Order are a great tool for controlling homeowner groups and like meetings; however, very few people know more than how to make a simple motion, second motion and a vote. We encourage the board to keep the parliamentary procedures simple and to focus on the substance, not the form of the meeting.

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A good chairperson follows the agenda and guides, rather than controls, the meeting. The chairperson should keep the meeting on track and limit needless or ancillary discussion. One of the biggest errors that a board of directors can make is the "snap" decision. A homeowner is recognized from the audience and outlines his or her problem. The board is usually eager to resolve the problems so a decision, based upon one homeowner's input, is quickly made. Next month, the other homeowners affected by that decision will show up at the meeting requesting the board reverse its first decision. If the decision is reversed, the board appears "wishy-washy". If the decision is upheld, the board appears unreasonable. Even the most innocent problem deserves a little time for the board, in conjunction with management, to investigate the circumstances before acting.

Most homeowners will approve of the board's deferment of a new problem to the next meeting in order to research the matter and give any opposition a chance to speak as well. This method can save the members of the board from embarrassment and ridicule.

1. Follow-Through: The final step to an effective board meeting is to ascertain if the parties involved have clear direction. Does management understand what direction the board has given? Do the committees understand the tasks outlined for them, their authority and their limitations? Have reasonable time frames for completion and reporting been set? When will delegated issues be addressed again and in what form, written or verbal reports? Are the time frames for required legal notice to the association membership built into the schedule?

In summary, a successful board meeting takes preparation, leadership and follow-through on the part of the manager as well as the board members. These key elements will allow even the most inexperienced board of directors to function as professionals.