

AVOIDING NASTY AGENDA SURPRISES

After a lengthy meeting and tiring debates on many issues, the agenda is finally coming to an end. Or is it? Just as you begin your mental windup, a member introduces a new motion under "new business," promising that it won't take long. But the issue is complicated and takes longer than promised. Most Council members are tired and annoyed, especially since the issue does not appear to be urgent. What can you do to minimize such nasty surprises at your meetings?

A meeting agenda typically consists of two parts. The first part is reasonably predictable, and consists of pre-scheduled business items: opening rituals, housekeeping, approval of minutes, presentation of reports and proposals which arise from them, unfinished business (items which were carried over from the previous meeting), and general orders (pre-scheduled items of business). The second part of the agenda consists of unscheduled items of business, and is entitled "New Business."

Allowing new business without notice has some merit: It gives a Council a much-needed flexibility to deal with urgent issues that could not have been predicted when the agenda was prepared.

However, for busy councils and boards whose decisions have significant impacts on communities and stakeholders, "New Business" can present a major problem: It forces members to spend time on issues which they have had no time to consider and study prior to the meeting. The result? There is a risk that the decisions made on such issues would lack depth and quality. This is especially true when such decisions are made at the end of a demanding meeting, when the physical and mental stamina are usually at their lowest levels.

To reduce the number of nasty surprises on the agenda, you need to balance two objectives: One is to retain flexibility, and the other objective is to ensure that the decision making process is measured, deliberate and informed. With these two objectives in mind, there are several options to consider.



1. DEALING WITH THE ISSUE

If the "New Business" issue is a simple one or must be dealt with without delay, the appropriate course of action is to debate the motion and vote on it right away. However, it should be made abundantly clear that such "emergencies"

are to be the exception and not the norm. In other words: The board or council should generally operate "proactively," envisioning and anticipating issues, and pre-scheduling them on the agenda.

2. DELAYING OR AVOIDING THE ISSUE

There are several procedures which enable the assembly - by a majority vote - to delay a decision on an agenda item or shelve it without a direct vote. Here are the most likely procedures you'll need (all of them can be proposed while the main motion is on the floor):

One option is the motion to Postpone to a certain time. If you believe the issue is not urgent and can wait until the next meeting, you can move that it postponed until then. The motion to Postpone requires a second, is debatable (as to the merits of postponement), and is adopted by a simple majority vote (more than half of the votes). The item which was postponed is usually scheduled under "unfinished business" at the next meeting.

A second option is the subsidiary motion to Refer. If you believe a study or more information on the issue are needed

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before an informed decision can be reached, you can move that the motion be referred to a committee or to staff. The motion to Refer should specify the data to be obtained, as well as the committee's reporting deadline. The motion to Refer requires a second, is debatable (as to the merits of referral), and is adopted by a majority vote.

Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised suggests a third option (which is rarely used): The subsidiary motion to Postpone Indefinitely. If you believe your council or board should decline to take a position on the issue, you can move that the proposal be postponed indefinitely. The motion to Postpone Indefinitely requires a second, is debatable, and is adopted by a majority vote. If "Postpone Indefinitely" is adopted, the main motion is shelved without a direct vote on it. However, the same main motion can usually be renewed (i.e.: re-introduced as "New Business") at a future meeting.

A fourth option is to suggest that the proposal be withdrawn, or to ask the mover to present it at the next meeting. In making this suggestion, you can question the urgency of the proposal, draw attention to the lateness of the meeting, and suggest that a rushed decision would be unwise. You can emphasize that - in the community's interests - most decisions should be made after a prior review and analysis of relevant documentation.

3. PERMANENT AGENDA GUIDELINES

The options outlined in section 2 would help Council address "nasty surprises" at the meeting itself. However, a preferred method of doing so would be by adopting permanent guidelines for placing items on the agenda. With such guidelines in place, "surprise items" would be infrequent, and would likely arise only when pressing matters require immediate attention.

Agenda guidelines should be documented in Council's Procedure Bylaw, and may include the following provisions:

a) How members place scheduled items on the agenda. For example: By delivering the proposal and supporting documents to the Municipal Clerk by a specified deadline

(e.g.: 3 business days before the next meeting), in time for them to be included with the official notice of the meeting; or by giving verbal notice of such items at the immediately preceding meeting.

b) How unscheduled items are added to the agenda. For example: By requesting at the meeting that the item be added to the "New Business" portion on the agenda. Some Procedure Bylaws authorize the Mayor to direct that the item be "a notice" and - as such - be placed on the agenda for the next meeting. Other Bylaws empower a majority of the members to make the item "a notice of motion" (This is similar to the motion to Postpone Definitely). Some Bylaws go as far as empowering any one member to force the postponement of an unscheduled item of business. However, such a provision gives an unreasonable amount of power to one individual, and can deprive the council or the board of the flexibility needed to respond urgent community issues in a timely fashion.

4. AN INFORMAL APPROACH

Establishing agenda guidelines is helpful, but may not suffice. Members should be "educated" about the benefits of such guidelines. This can be done through council orientation workshops or informal discussions. The need to make wise, informed and responsible decisions should be emphasized. Through such discussions, members would be more likely to participate in meetings in a thoughtful and sensible manner.

Editor's Note: The above ideas are based on Mina's *The Complete Handbook of Business Meetings*, which was recently published by AMACOM Books as its definitive guide to meetings and rules of order. The book can be ordered by calling (800/714-6395). Eli Mina, M.Sc., P.R.P., is a professional meeting facilitator, seminar leader, book author, and registered parliamentarian. He specializes in chairing contentious meetings, demystifying and humanizing the rules of order, and leading interactive training programs. He can be reached at (604/730-0377), or by e-mail at eli@elimina.com.

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Pictured above is a typical queuing/voting system with queuing stations and the chairperson's LCD display.