

10 Certain Steps to Better Municipal Council Meetings

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Yes, Councils have broad authority to govern municipalities. But there are good ways to govern, and not so good ways. Here are 10 steps that, if followed, will produce better outcomes for Council and Committee meetings.

1. Respect the Chair

The Chair is special and important. A competent Chair is a prepared chair. The prepared Chair facilitates fair and equitable speaking time in accordance with Council's procedural policies and is mindful of the time allotted to complete the meeting agenda.

2. CAO/Mayor Consultations

The CAO and mayor/warden need to respect each other. They need a common understanding of each meeting's priorities and how best to ensure each subject gets the attention it deserves. They should ensure important issues are not dealt with in a vacuum and that no member of Council, or staff, feels disenfranchised.

3. The Council Agenda

A good agenda focusses Council on the key topics. The agenda sets the stage and tone for the discussion to follow. The agenda should be fixed and distributed in advance and only in extraordinary or emergency situations should additional items be entertained.

4. Agenda Supporting Material

Better information makes for better decisions. Make sure the agenda package includes the material necessary for a fact-based and informed discussion, particularly where a matter is coming forward for debate and a final decision. "Winging it" is never a good option.

5. Clarity

Each meeting should have clear expectations. Let councillors know what's expected. Is a decision required or will there be future deliberations? Or is the matter on the agenda as an information item only? Be clear about expectations. Eliminate the guess work. Focus attention on matters most requiring attention.

6. Do Your Homework

The agenda and supporting materials are prepared and circulated beforehand for a reason. Everyone is expected to read and understand the materials and come to the meeting prepared to ask good questions and participate in informed discussion.

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7. Reports

Good decision-making is helped by good staff work. Solicit staff's views, particularly on contentious or tricky issues. Request a report and, ideally, a staff recommendation where appropriate. Make sure the report is distributed and the author is available, if necessary, to present and discuss the recommendation to assist Council in coming to a position.

8. Make the Decision

Perfect information is rarely available and rarely can every possible stakeholder be heard. But delay and procrastination seldom produce better results. Citizens have a right to timely Council decisions. Citizens expect council to make the best decision possible based on the information they have. Recognize that there's real public benefit in having the courage and discipline to regularly make timely decisions - and move on.

9. Disagree Without Being Disagreeable

The Chair will invite discussion and facilitate a debate that typically includes a range of perspectives and opinions. Then the item will be voted on, amended or otherwise dealt with. Not everybody will be happy with every decision. Remember, debate and disagreement are fundamental to avoid group think. Always strive for collegiality and nurture an environment that respects and reconciles divergent views. Lingering hostilities are never good for those you serve.

10. Follow-up

Have someone keep a record of items requiring follow-up from each meeting. What action needs to be taken and who has responsibility to complete it? The action list can then be captured in the minutes and carried forward as a standing agenda item at subsequent meetings until the item is completed or otherwise removed from the list.

What are the key factors in your experience that contribute to effective Council decision-making? How can Councils operate more effectively to service citizens better? Share it in a message to me at klatimer@coxandpalmer.com.

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