

What are Robert's Rules of Order?

Robert's Rules of Order are rules regulating parliamentary procedure. These rules were designed to be used by legislative bodies so that meetings may be conducted as efficiently as possible. They present a way to maintain order and stability in a legislative environment by dealing with one item of business at a time to minimize confusion. Robert's Rules ensure that the majority vote prevails, but only after the minority opinion has had the opportunity to be heard by the legislative body, establishing virtues of courtesy, justice, and impartiality during the parliamentary proceedings.

Importance in Boards and Commissions

Robert's Rules can be utilized within Boards and Commissions to increase organization within the group and help the body to communicate more efficiently. Nashville's 58 Boards and Commissions are created through the Metro Code of Law, and each Board and Commission has its own set of governing bylaws. These bylaws are maintained by each Board and Commission and contain specific voting regulations. Robert's Rules are intended to supplement any procedures not outlined in the bylaws that the group follows in regards to voting. Robert's Rules acknowledge that bylaws take precedent when conducting meetings; they are merely used to fill in the gaps so that order can best be established. In the event of a conflict between the bylaws and Robert's Rules, the bylaws take precedent.

Fundamental Principles of Robert's Rules

Robert's Rules maintains a few fundamental principles that help parliamentary procedure run as smoothly as possible in meetings. These three principles are:

- 1) That the deliberative assembly is an autonomous body with the ability to make its own decisions;
- 2) Only members who are present at the time of voting have voting privileges; and
- 3) Only one motion can be considered at a time.

In addition to the fundamental principles, Robert's Rules also includes some general principles that should be followed, provided they do not conflict with the bylaws of the legislative body. Robert's Rules maintains that the majority vote rules, but the minority opinion should have an opportunity to be heard, and that a higher vote is required to change or amend legislation than the vote required to originally adopt it.

Necessities for Robert's Rules to be Effective

In order for Robert's Rules to be used effectively, three primary components must first be enacted. They are:

- 1) Written bylaws of the deliberative assembly;
- 2) A meeting agenda that is conducive to orderly meeting conduct; and
- 3) The presence of a parliamentarian. This parliamentarian should be knowledgeable both about the bylaws of the legislative body and Robert's Rules, so that he or she may assist with procedural rulings to improve effectiveness of the meeting.

How Robert's Rules Works

Boards and Commissions work through agenda topics and take action through motions to ensure that these topics are addressed in an orderly fashion. Through motions, the entire membership has the opportunity to take a stand on issues. Individuals can participate by taking one of these actions: stating motions, debating motions, amending motions, or voting on motions.

Types of motions

There are four types of motions: main motions, subsidiary motions, privileged motions, and incidental motions. Boards & Commissions deal primarily with main motions.

Main motions introduce items to members for consideration in voting. Discussion on a motion is only allowed after the motion has been brought forward. When stating a motion, one should set the motion clearly and in the affirmative to minimize confusion among voting members. Once a motion is made, it then must be seconded by another member. The chair will clearly state the motion and its seconding, and then turn the motion over to the body. Members have the right to discuss the motion, beginning with the person who originally stated the motion. After full discussion, the chair calls the members to vote, and after voting, the chair will state the results.

Robert's Rules also maintains the following principles on voting on main motions:

- 1) The motion cannot violate federal, state, or local laws or governing bylaws;
- 2) The motion cannot essentially represent a rejected motion from the same meeting or a conflict with a motion previously passed in the same meeting;
- 3) Items postponed or deferred cannot be brought back up in the same meeting; and
- 4) No member can make a motion while another motion is under consideration. Only one motion may be considered at a time.

Subsidiary motions change how a main motion is handled or presented. This type of motion is voted on before the main motion.

The types of subsidiary motions are to:

- 1) Move to postpone. This can include postponing indefinitely – this is a parliamentary strategy used to kill a motion for duration of that meeting, and which may kill the motion entirely. If the member making the motion intends for his or her motion to be voted on, then he or she should suggest a specific date to which the motion will be deferred;
- 2) Refer the main motion to a committee for review;
- 3) Amend a motion;
- 4) Limit debate;
- 5) Call for the question – this means that a member feels the item has been sufficiently discussed and it is now time to vote on the motion; and
- 6) Lay on the table – this states that the motion will be discussed at a later point in the same meeting. This type of subsidiary motion may be used if the group is waiting on a specific member or speaker to present his or her argument.

Privileged Motions bring up urgent matters that are unrelated to pending business. These may include motions to recess, adjourn, or “raise a question of privilege” – i.e. asking a nonmember (such as a citizen) to speak into a microphone for hearing privileges, etc.

Incidental Motions serve as a questioning procedure for other motions and must be considered before the motion at hand; i.e. if debate begins before correct parliamentary procedure occurs, members may call for a Point of Order. The chair will pause current proceedings, rule on point of order, and then the meeting will proceed.

Making Amendments

Members may make amendments by clearly stating their proposed amendment. Amendments are allowed, provided they don't change the entire meaning of the proposed motion. The chair will call a vote on the amendment before the motion is voted on. If the amendment passes, the chair will restate the motion as amended, and the new motion will then be voted on. If a member wants to change the meaning of the original motion, he or she should make a motion to substitute instead of amend. A full debate will be open to debate the original motion and the substitute motion. The substitute motion may also be amended. After full discussion, the chair will call for a vote on the substitute motion. If that vote fails, proceedings will return to the originally stated main motion. If the vote passes, the original main motion is discarded.

Voting Methods

The legislative body may use four different voting methods for different purposes. The types of voting are outlined as follows:

Voice – When voting by voice, the chair asks those in favor to say “aye” and those opposed to say “nay.” Should any member have doubts about how the vote falls, he or she may move for an exact count. For small boards, chairs may announce the exact votes on the motion, including which members voted “aye” or “nay.”

Roll Call – In this type of voting, each member will answer “aye” or “nay” when his or her name is called from the roll. This type of voting is used when voting records are kept of individual members' votes.

General Consent – This occurs when there are no likely objections to the motion. The chair will say, “If there is no objection,” and state the motion in the affirmative. If there is silence among the members, the motion passes. If one or more members state “I object,” the motion will be put to vote by one of the other three voting methods.

Division – This type of vote is similar to the voice vote; members will raise their hands or stand to vote either “aye” or “nay.”

Regardless of the type of voting used, each vote should be recorded in meeting minutes.

Order of Precedence

Robert's Rules helps to ensure that order of precedence is followed in meetings. This procedure lets members know when a motion is in order and in what order pending motions should be voted on. Robert's Rules state that motions must be considered according to rank; therefore, highest ranking

motions must be resolved before lower ranking motions may be considered. After motions have been restated, a higher ranking motion may proceed, but a lower ranking motion may not proceed until the higher ranking motion has been resolved. All subsidiary motions must be resolved before the group can return to the main motion.

Sources:

<http://www.cityofaustin.org/edims/document.cfm?id=114605>

Jennings, C. Alan. *Robert's Rules for Dummies*. Indianapolis: Wiley Publishing, Inc., 2005. 1-22. Print.