

# The Three-Legged Table: Clarifying Frequently Confused Motions

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“I move to table that motion” is probably one of the most commonly used motions in city halls throughout the state. But for presiding officers, city legislative body members and city clerks, what exactly does it mean and why does it matter?

Without any additional clarification, the legislative body member could mean one of three things regarding the main motion (the term for all motions to take action, such as adopt a resolution or approve an ordinance):

1. To kill the motion
2. To postpone the motion to some other time
3. To set aside the motion to do something else immediately

So which one is it? It's up to the presiding officer to clarify and properly state the motion.

## To Kill the Motion

Many elected city officials believe that the motion “to table” something means to kill consideration of the motion at that meeting. They likely have seen the U.S. Congress use the motion “to table” legislation. According to the U.S. Senate, “The motion (to table) is equivalent to defeating the question tabled. The motion is used to dispose quickly of questions the Senate does not wish to consider further.”

According to *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised*, the proper motion to kill consideration is the motion to “postpone indefinitely.” Adoption of that motion “kills the main motion (for the duration of the session) and avoids a direct vote on the question. It is useful in disposing of a badly chosen main motion that cannot be either adopted or expressly rejected without possibly undesirable consequences.”

The motion to postpone indefinitely is debatable, and the discussion can go to the merits of the underlying main motion. It yields to all other motions, so it is not in order if the legislative body is considering an amendment or debating referring it to a committee. For instance, if an amendment has been proposed and is being debated, the motion to postpone indefinitely cannot be made. Also, if the motion to postpone indefinitely is currently on the floor and being

debated, a legislative body member could move to amend the main motion, refer it to a committee, postpone to a certain time and more.

To clarify what the member is trying to accomplish, the presiding officer could ask something like, “Is the motion ‘to table’ intended to kill consideration of the underlying resolution?” If so, then the presiding officer should state, if in order at the time, that the motion is “to postpone consideration of the resolution indefinitely, which effectively kills the resolution. Is there a second?” If seconded, then debate may begin on the motion to postpone indefinitely. An affirmative vote of a majority of the quorum present would kill consideration of the main motion. If it passes, the presiding officer would move to the next item of business. If it fails, then debate on the underlying resolution would recommence.

## To Postpone the Motion

Even though they use the word “table,” the legislative body member could actually want to postpone consideration of the motion to a certain time, such as to the following regular meeting or until some action has happened or information is available. That motion is actually “postpone to a certain time (or definitely).”

*Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised* states that the motion to postpone to a certain time “is the motion by which action on a pending question can be put off, within limits, to a definite day, meeting or hour, or until after a certain event.” For city purposes, that could mean the legislative body member wants to wait to get more input from his or her constituents or wants to get more information on an issue under consideration.

The motion to postpone to a certain time is debatable; however, unlike the motion to postpone indefinitely, debate on this motion cannot go to the merits of the underlying main motion being considered. Instead, debate should be limited to

whether the question should be postponed and by how much time. It outranks the secondary motions to postpone indefinitely, amend and refer to a committee, but it yields to motions with higher rank (such as call the previous question, lay on the table, recess and adjourn). Therefore, it would be in order while debating an amendment or whether to refer the main motion to a committee, but it would not be in order when the pending business has a higher rank.

To determine if the legislative body member is actually meaning to postpone, not kill, the main motion, the presiding officer could ask something like, “Is the motion ‘to table’ intended to delay consideration of the underlying resolution until a certain time, such as the next regular meeting?” If so, then the presiding officer should state, if in order at the time, that the motion is “to postpone consideration of the resolution until the next regular meeting. Is there a second?” If seconded, then debate may begin on the motion to postpone to a certain time. An affirmative vote of a majority of the quorum present would postpone consideration of the main motion and put it on the agenda of the next regular meeting under “unfinished business.” If it passes, the presiding officer would state that and move to the next item of business. If it fails, then debate on the underlying resolution would recommence.

## To Set Aside the Motion

The third possibility could be that the legislative body member wishes to set aside the underlying main motion temporarily in order to do something more pressing or time sensitive. In *Robert's Rules*, that's the motion “to lay on the table.” Given that this motion is the only one that has the word “table” in it, many presiding officers mistakenly assume that the legislative body member is meaning this secondary motion when moving “to table” something.

Subsidiary Motions (in order of rank)	Require Recognition	Require Second	Debatable	Amendable	Vote Required	Can It Be Reconsidered
<b>Lay on the Table</b> <i>Sets aside the motion for a pressing matter</i>	Yes	Yes	No	No	Majority	No
<b>Previous Question</b> <i>Stops debate, requires vote(s)</i>	Yes	Yes	No	No	Two-thirds	Yes*
<b>Limit/Extend Debate</b> <i>Limits/extends debate on main motion</i>	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Two-thirds	Yes*
<b>Postpone Definitely (to Certain Time)</b> <i>Postpones motion to later, certain time (e.g. next meeting)</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority	Yes
<b>Commit or Refer</b> <i>Sends motion and amendments to committee for review</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes*	Majority	Yes
<b>Amend</b> <i>Inserts, deletes or replaces text</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes*	Yes	Majority	Yes
<b>Postpone Indefinitely</b> <i>Stops consideration of the main motion</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Majority	Yes*
<b>Main Motion</b> <i>Proposed item of business</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority	Yes

\* Certain exceptions apply

“The motion to lay on the table enables the assembly to lay the pending question aside temporarily when something else of immediate urgency has arisen or when something else needs to be addressed before consideration of the pending question is resumed,” states *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised*. Unlike the motion to postpone to a certain time, there is no set time for taking up the underlying business again; instead, the assembly must move by motion and vote “to take from the table” when ready to return to that main motion.

As opposed to the other motions listed here, the motion to lay on the table is *not* debatable. This is a key difference and a significant reason why the presiding officer needs to clarify the motion. In some city meetings a legislative body member has moved “to table this until the next meeting,” and the presiding officer announced the motion, stated that the motion “to table” is not debatable, and immediately went to a vote. By doing so, the presiding offi-

cer robbed the assembly of debating whether the motion could or should be postponed.

“Lay on the table” outranks the previous “table-related” motions included here as well as other common motions such as amend, refer to a committee and call the previous question. It yields to privileged motions such as recess and adjourn.

In order to clarify intent, the presiding officer could ask something like, “Is the motion ‘to table’ intended to set aside the resolution temporarily so the body can take up some other, more pressing issue?” If so, then the presiding officer should state, if in order at the time, that the motion is “to lay on the table, which will temporarily set aside consideration of the resolution. Is there a second?” If seconded, then the presiding officer would state, “The motion to lay on the table is not debatable. All in favor of the motion to lay on the table, which will set aside consideration of the resolution temporarily, please say, ‘Aye.’ All opposed, ‘Nay.’” An affirmative vote of a majority of the quorum present would postpone consideration of the underlying

main motion until the assembly moves “to take from the table.” If it passes, the presiding officer would state that and move to the next item of business, which could have been included in the tabling motion (e.g., “I move to table this so we can have our audit report presentation instead”). If it fails, then debate on the underlying resolution would recommence.

If the motion is not taken from the table at the current meeting or the next meeting at which it legally could be considered (e.g., regular meeting if a special meeting on another issue happens between regular meetings), then the underlying main motion dies. However, it could be reintroduced at a future meeting as a new main motion.

One of the main roles of the presiding officer is to ensure that the motions made by city legislative body members accurately represent what that individual wants and are in order at the time they are made. When in doubt, presiding officers should seek clarification to ensure proper handling of all motions. 