

# **ROBERT'S RULES IN SHORT: A GUIDE TO RUNNING AN EFFECTIVE MEETING**

(Adapted from Michael P. May's Guide, for the City of Madison, Wisconsin)

"Where there is no law, but every man does what is right in his own eyes,  
there is the least of real liberty." Henry M. Robert.

## **Importance of Rules to an Effective Meeting**

While groups sometimes proceed informally or by consensus, it is generally accepted that deliberative bodies operate much more effectively when they follow known rules of procedure. In most instances and except as changed by the deliberative council, the rules to be followed are **Robert's Rules of Order** (hereinafter referred to as RR). These rules were first established by General Henry M. Robert in 1876. These rules have been crafted and adjusted over the years to assist in effective meetings, and to balance carefully the rights of the majority to act and the rights of the minority to be heard, and in some cases, prevent action.

## **Proper Notice and Agenda for a Meeting:**

RR requires that there be an order of business for a meeting. Those conducting a meeting should know some of the basic rules. They are in the case that:

1. All meetings must be preceded by adequate notice. This is generally 24 hours, although it may be two hours in the case of an emergency. The giving of the notice should be coordinated through the Sports Club Coordinator's office.
2. The notice must include all items to be taken up at the meeting in such a manner as to apprise the public of the nature of the public business. Agenda items should be specific in their nature.
3. Except for meetings that provide for public comment, there can be no discussion of any item not on the agenda. Nor can there be action on any item not on the agenda. A "Public Comment" section allows the public to talk about anything, and the council may question them, but no further action or discussion is allowed.
4. There may be action on any item on the agenda, unless the agenda explicitly states something to the effect of "for information only - no action."
5. Special rules govern when an executive council may go into closed session.

## **Robert's Rules of Order / Common Motions**

This section will summarize some of the provisions of RR.

1. Proceed by Motion. The most basic element of RR is that matters come before the council by motion. An alder makes a motion simply by saying "I move that..." or "Move adoption of..." or "Move referral of..." or "I move to amend..." It is not the form of the motion, but the substance of it which governs.

2. Role of the Executive Board (Chair). It is the obligation of the Executive Board to run an orderly meeting. Members of the council are not to speak until they have been recognized by the Executive Board. Except for a limited class of motions, a member may not interrupt another member when they have the floor. The Executive Board also rules on any votes and rules on any questions of proper procedure. In the event of a disruption in the meeting, the Executive Board may call on the sergeant at arms or others to return the meeting to order. Generally, under RR, the Executive Board does not participate in debate or vote (for the sake of *this* council though, they shall if they are the representative of their sport club).
3. Types of Motions. Under RR, motions generally fall into one of four classes. These are:
  - a. The Main Motion: This is the matter that is before the council at that moment. Nearly all other motions bear some relation to the main motion.
  - b. Subsidiary Motions: These are a series of motions which propose to do something to or with the main motion. Examples include amendment, referral, laying on the table, calling the question. These motions are all subject to an order of precedence which will be discussed below.
    - i. Note that what is the "main motion" for application of the rules of precedence may change during the course of consideration of a matter. For example, if the main motion is to adopt a resolution, and a member offers a subsidiary motion to amend the resolution, the proposal for amendment becomes the main motion for purposes of consideration of the order of precedence of other motions. That is, the motion to amend is subject to further amendment, referral, laying on the table, etc. It is only when that motion has been disposed of that the motion to adopt is then back before the council for consideration.
  - c. Incidental Motions: Incidental motions relate to the pending matter, but generally relate to it in a procedural way such that the incidental motion must be dealt with before the council may return to either the main or subsidiary motion before it. Incidental motions take precedence over whatever motion is before the council, and in some instances, may be made when the mover does not have the floor. Examples of incidental motions are a point of order or procedure, appeal of a ruling on a point of order or procedure, a point of information, call for a roll call (division of the assembly), or a suspension of the rules.
  - d. Privileged Motions: These are very few motions that take precedence over all other motions. They include motion to recess, question of privilege, and a motion to adjourn.

## **Common Motions**

An almost limitless number of motions may be made. RR lists at least 84 potential motions. This section will discuss some common motions; the reader is also referred to the accompanying "cheat sheet" attached as an appendix to this manual.

1. Adjourn: To end the meeting. Not debatable.
2. Adoption: This is to adopt the matter before the council.
3. Amendment: To modify the main motion before the council.
4. Division of Assembly / Roll Call: A call for division is the same as calling for a roll call vote. Any member may do this and the motion need not be seconded; it is simply granted when asked for. It is not debatable.
5. Division of the Question / Separation: This is a request to have separate votes on different paragraphs or portions of the proposal before the council. It is not debatable, but does require a second.
6. Lay on the Table / Take off the Table: This is a motion to temporarily defer consideration of a matter and then to ask that the matter be taken up again. It is often used, when, for some reason, a member of the assembly or some information necessary for consideration is temporarily unavailable. Motions to lay on the table or take off the table are not debatable. The motion is often made simply as a motion to "table." The motion should not be used if the intent is essentially to kill a proposal.
7. Place on File/Postpone Indefinitely: This is a common motion used in proceedings of the Madison Common Council and is the equivalent of a motion to postpone or defer indefinitely. This is the motion to be used if the intent is to not adopt the matter before the Council, without explicitly voting it down.
8. Point of Information: This is an incidental motion in which a member of the assembly desires some information prior to proceeding to a vote on the matter before the council. It does not require a second and no vote is actually taken on the point of information. A member simply says "I rise to a point of information" or "Point of Information?" It is proper when another has the floor.
9. Point of Order or Procedure: This is another incidental motion and again is not subject to a second or a debate. It raises a question about the procedure being followed by the council. The ruling on the Point of Procedure is committed to the Executive Board of the council. If a member of the council disagrees with the ruling, they may appeal the ruling of the Executive Board to the full council. An appeal does require a second, and a majority of the council must disagree with the Executive Board's ruling for it to be reversed.
10. Point of Privilege: This is one of the privileged motions, and again does not require a second, nor is it debatable. This normally relates to some personal matter or something relating to the operation of the council, such as a room that is too hot, too cold, too loud, some confidential information which should not be discussed before the council, etc.
11. Previous Question: This is a motion requesting that the council immediately vote on whatever matter is otherwise before it; it cuts off debate and proceeds to an immediate vote. The motion can be made either by "calling the question", "moving the previous question," or simply stating "Question." The motion requires a second and is non-debatable and requires a two-thirds vote.

12. Recess. The motion asks that the council take a short break. The length of time of the recess should be established. This is a privileged motion, in that it takes precedence over almost all other pending motions. It requires a second, it is not debatable, and requires a majority vote.
13. Reconsideration: A motion for reconsideration asks that the council reconsider something it has already acted upon. It must be made either at the same meeting at which the matter was considered, or at the next succeeding meeting. If it is to be made at the next succeeding meeting, it must be on the official agenda of the meeting.
  - a. A motion to reconsider may only be made by a member who voted on the winning side of the prior question. This normally will be a member in the majority, but if a matter fails because it does not reach the required majority, it may be that the motion for reconsideration may be made by a member who actually is less than a majority. For example, if a matter needing a 2/3 vote falls one vote short of 2/3, reconsideration may only be moved by a member of the minority. If the motion to reconsider is approved, the prior proposal is then again before the council.
14. Motion to Refer/Commit: This is a subsidiary motion which asks that a matter be referred to another council, or to another meeting of the same council. Called a motion to commit in RR.
15. Suspension of the Rules: This is an incidental motion because it relates to the manner in which the council will take up an issue. It requires a two-thirds majority, but is not debatable.
16. Debate. Once a debatable motion is before the council, members of the council proceed to debate. In both the making of motions and in debating the motions, members should wait to be recognized by the Executive Board. The standing rules of the Common Council limit the number of times and length of time that a member of the council may participate in debate.
17. Unanimous Consent. Asking for unanimous consent is a quick way to dispose of non-controversial items. The Common Council does this by proposing a "consent agenda" near the beginning of every meeting. Items that no member of the council objects to are disposed of by unanimous approval. The Executive Board may ask for unanimous consent, or a member may ask for it on any pending matter. The Executive Board may do this by asking: "Is there any objection to recording a unanimous vote on item ?"

## **Precedence of Motions**

Some common motions are listed in descending order of precedence, that is, a motion is not in order if it has a higher number than the pending matter.

### **Un-debatable Motions**

1. Adjourn
2. Recess
3. Question of Privilege

4. Lay on the Table
5. Previous Question
6. Limit or Extend Debate

**Debatable Motions**

7. Postpone to a Definite Time
8. Refer or Commit
9. Amend
10. Postpone Indefinitely / Place on File
11. Main Motion

Incidental Motions (e.g., Point of Order, Point of Information, Suspend the Rules, Division of the Assembly or of the Question) take precedence over whatever matter is pending.

## "Cheat Sheet" for Robert's Rules

Motion	In Order When Another has the Floor?	Second Required?	Debatable?	Amendable?	Vote Required for Adoption	Can be reconsidered?
<b>Main Motion</b>	N	Y	Y	Y	Majority unless other spec'd by Bylaws	Y
<b>Adjournment</b>	N	Y	N	Y	Majority	N
<b>Recess (no question before the body)</b>	N	Y	N	Y	Majority	N
<b>Recess (question before the body)</b>	N	Y	Y	Y	Majority	N
<b>Accept Report</b>	N	Y	Y	Y	Majority	Y
<b>Amend Pending Motion</b>	N	Y	If motion to be amended is debatable	Y	Majority	Y
<b>Amend an Amendment of Pending Motion</b>	N	Y	See above	N	Majority	Y
<b>Change from Agenda</b> to Take a Matter out of Order	N	Y	Y	N	Two-thirds	N
<b>Limit Debate Previous Question / Question</b>	N	Y	N	Y	Two-thirds	Yes, but not if vote taken on pending motion
<b>Limit Debate</b> or extend limits for duration of meeting	N	Y	Y	Y	Two-thirds	Y
<b>Division of Assembly (Roll Call)</b>	Y	N	N	N	Demand by a single member compels division	N
<b>Division of Question/ Motion</b>	N	Y	N	Y	Majority	N
<b>Point of Information</b>	Y	N	N	N	Vote is not taken	N
<b>Point of Order / Procedure</b>	Y	Y	N	N	Vote is not taken	N
<b>Lay on Table</b>	N	Y	N	N	Majority	N
<b>Take from Table</b>	N	Y	N	N	Majority	N
<b>Suspend the Rules as applied to rules of order or, take motion out of order</b>	N	Y	N	N	Two-thirds	N
<b>Refer (Commit)</b>	N	Y	Y	N	Majority	Neg. vote only