

## **A FIELD GUIDE FOR BOARD MEMBERS** ***Keeping Order At Member Meetings***

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*This marks the tenth installment in a series for board members about commonly faced questions and issues. Many of these challenges require a combination of legal, political and practical solutions. Hopefully these articles will be useful for board members in determining what is in the best interest of the association.*

Some community associations are lucky enough to experience smoothly run homeowner meetings involving reasonable and courteous participants...some are not as lucky. It may only take one emotionally immature adult to disrupt a meeting or even bring it to a grinding halt. The 'chair', who is often the president, is responsible for keeping an orderly meeting by conducting it pursuant to parliamentary procedure. The most widely relied upon set of procedures is *Robert's Rules of Order*, and sometimes the bylaws will require their use.

In addition to parliamentary procedure there are other tools at the association's disposal for keeping order. Three of the most important are: the sergeant-at-arms; the use of a well drafted agenda; and the adoption of a code of conduct for the meeting.

Sergeant-at-Arms. I no longer attend member meetings unless an off-duty police officer is present. Besides the obvious benefit of guarding against violent outbreaks, the presence of an officer in uniform really quiets down the otherwise disruptive participants. It is usually inexpensive to hire an off-duty officer, and most local police departments will be familiar with this type of request. The police officer is often included in the official meeting agenda to address neighborhood safety. I can't stress how effective this approach is in keeping order and civility.

Agenda. An agenda is critical to running an organized meeting that is also reasonable in length of time. The bylaws usually require the use of an agenda, and a typical one will consist of a Call to Order, Proof of Notice of the Meeting, Approval of the Minutes, Officers Reports, Committee Reports, Appointment of Inspector of Election, Election of the members of the Board, Unfinished Business and New Business. Some associations now include a Residents' Forum, but a strict time limit should be imposed.

Without an agenda there is no direction and nothing to adhere to the chair can point to in guiding the direction of the meeting. In next month's article we will delve deeper into meeting agendas and parliamentary procedure.

Code of Conduct. The board should consider adopting a code of conduct that applies to all member meetings. Ideally a copy of the code would be mailed along with the notice of the meeting. Some associations require the members attending the meeting to sign an acknowledgement of the code. The code should provide that any person who is in violation may be ejected from the meeting. Here are some sample provisions for a code of conduct:

- No one may speak until recognized by the chair;
- Only one person may speak at a time;
- A person may only speak once to a particular topic;
- A member's time to speak is limited to \_\_\_\_ minutes;
- Abusive language or personal attacks or will not be tolerated; and
- Only the chair may interrupt a speaker.

When faced with a hostile or difficult member, the chair should call them to order and issue a warning. (A good old fashion gavel can be very effective.) If the member does not come to order, or later disrupts the meeting, the chair should ask them to leave. Another alternative would be to take a quick adjournment to let things calm down for a few minutes. Finally, the chair does have the authority under *Roberts Rules* to adjourn without a vote to a later date for emergency purposes "...if the chair believes taking time for a vote on adjournment would be dangerous to those present..."