



Discussion Rules for Chairpersons

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Last month this column focused on agendas and agenda control. Getting something on the agenda is the first step in the discussion process for a city council, village board, or committee/commission. There are many other discussion rules and principles under *Robert's Rules of Order*, and this column highlights a few specifically related to the chairperson.

One general statement that may surprise some members of municipal governing bodies and other subunits, is the right of the chair to participate just as any other member of the body. So, if a chairperson is a member of the body, s/he has all the rights of participation as any other member, including the right to make motions, second motions, participate in discussion, and vote.

A member-chairperson is not obligated to make motions, seconds, or participate in discussion while they are presiding. However, s/he has the full right to do so and this right may not be denied by the remaining membership.

The body, however, may require the chair to temporarily vacate their presiding officer role in order to participate in the

discussion. This is impractical though, with small governing bodies and committees and should not be demanded in those circumstances.

When a chairperson vacates their chair to participate in discussion, s/he must comply with all rules of discussion and debate that apply to all other members. In addition, s/he should not resume their role as presiding officer until the issue being discussed is no longer pending.

Like their right to participate in discussion, a member-chairperson is not obligated to vote while they are presiding. However, s/he has the full right to do so and this right may not be denied by the remaining membership.

A member-chairperson's right to vote may be limited by other law, however. In the case of mayors, their voting rights are restricted by state law to only in cases in which there is a tie vote cast by the voting members of the city council. And, like any other member of a body, the chair's right to vote is lost if s/he has a direct personal or pecuniary interest in the question presented for vote.

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