

David Madore

# MASTERING COUNCIL MEETINGS

A GUIDEBOOK FOR ELECTED OFFICIALS  
AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

*Ann G. Macfarlane, PRP, CAE  
and Andrew L. Estep, CAE*

  
Jurassic  
Parliament



## Minutes

The purpose of minutes is to preserve an accurate record of a council's actions. Council minutes are not intended to inform absent members of all that went on at the meeting they missed, to create a record of the reasons for a council's decision, nor to demonstrate the eloquence and brilliance of elected officials to their public.

Councils should use "action minutes," in which actions are noted briefly and simply. Minutes of this type will include the following items:

- Place of the meeting;
- Time the meeting started and ended;
- Which members of the council were present and, if relevant, any absences;
- The fact that a quorum was present;
- Text of all main motions taken up by the council and their disposition (passed, failed, referred to a committee, postponed etc.);
- If amendments were made, the final version of the motion as amended;
- Any points of order that were made and their resolution; and
- If the council went into executive (secret) session, the time of entering and the time of leaving such session.

If public comment is made, it is ordinarily sufficient to note the fact. Some councils include the names and addresses of those who spoke and some go even further, summarizing the remarks that members of the public make. (At a public hearing, which is a different type of meeting, including the content of remarks is appropriate.)

If council members wish to have more detail in their minutes, another option is "summary minutes." These minutes include a brief listing of the chief arguments that are made for and against different motions, without attribution to any individual. The clerk or secretary must have the capacity to extract those key points from what is said, which can be a challenging task.

The least desirable option is "detailed minutes." This type of minutes is sometimes called "verbatim minutes," which really should apply only to minutes taken by a court recorder who captures every word. In this type of minutes, individual remarks are included along with the name of



the person who made them. Detailed minutes are undesirable for several reasons:

- If legal questions arise, delving into the remarks that were made can complicate the council's defense of its actions.
- Clerks must spend substantial time on recording such minutes, which represents an expense that many jurisdictions can ill afford.
- Reviewing, amending and approving detailed minutes can take up great swaths of the council's time; time that would be better spent on more productive activity.
- In searching earlier records, it is hard to extract the key items from among the acres of verbiage included in detailed minutes.

The prevalence of audio and video recording today makes it even more wasteful for councils to invest time and energy in preparing detailed written records of "who said what to whom." Sometimes it seems that the main purpose of such records is to gratify the egos of the speakers. (Note that audio and video recording cannot substitute for written minutes.)

Minutes as prepared by the clerk should be clearly identified as "DRAFT" in the text and the file name. Once they are approved by the body, a clean copy can be prepared that omits the word "draft" and includes the date of approval and appropriate signatures.

#### Important points about minutes

Minutes are not approved at a special meeting, but are held over until the next regular meeting.

Minutes should not include the name of the seconder of the motion (unless law or regulation requires it).

Minutes should not include routine procedural motions, such as approving the agenda or moving to recess.

Minutes of executive (secret) session, if kept at all, are approved in executive session and filed separately from regular minutes.

A motion that has been withdrawn is not ordinarily included in the minutes.

It is no longer considered appropriate to include the words "respectfully submitted" above the clerk or secretary's signature.



## Mastering Council Meetings

### IN OUR EXPERIENCE

*One poor clerk told me that after she had prepared detailed minutes of a certain meeting, a council member went up to her and said, "You didn't write down what I meant!" Clerks, like the rest of us, have yet to develop mind-reading abilities. —Ann*

### Amendments

A clerk or secretary will need to keep careful track of amendments—who made them, how they are voted on and so on—as they are being discussed. The presider and the members expect this of the clerk and will turn to her for help during the meeting when they are confused themselves.

However, when it comes time to prepare the official minutes, Robert's Rules states that the clerk does not include the details of those amendments, who moved them and how they were voted on. Instead, the minutes should include the final text of the motion as amended. In addition to being sensible and clear, this approach saves the clerk a lot of unnecessary effort.