



# Parliamentary Procedure for Local Officials

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It is a pretty good guess that most Wisconsin city councils, village boards, and their subunits utilize *Robert's Rules of Order* as the rules of procedure for their respective body even though no state law requires they be utilized and despite the fact that they can be cumbersome and unwieldy for small governmental bodies such as city councils and village boards.<sup>1</sup> Typically provided in a daunting, complex, 700-plus page book, *Robert's Rules* are also difficult to access and understand. So, local officials, especially those newly elected, might find more useful a short and concise summary of some basic parliamentary procedures they should know: how to make a motion, amend a motion, vote, and protect a member's rights to participate. This article is offered with that goal in mind.

## Making a Motion

Motions are made in a basic two-step process. First, the person seeking to make the motion is recognized by the chair, unless the chair is making the motion, which the chair is allowed to do. Second, the member, or chair, makes a motion beginning with "I move . . ." and followed by the substance of the motion. For example, a member, or the chair, of the planning commission might state: "I move that we grant a conditional use permit for 123 Main Street to operate a day care facility for 30 children."

Once made, the motion may be seconded by another member of the body. After being seconded, the chair restates the motion and indicates that it is open for debate. ("It is moved and seconded that \_\_\_\_\_. Is there any discussion?") Then, the motion is debated subject to any debate limits set by rule.

## Amending a Motion

During debate, a member may wish to amend the original motion. This is permissible under *Robert's Rules of Order*.

If a member wishes to change a basic motion that is before the body, they would move to amend it. A motion to amend might be: "I move that we amend the motion to grant a conditional use permit for 123 Main Street to operate a day care facility for 30 children by striking out 30 and inserting 20."

Thus, a motion to amend changes the motion before the body in some way by adding new words, deleting words, or substituting new words for some of the original words.

## Voting

Once debate is complete, the chair calls for a vote. Usually, this is done by voice vote in small bodies. However, a counted or roll call vote can be ordered by the chair or by a majority of the members. In Wisconsin, a secret ballot vote is not permissible except to elect an officer of the body.

The type of vote may vary. Usually, a simple majority is sufficient. However, state law, local ordinance, or local rule may require a super-majority vote depending on the subject matter. For example, a budget amendment requires a vote of "two-thirds of the entire membership of the governing body of the municipality." Wis. Stat. sec. 65.90(5)(a).

## Other Procedures

There is frequently a need to address a matter immediately to protect a member's rights to participate. Although *Robert's Rules* refers to them as "Incidental Motions" they are not ordinary motions: they do not require a second, they may interrupt other speakers, usually they must be addressed immediately. More importantly, they are very helpful in ensuring the rights of each member to participate fully in the business taking place and to make decisions.

## Point of Order:

The most common of these is the point of order. If a member feels that the rules of the assembly are not being observed (e.g., a member is speaking about a matter unrelated to the motion before the body), the member may "Raise a Point of Order." This requires the chair to make a ruling as to whether the point is "well taken" or "not well taken."

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<sup>1</sup> There are less complex alternatives to *Robert's*. Municipal governing bodies may adopt simplified or modified versions of standard parliamentary works tailored to their own needs, traditions, and personalities. The League of Wisconsin Municipalities has also prepared some basic model rules for governing bodies that are contained in two manuals published by the League, *The Conduct of Common Council Meetings* and *The Conduct of Village Board Meetings*. These manuals are available for purchase from the League. In addition, municipal governing bodies might consider *The Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure*, 5th Edition, as a parliamentary guide, which has been described as less technical and easier to use than *Robert's*. Another alternative is *Suggested Rules of Procedure for Small Local Government Boards*, 2d Edition, by A. Fleming Bell, II.

**Appeal:**

Then if the member disagrees with the decision of the chair, the member may appeal from the decision of the chair. If this is done, it will take a second to the appeal and a majority opposed to the decision of the chair to reverse it.

**Point of Information:**

If a member wants to get information (to ask a question), the member raises a point of information. The chair then directs the appropriate person to answer the question.

**Parliamentary Inquiry:**

If a member needs help with parliamentary procedure, the member raises a point of parliamentary inquiry. The chair attempts to assist the member to do what he/she wishes to do.

**Question of Privilege:**

If a member feels that the comfort of the assembly or anything else is interfering with the decision-making process, the member can raise a point of privilege and ask the chair to correct the situation (e.g., too hot, can't hear, belligerent member).

**Conclusion**

If local officials are able to make a motion, amend a motion, vote, and know the key procedures for protecting members' rights, they will be well on their way to understanding the basic process for conducting local government business. More importantly, the business may be handled in a manner that is orderly and efficient, respects minority interests, and enforces the will of the majority.

*Make a copy or cut out and reference the "20 Basic Parliamentary Motions" chart on page 15.*

**Governing Bodies: Parliamentary Procedure 395R1****About the author:**

Daniel Olson is the League's Assistant Legal Counsel. He provides legal assistance to municipal attorneys and officials through telephone inquiries, written opinions and briefs, workshop presentations, and published articles. He also assists in writing League handbooks and planning the Municipal Attorney's Institute. Daniel joined the League staff in February 2001. Contact Daniel at: [danolson@lwm-info.org](mailto:danolson@lwm-info.org)

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# 20 Basic Parliamentary Motions\*

Governing Bodies: Parliamentary Procedure 395R1

	To do this	Say this	Does this Motion interrupt?	Do you need a second?	Is it debatable?	Can it be amended?	What vote is needed?
1	Open discussion	I move that ...	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority
2	Change a motion	I move to amend by ...	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority
3	Change debate rules	I move to limit/extend debate as follows ...	No	Yes	No	Yes	2/3
4	Lay on the table	I move to table ....	No	Yes	No	No	Majority
5	Reconsider a previous action	I move to reconsider the vote on ... <i>Must be made within time limits</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Majority
6	Take up a matter previously tabled	I move to take from the table ...	No	Yes	No	No	Majority
7	Repeal previously adopted motion	I move to rescind ...	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority w/notice
8	Postpone indefinitely	I move to table the motion.	No	Yes	Yes	No	Majority
9	Postpone to time certain	I move to postpone (table)... until...	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority
10	Defer action/commit	I move to refer the matter to committee.	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority
11	Suspend rules	I move to suspend the rules to ...	No	Yes	No	No	2/3
12	End debate	I move the previous question.	No	Yes	No	No	2/3
13	Roll call vote	I call for a division.	Yes	No	No	No	No vote
14	End meeting	I move to adjourn.	No	Yes	No	No	Majority
15	Enforce rules	I rise to a point of order ..	Yes	No	No	No	Chair**
16	Challenge a ruling of the chair	I appeal the chair's decision.	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Majority
17	Take a break	I move to recess for/until	No	Yes	No	No	Majority
18	Request information	Point of information ...	Yes	No	No	No	Chair**
19	Request rules help	Parliamentary inquiry ...	Yes	No	No	No	Chair**
20	Complain about heat, noise...	I rise to a question of privilege ...	Yes	No	No	No	Chair**

\*Based on Robert's Rules of Order 11th Edition

\*\*The chair does not vote but responds to the inquiry or requests assistance for a response.