

Resolution

Guidelines and Ground Rules for Committees, Commissions and Boards

The purpose of this document is to develop a set of Guidelines and Ground Rules to assist in the smooth functioning of Town boards, committees and commissions (hereafter I'll refer to all such groups, whether permanent or ad hoc as "boards"), as they deliberate, take input from the public and exercise their various and important missions.

These Guidelines and Ground Rules are intended to provide a common sense approach for members of Town boards, board chairs and the public to exchange views and work constructively to accomplish their objectives. These Guidelines and Ground Rules for Committees, Commissions and Boards will become effective immediately upon adoption by the Selectboard.

Do Unto Others...: If you want to distill these ideas to their simplest and purest form, we probably could discuss this topic in the context of just one rule or guideline. Whether you are a member of the public, a board member or a chairperson I believe the golden rule should govern all interactions (not the one about he who has the gold makes the rules, the other one). That is, treat others as you would have them treat you.

The Role of the Chairperson: In every board, the chairperson plays the key role in making sure discussion remains civil and free from personal attacks. Therefore, the chairperson has a special responsibility to be as fair and impartial as possible. In some ways, to be effective, the chairperson cannot exercise some of the same prerogatives he or she might have as a member of the board; as a result, not everyone will feel that they are appropriately suited to be chairperson.

- *Civil Discourse:* Most important, the chairperson is responsible for understanding and insuring all discussion between and among board members, guests (the public) and staff must not be allowed to become combative. Rudeness, accusations, sarcasm, foul language and personal attacks cannot be permitted or encouraged.
- *Impartiality – Not Advocacy:* The chairperson must act to create an atmosphere of tolerance and impartiality. While the individual might wish to be an "advocate" of a particular point of view, if that individual becomes the chairperson, the individual should shed the advocacy role and be scrupulously impartial, so all the board members (and the public) can be helped to feel their views are welcome. Chairpersons do have a right to express their opinions and viewpoints. At the same time, the chair of a board should probably be working harder to elicit other persons' views than to state his/her own views.
- *Setting the Tone:* The chairperson should be open to others' opinions. A chairperson who is impartial and fair will have a board whose process is impartial and fair and results which will be respected. A chairperson who sets a different tone (e.g. advocacy or confrontation), will have a skewed, biased process and whose result will not be embraced by others. Outcomes from an adversarial process are not likely to be adopted by the powers that be.
- *Understanding the Mission or Board "Charge":* Quite often, boards are given a charge or mission from the legislative body (in Towns' case, the Selectboard). It is incumbent upon the chair to not only understand the charge, but to seek to enforce it. If the chairperson can't represent the mission/charge to the board members or the public, he/she may not be well suited to be the chairperson and might want to consider stepping down from that role.
- *Following the Agenda:* While obvious, I believe this still need mentioning. Without reasonably strict adherence to the agenda meetings can become nothing short of chaotic. Obviously, the agenda can be revised and items shifted around in everyone's best interest.

Protocols for Chairpersons, Board Members and the Public: Generally, informal discussions are ideal when the parties are able to conduct business informally. Sometimes, however, boards may need to impose – even on the spur of the moment as the situation warrants – more strict and directed rules to allow the proper conduct of business. Here are several suggestions:

- *Respectful, Civil Discourse - a "Must":* An important role of the chairperson and board members is insuring discussions are civil. Personal attacks, sarcasm, name calling, yelling, etc., should neither be encouraged nor tolerated. While the chairperson bears primary responsibility for making sure discourse is civil, each board member shares in this responsibility.
- *Debates are to be Discouraged:* Members of the public (and, generally, other board members), should not be allowed to debate each other, but should make their remarks to the chairperson.
- *Public Input May Be Limited:* If there is a number of individuals who wish to speak on an issue, the chairperson (and board), could limit the time individual speakers have to speak on an issue. Any amount of time can be chosen (1, 2, 3 or 5 minutes, for example), as long as it makes sense under the circumstances. In addition, it may be appropriate to consider asking individuals to not "repeat" the comments made by others. Instead, ask for opinions and information which has not already been provided (even if from another speaker).
- *Hearing from all individuals "once" before hearing from anyone a second time:* When it is anticipated there will be a lot of interest in a particular agenda topic, it may be appropriate to insure everyone (who wishes to do so), is given a chance to speak once on an issue before hearing from others a second or third time.
- *Board Members to Understand and Agree to the Charge/Mission:* All board members need to understand and agree to the legislative body's charge and mission. If they do not understand the charge, they have an obligation to make an effort, through the chairperson and staff (if any), and the legislative body to develop that understanding. If they do not agree with the mission or charge of the board, they may not be able to serve on the board effectively and will need to evaluate their position on the board for themselves.

Receiving Public Input: Most boards find it is useful to have a portion of the meeting devoted to public input, sometimes called public forum. This portion of the meeting is typically reserved for items which are not on the agenda. Public input on agenda items is often permitted when the respective agenda items are being taken up.

Input from the Public Is Not the Same as Discussion or Debate Among Board Members: While openness is important, it is sometimes necessary and practical for the chairperson to limit comments from the public to insure the board members themselves have sufficient time to discuss and debate issues. In essence, members from the public should not be given de facto "ex officio" status during board deliberations nor should they be permitted to dominate board deliberations.

Date: October 25, 2010

Milton Selectboard

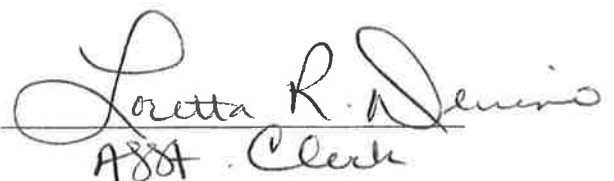




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Oct. 26, 2010

Signed:


ASA Clerk