

# Rethinking your board's decision-making

**K**aren Rosa is quick to laugh when asked if running township board meetings is what she expected when she was first elected to serve **Long Lake Township** (Grand Traverse Co.). Now, more than 30 years later, while her board has grown from five members to seven, she considers herself lucky to have a cohesive board that is able to come to decisions without conflict.

There are many things that Rosa, and elected officials in every township, do to have successful meetings. These tricks of the trade can be easily done to help move decision-making forward and ensure each board member is on the same page, with an understanding of the goals of the meeting. These steps can help avoid surprises, build consensus, and ensure everyone has the same facts for each decision—big and small—that impacts your community.

In other words, successful decision-making is something that needs to be planned for ... it doesn't just happen.

## **Find your vision**

Developing a vision is one way to define the future for your township. Where do you see your township in 10 years? What would you like it to be? Is that the same hope and opinion of others on your board, and in your community?

Agreeing to an overall common vision can be a first great step in building a strong foundation for a board willing to work together. Leadership is forward thinking and having a vision conveys to each elected township official, as well



as township residents and the business community, that the board—and its leadership—has an eye toward the future. The vision is the dream, the aspiration for the future of the community. It may not even be something that will be realized during your time on the board, but what you are hoping for in the township’s future.

For Long Lake Township, Rosa said her board found that inspiration and vision in the open spaces in their scenic, lake-filled northern Michigan community. “We’ve been very fortunate to have acquired some open space areas in our township over the last several years,” Rosa said. “That is part of our vision—to preserve these areas for future generations.”

While there may be different ideas on how to achieve your community’s vision, it puts a marker “on the map” and helps direct the next actions needed toward building a strong environment for making decisions to help that vision become a reality.

### **A mission as a blueprint**

Creating a township mission statement goes hand in hand with making sure that each board decision is viewed through the lens of ensuring the township’s desired future is realized. A successful mission statement not only generates an initial consensus of the board members, but—like a stated vision—it also conveys to the general public what the township board stands for and tries to accomplish with each of its decisions.

This continuing education article and accompanying self-assessment are worth 2.0 elective credits in MTA’s Township Governance Academy. See page 22 for details.



### **OBJECTIVE**

To optimize township board decision-making by identifying tools to reach consensus on decisions, and understanding barriers to reaching the best possible decision.

### **CORE COMPETENCIES**

- Communicates effectively
- Listens attentively
- Possesses vision, especially relative to the township’s needs or potential
- Possesses effective policy-making skills and decision-making skills
- Utilizes consensus-building techniques

## Examples of township mission statements

### **Bridgewater Township** (Washtenaw Co.)

*To provide our constituents a people-focused approach to public service built upon the simplicity and efficiency of rural government where all public bodies work closely together to be more responsive to the public's needs.*

### **Clay Township** (St. Clair Co.)

*We protect, preserve, promote and improve the quality of life in our community by providing leadership and services reflecting the pride, values and vision of Clay Township.*

### **Cascade Charter Township** (Kent Co.)

*Cascade Charter Township is committed to serve the public by providing the finest community services possible with respect, efficiency and integrity.*

### **Long Lake Township** (Grand Traverse Co.)

*It is the mission of Long Lake Township to provide for the health, safety, and well being for all citizens of Long Lake Township by providing municipal leadership dedicated to sound fiscal management, protection of the natural and historic environmental resources, and to preserve and enhance the features that make Long Lake Township unique to improve the quality of life for present and future generations.*

### **Ross Township** (Kalamazoo Co.)

*The mission of Ross Township is to:*

- *Provide a safe environment in which to live*
- *Maintain and enhance the rural character and quietude of our community*
- *Protect all the natural resources*
- *Respond to the needs of the township with respect and concern*
- *Uphold and enforce the local, state and federal laws*

### **Wells Township** (Delta Co.)

*Wells Township's mission is to provide a community with the quality of life that its citizens have grown to expect and are accustomed to in the Upper Peninsula. To provide a healthy and safe environment for the residents and citizens who live, work and play in our community.*

Does your township have a mission statement? It should. A mission statement is not just hyperbole—it is a proclamation of your township's core purpose and priorities. If your board doesn't have a mission, take the steps toward creating one. It can inspire and create a sense of unity among board members.

A powerful mission statement is succinct, understandable to the general public, inspires a commitment to quality and excellence, and reflects a consensus of the board and staff. It should make clear the township's purpose(s) which are measurable, attainable and practical. It can turn a board into a team, following the same rules with the same expectations in place.

A mission statement clarifies:

- Who benefits from achieving the mission?
- What is the vision? Does the mission work toward that vision?
- What is being focused on to achieve the mission?
- Who is responsible? Is there accountability (and to whom)?
- How is success measured?

There is really no wrong way to create a mission statement. It can be as detailed and short as your board wishes it to be; it can also be as creative (and as flexible) as you need it to be. The important thing is that you all agree to it and it means something to you, your board members and your community. It is a flag in the ground, proclaiming not only what you believe in, but what you aim to do on the board and for your township. Consensus on fundamental purpose and priorities—expressed in a mission—can help to transform your board into a more cohesive team with improved decision-making.

With an agreed-upon vision and mission, a board can work to move their agenda more proactively, maybe even taking on broader local or regional issues, like job creation or serving an aging population. When a board is unified, decision-making can become easier since everyone will feel on the same page (thanks to the mission) and working toward the same goals (thanks to the vision).

## Success through an agenda

While not required by statute, the agenda is perhaps the single most important factor for a successful board meeting. It is the plan for the meeting, and ensures everyone—both board members and the public—knows what is being discussed and when.

A policy should be in place for who, how and when the agenda is compiled, and each board member should have the opportunity to request an item be placed on the agenda. All board members should receive both the agenda and additional materials well in advance of the meeting. The expectation is that the information is reviewed ahead of time—not that the

envelope is opened for the first time while sitting at the board table.

**Wells Township** (Delta Co.) Supervisor **Matthew Jensen** says that very practice is what contributes to making his monthly board meetings successful.

Jensen, who assembles the agendas, distributes them to all board members the Thursday before their meetings, held the third Wednesday of each month. He said he includes any important information that may be needed to help make a decision right in the agenda. For example, if a road issue will be debated by the township board members, the agenda may include an estimate for the work right along with it.

Jensen says that giving the board members their packet a week early allows them to do any additional research they may want to do on an item. The information is there to be used—not gathered—during valuable meeting time.

“All board members know the who, the whys, and the status of any unfinished business,” said Jensen, noting that the agendas are also made available to the public prior to the meetings.

An agenda can become a strategy not just for keeping a meeting going, but making sure everyone is working from the same information. It creates a focus that is also felt in the meeting, where the conversation is more about discussion and decisions.

In Long Lake Township, board members also receive the agenda and a board packet in advance of their meeting, with the expectation that it will be reviewed ahead of time.

“I’ll do the research and include what I feel will be helpful and what might come up that I am not prepared to answer,” noted Rosa, who assembles the agenda and board packets, with the help of the clerk. “I try to think through the subjects ahead of time, so we are totally prepared for anything.”

## Deciding together

Group decision-making is simply where multiple people, acting together, analyze problems and issues, consider and evaluate different courses of action, and come up with a solution or plan.



**Having the agenda early, along with the facts of the issue at hand, helps board members prepare their discussion points in advance and ensures everyone is working off the same facts.**

Sound familiar? Group decision-making takes place on every township board in every township in Michigan. How each comes to that final conclusion is what makes their own board and situation unique. With the facts in front of each of the board members, everyone comes to the meeting prepared and with a vision for what they hope to accomplish.

A critical thing that every board member should remember—especially as new discussions and issues emerge—is the township’s capabilities and capacities. This is not to limit debate and new ideas from emerging, but for grounding the conversation into the realm of what is possible at that time. This can include such points as available finances, competencies, human resources and processes that might need to be introduced or included for a decision.

Having an agreed-upon vision and mission and getting facts in an agenda or as part of a packet before a discussion begins can all help to avoid unnecessary debates. Other issues that can certainly impact board debate such as ongoing personality conflicts or different beliefs (political and otherwise) can turn a situation toxic. It doesn’t help, of course, that the media is drawn to such arguments and finds them newsworthy.

It is important to address these conflicts. This can be done by reminding board members of the mission of the board, discussing the rules of how the board is run (and maybe see if suggestions can help correct issues if someone sees a problem), and making sure that everyone feels they have the capability to be heard.

# cover story

Disagreeing is not necessarily a negative thing. A board culture that encourages members to look at issues in the context of their own individual experiences, values and knowledge—and to express their thoughts and opinions—can result in better, more well-thought-out decisions. Having a disagreement—when handled professionally and respectfully—can give both sides an opportunity to find more facts or information while shaping their viewpoint. That could lead to a new solution emerging or creating a strong argument for other board members. The thing to avoid is debating for the sake of debating, or creating a culture of perpetual arguments or disharmony.

What's the difference between healthy debate and a culture of toxicity? For a board that welcomes debate and differing opinions when decision-making, discussions are free of personal animosity, the township's best interests are always paramount, and arguments are focused on logic, reasons and facts.

There are ways to avoid conflict taking over a meeting and distracting everyone from the task at hand. One is identifying the choices in advance around what is possible. These choices can be generated by asking questions like “What could we do?”, “What strategies could we employ?” To set a benchmark for any debate, ask, “What are our alternatives?” and “What are the pros and cons of each of these choices?”

Limiting the information shared among all board members will only sow distrust. Providing all of the information creates a culture of trust and helps ensure decisions that are built around a consensus on what is best for your township.

The challenge, especially around larger decisions, can be focusing on the end result and making decisions that reach the outcomes that positively impact everyone in

the community. The power of Michigan township boards ultimately relies on the citizens in their townships and how successful and effective they see their board. If they see their board as making a positive difference in their lives (and not just another administration for government functions), they will see them as powerful and important.

Strategic leadership (and having a strategic leadership board) is about focusing—together—on the next step that needs to occur. This means avoiding past debates, centering the conversation on the next topic or point that moves the mission and vision forward.

## Barriers and biases

A board's decision-making can be constrained by multiple different barriers. Acknowledging these barriers and finding ways to resolve or work around them is another tool to ensure quality decision-making—and overall quality and professional local governance. Some of these barriers may exist in one board member or even across the board.

Some board members may feel constrained by their capability as a township. Called “bounded rationality,” this is seen when decision-makers have felt limited in what they could do in the past, so continue to make decisions in that limited perspective in the present, even when circumstances or scenarios are changed. In other words, why think outside the box now, when you were not able to in the past?

This leads to another barrier—a lack of creativity. This is the safe option—coming from a desire for consensus over rocking the boat or trying something new. A new and creative idea takes more time to plan and organize, while something done in the past can easily be accomplished again and probably has a history of working (or else why would it be considered again?). Since creativity can be seen as more work, it might be more easily dismissed, especially when a board is busy and just wants to find an agreement. Creativity, in other words, challenges order and may not always be encouraged by boards that appreciate or protect the status quo.

When there are no new voices or new ideas, a board might find themselves in a “groupthink” environment, making decisions together in the same way they have always done. Officials might not even realize they are “groupthinking.” There are signs to look for, like if members are critical of ideas outside of the group and prefer to follow the ideas formed in the group.

Another barrier, especially in our divisive world, is politics and the affiliations of different board members. Many times, reminding board members of the agreed-upon mission and an agenda with facts of the matters being discussed can hold off the outside world impacting the important decisions that need to be made for the community.

## Four key questions to ask for knowledge-based decision-making

1. What do we know about our constituents—their needs, wants and preferences—that are relevant to this decision?
2. What do we know about legal parameters and requirements relevant to this decision?
3. What do we know about the resources available in the township to address this issue and the township's ability to marshal those resources efficiently and effectively?
4. What are the ethical implications of our choices?

*Bonus question:* What do we wish we knew, but don't?

Various biases can also exist on the board or with a certain member or members. Biases can take many forms and many times, board members might not realize that the bias is impacting on their decisions. Some examples include:

**Confirmation:** Focusing on a currently held belief and dismissing evidence or other ideas that might contradict it.

**Anchoring:** Relying on a belief or accepted piece of information to make other decisions and not seeking out new information.

**Halo effect:** Allowing a positive impression to influence your feelings about the overall. In other words, if I like a member on a group, it generates a positive feeling for the group and all of the people on it.

**Overconfidence:** Occurring when someone relies on their own judgement (or gut reaction) as compared to the unique facts in front of them.

**Pursuit of perfection:** Fearing that you might get it wrong, you spend so much time gathering material that a decision is never made.

**Cultural:** Having a preconceived belief or assumption related to other cultures.

One way to take on a possible bias is ask some questions that could challenge the fairness of a possible decision. For example:

- Does any choice unfairly benefit one resident over another?
- Are we treating any citizens unfairly by making this decision?

Many different kinds of biases impact decisions. Taking on a bias—both on your board as a whole, as well as in yourself—can be quite difficult, but it is an important undertaking when the aim is to make decisions that are fair to your constituents.

### Finding a consensus

To say a decision has a consensus is to state that everyone on the board can agree with the final decision and it will move forward. This may be a “pure consensus,” which means it was

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## 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

# cover story



**The only place a township board can do its business and make decisions—both routine and complex—is in a public meeting of the township board. This underscores that importance of these meetings, and the decisions and discussions that take place among members at the meetings.**

unanimous decision, or it might be a “practical consensus,” a decision, in other words, that board members can accept, even if it isn’t their first choice. The main idea is that the board speaks with one voice, so when a decision is made, it is supported by all board members—even those who did not agree 100 percent.

When determining areas of consensus, there are steps that can help move the process forward. Some questions that can be asked of the board around an issue include:

- Are there any choices we can eliminate?
- Are there any choices that can be combined with others?
- Is there one (or a combination) that we can at least agree upon?
- Is there any additional information that is needed to make a confident decision?

The last question is key, because sometimes there is time for a board to make a decision that they can come to a consensus around. And if there isn’t time, that can be a question as well. The goal should be making the right decision for the township and you should have the capability to take the steps needed to reach that conclusion.

One thing that can help a meeting move forward to a consensus and make sure everyone has a say in the final outcome is creating a series of ground rules that the board will follow for each aspect of a decision process. Don’t be afraid to repeat these rules as needed (*see page 19 for MTA’s sample “Rules of Engagement”*). These can fluctuate based on the topic and differences within each community.

One option to consider in having a discussion on your board is to have more than one possible solution to an agenda topic. If there is only one option available or presented, it creates the illusion that it is either that or nothing. More than one option encourages a discussion on which is the best for the township.

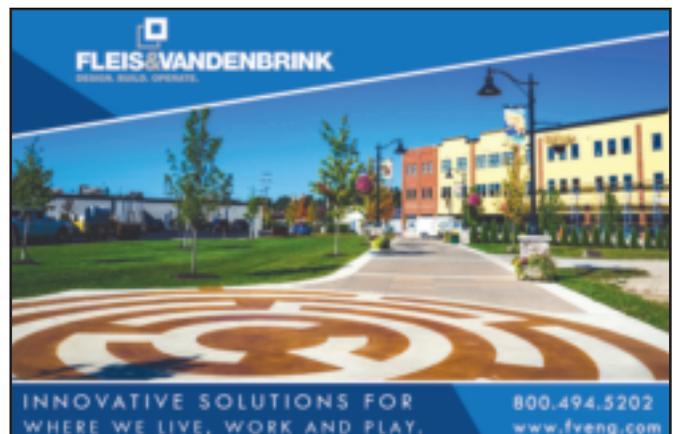
Remember, a board can always postpone a final decision until more information is available. It’s perfectly acceptable to collect more information and facts so the right decision can be made at a future meeting. Sometimes stepping away from a hot topic that is not finding a consensus is a better option. This allows board members to weigh the options and maybe even come back with better information or a more creative idea. In other words, sometimes things can wait for the right time.

Part of coming to a decision is defining the actions that are being agreed upon, the intent of those actions, and deciding who will have accountability for them. The final two steps after making a decision are crafting a motion (which includes background, action and guiding principles), and the deliberation on the motion. Clarity is always important in making a plan and avoiding any confusion of its execution.

## There for a reason

When asked what guides his board in making their decisions, Jensen said, “One of the biggest factors is remembering why we’re there and who we represent. And putting ourselves in the average person’s shoes—who we are representing and what would they want?”

Under the Open Meeting Act, the only place that a township board can do its business and make decisions—both routine and complex—is in a public meeting of the township board. This underscores the importance of these meetings, and the decisions and discussions that take place among members at the meetings. It is a time to be focused and professional, and remember one’s duty to their township. In addition to the required public comment period at all meetings, board members should ensure that their public



is aware of the decisions being made at the meetings. This could include:

- Sending out newsletters to your community
- Issuing press releases when a decision is made
- Making agendas readily available on your website or at the township hall

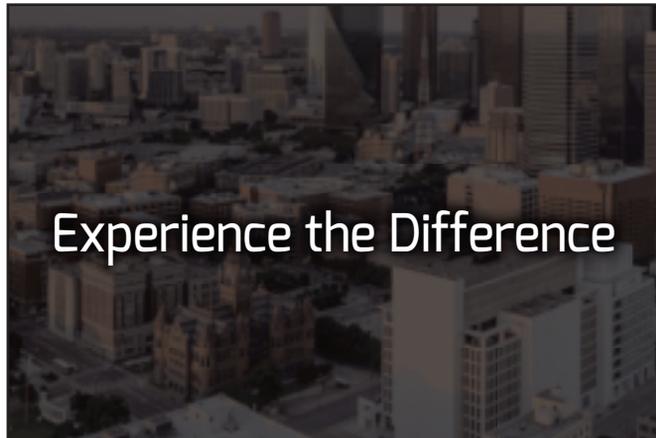
Even if only a few township residents show up at a meeting, township boards need to make their decisions and their arguments as if they are in a room full of residents, for those are the people to whom they are answering and who the decisions will impact.

Every township in Michigan is different, and this is also true in relation to their boards and how they come to decisions for their community. However, there is one fact that is true throughout. Every elected official made the decision to run for public office to make a difference in their township. With the right planning and organizing in place, everyone can stay on the same page to accomplish the same goals—the success and strength of their township.



**Scott Southard,**  
MTA Staff Writer

*Candidates in MTA's Township Governance Academy can earn 2.0 elective credits by completing the Continuing Education Self-Assessment on page 22. To learn more about the Academy, visit [www.michigantownships.org/members/tga.asp](http://www.michigantownships.org/members/tga.asp).*



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# 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, "Rethinking your board's decision-making". 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 Rethinking your board's decision-making

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

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

- 1. A township's vision can:**
  - a) Build a strong foundation for a board
  - b) Help tell community what you believe as a board member
  - c) Focus an agenda
  - d) Boost creativity
- 2. Your township's mission statement needs to be:**
  - a) A restatement of your vision
  - b) A clear statement of your board's purpose
  - c) An advertisement of what makes your township unique
  - d) A declaration of your area's importance to Michigan
- 3. Which question is most beneficial in developing a mission statement?**
  - a) How is success measured?
  - b) What is the easiest option?
  - c) Does this benefit other townships?
  - d) How difficult does this make decision making?
- 4. A helpful tip in creating an agenda is to:**
  - a) Allow the public to make changes to it
  - b) Share it on the day of the board meeting
  - c) Include information that helps decision-making
  - d) Prepare only one copy for the board to share
- 5. What is not a bias that can impact your board's decision-making:**
  - a) Anchoring
  - b) Halo effect
  - c) MSU vs. U of M preference
  - d) Overconfidence
- 6. Effective rules of engagement must:**
  - a) Promote public respect
  - b) Always be the same, no matter the topic
  - c) Include limited time for responses
  - d) Be decided by the supervisor
- 7. Which of the following will help your board ensure successful decision-making?**
  - a) An agreed-upon vision
  - b) A mission statement
  - c) An informative agenda
  - d) All of the above
- 8. A "pure consensus" is:**
  - a) Determined by a majority
  - b) Decided by the supervisor
  - c) A unanimous decision
  - d) Postponed for a later meeting
- 9. "Groupthink" occurs when a governing body:**
  - a) Supports open debate
  - b) Encourages new ideas
  - c) Bases all decisions on past successes
  - d) All of the above
- 10. What is a suggestion for informing and working with the public?**
  - a) Limit Q&A to specific topics
  - b) Share agenda prior to the meeting
  - c) Only allow one question per attendee
  - d) Lock the door after meeting begins

### Learn more ...

You can learn more about board decision-making with MTA's two-part webcast, *How Boards Make Decisions*, which explores using "knowledge-based" governance to help your board make informed choices with improved outcomes. This fall is the perfect time to check out this eLearning opportunity—and all of MTA's webcasts—with our half-off sale during the month of November. That's right, **all MTA webcasts will be 50 percent off in November!**