

Best Practices for Small Board Meetings – Creating a Successful Culture

- Be courteous and respectful
- Provide board members equal opportunity to express views
- The chair is the servant
- Rules of order
- One thing at a time
- Consent agenda
- Public Comment period
- Closed session

Be courteous and respectful

Your chair and your board must always insist on courtesy and respect. Decorum is essential and vital for the democratic process. There should be no personal remarks, no insulting language, no attacks, no interrupting, no sidebar conversations, and no disrespectful body language. If any of this happens, gently and firmly put a stop to it. The members of the board should model courtesy and respect and encourage members of the public to do the same.

Provide board members equal opportunity to express views

Often when a board is in discussion, dominant people tend to dominate the conversation. This isn't fair and may lead to a poor outcome. All your board members have equal rights, privileges, and obligations. A board policy that no one speak a second time until everyone who wishes to speak has done so once on the particular topic would be an item that would be good to include in the board's policies.

The chair is the servant of the board

All board members have equal standing and are peers. The chair is the leader among equals. The chair is not the 'boss'. The chair has a special responsibility to maintain proper procedure during the board's meeting. The board makes its own decision and is responsible for its own performance. The chair's duty is to assist the board.

It is best that the chair, in that position of power, does not make a motion. Instead, the chair may ask, "Does any member care to make a motion that ...?" If the chair wants to engage in discussion, the chair should speak last. If the chair votes, the chair should vote last. We tend to give deference to our leaders, and that gives them undue influence on us. Better decisions result when everyone is on equal footing. The chair can encourage this by holding back a bit.

Rules of Order

In your board's policies, there should be a statement relating to the specific parliamentary procedures that your board will follow. *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised 11th Edition* is the latest edition of this common resource for boards' procedures. Your policy might state that the board's meetings will be governed by '*Robert's Rules of Order, latest edition*'. In this latest edition of *Robert's Rules of Order*, there are rules for small boards. The rules for small boards allow a flexibility and informality that may benefit your board in accomplishing its business. If the board

doesn't want to follow all the rules, it should just so state in a special rule of order in its written and approved policy document.

Special rules of order are permanent rules, specific to your board, that guide your meetings. The special rules of order help your board function and make decisions in the way that works best for you.

Please note that *Robert's Rules of Order* is not the only parliamentary procedure authority. Your board may choose a different guide such as *American Institute of Parliamentarians Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure* or *Mason's Manual for Legislative Bodies*.

One thing at a time

An efficient tool for your board's meeting is to adopt a policy that when the group is discussing a certain item it must stick with that topic or make a conscious decision to end that discussion and to deal with something else. In other words, don't skip from one topic to another. Be deliberate in how you address each item.

Consent Agenda

One of the most useful tools for an efficient meeting is a consent agenda. A consent agenda is a single item of business on a regular agenda that includes several routine items bundled together. The items on the consent agenda are not discussed or debated. A single vote approves it.

The items on the consent agenda are ones not likely to be controversial such as approval of draft minutes, regular payment of bills, or routine staff trainings. Ordinarily the items on the consent agenda would be determined before the meeting by the board's chair and the secretary.

Items on the consent agenda should be available before the meeting to members of the board.

At the beginning of the meeting, the chair asks for an approval of the agenda or if any member wants to remove any item from the consent agenda. A member should request that an item be removed from the consent agenda if he wants to comment or discuss it. The item should then be added to some other place on the agenda and dealt with later in the meeting.

The chair then takes a single vote on the consent agenda that includes the items remaining on the consent agenda. The board votes for all those items in one motion.

If your board wants to use a consent agenda, it should be included in your board's operating procedures, policies, or standing rules of order and recorded in the board's minutes.

Public Comment Period

The public comment period during a board meeting is the public's opportunity to inform your board about their views. The public should not participate in the board's decision-making. The public should provide you input which the board may consider in making its decisions. A public comment period is not mandated by law for soil and water conservation district board meetings but may enhance your board's relationship with the public. Also in times of a public turmoil, a public comment period policy may help your board weather the storm.

--Time Considerations for public comment

Establish a specific period on your agenda for public comment with a beginning and ending time limit. A vote of the board may extend this time period. Set a time limit for each speaker. Speakers may not give their time to other people.

--Guidelines and Expectations for public comment

Review the guidelines at the beginning of each comment period and provide printed copies of the guidelines and expectations to any public present. The guidelines should be developed by the board and be part of the board's policies.

Explain that this is the time for citizens to express their views in order to inform the board and that the board will not engage in dialogue with the public during this comment period.

The board has the right to set limits on what subjects may be addressed, how long public comment will be, and how many times people may speak. All the limits should be viewpoint neutral. The limits should not favor one viewpoint over another.

Closed Sessions

North Carolina's Soil and Water Conservation District Boards are public bodies and subject to North Carolina's open meeting laws. However, there are specific, legislated situations where these boards may go into closed session and exclude the public. The law makes provisions for privacy when open sessions might harm public interests or an individual's privacy.

There are two main and applicable reasons out of the ten legislated reasons for a closed session of a soil and water conservation district board. These are (1) personnel actions and (2) items made confidential by state or federal laws (such as Section 1619 of the 2008 Farm Bill).

A closed session may only be held when a proper motion is made and adopted during any of the board's open meetings. The proper motion to go into closed session will state a purpose of one of the ten legislated and permissible reasons. If the reason for the closed session is an item made confidential by state or federal law, the motion may also identify the specific law by name. The motion to go into closed session does not require a citation of the Law that gives the board the authority to go into closed session (143.318.11).

The board may ask other people to assist the board by attending the closed session. Closed session minutes should give a general account of subjects discussed and capture any action taken. Below is a sample statement for a closed session.

Chairman; 'We have a motion and a second to go into closed session to prevent disclosure of information that is privileged or confidential. The information to be reviewed is protected by Section 1619 of the 2008 Farm Bill. All those in favor say "aye". Motion carries. This board will now go into closed session. We would like for our NRCS partner to please remain seated and assist us with this issue.'

The board should only address the item cited in the motion during the closed session.