



“Ownership” of Motions

Larry Larmer, Professor Emeritus, University of Wisconsin-Madison

The April “For the Good of the Order” column discussed the process of introducing a motion for the body’s deliberation. The motion is made by one member and seconded by another and then is presented to the body by the chairperson. This last step – (presenting the motion to the body) is important in that it determines that the control of the motion, i.e., whether to adopt it or change it or whether it ceases to be pending, belongs to the body and not to the maker or seconder. Examining each step of the process – moving, seconding, and stating by the chair – will reveal not only what is permissible at each stage but also some common misconceptions.

At the time a motion is first uttered, it belongs only to the member or members (if it is brought forth by a committee) who propose it. Suppose a single member spontaneously offers a motion pursuant to a discussion of an issue and immediately realizes it’s a bad idea or that the wording needs to be changed. Prior to the motion being seconded, that member can unilaterally withdraw it or alter the wording. (“Sorry, that wasn’t a good idea,” or “Whoops, I should have said ...”). In a more formal context, such as when a motion that is expected to come from a committee is stated on the agenda, the committee can change the wording prior to presenting it or even decide not to introduce it at all.

When a motion has been seconded, but prior to its being stated by the chair, it belongs jointly to the mover and seconder. At this point they may make any changes to the motion they wish provided they agree. However, if either suggests a change not agreeable to the other, the second will, in effect, be withdrawn. In this situation, the motion is not necessarily lost – another member could provide the second.

If the mover and seconder agree on the motion’s wording and intent, which is usually the case, the motion is then presented

to the body by the chair, typically with such language as “It has been moved and seconded that”. At this point the motion is “owned” by the body and any changes or other disposition of it is determined by the body. If the motion is not debatable, the chair puts it to a vote immediately. It is during the deliberation of debatable motions that two procedural mistakes might occur.

The first of these is the notion of a “friendly amendment.” Sometimes during the deliberation of a motion, a member believes that a relatively minor change in the wording of a motion would improve it and addresses the original mover of the motion asking, “Would you accept the friendly amendment that”. Since the motion now belongs to the body, it’s not up to the mover to accept or reject the suggested change – only the body makes that decision. In this situation, the chair can ask the body for unanimous consent to approve the change. If unanimous consent is not obtained – i.e., if even one member objects to the change, any member desiring the changed wording could offer a formal motion to amend which would need a second and majority vote for passage. (The amendment process was discussed in the May issue of this column.)

The second mistake involves “withdrawing” the motion. Perhaps the discussion of the motion leads the mover to conclude it wasn’t a good idea after all. In such a case, the mover often attempts to remove the motion from deliberation with language such as, “I withdraw my motion.” Again, since the motion now belongs to the body, the body must approve withdrawing it – the mover cannot do it unilaterally. The mover needs to request permission of the body to withdraw the motion. The request may be approved by unanimous consent but, if not, a majority vote of the body would grant the permission. Incidentally, once discussion of a motion has begun an attempt to withdraw its second is of no consequence.

Editors note: Thanks to Larry Larmer for continuing our “For the Good of the Order” column. Larry taught in the Division of Continuing Studies at UW-Madison for 30 years and is widely known as the expert on parliamentary procedure. Upon his retirement in 2001, he began an association with the Local Government Center in UW-Extension providing written materials as well as seminars and workshops. Larry has also presented a number of times at League conferences. He is the author of “A Guide to Parliamentary Procedure for Local Governments in Wisconsin” published by Kendall-Hunt in 1998 and several of his articles have appeared in professional journals. He is past-president of the Commission on American Parliamentary Practice.

Do you have a question about parliamentary procedure?

Email the League at league@lwm-info.org with the subject line “For the Good of the Order” and Larry will respond in a future column.







BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS THAT BUILD COMMUNITIES.™

- ⊗ ENGINEERING
- ⊗ SURVEYORS
- ⊗ ARCHITECTURE
- ⊗ PLANNERS

107 Parallel Street
Beaver Dam, WI 53916
(920) 356-9447
Kunkelengineering.com



**REGISTERED ENGINEERS
AND LAND SURVEYORS**

**MUNICIPAL AND INDUSTRIAL
CONSULTANTS**

La Crosse, WI 54601
Phone (608) 782-3130
www.davyinc.com

FULL-SERVICE IN-HOUSE SOLUTIONS TO HELP SHAPE OUR COMMUNITIES






McMAHON

ENGINEERS ARCHITECTS

920 751 4200 | MCMGRP.COM

- Architecture
- Wastewater Systems
- Waste-to-Energy
- Water Systems
- Municipal Engineering
- Environment/Ecology
- Stormwater Management
- Transportation
- Parks & Recreation
- Land Surveying
- Site Development
- Geospatial Solutions
- BIM
- GIS Development
- LEED®
- Structural Engineering
- Industrial Engineering
- Electrical/Controls
- Mechanical HVAC/Plumbing
- Funding Strategies, Solutions and Grant Assistance
- Construction Services
- Design-Build Services
- Public/Private Partnerships
- Municipal Administrator Services
- Operations Services