

Robert's rules of H-B Woodlawn Town Meeting

Introduction

So why does Town Meeting need order? Put simply, it can be a big, hairy, mess. When people start yelling and screaming and calling each other out of order, it makes you want to crawl under the big library tables and scream. These rules have been designed to prevent that; to allow everyone access to a short, readable version of the rules without the crazy details that hardly pertain to our needs. But keep in mind, no matter how much you sleep with this guide under your pillow, the best way to learn about Town Meeting is to just go!

The Agenda

- I. Selecting Officers
 - II. Precursors
 - III. Announcements
 - IV. Motions
 - V. Discussions
 - VI. Adjournment
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Getting on the Agenda

Getting on the Town Meeting Agenda is the first step towards presenting your ideas before the Meeting. And it's easy! First, make sure that your proposal is well thought out. Anything half-baked is generally a waste of everybody's time. Next, just put the title of your idea and your name in the appropriate category (announcements, motions, or discussions) on the sign up sheet by the office and you're done! Just make sure to be present when the chair calls up your motion, or it will be sent to the back of the agenda, and then removed at the end of the meeting if you have not arrived. *Note:* the Agenda is closed when the Meeting is called to order, though additions may be made with the special permission of the chair.

I. Selecting officers

Officer selection is quick and easy. Once fifteen people, including at least five students, two teachers, and one administrator are present, and no earlier than three minutes after the PA rings, someone stands up, calls the Meeting to order, and asks for nominations for chair. Each nomination is voted on and the candidate with the most votes wins. The 2nd place in the election is co-chair. In case of an unlikely dispute over secretarial position, a vote will decide the position. When all officers are selected and in place, the chair starts with precursors.

Note: Anybody who can vote is also eligible to be chair, co-chair, or secretary. It is, however, the responsibility of those present to elect competent officers with a firm understanding of the rules in this handbook.

The role of the Chair

First and foremost, it is the chair's job to preserve order and make sure things are attended to with all efficiency and civility. This means that only one person talks at a time and that the person is permitted to speak freely while on topic. It may also mean calling out inappropriate motions, points, and interruptions "out of order". A chairperson should know these rules cold; he or she must be able to explain them clearly and calmly in case of misunderstanding. Finally, the chair must not be involved in the debate or biased towards either side. If you are planning to make a motion or engage in discussion, let someone else be chair; you may not step down in order to do so. To be taken seriously, a chair should be wearing the Cape of Order, and wielding a gavel. A person may not chair two meetings in a row.

The Role of the co-Chair

The primary job of the co-chair is to control the speakers list and call on speakers so that the chair can run the meeting. Even though you're up on the high chair, the co-chair should try to stay out of the way. Co-chairing is good training for eventual chairdom.

The Role of the Secretary

The secretary is there to make sure that we remember all the crazy stuff we decide. As secretary, you are responsible for keeping reasonably good notes. Also, the secretary is the only officer allowed to contribute to the discussion or put a motion, discussion, or announcement up on the board.

II. Precursors

For our purposes, a teachers' meeting and SAB (Student Advisory Board) report. The chair asks for brief summaries from a teacher or two and from an SAB representative. At times, it's nice to keep posted on what everyone else is doing and thinking.

III. Announcements

More painlessness. In order of who-signed-up first on the agenda, the chair gives the floor to people with things to say. The announcements are made, everyone else stays quiet or asks brief, respectful questions after being recognized by the co-chair and it's all over.

IV. Motions

This is the big fish. The meat and potatoes. The kit and caboodle. In a typical Town Meeting, motions usually take most of the period and they are often rushed and cut short. As a result, it is here that order and expediency are most important. Without them, people claw each other to death in a debate that might last until August. Not surprisingly, there are quite a few details necessary to preserving order at this point.

Overall Motion Procedure

- Chair recognizes each motion one at a time in order of agenda. The motion's sponsor (the person whose name is on the agenda with the motion) briefly states his or her motion.
- Call for a "second". It's kind of a silly thing to have to yell out, but if there is no second, the motion is immediately dropped.
- Debate. The chair asks if there is any discussion and all hell and opinions break loose. See "Rules of Debate" for salvation.
- Voting. Chair asks for "ayes" and "nays" because they sound funny. See "Voting" for a more creatively titled section.

Voting

Mondo-important. Voting is how lives are changed and worlds are rocked. To initiate a vote, the chair asks if anyone would like the motion to be restated. If so, the motion is restated. If not, the vote is immediately taken. Big surprise. Then the chair calls for “ayes” and “nays”. If it is clear who is in the majority, the vote stands in the chair’s judgment. If it is unclear, the chair may call for a “hand-count”. In that case, the officers count hands, surprisingly enough. Here are some guidelines:

- Most motions require a simple majority (more than half) in order to pass. A tie after two additional votes amounts to a defeat.
- Any motion determined by the chair to change a rule of Town Meeting conduct (a by-law) or overturn a previous decision requires a two-thirds majority to be passed.
- At anytime, the presenter of the motion may move to divide the motion. The individual particulars of the motion are then divided and may be brought up for vote and passed separately instead of as one big mess.

Rules in Debate

Here’s what goes down in any Town Meeting discussion or debate:

All rules are enforced by the chair and his or her gavel.

- Discussion must be pertinent and germane; don’t start talking about unrelated subjects.
- Only people recognized by the chair or co-chair may speak.
- The recognized speaker may ask a brief and direct question of the sponsor or anyone else present who may have pertinent information. Again, please remain on topic.
- If what you were going to say has already been said, (pretty) please state your agreement briefly and be seated.
- For expediency’s sake, if you agree with what’s being said, simply nod your fist rather than adding yourself to the speakers’ list. If you disagree, tap your four fingers against your thumb while waving your hand across your face.

The Laws of Motion

Get it?

A motion remains “on the floor” and in debate unless any of the following happens:

- The “Question” is called. This is a pompous term for closing the speakers’ list and immediately voting on the motion. Please wait until someone is done talking before calling the question. Requires a majority.
- The a motion to close the speakers’ list is made. After this, no new additions may be made to the speakers’ list. Requires a majority.
- A Motion for Revision is made by someone who is recognized from the speakers’ list. A revision may be made to alter the motion on the floor in any way, from the most minor to a change in the motion’s spirit. If the motion’s sponsor deems the proposed revision “friendly”, debate continues with a new speakers; list, and the revision is automatically added. If it is deemed “unfriendly”, the revision must be seconded. It is then discussed (again, with a new speakers’ list) and voted upon. A majority vote means that the revision is accepted. If a Motion for Revision is made on an un-passed revision, the above process is repeated. Only two revisions may be on the floor at any one time.
- The motion is tabled by a majority vote, initiated by a call to table, or the sponsor removes it. This means that discussion is stopped and the chair proceeds to the next item on the agenda. If the motion is tabled, it is brought up at the next Town Meeting. If it is withdrawn, the motion is gone for good.
- The Town Meeting is adjourned. See Section VI.
- The speakers list is finished. In this case, voting begins.

V. Discussions

There is no big mystery to this. People who want to know what everyone has to say just puts up a discussion topic on the agenda. Discussions are an excellent way to develop a motion for a later Town Meeting. And, of course, discussion debates are governed by the “Rules in Debate” and regulated by the chair.

VI. Adjournment

No big mystery here either. At any time, provided he or she is not interrupting anyone, someone can call a “Motion to Adjourn”. If the chair finds this motion in order, he or she calls for a vote. If a majority yells out “aye”, all the fun ends and everybody ships off to class. Should Town Meeting not end on time, all present are excused from class until five minutes after adjournment.

A note on Powers

The buck stops here. This document is the complete and official procedural document for Town Meeting, minus the Appendix. However, it lays no claim to the rights, powers, and jurisdiction of Town Meeting, which are covered in the Merger Report and previous Town Meeting decisions. Amendments may be passed by Town Meeting with a two-thirds majority vote, although anyone who sees imperfections in here is simply plum crazy!

Appendix: The “Anytime” Motions and Points

These are handy little things to know. They are mostly procedural and are to be handled immediately if deemed in order by the chair (except appealing the decision of the chair, obviously). To make one when the floor is open (don't interrupt, this is supposed to be decorous), state the name of your procedural point or motion and, only if you are recognized (except for appeal, obviously), proceed.

- **Point of Order.** You use this if you think you're all smart and think something is not going in accordance with the rules. Please be nice with it. The chair alone may handle a Point of Order.
- **Point of Information.** If you have a brief question about facts concerning the issue on the floor or Town Meeting procedures, you may raise this point to the chair, who will direct your inquiry to someone in the know.
- **Raise a Question of Privilege.** This motion permits you, provided the chair allows it, to ask a direct question of the Principal or an acceptable substitute (a robotic Principal?) concerning the not-so-unlimited jurisdiction of Town Meeting, especially in the context of local, state, federal, and international law.
- **Appeal the Decision of the Chair.** Use this if you think that the chair has made an unfair decision on procedure or is not following the rules. Once the motion is seconded, you may briefly explain your case. The chair may also defend his or her decision before calling a vote, with the winner decided by a majority.
- **Motion to Recess.** This may be called if there is a need for a short break from Town Meeting. It is best used as a chance for everyone to read a complicated written motion or to discuss an issue amongst themselves. It is quickly decided by a majority vote without discussion. The length of time may be suggested in the motion, but the final decision rests with the chair.
- **By-law motion.** This may be called by anyone who wishes to change the procedural rules temporarily in order to make things go more smoothly. It requires a second and is immediately and without discussion determined by a two-thirds vote.

- Withdraw a motion. Between speakers or when he or she has the floor, the sponsor may remove a motion from the floor without need for a second, debate, or vote. The Meeting moves to the next item of business.
- Motion to Adjourn. As discussed above, this motion ends discussion and closes Town Meeting. This motion requires a second is immediately decided upon by a majority vote. Any item still on the agenda is tabled for the next meeting.