

10 Meeting Myths in Community Associations

Jim Slaughter, JD, CPP-T, PRP

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Any idea how many community association meetings are conducted each year? 100,000? 250,000? The Community Associations Institute (CAI) estimates there are more than 320,000 annual membership meetings of homeowner and condominium associations, 2.5 million board meetings, and a million committee meetings. That’s a lot of meetings.

If your association meetings are organized, properly run and stay on track, consider yourself lucky. If not, it's likely your association is spending time on things it shouldn't or isn't doing things it should.

There are several reasons why you might be having troubles. Let's dispel some common meeting myths and explore what it takes to run a good one.

Myth #1: Parliamentary Procedure Doesn’t Matter. Many associations dictate in their governing documents that a certain parliamentary book will be followed when transacting business. For that matter, many states now have statutes requiring that community association board and annual meetings follow specific rules or even Robert’s Rules during meetings. Ignoring or incorrectly applying these procedures can lead to embarrassment, hard feelings, and even lawsuits.

Myth #2: Any Robert’s Rules Will Do. There are lots of books with “Robert’s Rules” in the title. However, most of these books are earlier editions of Robert’s or knock-offs. There’s only one official Robert's Rules. The current book is *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised (12th Edition)*, published in 2020. If you are supposed to follow the "latest edition" of *Robert's*, this is the book you need. Each new edition brings changes to procedure; the latest has hundreds of small updates.

Myth #3: Rules Are the Same for All Meetings. Rules aren’t one size fits all. Problems are common when large meetings behave too informally or small meetings behave too formally. Rules, like clothes, should fit. They should suit the organization they are meant to serve.

Most parliamentary manuals provide that board meetings and membership meetings are conducted differently. Large meetings must be fairly formal. However, formality can hinder business in smaller bodies. As a result, *Robert’s* recommends less formal rules for small boards and committees, such as no seconds to motions, no limits on debate and the chair can debate and vote.

Smaller boards that dislike this informality may wish to follow more formal procedures. Even informal boards may choose to be more formal on important or controversial matters, just to make sure things are handled absolutely correctly.

Myth #4: Seconds Always Matter. In a larger body, such as an annual membership meeting, a motion with a second implies that at least two people want to discuss the motion. On the other hand, if there is no second, only one person of the entire group is interested. In this case, there should be no further action on the proposal. However, after any debate on an issue, the lack of a second is irrelevant. Despite the important part seconds play for large groups, they aren't required for less formal smaller boards or on motions from committees.

Myth #5: Debate and a Formal Vote Are Required. Many noncontroversial matters can be resolved without debate through "general" or "unanimous" consent. Using this method, the presiding officer might ask, "Is there any objection to ending debate?" If no one objects, you're done. Debate is closed. If a member objects, the matter is resolved with a motion and vote. Unanimous consent allows an assembly to move quickly through noncontested issues.

Myth #6: The Maker of a Motion Gets to Speak First and Last. The maker of a motion has the right to speak first to a proposal. After speaking, the maker has no more rights to speak than other members. In fact, the maker cannot speak a second time unless everyone else who wishes to speak to the issue has had a chance.

Myth #7: "Old Business." "Old Business" is not a parliamentary term. The correct term is "Unfinished Business" and makes clear the term refers to specific items carried over from the previous meeting. A presiding officer never needs to ask, "Is there any unfinished business?" The officer simply states the question on the first item ("There is one item of unfinished business"). Annual meetings generally have no unfinished business.

Myth #8: Yelling Out "Question!" Stops Debate. The motion to close debate (calling the "Previous Question") is often mishandled by stopping debate anytime someone shouts "Question!" from the back of the room. First, shouting anything from anywhere in the room is bad form. For the chair to act, a member must be recognized by the chair and the motion brought forward. The motion to close debate is like any other motion. The Previous Question requires a second and a two-thirds vote. Only the assembly decides when to end debate.

Myth #9: "Lay on the Table" Kills Sticky Issues. "Lay on the Table" is often misused to sweep difficult issues under the rug. *Robert's* provides that the motion is out of order if the intent is to kill or avoid dealing with a measure. Properly used, the motion temporarily delays a matter when some other urgent issue has arisen, such as an emergency or an important guest who is to speak to the group. Once the urgent matter is over, the group can resume the tabled matter. Because the motion to Table is undebatable and only requires a majority vote, it should not be used to get rid of a topic.

Myth #10: The Chair Rules the Meeting. The chair is the servant of the assembly, not its master. Put another way, the chair can only get away with what the assembly allows. If the rules of the assembly are being violated, any member can raise a “Point of Order.” Once the chair rules on the Point of Order, a member can Appeal from the decision of the chair. If seconded, the Appeal takes the parliamentary question away from the chair and gives it to the assembly. The assembly is the ultimate decider of all procedural issues.

CONCLUSION

Those who live in or work with community associations should learn at least the basics of parliamentary procedure. The benefits of a well-run meeting go beyond legal concerns. Proper procedure can turn long, confrontational meetings into short, painless ones. Eliminating these myths will bring your meetings more in line with proper procedure and result in shorter, more effective meetings.

Jim Slaughter is an attorney, Certified Professional Parliamentarian, Professional Registered Parliamentarian, and past President of CAI’s College of Community Association Lawyers (CCAL) and the American College of Parliamentary Lawyers (ACPL). He is author of *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Parliamentary Procedure Fast-Track* and lead author of *Notes and Comments on Robert’s Rules, Fourth Edition*. Jim is a partner in Law Firm Carolinas. For more information, visit www.jimslaughter.com.