

## Your Board Meetings Can Be Shorter

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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. Long board meetings need to be avoided as much as possible. Directors become fatigued, irritable, and prone to bad decisions. Members become discouraged from attending board meetings, let alone considering service on the board. Conflict becomes more likely as people become tired. Frustration on all sides can lead 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.** Some small associations are able to meet only quarterly, but sometimes even monthly is insufficient to avoid a long agenda, as there is simply too much business to conduct. On those occasions, perhaps a special board meeting, called in the middle of the month, would help.

2. **The agenda.** Advance planning for the meeting is critical. Have a plan as to exactly what needs to be addressed in that meeting. That plan becomes the agenda.

3. **Avoid overly ambitious agendas.** In preparing an agenda, it can become obvious that there are too many things to be discussed, and that the meeting will be too full. Are all of the items on the agenda

critical to be discussed that day, or can some items be delayed for a later meeting? Board chairs should be realistic in setting agendas.

4. **Preparation prior to meeting** -- the "Board Packet".

A technique that professional association managers use is the "Board Packet". This packet contains all of the essential information the board needs for its deliberations in the meeting, such as draft minutes, financial reports and summaries, copies of documents on matters to be considered at that meeting, and so on. It will take some preparation and planning in advance, but good managers know how to do this. For self-managed associations, preparing a board packet will be somewhat more difficult, but the effort in making sure the directors have all they need will help toward a shorter meeting.

5. **Directors should be prepared.** Meeting materials should be provided to the directors as soon as possible before the meeting, and should be reviewed before the meeting. Prepared directors will do their part in making a meeting shorter.

6. **Open forum abuse.** Some meetings are lengthened by abuse of open forum. Open forum must be a part of every board meeting, but sometimes a very few members can dominate it. Have a reasonable time limit. Two or three minutes per person are plenty. Even city councils normally only give people three minutes. Some directors also abuse open forum. Open forum is the time for the non-director to speak, yet all too often directors interrupt or even argue with the speaker. This is inappropriate, and leads to conflict. Let the member have two or three minutes, take notes, and if action or discussion is needed on the member's issue, add it to new business at the end of the agenda.

7. **Filibustering.** We have all experienced those directors that feel the need to talk for extended periods of time on every issue, even where there is no dispute in play. A chair needs to exercise a firm hand in moving the agenda forward, and if there is unanimity on the issue, there is no need for substantial discussion. If a filibustering member does not take the hint in the meeting, the chair should diplomatically discuss this privately with the director. If a member persists in extending discussions with overly extended comments, chair may have to interrupt the member and call for the vote. Note: What is extended to you may be reasonable to others, so be judicious here.

8. **Consent calendar.** Some boards work with a consent calendar, where items are non-controversial and yet still need specific approval. Why spend time on discussion over whether the electric bill should be paid?

9. **Overemphasis on unanimity.** Not all votes need to be unanimous. A board of directors hopefully includes people of different backgrounds and viewpoints, and consequently disagreement occurs. A healthy board will have disagreements. An acknowledgement that dissent is not disloyalty will free the board to move on once it is clear that complete consensus is not going to occur. While some votes are so important that unanimity is needed, most votes are not.

When the debate becomes repetitive, call for the question and move on.

10. **Meeting conduct rules.** Adopt a set of meeting rules, which gives the standard agenda 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 or deferred until a later meeting? Can a special meeting be set in seven to ten days to conclude the agenda?

12. **Don't hide it in executive session.** Executive session is reserved for very narrow topics: Personnel, litigation, member discipline, and contract formation.

Shortening the "official" board meeting through packing business improperly in executive session violates the Open Meeting Act, and abuses the trust of your neighbors.

13. **Committees.** Very busy associations would benefit greatly from use of committees. Building and grounds, architectural, finance, personnel, communications, and social committees are all common ways of spreading out the work, and bringing other members into involvement in their association.

Give it a shot. You might find your meetings could be shorter.

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