

Your Board Meetings Can Be Shorter?

By: Kelly G. Richardson

Most homeowner association board meetings are too long. All too often boards begin meetings at six in the evening, and are unable to adjourn until after ten.

Routinely long board meetings should be avoided like the plague. Directors become fatigued, irritable, and prone to bad decisions. Members become discouraged from attending meetings, and are less likely to consider serving on the board in the future. Conflict becomes more likely as the participants tire. Frustration leads to discouragement, making the experience of serving on the board much more negative than it has to be.

It has often been said that if you do not have a target, you will achieve just what you shoot at. . . nothing. So, how about this for a goal: Board meetings, except in extraordinary situations, should be not longer than 1-1/2 to 2 hours long. Executive sessions should be as short as possible, and rarely more than one hour.

Here are some tips that may help shorten your meetings:

1. Meet more frequently. If your meetings are routinely too long, meet more frequently. Monthly should normally be sufficient for most associations.

2. The agenda. Advance planning is critical. The law now requires that you must plan exactly what will be addressed in that meeting. That plan becomes the agenda, which the law now requires must be announced four days prior to the meeting.

3. Overly ambitious agendas. Some agendas are simply too full. Are all of the items critical to be discussed now, or can some items be delayed for a later meeting? Board chairs should be realistic in setting agendas.

4. Preparation for the meeting. Good professional managers provide "board packets," containing the essential information for the meeting,

such as draft minutes, financial reports and summaries, and copies of documents on matters to be considered that meeting. For self-managed associations, preparing a board packet takes planning, but the preparation will cause a more efficient meeting.

5. Directors should be prepared. Prepared directors, having read their board packets, help make a meeting shorter.

6. Open forum abuse. Open forum must be a part of every board meeting, but sometimes members can abuse it. Have a reasonable time limit. Directors should not interrupt or argue with the speaker, which is inappropriate and causes conflict, but should listen and take notes.

7. Filibustering. Some directors like to talk a long time on every issue. A chair needs to exercise a firm hand in moving the agenda forward. **Note: What is extended to you may be reasonable to others - be judicious.**

8. Consent calendar. Some boards work with a consent calendar, where items are non-controversial and yet still need specific approval.

9. Overemphasis on unanimity. A board hopefully includes people of different backgrounds, personalities, and viewpoints, and healthy boards have disagreements. Acknowledging that dissent is not disloyalty frees the board to move on once it is clear that unanimity is not going to occur. Some decisions are so important that unanimity is required, but most are not. When the debate becomes repetitive, call for the question and vote.

10. Meeting rules. Adopt a set of meeting rules, stating the standard order of business and reasonable conduct standards.

11. Save it for another day. When the meeting is running long, are there topics that can be tabled until a later meeting? Consider setting a special meeting to conclude the agenda.

12. No hiding in executive session. Executive session is reserved for only personnel, litigation, member discipline or arrearages, and contract formation matters. Shortening the open meeting by moving other decisions into executive session violates the law and builds mistrust of the board.

13. Committees. Busy associations benefit greatly from committees. Building and grounds, architectural, finance, personnel, communications, and social committees help spread out the work, and involve more members in the association.

Give it a shot. You might get home earlier.

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