

There's Help for Dysfunctional Meetings

by Elaine Cogan

Most planning commissions have proscribed rules and methods about how to make legally binding or policy decisions. You probably follow Robert's Rules or at least are expected to subscribe to its major tenets.

But many agenda items are procedural, advisory or preliminary to making that grand decision. Robert's Rules are of little use there and may, in fact, get in the way. It is in handling these matters that too many planning commission meetings become dysfunctional.

Consider these as first aid solutions to troubled meetings.

The Agenda. Controlling the agenda is the first way to rein in runaway meetings. Place and consider the items in order of importance, not in the tiresome and non-productive usual sequence of "minutes, old business, new business." It makes sense to tackle new business when you are all at your freshest, and that is usually at the beginning of the meeting.

Some public bodies take another approach: dividing matters into categories — a "consent agenda" and an "action agenda." The former contains routine items that may be dispensed with by general agreement of the decision-making body, with the proviso that any member may remove any item to the "action" or decision category. In some communities, a member of the public also can request this be done.

Though this method speeds up the meeting so you can cover the most important items before you are worn out, you have to be careful that the public does not suspect you of duplicity. One way to avoid this is to print all the items on both agendas and have them available for review, giving the public, as well as the commissioners, an opportunity to comment.

The Discussion. Assuming you have found a way to move quickly through routine matters and are ready to deal with

substantive issues, is your discussion a monologue or a dialogue? If it is a monologue, we pretend we are talking with each other, but really are just waiting for one person to finish speaking so that we can have our say. We rarely respond directly to anyone else's remarks because we have not been listening. Many people engage in this kind of speaking at or over one another.

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A clear clue that their minds are made up and the so-called "discussion" is just a farce is when planning commissioners read remarks obviously written beforehand.

In a dialogue, members talk to, not through, each other, and respond to each other's concerns. The discussion may become intense as real feelings and opinions are expressed, but it is the first step toward understanding and accommodation.

Anyone can stop a monologue by refusing to engage in it. Listen carefully and respectfully to what your colleagues are saying, and respond thoughtfully, even if you heartily disagree. Acknowledge each other. Start out your response with, "As Penelope was saying . . .," even if, in the next breath, you say how much you disagree with everything Penelope said.

The Decision. How do you reach agree-

ment on planning issues that do not require a legal vote?

Does the chair look around at Commission members and, in a somewhat genial, informal fashion, seeing no vociferous disapproval, declare the decision made?

Is the person who speaks the loudest — or the longest — or last — usually the most convincing?

How much are your decisions influenced by partisans of one side of an issue who manage to pack the meeting room?

Are you comfortable with the way you make these decisions or have a general unease that there must be a better way?

Consensus is an acceptable way to make many decisions, but it requires that participants generally agree. If you have set the agenda so you have time for the more important matters and have had a true dialogue, a sensitive chair can usually tell when and in what manner the group is ready to reach a decision.

One way to clarify opinions is to go around the table and give each one the opportunity to make one final comment. This brings closure to the discussion and clarifies ambiguity.

If you leave the meeting feeling satisfied that everything was discussed in a free, open, and responsive manner you will not mind if you did not get everything you want. You will just be inspired to try harder next time. ♦

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