



PARLIAMMENTARY PROCEDURE: RULES OF THE GAME

by Joseph Coleman, KLC Research & Federal Relations Manager

Whether or not you are a parent, you've most likely seen the spectacle of toddlers playing soccer. They chase the ball. They show off to their family. They chase the ball some more. And, usually, most of them don't know many of the rules. When it's their turn, they are going to do the best that they can for their team ... and they are going to chase the ball.

Sometimes, public meetings can be just as much of a spectacle, although likely without smiles from happy parents and some post-game ice cream.

Elected leaders play a different kind of game. Instead of chasing the ball, they sometimes chase an issue or the right to speak on a topic. Instead of showing off to their family, they may show off to their constituents. Instead of doing the best that they can for the team, they might forget they are part of one.

But one thing is quite common — they often don't know the rules of the game.

Parliamentary procedure has evolved over centuries to help people plan and conduct effective meetings. Whether on a city legislative body, on a nonprofit board of directors, in a neighborhood association, in a church or at a public community forum, understanding basic parliamentary law can help your meetings run fairly and efficiently.

Parliamentary Law

For the purposes of city business, city councils and commissions are relatively free to develop their own plans for conducting meetings, as long as no rules or operations violate state law. Even if cities do not officially adopt a parliamentary manual, such as *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised*, they are still bound by general parliamentary principles.

Parliamentary law balances the rights of the following:

- The majority
- The minority, especially a substantial one
- Individual members
- Absent members
- All of these together

Even though all final action must be approved by at least a majority of a quorum — the minimum number of people necessary to conduct official business, which is a majority

of legislative body members in Kentucky cities — under parliamentary principles, procedural rights can only be taken away from members with a two-thirds supermajority.

Limit Debate

One of the fundamental tenants of parliamentary law is a deliberative process with full and free discussion. In other words, each individual or minority subgroup has the right to make the maximum effort — to the degree it can be tolerated in the interests of the entire body — to have a position declared the will of the assembly. Any action that would limit debate beyond what the body has already established within its own rules would require a supermajority vote.

Although not taking away a right of a member, the motion to “lay on the table” is also often misused in meetings of ordinary societies. This motion is meant to interrupt pending business in order to permit doing something else immediately.

The motions to “limit the limits of debate” and “call the previous question” both require supermajorities. The motion to limit debate (such as the time limits, the number of times a member may speak on an issue or a set time to stop debate) not only suspends a current rule, but it also restricts the right of a member to debate. Previous question immediately closes debate and prevents making most other motions that help the assembly handle a main motion. Since these motions remove the right of a member to express his or her opinion, they require more than just a simple majority vote.

Except in the case of ordinances (which must be by roll-call vote), the presiding officer may offer unanimous consent to satisfy the requirements for either a majority or a supermajority. The minutes of city meetings must show how all members voted or if a member abstained from a vote; however, if the vote was unanimous, it is sufficient to state so in the minutes. A presiding officer seeking unanimous consent for noncontro-

versial issues may simply ask, “Is there any objection to...?” If an objection is heard, then the matter must be put to a full vote after the close of debate.

Lay on the Table

Although not taking away a right of a member, the motion to “lay on the table” is also often misused in meetings of ordinary societies. This motion is meant to interrupt pending business in order to permit doing something else immediately. Most often, this is used to stop consideration of a contentious motion to deal with a pressing matter, such as an emergency or the arrival of a guest speaker.

Unlike the motion as used in the U.S. Congress, the secondary motion to lay on the table does not kill the underlying main motion. Instead, it stays within the control of the assembly. It may be taken from the table by a majority vote to continue consideration either during the current session or the next regular meeting. If the motion is not taken from the table prior to the end of the subsequent meeting (or the current meeting in societies that meet less than quarterly), then the question dies.

Proper Decorum

All motions, inquiries, requests and debate should be addressed to the presiding officer, even though many people feel that their meetings are more informal by nature. These actions, along with refraining from attacking others’ motives or speaking on irrelevant issues, will make for much smoother and more pleasant meetings.

As fun as it is to watch children chase a soccer ball across a field, it’s rather unpleasant to sit through a meeting filled with confusion, uncooperative members and few results. The goal for kids playing soccer is pretty simple — put the ball in the net. The goals for cities are constantly moving. By educating yourself on parliamentary procedure and properly employing it in city meetings, you can help reach your community’s goals in a more efficient and fair way. **KYC**

Editor’s note: Joseph is a member of the National Association of Parliamentarians, the oldest and largest professional nonprofit association of parliamentarians in the world, and has trained hundreds of city officials on parliamentary procedure. The views expressed in this piece are his own.


For more information on planning and conducting effective meetings, see the 2013 edition of the City Officials Legal Handbook published by KLC.



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