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Manager’s Perspective: Tips for Keeping Board Meetings from Going on Too Long

By Sherri Hall

As the days get longer and the temperatures rise, people want to spend more time outdoors and less time indoors. That includes property managers, board members and homeowners, who especially don’t want to find themselves part of a board meeting that’s going on for way too long. However, with a wide variety of spring and summer projects underway, how can boards keep their meetings running efficiently? We spoke with RCP Management Company President Mary Faith Nugiel, AMS, PCAM, to find out.

First and foremost, said Nugiel, a typical board meeting should run for no more than two hours. If an association’s board meeting is averaging three or four hours, it’s time to make some changes. “Everything can be accomplished in two hours,” Nugiel said.

She noted that one reason that an association may have lengthier meetings on a continuous basis is lack of organization. Board members have more responsibility than just attending the meetings and placing their votes. “Failure to perform other duties throughout the time period between meetings will alone make the board meeting longer than it should be,” Nugiel explained.

An efficient board discusses association items amongst themselves all month long, whether in-person, by phone, via email or through another method of communication. “The secret to having an efficient board meeting is to come prepared and to know about the issues,” she said.

Another factor that could play a part in an unexpectedly long meeting is when the board members stray from the agenda. According to Nugiel, doing so can cause the meeting to become derailed. “The agenda should be the outline for the meeting. It should be followed to the letter,” she noted. “The board members need to come prepared to discuss only what’s on the agenda.”

Part of the meeting agenda includes a section for new business. This time slot should be reserved for bringing up items to be discussed at the next meeting, unless there is an urgent matter to be addressed at that particular meeting, explained Nugiel. “If they want something discussed at the meeting, they need to let the manager know in advance,” she said.

Nugiel noted that the manager is responsible for ensuring that the agenda isn’t packed with so many items that it will make the meeting too long. She added that if a manager finds the agenda to be too long, it is perfectly acceptable to suggest to the board that items that can wait be held off until the next meeting.

In addition, placing times on the agenda lets everyone on the board know what topic they should be discussing at a specific time during the meeting, said Nugiel.

Another cause of meetings that go astray is not controlling homeowner input. According to Nugiel, the board should allot a specific time for homeowners to speak, ask questions or state concerns. The homeowners should not be permitted to comment throughout the entire meeting, but rather at the beginning or the end. Additionally, their comments should be timed and when their time is up, the board should move on to the next homeowner.

The New Jersey Open Public Meetings Act requires that most decisions that affect the association be made in an open meeting where the public may attend. However, it does not require boards to allow homeowners to speak at the meeting. Therefore, Nugiel explained, if a homeowner gets out of control, the board can suspend the homeowner comment period. Homeowners can sit in the meeting, obtain the minutes and then send their comments in written form or email for the board to discuss, she noted. Furthermore, if a homeowner is too rowdy and cannot act in a civil manner, the board members can choose to adjourn the meeting without finishing their business.

In addition, if a homeowner brings up a topic that is not on the agenda, and the board is unprepared to discuss the matter, it’s okay for the board to add the item to the following meeting’s agenda. The board can let the homeowner know the concern has been heard and appropriate research will be conducted. “The board doesn’t have to feel that they have an answer for everything that minute,” said Nugiel.

Controlling the meeting is the responsibility of the board president. Nugiel suggested that the property manager should discuss each officer’s duties with the board before the board members elect their officers. Not only is there literature available for board members that explains these job descriptions, but there are also board member training programs offered by organizations and some management companies. If for some reason, added Nugiel, there is a concern with the board president’s ability to keep the meeting running on time, the manager should be sensitive to the fact that the president is a volunteer. The manager should discuss the matter privately with the president and offer suggestions on keeping the meeting on track.

Nugiel explained that it is the role of the property manager to provide information to the board members in an organized fashion so that they can ask questions ahead of time and be prepared to make a decision at the meeting.

Holding workshops or a closed session before the open meeting can also help the meeting run more efficiently. In fact, it is not uncommon for boards to do so, said Nugiel, because sometimes the process is just too long to take place during the regular meeting. Selecting a landscaping company is a prime example. Prior to voting on a landscaping contract, the board must approve a set of specifications, send the project out to bid and may even want to interview or meet with some of the landscapers. “It’s a long, involved process, and it’s not something that can all be done at the meeting,” Nugiel noted.

Having the landscaper interviews take place for 20-30 minutes each at an open board meeting would take up too much time, she explained.

“There are very legitimate items that could and should be discussed beforehand at a workshop,” said Nugiel. “A good portion of the legwork can be done prior, which is a great way to prepare for the meeting.”

In conclusion, being organized and prepared is the key to holding efficient board meetings. Board members should review the materials in advance, so they are ready to have a productive discussion and vote on the issues. “Board members who come prepared are the ones who have two-hour meetings,” noted Nugiel.