



# Making the most of your meetings

**Y**ou look at the calendar and groan when you realize tomorrow night is your monthly township board meeting.

You're not sure what you'll discuss that night—you haven't seen an agenda yet—but if the past is any indication, it's sure to last at least three hours. Every board meeting is an endless stream of votes on boring, administrative details. The public never shows up, and you don't blame them.

This scenario is all too real for some townships—but it doesn't have to be this way.

Maybe you already know your board meetings aren't working and need to change. Or perhaps you never considered that meetings could be anything more than an evening of dealing with township administration and finances.

But many township boards enjoy meetings that are not only productive and efficient, they also engage the community. While their meetings might occasionally experience conflict, they understand that's sometimes a byproduct of a robust discussion. Instead of accepting division, they make the effort to build consensus among board members and come to an agreement everyone can live with.

This continuing education article and accompanying self-assessment are worth 2.0 elective credits in MTA's Township Governance Academy. See page 29 for details.



## OBJECTIVE

- To organize board meetings to be professional, efficient and forward-thinking on behalf of the township

## CORE COMPETENCIES

- Understands how to conduct effective board meetings and is knowledgeable about parliamentary procedure
- Possesses effective policy-making skills and decision-making skills

# cover story



Many township boards enjoy meetings that are not only productive and efficient, they also engage the community. They make the effort to build consensus among board members and come to an agreement they can all live with.

Having effective board meetings doesn't mean your board simply pays the township's bills and approves everything presented to it in under an hour. Township boards were designed to focus on what's truly important to their communities and lead them through current and future storms. Your board can't do this job well if your meetings are bogged down by administrative minutiae.

By streamlining and organizing meetings—and focusing the conversation—your board can focus on what really matters to your residents. Your township will reap the benefits of having a board with an eye on both current and future issues.

Good board meetings are better for board members and the public alike. Your residents will respect your board more if they see a well-run meeting. Public service will also be more enjoyable for your board members. While board meetings don't exist just to have fun, they shouldn't be torture! With the right processes and planning, your board meetings could actually become something you look forward to.

## Why do meetings fail?

One of the most common mistakes boards make is letting the conversation wander without keeping the focus on agenda items, MTA Executive Director and township governance expert Larry Merrill said. While anyone can veer off topic, some boards don't steer the discussion back to the agenda.

Their meetings end up unfocused and don't accomplish as much as they could.

Many boards are tripped up by how to handle public participation. Some are extremely rigid and refuse to answer even the simplest question from the public, while others become too engaged, leading to a breakdown in decorum.

Some boards struggle with showing negative emotions in board meetings. While there's nothing wrong with showing excitement or joy, a visibly angry or frustrated board member will only stir up more of the same emotions from other board members or the public.

But unless your meetings are plagued with clashes and last for four hours, it isn't always easy to recognize a problem in your own board meetings—especially if you're the moderator. Watch for red flags, such as an angry mob that shows up month after month, or a public that is chronically unhappy with you. Or, the public might be completely apathetic, and no one ever comes to your meetings unless absolutely necessary.

"If a large segment of the community is always unhappy, there's a message there that you're not in touch with your community," Merrill said. "If the public is apathetic, you're not focusing on the things that the community really wants you to do."

Problems might also be present if the board is constantly divided. While debate is positive, and your board does not always need to be unanimous, your board has some unifying work to do if votes are frequently split along the same factional lines.

It's helpful for boards to regularly assess themselves and look for areas that need improvement. Ask other board members for their honest opinion on how the meetings are running. Do they feel they're being treated fairly, and that their time is used well? Are the issues on the agenda the topics they ought to be talking about? The answers to these questions can help you evaluate how well your meetings are working.

Five years ago, anyone who attended an **Independence Charter Township** (Oakland Co.) board meeting could see the meetings needed an overhaul. Their marathon three- to four-hour meetings were frequently peppered with shouting matches. Board members clearly didn't respect each other, and the public followed their lead.

When a new slate of board members were elected in 2012 except for one remaining trustee, Trustee **Andrea Schroeder** and her fellow officials made pact that the previous level of disrespect would not be tolerated anymore. While they've disagreed at times in the last five years, they've stuck to their agreement that civility will always win—and when they go too far at a board meeting, they apologize. "Agreeing to disagree is not enough," Schroeder said. "We have to disagree without being disagreeable. That's our overriding culture."

## Come together

Your township can have the most carefully thought-out agenda in the world, but if your board isn't cohesive, your meetings will never reach their full potential. This doesn't mean everyone on the board must agree all the time. Instead, it means that your board must have a consensus on the township's mission.

Strong boards take the time to discuss the township's role in larger issues such as economic development, farmland preservation, providing services and how to make the community a better place to live. These conversations help to focus the board on its priorities and set a foundation for future decisions.

A short mission statement can serve as a compass to your board as it makes decisions and debates controversial issues. Even the discussion itself can be a unifying process for board members, Merrill said. Then, when your board disagrees in the future, you can always turn to the mission statement that everyone believes in and is invested in.

## What's the purpose of your meeting?

Before you meet, think about the outcomes you hope to achieve and what might be the best way to get there. For example, if your board plans to spend the meeting discussing an issue and working on possible solutions without a vote, you might want to adjust your agenda so that board members have ample time to speak.

If the meeting is a public hearing, your format might be more formal, complete with a microphone and podium so that each speaker can be heard. Or perhaps you plan to spend a meeting becoming educated on a particular topic.

Whatever the purpose of your meeting, you need to decide in advance so that you can plan your agenda and set up your meeting accordingly.

## Keep it legal

It sounds basic, but your board must first make sure that its meetings meet all statutory requirements. Check the Open Meetings Act (see the March issue of *Township Focus* for more details on the OMA) to ensure that your meeting notices are compliant.

State laws require your meetings to accommodate anyone with a disability. A quorum must be present, and minutes must be kept, approved and properly filed. While closed sessions are allowed, this is only in certain, specific circumstances. The public must also have a chance to participate.

## Be prepared

When your board is thoroughly prepared for its meetings, the public receives a message that you respect them. Everything from the facility to the agenda to the board packets can make or break your meeting.

Think about how the chairs are set, and how the board's seating is organized. Pay attention to the acoustics and determine if a sound system is needed in order for the

## Seven steps to basic voting procedures

A township board may choose to adopt an established form of parliamentary procedure, such as *Robert's Rules of Order*, *Mason's Manual of Legislative Procedure*, or any number of other recognized forms of parliamentary procedure. A board could also choose to use a simplified version of meeting procedure or even establish its own rules of parliamentary procedure, as long as they do not violate state law. The key is for all board members to know the rules and use them consistently.

For example, here are some basic steps to voting that a township board may find useful.

### “\_\_\_\_\_ Township Rules of Voting”

- 1. Board members who are not abstaining participate in fact-finding, discussion and debate to reach a consensus that the board should take action on a matter.**
- 2. A board member makes a motion to take a specified action.**

The clerk, recording secretary or the motion-maker should write the motion out as it is made and as amended—even on an index card that can be passed to the clerk—so all members will know exactly what they are voting on when a vote is taken.
- 3. Another board member seconds the motion.**

Note: A “second” is not required by law, or even recommended by all forms of parliamentary procedure. A township board may choose to not require that motions be seconded.
- 4. The motion may be discussed and amended until the moderator (supervisor, if present) calls for the vote.**
- 5. The moderator restates the motion before the motion is taken.**

By reading out the written version of the motion, the moderator is stating the motion so all board members, as well as the public, knows what is being voted on.
- 6. The moderator calls for the vote.**

A vote may be a simple “voice vote,” where each voting member calls out his or her vote at the same time when asked to vote “Aye” or “No,” or a vote may be a roll call vote, where the clerk calls each voting member's name and records in the minutes how that member responds. Secret ballots are never allowed for a township public body—all votes must be made in open session at a public meeting so the public may hear the votes.

The clerk may shuffle index cards with each member's name to ensure that no one member always votes first or last for roll call votes.

Each member, including the supervisor/moderator, votes on all business before the board unless that member is properly abstaining. The supervisor/moderator does not vote only to break a tie, and does not have to vote last.
- 7. The moderator announces the outcome of the vote and should identify responsibility for accomplishing the action (who will do it, and when).**

Note that a public body may choose to decide motions by “consensus,” without actually taking a vote, when a roll call vote or specific majority is not required. The motion is stated and, if no objections are heard, carries.

# cover story

audience to hear the discussion. If you're expecting a large crowd, consider moving the meeting to a location that can seat everyone. And plan ahead—if you're setting up chairs when the public starts to arrive, that says the meeting wasn't important enough for your board to prepare for it.

The meeting's starting time sends a similar message. If the official start time is 7 p.m., but the chair doesn't call the meeting to order until 7:15 p.m., you do a disservice to those who arrived on time. Start your meeting at the published time, even if someone you're expecting hasn't arrived yet.

Board members should sit down at each meeting prepared to do the township's business. They should receive their board packet—including proposed resolutions, draft ordinances and background materials—at least a few days in advance, and they should read it cover to cover well before the meeting is called to order.

As a township board member, you're faced with complex issues and critical decisions, many of which involve taxpayer dollars. If you don't read through the information and ask questions in advance, you'll either make an uninformed decision or waste time at meetings on issues that could have been handled on your own time.

"The purpose of a board meeting is to use information, not to collect it," Merrill said. "Everyone should come into the meeting knowledgeable and ready to make decisions."

## The agenda

The board meeting agenda is the plan for your board's meeting. Anyone who reads it knows what will be discussed that night and in what order. Typically, your agenda should stay consistent. Once you find an agenda that works, use it again and again. This provides both board members and the public with predictability. They know when the public has a chance to comment, when the board handles new business and when it discusses unfinished business.

If your agenda is your plan, then adding a last-minute agenda item at the meeting can throw the plan completely off balance. Not only does it catch board members—and the

public—off guard, but it forces board members to publicly discuss an issue, or even make a decision, without having a chance to prepare.

Independence Charter Township board members realized a major source of conflict at past meetings was the feeling that people were left in the dark. To remedy this, Clerk **Barb Palotta** created a form that board members are now required to complete if they want an item on the agenda. The form states who's requesting the agenda item, background information, what budget line item it would impact and how, the purpose of the request and a proposed motion. They must also indicate if they've run the issue by the township budget director.

All agenda requests must be submitted in time for the agenda to be posted on the township website the Thursday prior to their Tuesday meeting. This way, the public knows what the board is doing, and board members are prepared for the meeting.

"It builds trust in the community when they know what we're doing," Schroeder said.

## Less is more

The agenda can single-handedly determine the success of your meeting. If it's too long, and too crowded with business items, your meeting will last too long, and board members might not get the time they need to discuss the issues that are truly important to them.

**Wales Township** (St. Clair Co.) Supervisor **Larry Thompson** was only one year into his first term as supervisor when he decided the board's agenda needed a change. Far too much time was spent at each meeting approving the minutes, bills and other minor issues that were always approved with a unanimous vote. Combining all of those items into what's called a consent agenda was a game-changer. "The items that used to take us forever to get through them individually, we now pass them all en masse," Thompson said. "That saves us a whole lot of time from getting bogged down on side issues."

At the same time, transparency should always trump efficiency, Merrill said. If a crowd from the public is at a meeting, the board chair might spend a few moments explaining what's in the consent agenda if your board chooses to use one. And if an item in the consent agenda becomes the subject of controversy, it can always be pulled out and put on the regular agenda.

Your board's agenda should be a reasonable length—if it takes your board more than two hours get through the entire thing, it's probably too long. Lengthy meetings are tedious and tiring, and they can lead to bad decisions. No one has an infinite ability to process information, Merrill said. After two or three hours, even a 15-minute break won't refresh you. A board that consistently has three-hour meetings is most likely attempting to tackle too many issues.

MONROE · CANTON · LANSING · DETROIT · TRAVERSE CITY

**Mannik Smith GROUP**

TECHNICAL SKILL.  
CREATIVE SPIRIT.

- Civil | Structural Design
- Planning | Landscape Architecture
- Funding Assistance
- Environmental
- Geotechnical
- Construction Support
- Surveying

[www.MannikSmithGroup.com](http://www.MannikSmithGroup.com)

## Follow the rules

While some boards may be more formal than others, generally speaking, *Robert's Rules of Order* provides a procedure that will keep your meetings moving. These rules serve to protect the minority and give your board a mechanism for making a decision (see sidebar on page 25).

Your board also has the freedom to create its own rules of engagement (see sidebar on page 28). These should be discussed as a board and agreed upon so that everyone is on the same page, and they can be either a written set of rules or a verbal understanding. While Wales Township doesn't have a document outlining the rules, everyone on the board knows Thompson generally limits meetings to two hours. They know they're expected to stick to the agenda items without becoming side-tracked on a tangent, and if they do, he won't hesitate to gently steer them back to the agenda.

When someone violates one of these rules, any board member can correct him or her—not just the supervisor. At the same time, the rules are not state statutes, and they can be suspended in certain circumstances if the board agrees to it.

## Engage the public

Your board is required to give the public a chance to speak at its meetings—and each person must be treated equally. How your board handles this is critical—it should not leave the public with the impression that you don't want to hear what they have to say, or that expressing your opinion at a board meeting is more trouble than it's worth.

Many boards have two opportunities on each agenda for public comment—one at the beginning of the meeting, where agenda items may be discussed, and another at the end of the meeting for any topic. Your board can choose to limit each comment to a certain time period, such as three minutes each. However, this must be equally enforced, and your board cannot set a limit on the total time it will spend on public comments.

Merrill recommends taking your public comment periods a step further and also allow them throughout the meeting after the board's discussion on individual agenda items. This way, when the board is ready to vote, the voice of the public is fresh in each member's mind. Having this additional public comment serves two purposes. When members of the public comment on an agenda item after the board's discussion, their questions might be answered before they even ask and confusion can be avoided. Plus, the public feels it was genuinely heard by the board.

One way to handle this type of public comment is to explain that the board will discuss the agenda item first, then the public will have a chance to comment. Then, if a public comment changed a board member's mind, there's still time to change the motion or your vote.

"I want the public to see how awesome the board is," Merrill said. "I want them to hear the board process the issue. If the only time you take public comment is before the board's discussion, they assume that the board doesn't understand or see the issue that they are concerned about.



Having effective board meetings doesn't mean your board simply pays the township's bills and approves everything presented to it in under an hour. Township boards were designed to focus on what's truly important to their communities and lead them through current and future storms.

Most likely what they're going to see is the board already knew about that concern and had it addressed."

In **Carp Lake Township** (Emmet Co.), board members had to find a balance between taking public comment throughout the meeting and descending into an ongoing dialogue. The small township has more relaxed meetings, but it's still the time for board members to do the township's business, Clerk **Tanya Procknow** said.

They've curbed the problem by reminding the public that board members are available for phone calls and in-person meetings. By being accessible, board members can answer questions outside of meeting times. This change has also led to shorter meetings, Procknow said.

## Everyone's opinion matters

Good boards don't necessarily agree all the time. Disagreement is healthy, and no group of five to seven people will always see an issue the same way. Instead, board members must remember that everyone's viewpoint is valid—after all, each of you were elected by the public. "You may not agree with them, but they are owed respect," Merrill said.

Sometimes board members don't speak up to avoid conflict. They don't want to stick out when everyone else seems to agree. But when board members keep quiet and then vote against the motion, it confuses the rest of the board, Thompson said. "When you do that, you're depriving your fellow board members of an argument for the other side that we might have missed," he said. "If you disagree, tell us why. You might change our minds."

# cover story

Board decisions don't have to have winners and losers. When some board members disagree, it's your chance to reach a consensus. This doesn't mean you're unanimous, Merrill said. Consensus-building is a process in which your board reaches a conclusion you can all live with. Members in the majority reach out to those in the minority and ask what they can do to tweak a motion and get everyone on board. For example, your board could start a program as a pilot program only, or cap the amount it's willing to spend. With these changes, the decision isn't perfect for anyone, but everyone can live with it.

Consensus-building unifies the board and helps each board member have a stake in the decision. It also eliminates the problem of board members speaking negatively about a board decision. When the minority signs on to a decision, it gives up its right to criticize, Merrill said.

## Do what matters

Board members are indeed public servants, and your board is statutorily required to carry out administrative and financial duties. But your board can be so much more than that. As elected officials, you are community leaders. Don't be shackled with the perspective that your job is merely to oversee a few programs, Merrill said.

"Leadership means recognizing community challenges and issues, and taking them on before the community tells you that you need to do it," he noted.

Even the smallest township has challenges and issues that its board could help see it through. No township in Michigan is without road issues. Rural community populations are declining, and communities are losing jobs. Urban communities are grappling with development issues. The list goes on and on.

Change is inevitable in your community. In the midst of following state laws and paying your township's bills, it's up to your board to help steer your community through changes with a steady hand.

"Townships that never have a conversation other than the bills they're paying won't ever see what's happening in their community," Merrill said. "Consequently, their community becomes a victim of forces rather than being a group of people in control of their destiny."



**Bethany Mauger,**  
MTA Staff Writer

*Learn more about this topic at MTA's Annual Educational Conference, April 10-13, in Lansing, including sessions, "Parliamentary Procedure: Who Needs It?" and "Meetings Misconceptions."*

See page 29 for a continuing education self-assessment, worth 2.0 elective credits in MTA's Township Governance Academy.



## Board 'rules of engagement'

*developed by the Michigan Townships Association*

### Rules of engagement must be:

- 1) Appropriate to meeting purpose
- 2) Agreed to by all
- 3) Efficient
- 4) Fair
- 5) Promote public respect

### General rules

- 1) Only one meeting—no side conversations
- 2) All viewpoints are valid
- 3) Ideas generated first, evaluated later
- 4) Try to reach consensus—majority vote as last resort
- 5) Decisions will be supported by all members
- 6) Materials will be received in advance
- 7) Each member speaks for established period of time
- 8) Brainstorming—record all ideas
- 9) Manage any war stories and off-track discussions
- 10) Intervene with tact—any group member can act
- 11) Set time limit for each item
- 12) Adopt agenda by \_\_\_\_\_

### Participants

- 1) Prepare by reading; develop points of view, questions and opinions
- 2) Determine your goals
- 3) Take meeting seriously; stay involved, show up on time
- 4) Actively listen
- 5) Know where your point is going before you start—keep comments relevant
- 6) Help chair keep meeting moving
- 7) Obtain recognition from chair before speaking
- 8) Limit remarks to issue being considered
  - a. Ask questions for clarification
  - b. Respect colleagues' rights
  - c. Explain reasons behind significant decisions
  - d. Raise concerns and objections at meeting, rather than after
  - e. Express disagreement verbally and respectfully
  - f. Don't spring surprises
- 9) Criticize constructively and in private



# Continuing Education Self-Assessment

Participants enrolled in the Township Governance Academy (TGA), MTA's credentialing program, may obtain 2 elective credits for successful completion of this quiz. To obtain credit, participants must answer the following 10 multiple-choice questions by circling the correct answer and receive a minimum passing score of 70 percent. The questions are based on content from the article, "Making the most of your meetings". There is no charge for MTA members to take the quiz or to obtain TGA credit.

Completed quizzes should be faxed to (517) 321-8908 or mailed to: MTA, 512 Westshire Dr., Lansing, MI 48917. MTA will notify you of your results within two weeks after receiving your quiz. **IMPORTANT:** Please keep a copy of your completed quiz in your TGA binder. For information about TGA, call (517) 321-6467, email [tga@michigantownships.org](mailto:tga@michigantownships.org), or visit [www.michigantownships.org/learning/tga/](http://www.michigantownships.org/learning/tga/).

## TGA Continuing Education Making the most of your meetings

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ TOWNSHIP & COUNTY: \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

1. **What is a common mistake boards make that causes their meetings to fail?**
  - a. Following *Roberts Rules of Order*
  - b. Showing emotions at meetings
  - c. Letting the conversation wander off agenda items
  - d. Finishing in under an hour
2. **How can boards become more cohesive?**
  - a. Take the time to discuss larger issues
  - b. Vote on agenda items unanimously
  - c. Avoid disagreements during debates
  - d. Reach a consensus outside of board meetings
3. **What must your board do in order to plan and set up your meeting?**
  - a. Approve a five-year strategic plan
  - b. Determine the purpose of the meeting
  - c. Publish a meeting notice in your local newspaper
  - d. Check the Open Meetings Act for compliance
4. **Board member packets should NOT:**
  - a. Include proposed resolutions
  - b. Be used to answer questions in advance
  - c. Be available to the public
  - d. Be distributed at the meeting
5. **What can boards do to shorten long agendas?**
  - a. Discuss fewer issues at meetings
  - b. Take fewer breaks
  - c. Use a consent agenda
  - d. Limit public comments
6. **Your board's rules of engagement:**
  - a. Must be in a written document
  - b. Should be agreed upon by the entire board
  - c. Can only be enforced by the supervisor
  - d. Apply in all circumstances at board meetings
7. **State law requires township boards to give the public an opportunity to comment:**
  - a. At every meeting
  - b. At the beginning of the meeting
  - c. At the end of the meeting
  - d. Throughout the meeting
8. **Your township board may limit:**
  - a. The total time allowed for public comment
  - b. Comments from members of the public who oppose the board
  - c. The time allowed for each person who wants to comment
  - d. Comments from attendees who don't live in the township
9. **How should boards handle an agenda item that divides members?**
  - a. Accept that decisions have winners and losers
  - b. Make compromises to build a consensus
  - c. Table the decision and gather more information
  - d. Ask the public for more input
10. **How do township boards lead their communities?**
  - a. Recognize challenges and steer the township through change
  - b. Make sure board meetings follow state statutes
  - c. Avoid controversies to ensure more positive board meetings
  - d. Limit board meetings to finances and township business