



Why Robert's?

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In discussing procedural issues that concern local governments, we have assumed that Robert's Rules of Order is our guide for questions not covered by statutes. Why so? As one questioner put it, "Is Robert's Rules of Order a necessary or even a good system for local governments?"

This is an understandable question. We may have experience working in non-governmental contexts and have gotten along and made good decisions without rules, and in governmental bodies – especially small ones – we might become confused and frustrated in attempting to follow the provisions in Robert's. Questions arise such as: "Is all this formality necessary?"; "Much of this doesn't apply to us."; "What happens if we don't do it by the book?" These concerns call for an explanation of why Robert's might matter. Realizing that governing bodies make important and highly controversial decisions that affect constituencies, it is prudent to follow a system of deliberation that promotes procedural clarity and fair and equal opportunities to be heard. Robert's Rules of Order, when reasonably understood, does just that.

Some rules of procedure are in statutes and local government bodies probably have rules of their own that govern their deliberations. However, neither statutes nor the body's own rules are likely to be specific enough to provide guidance for such common questions as have been discussed previously in this column: "What's the difference between tabling and postponing?"; "Can a single member close debate by calling the question?"; "What if a motion gets discussed but was never seconded?"; "When there are several motions pending, does closing debate apply to all the motions or just the one immediately pending?"; etc.

In addition to answering questions such as these, Robert's provides guidance for maintaining orderly deliberations. Following the rules of precedence ensures that the body

attends to one issue at a time. Also, Robert's suggests managing debate by seeking a balance of opinions and by not recognizing a member to speak if that member has already spoken on the pending matter if another member who has not yet spoken seeks recognition. Other provisions such as raising questions of privilege, points of order, calling for the orders of the day, raising requests for procedural and substantive information, all serve to protect rights of members while maintaining order, equality, and fairness.

The body might work out its procedural questions on a case-by-case basis and thereby develop its own customs. But unless these customs are codified in the body's rules, new members might bring different experiences and perceptions as to how business should be conducted, resulting in disagreements and confusions like those mentioned above.

If a body needs a system to supplement statutes and their own rules, why Robert's? There are other systems that seem simpler and therefore more appealing. However, Robert's, though complicated, has advantages.

Robert's is better known than other references. Thus, members, although not well-versed in parliamentary procedure, are likely at least to have heard of Robert's. Thus, as questions calling for a reference arise, Robert's will be more readily available and will probably be regarded as more authoritative.

Reasonably understanding Robert's is not terribly difficult. Those provisions that are clearly not relevant to local governments can be set aside. Local government personnel should focus on Chapter XII that covers rules on debate and Chapter III that describes common motions and the precedence among them. Subsequent chapters treat each of those motions in detail and can be consulted as needed. Also, Sec. 49 contains provisions that permit small boards to operate with less formality than larger bodies.