

Robert's Rules of Order

Boards and Commissions are groups of passionate volunteers who are often considered experts in their fields. Most of Austin's boards or commissions contain 11 members, but some can have numbers greater than 18! With so many members, Robert's Rules of Order help keep meetings efficient and provide an opportunity for all members to speak and be heard.

Why follow Robert's Rules of Order

Robert's Rules of Order are a specific kind of parliamentary procedure to help groups of people hold meetings that: take up business one item at a time; promote courtesy, justice, and impartiality; and ensure the rule of the majority while protecting the rights of the minority and absent members.

It is a fundamental right of deliberative assemblies that all questions be thoroughly discussed before acting or making a decision. Robert's Rules allow decision-makers to come to conclusions without confusion. Meeting conduct is controlled by the general will of the membership and not by any single member. Being knowledgeable about parliamentary procedure helps members focus on the merits of the cases they discuss.

How do Robert's Rules of Order work within Boards and Commissions?

Boards or Commissions are created through City Code, Charter, or state or federal laws or provisions. These laws and requirements govern boards'

authority and their scopes of work. City bodies are also required to create bylaws that define how their bodies will be organized, their purposes and duties, and how agendas will be created and standard components for each meeting. Bylaws may also set rules for quorum, number of votes for passage, who is eligible to vote, and so forth.

Robert's Rules are used to supplement any procedures not specifically stated in a board or commission's bylaws. Robert's Rules are general procedural guidelines, but please recognize that bylaws, City Code, and the Texas Open Meetings Act always take precedence. Robert's Rules do not always align with the City's requirements under the Open Meetings Act, such as posting requirements and limiting discussions to only posted items. For example, Robert's Rules allow the Chair to change items on the agenda after the meeting is called to order. The Texas Open Meetings Act, in contrast, requires the agenda to be posted at least 72 hours prior to the start of the meeting and limits discussions to *only* the posted items. Once again, Federal, State, and City rules always take precedence over Robert's Rules.

How do Robert's Rules Work?

Sometimes Robert's Rules are perceived to be too complex to be helpful. This is partially because of how they are depicted in movies, tv shows, or the news. It's important to remember that Robert's Rules were created to *simplify* meetings – and allow members

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to focus on the subject of the meeting instead of how business will be conducted.

To be an effective member, you must be familiar with your prerequisites:

Study your board or commission's written bylaws. The bylaws contain information that you should keep in mind as you participate in meetings.

Remember bylaws take precedence over Robert's Rules. Some bylaws may require a member to be appointed to serve as a Parliamentarian to advise the Chair on procedural rulings.

Second, you must have an agenda that organizes your meetings. The board works through the items on its agenda by discussing each item posted.

Third, understand how the board acts on each item through a series of motions. Motions are designed to ensure that every item is addressed in an orderly fashion. A motion is a proposal on which the entire membership can take action – or a position – on an issue. Individual members can participate in a meeting through stating motions, debating motions, amending motions, and voting on motions.

Making Motions

There are four basic types of motion: main motions, subsidiary motions, privileged motions, and incidental motions. Most boards only deal only with main motions. The purpose of the main motion is to introduce items to the membership for their consideration. The Chair should not allow discussion of any

item until a motion has been brought forward. Also, the Chair must insist the main motion *makes sense*. The Chair can help this by restating the motion in the *affirmative*. Stating in the affirmative means to avoid words like “no” “don't” and “not”. For instance, it is better for the Chair to say, “Commissioner Jackson has moved that we *cancel* the Jobs Fair in July, is there a second?” than to say: “Commissioner Jackson has moved that we *don't host* the Jobs Fair in July”

Making Motions in the *affirmative* is helpful for three reasons:

- 1- It encourages debate and constructive discussion.
- 2- It provides clarity and prevents misunderstandings. It is difficult to understand what is meant when one votes “yes” on “Not holding a bake sale.” It would be better to move that we hold a bake sale, and then vote “no”; or move to *cancel* a bake sale that is already scheduled.
- 3- If the motion is to not do a thing, then a motion should simply not be made – then no action will be taken.

It is the responsibility of the Chair to make sure any motion is clearly stated. Once a motion has been made and seconded, it no longer belongs to the person who made the motion. The entire body owns the motion. The body can discuss it, amend it, or vote it up or down. The person who made the motion has the right to speak first.

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There are 8 steps in handling a motion that is approved without amendments.

1. A member seeks to be recognized.
2. The Chair recognizes the member.
3. The member states their motion.
4. Another member seconds the motion.
5. The Chair re-states the motion and asks if there is any discussion, comments, or debate.
6. Members discuss the motion beginning with the person who made the motion.
Every member may speak twice on the motion, if desired.
7. The Chair calls for a vote.
8. The Chair states the results of the vote.

You can see from the list that the Chair (or other presiding officer) is performing half of the steps in processing a motion. Here are some additional rules concerning main motions:

- They cannot violate federal, state, or local laws or your bylaws.
- They cannot present substantially the same question that was rejected earlier in the same meeting or conflict with a motion that was passed earlier in the meeting.
- The same is true of an item that was temporarily disposed of earlier in the meeting, or one that was postponed or referred.
- And no member can make a new main motion when there is a previous motion under consideration.

Now let's look at some of secondary motions. Secondary motions can be: subsidiary, privileged, or incidental motions.

Subsidiary motions change or affect how a main motion is handled and are voted on before the main motion. Some examples are:

- **Move to postpone.** To “postpone indefinitely” is often used as a parliamentary strategy to kill a motion for the duration of that meeting, and possibly permanently. If that is not the intent of the maker, then she or he should suggest a specific date.
- **Refer the main motion** to a committee or working group for review.
- **Amend the motion.**
- **Limit debate.**
- **Call for the question** simply means a member thinks the item has been adequately discussed and that it is time for a vote.
- **Lay on the table.** This means that the item will be discussed later in the same meeting. For example, you may be waiting for certain presenters, and you want to withhold discussion until they arrive.

Privileged motions bring up items that are urgent about special or important matters unrelated to pending business. This would be a motion to recess or a motion to adjourn or to raise a question of privilege, which could be something like a board member asking that a

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member of the public speak into the microphone so they can be heard.

Incidental motions provide a means of questioning procedure concerning other motions. It must be considered before the other motion. An example would be that a motion was made, and debate started immediately. The member might say "I would like to call for a point of order: I believe the motion that was made is outside the posted agenda." The Chair would have to stop the meeting and rule on the point of order before proceeding.

Amending and Substituting

One of confusing parts of Robert's Rules can be making an amendment to a motion. You should specify exactly what the amendment is. An amendment does not change the *entire* meaning of the motion. The Chair should call for a vote on the amendment first, and – if it passes – restate the motion as amended, then take a vote on the main motion.

If a board member wants to change the entirety of a motion, they should make a motion to substitute. A full debate on the merits of the original text and the substitute text would be held. The substitute motion can be amended. The Chair would ask for a vote on the substitute motion and if failed, go back to the main motion. If it passes, then no vote is taken on the main motion.

Voting

Boards and commissions record agreement on motions by taking a vote of their members. There are four allowed methods for voting during a City of Austin Board or Commission meeting:

By voice – The Chair asked those in favor to say "aye", those opposed, "no". Any member may move for an exact count if there is any doubt about which side has prevailed. This helps the membership know what happened because often in small groups votes are by body language.

Roll Call – Each member answers "aye" or "no" as their name is called. This method is used when a record of each person's vote is required. It is often the best method when some members are attending the meeting remotely.

Unanimous Consent – When a motion is not likely to be opposed, Chair says, "If there is no objection, the members show agreement by their silence." However, if one member says, "I object," the item must be put to a vote. This is not recommended on most motions, but it is acceptable for recess and adjournment. Please note that a motion and second are still required.

Voting by Division – This is a slight variation of a voice vote. Members stand or raise their hands.

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For hybrid meetings, it is always recommended that the Chair announce the results of the vote. Regardless of the method of voting utilized by your board, each vote must be recorded in the meeting minutes.

Note: Although Robert's Rules of Order allow for ballot voting, the Texas Open Meetings Act does not.

Remember: *State law supersedes Robert's Rules.*

Order of Precedence

You should also be aware of the Order of Precedence. The Order of Precedence tells you two things: when a motion is in order and in what order to vote on the pending motions. Here is a *partial* list of motions and their rankings in the order of precedence:

Privileged Motions

- 13) Fix Time to Which to Adjourn
- 12) Adjourn
- 11) Recess
- 10) Raise a Question of Privilege

Subsidiary Motions

- 9) Call for the Orders of the Day
- 8) Lay on the Table
- 7) Previous Question (to close debate)
- 6) Limit or Extend Limits of Debate
- 5) Postpone to a Certain Time
- 4) Commit (or Refer)
- 3) Amend
- 2) Postpone Indefinitely
- 1) **Main Motion**

In the Order of Precedence, motions must be considered according to the rank, meaning a lower ranking motion may not be brought before the assembly and considered until a higher-ranking

motion is resolved. This means that after a motion has been restated by the Chair, a new motion that ranks higher may be considered but not a motion that ranks lower. For example, a motion to postpone to a certain time may not be brought forth if a motion for the previous question has not been resolved. But a motion to postpone to a certain time may be brought even if a motion to postpone indefinitely has not been resolved. All subsidiary motions must be resolved before the group can return to the main motion.

A more complete list of motions and rankings can be found in the resources tab in the boards and commissions online training. It outlines the ranking motions as well as what can and cannot be amended and debated along with voting requirements.

Summary

This training has touched on the basics of Robert's Rules of Order. The purpose of Robert's Rules are to provide guidance to groups as they conduct their business. Remember: The Rules are designed to facilitate *full discussion* and participation by *all* members in the assembly.