

Are your meetings seven hours long?



This strange time of COVID-19 is producing some strange situations. We hear reports of local government meetings lasting far into the night, in some cases taking as long as 7 hours. Does this happen to you? Are your meetings too long? If yes, what can be done to bring meetings back to a human scale? Here are our suggestions.

Accept the limits of your situation

We find that many councilmembers, conscientious and dedicated, really dislike the fact that their discussion is, of necessity, so limited. They yearn to “get into it” with their colleagues, hold a deep dive into what people really think and feel, and argue it all out. Unfortunately this is seldom possible. As elected officials, you have a large body of work to get through, and it has to be gotten through in a reasonable time. Accepting the imperative of making decisions on complex matters with only a limited time to explore them will help you navigate your tasks.

It is reasonable to hold meetings of a reasonable length

Local elected officials and their staffs are giving their all right now, and they should not have to meet until the wee hours of the morning. This is bad for their personal health and well-being, and it also means that their decisions suffer as well. A local government body with this problem should start from the premise that meetings should have a reasonable length.

What is reasonable?

We would like to see ordinary weekly or bi-weekly meetings of 3 or 4 hours at a maximum. This is still a stretch on Zoom, but it seems to be within our ordinary capabilities. How are you going to get there?



Prepare for meetings in advance with committees and work sessions

Many cities and other boards create committees to go into their concerns in detail. They also use study or work sessions to explore issues at more leisure. This is a great way to consider the complexities of your agenda items. It also allows for a more informal style of discussion. We offer a technique called the Exploratory Round Robin that can be very helpful. Read our article [here](#).

Use a consent agenda

Agreeing to use a consent agenda (also called a “consent calendar”) will speed up your meeting time. This should contain routine and non-controversial items. If any member of the body requests that an item be removed from the consent agenda, this is done on request. Read more in our article, [Consent agenda: great tool for speedier meetings](#).

Structure discussion of agenda items

We believe that it is helpful to structure the council’s discussion of its agenda items in this way:

1. Staff introduces the item in writing and answers any questions.
2. The motion is moved and seconded.
3. Members of the body discuss the motion and amend it if desired.
4. Members vote on the motion.

One good practice is to keep questions to the staff and discussion separate. Sometimes we see that during the informational step 1, members start offering alternatives or opinions: “Wouldn’t it be better if we…” Avoid this.

Note that under *Robert’s Rules of Order*, small boards (up to about 12 people) may discuss a topic without having a formal motion before them. We think that if you have a motion on the agenda, it is best to move it before starting discussion. Read more about the small board rules [here](#).

Agree on common discussion guidelines

Your council will benefit from spending some time reviewing its guidelines for discussion and agreeing on which of them to follow. There’s no point having *Robert’s Rules of Order* or Jurassic Parliament tell you what to do if people don’t want to do it. Here is what we suggest:

- During discussion, the chair must recognize people before they speak. This is crucial! Allowing everyone to blurt out whatever they think can lead to chaotic and emotional discussion.
- Jurassic Parliament strongly believes that following the rule that no one may speak a second time until everyone has spoken once is critical for fairness, and also makes a more efficient meeting. We find that while people accept this in theory, they find it hard to apply in practice. Don’t use the “conversational style.” Don’t allow members to answer other members back.
- If you find yourselves caught in conversation too often, a great method is to address all remarks to the chair. This keeps things neutral and lowers the emotional tempo.
- Some councils have adopted the rule that each person may speak twice on a given subject. *Robert’s Rules of Order* gives this rule for larger bodies, but even small boards (up to about 12 people) can benefit from it when time is limited.

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- The rules of decorum must be observed during your meetings. Learn more in our article [here](#), which has information about inappropriate remarks at local government meetings. Too much emotion will prolong your meetings and make it harder to navigate them. It can be helpful to remember that your meetings are not about the opinions people hold, they are about words on paper—the motions that you adopt or defeat.
 - Once a vote has been taken, no further discussion is allowed during the meeting! “Woulda, coulda, shoulda” have no place during your meetings.

Examine your rules on public comment

Hearing from the public is a critical part of your role. You need to be in touch with your public, to be responsive, and to appear responsive. Always remember, though, that your meetings are meetings for you, the council. They are not meetings of the public. The purpose of the public comment period is for you to learn the views of the public.

You will of course be guided by your state’s laws and regulations on this, which vary considerably. Some councils go overboard, in our view, and schedule too many opportunities for public comment during the meeting. We think it’s reasonable to hold two public comment sessions, one at the beginning of your meeting and one afterwards. You may choose to do without comment on individual agenda items. If you have a very controversial topic to deal with, you can schedule a public forum dedicated just to that topic.

We believe that it is reasonable to set time limits, such as 30 minutes per session, and limits on individual speakers, such as 3 minutes per person, or 5 minutes if someone represents a larger group. This may mean that sometimes you close public comment when people are still waiting to speak. In Washington State, this is allowed, and we believe that it can be appropriate in the interest of running a meeting of reasonable length. Consult your attorney when deciding what structure to use.

We also recommend that the chair and council members do not respond to the public. Read more in our publication [Guidelines for Public Comment in Local Government](#).

Are these suggestions helpful? [Let us know!](#)

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