

# Effective Municipal Government Meetings

A key indicator of a successful municipality is a well-organized and properly run board meeting. While the Mississippi Code is silent on the procedure a municipality must follow when conducting its meetings, the Mississippi Attorney General's office has opined that in the absence of such laws, "generally, we have provided that it is appropriate for a municipality to adopt its own regulations and rules of procedure when such is not prescribed in statute or in the municipality's charter provisions and that general parliamentary law prevails, such as that described in *Robert's Rules of Order*." MS AG Op., Harvey (February 17, 1987); MS AG Op. Barry (October 21, 1992) [2007 WL 5425661 (Miss.A.G.)].

## Best Practices for Orderly Meetings

- At the beginning of each term, municipalities should adopt a procedural ordinance that includes the following:
  - Sets the parliamentary authority that will be followed. Two commonly used options are *Robert's Rules of Order* and *The Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure*.
  - Sets a process for establishing the official agenda and the agreed-upon deadline for submitting items to the city clerk to be placed on the agenda. (Both the mayor and the board of aldermen have the authority to place items on the agenda; the board of aldermen has ultimate control over the agenda by majority vote.)
  - Sets the order of business that will be used to establish the agenda.
  - Sets the rules of debate that will be used by board members.
  - Sets the rules that will be used for public comments.
  - See the Model Procedural Ordinance, available upon request from the MSU Extension Center for Government and Community Development, for additional guidance.
  - **Use of a consent agenda:** A consent agenda is a useful method for handling multiple non-controversial items that generally do not need further discussion in a single vote. Before the vote, the chair of the meeting should ask if any board member would like an item removed and placed on the regular agenda. The consent agenda is passed in one motion, but, in the minutes, the actions that are passed are recorded individually.
- The chair of the meeting should be well-equipped with knowledge of the procedural ordinance and the adopted parliamentary authority. It is the duty of the chair to guide the meeting in an orderly manner to accomplish the board's tasks. The chair should always maintain order and be willing and able to enforce agreed-upon rules of the board.
- It is the duty of the board to follow the accepted procedural ordinance and rules set by the board. If a member is outside the scope of those rules, they must be willing to be reminded of the rules by the chair without taking it personally.
- The board should ensure that only one matter is handled at a time by following the agenda closely. If discussion drifts from the current agenda item, the chair should steer the group back to the current agenda item.
- Each matter on the agenda should be handled with a clear motion. Once a motion has been made and seconded, the chair should always repeat it. After any discussion, and before a vote, the chair should restate the motion to ensure that all members are clear on what is being voted on.
- The public comment period is not required by law; however, it can serve as a meaningful tool for citizen engagement. If public comment is allowed, the board should have clearly defined rules available for the public to view before the comment period. The board should consider the following for a public comment policy:
  - Each speaker should have a set time limit.
  - All comments should be addressed to the board as a whole and should not include personal attacks.
  - The board should refrain from responding, engaging in question-and-answer, or debating an issue with the public.

## Frequently Asked Questions

**I wish to change my vote from the previous meeting. Can the city clerk simply change the minutes before they are approved?**

No. The minutes are a record of the actual votes taken at each meeting. A motion to reconsider a previous action can only be used during the current meeting. If a board member would like to rescind an action, they may do so if no action has been taken on the previously approved matter.

**Can the mayor refuse to accept a motion?**

No. A motion that is properly made and seconded should be discussed, then put to a vote.

**Who has the authority to determine what is on the agenda?**

Both the mayor and the board of aldermen have the authority to place items on the agenda. However, the board of aldermen has the ultimate control through the adoption of the agenda by majority vote.

**I seconded the motion; doesn't that mean I automatically voted in favor of it?**

No. "An alderman does not implicitly cast his or her vote simply because he or she made a motion or seconded a motion. The alderman is still required to cast his or her vote when the vote is called for by the mayor."

**The mayor is absent from the meeting, and the mayor pro tempore is serving as the chair of the meeting. Does the mayor pro tempore still count in the quorum and get a vote?**

When an alderman is acting as mayor pro tempore, they are not included in the number of aldermen needed for a quorum. The mayor pro tempore should vote only in the case of a tie.

**I need to recuse myself from a vote. Can I stay in the room during the discussion and not vote?**

No. When a member needs to recuse themselves from an ethical conflict during the meeting, they should leave the room before the matter arises and not return until the vote is complete.

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## Reference

Mississippi Attorney General. (2007). *Opinion No. 2007-00571*. Office of the Attorney General, State of Mississippi.

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