

Tips for Smooth-Running Neighborhood Association Meetings by Paul Conte

We all enjoy smoothly-run neighborhood meetings that accomplish a lot and end on time. Productive meetings also encourage more of our neighbors to attend regularly, not just when some “hot” topic is on the agenda. Observing standard practices for conducting discussions and voting is one key to well-run meetings.

At neighborhood meetings we have both informational discussions and we conduct business, such as adopting neighborhood organization positions on various land use, policing, transportation, and other issues. The standard way we conduct business is to discuss and adopt or reject motions that are presented by the board or by a person attending the meeting. What follows are a few basics that will help you be part of our next *well-run* JWN meeting.

Prior notice. The JWN bylaws encourage advance notice before the neighborhood association votes on motions. The JWN Executive Board publishes the agenda for each meeting and motions related to a published agenda topic can be voted on at the same meeting. Any JWN member can add new topics to the agenda at any meeting, but votes on related motions generally can occur only at the *next* meeting. (By a two-thirds vote of members present, a motion can be voted on at the same meeting.) If you want to vote on something, you should request the Executive Board consider the topic for a future meeting’s agenda or you should present the topic at one meeting and indicate an intent to vote on related motions at the next meeting.

Main motions. When the Chair has called on you and no other main motion is being considered, you can say: “I move that ...[whatever the group is to decide].” At this point, some other person must say, “I second the motion,” before it can be discussed.

Clarifying a motion. It helps to have a clear, concise statement of a motion’s intent. If you have time, jot down the wording and hand it to the Chair when you make the motion. The Chair can often help by taking a few minutes to refine the wording. A typical approach is for the Chair to say something like: “If you [the person making the motion] have no objection, can we restate the motion as ... [the suggested restatement]?” During this clarification process, the Chair may also consider suggestions from other individuals. Of course, neither the Chair nor anyone else should attempt to use this informal process to steer a motion in a direction that’s not acceptable to the person who made the motion. Keep in mind that this informal clarification process should occur *before* discussion of the motion begins. From that point on, an amendment is required, as explained below.

Discussing a motion. Once a main motion is under consideration, discussion begins. Obviously our meeting time is limited, so discussion on a motion has to be limited, as well. JWN meetings operate somewhat informally, so the Chair should generally suggest how to allocate time. For example, the Chair might say: “If there’s no objection, shall we limit discussion on the main motion to 10 minutes and then see if we’re ready to vote?” If the motion presents a larger issue which a number of people may support or oppose, the

Chair might suggest a more structured approach by first asking how many people would like to speak. The Chair can then divide the available time up, as in: “Eight people have expressed a desire to speak and we have 20 minutes allocated to this agenda item. If there’s no objection, shall we limit each person to 2 minutes and then proceed to a vote?”

When you speak, be brief and discuss *only* the motion before the group. If you’ve already spoken once, you’re not entitled to speak a second time until everyone else who hasn’t yet spoken has their turn. If the discussion is dragging out, speak more than once only when you have genuinely new information to present and which you truly think will change the way others vote. If a discussion becomes lengthy, the Chair can try to bring it to a close by saying: “We seem to be revisiting the same information and our discussion has now run 20 minutes. Is there any objection to bringing the matter to a vote?”

Amendments. If, during discussion of a main motion, you want to change some part of the motion, you must wait until you’ve been called on by the chair and then say: “I move to amend the motion as follows ... [the proposed change].” An amendment to a main motion also requires a second. Once an amendment is made and seconded, it becomes the topic of discussion. Only one amendment at a time can be considered; multiple amendments can be discussed and voted on in turn. (You can also have an amendment to an amendment, following a similar process as an amendment to a main motion. But this process can get confusing and should be used infrequently.)

Once a motion has been made (possibly with some refinement help from the Chair), seconded, and is under discussion, the motion can be altered *only* by passing an amendment. The person who made the motion *cannot* simply accept changes on his or her own (a practice sometimes called a “friendly amendment”). The Chair can facilitate amendments intended to clarify a motion and which the Chair suspects have universal acceptance by saying: “If there’s no objection, can we amend the motion as follows ... [the proposed change].” If a single person objects, however, the formal amendment process is necessary.

Cutting off discussion. If you want to cutoff discussion on a main motion or amendment and have the group vote immediately, you must wait until you’ve been called on by the chair and then say: “I call the previous question.” Calling the question requires a second and a two-thirds majority vote. Note that you can’t just shout “I call the question” as a way to stop discussion. Unless otherwise stated, a call for the previous question during discussion of an amendment applies *only* to cutting off discussion of the amendment itself and doesn’t cutoff further discussion on the main motion.

Voting. When no one else wants to speak, the time allotted for discussion has expired (and hasn’t been extended by a vote or general agreement), or a call for the previous question has passed, the Chair repeats the motion or amendment. (If the vote is on a main motion that has been amended, the Chair should restate the motion as it was modified by the amendments.) The Chair first asks all those in favor to raise their hands; then asks all those opposed to raise their hands. When the outcome of a vote appears likely to be strongly in favor or opposed, the Chair may ask for a voice vote instead of a show of

hands. The Chair and Secretary record the results. (Note that the Chair doesn't ask for "abstentions" since this is meaningless except in a roll call vote.) After a vote is taken on an amendment, discussion resumes on the (possibly amended) main motion.

Rules of order. JWN currently follows a widely-used set of meeting rules known as *Robert's Rules of Order*. There are many other actions, for example, tabling a motion, that a group can use in the conduct of its business. Because these rules can be quite complex, however, a common practice in JWN meetings is for the chair to ask consent to proceed in a particular way appropriate to the situation at hand. For example, the Chair might say: "I think it would go more quickly if we first take a straw poll on the preferred date for the painting party. Is there any objection?" If anyone at the meeting objects, then the formal process of a motion, discussion, and vote has to be followed. This approach allows the Chair latitude to proceed somewhat informally, while still preserving the procedural safeguards of the formal rules of order.