

[CAM blog](#)[About](#)[TOPS Software](#)[TOPS Professional](#)[Customer Care Center](#)[Subscriptions](#)[FAQ](#)

Get regular CAM blog updates in your inbox

[Subscribe](#)

Is Robert's Rules too Restrictive? Consider Martha's Rules of Order for Meetings

by **Andrea Drennen, CMCA** | Find me on:



The setting is Ancient Rome, in the Colosseum. After two gladiators have fought, the winner looks to Ceasar to make a decision. Should the loser live, or die? The crowd goes wild. Holding out their thumbs with their vote—up to say live, down to say die. Ceasar raises his arm, and makes the gesture. Just like that, the decision is made.

Recommended Posts

- [Surviving Community Association Budget Season \[Free eBook\]](#)
- [3 Things Every CAM Manager should Know about HOA Resales \[Free Estoppel Letter Template\]](#)
- [Avoid the Dreaded 'Selective Enforcement' Label \[Free Violation Letters\]](#)
- [So You're](#)

If only it were that straightforward in modern times.

Perhaps the most universally [dreaded aspect](#) of community association management is the meetings. Monthly board meetings, annual general membership meetings, even committee meetings can produce a sense of dread in the pit of your stomach. Usually it's not the actual meeting itself that causes you pain, but the fact that there are humans involved—humans who all have unique opinions, and all [wish to be heard](#).

It was because of one such meeting of the Board of Directors for his church that prompted Brigadier General Henry Martin Robert to pen his book, "Robert's Rules of Order".

Robert's Rules of Order: The Standard

[Robert's Rules of Order](#) were first published in 1876, as a method of conducting orderly meetings in business and other 'ordinary societies'. The original rules were loosely modelled after the parliamentary procedures used by US House of Representatives.

In the nearly 140 years since Robert's Rules was published, the document has undergone 11 revisions, and has earned the distinction of being the most highly adopted parliamentary procedure in the United States.

That said, with 11 revisions under its belt, and a methodology that was designed for every kind of organization, Robert's Rules is a pretty hefty book these days, with a lot of strict processes and procedures for every imaginable kind of circumstance. This can make following Robert's Rules in Community Association Management [challenging at best](#).

As adults, we ought to be able to conduct a civil, functional, BRIEF meeting without requiring specialized training.

While many of the problems stemming from Robert's Rules in community association governance are simply due to misinterpretation, the

[Thinking of Starting a Management Company \[Free eBook\]](#)

- [Everything You Need to Know About Balancing Monthly HOA Financials \[Free Checklist\]](#)
- [Love Where You Work - Corporate Culture in CAM Management](#)
- [The Ultimate Link List of CAM Laws in Your State](#)
- [A Blueprint for the CAM Accounting Cycle \[Free eBook\]](#)

Want more? Subscribe!

Email

Notification Frequency

sheer volume and complexity of Robert's Rules can actually contribute to these delays.

Some management companies have even resorted to requiring managers to get parliamentary training to prevent [misinterpretation issues](#). And while parliamentary training can be helpful in a number of circumstances, I cannot help but feel that, as adults, we ought to be able to conduct a civil, functional, BRIEF meeting without requiring specialized training. Perhaps something easier like the thumb vote of ancient times?

Martha's Rules of Order: An Alternative

You hear the name Martha these days, and Martha Stewart immediately comes to mind. And searching Google for "Martha's Rules" will likely net you a number of results for [her book](#) "Martha Rules: 10 Essentials for Achieving Success as You Start, Grow and Manage a Business" which (although I must admit I haven't read it) is probably a great discussion for another day! But I actually want to talk about a different Martha.

Martha's Rules of Order were originally published in the 1970s in a paper entitled "Suggestions for Harmonious Meetings" by a student and low-income housing cooperative in Madison, Wisconsin.

The paper stated the premise: *"We recognize that consensus decision making, while it takes a lot of time, makes for high quality decisions. But some decisions are not worth the effort. So we developed a way to decide whether or not an issue was important enough to warrant taking the extra time to reach consensus."*

This simple idea spawned an entirely new consensus-based parliamentary procedure that is simple, and easy to understand. Because it was designed specifically for a housing co-op, it is particularly well

"Consensus decision making, while it takes a lot of time, makes for high quality decisions. But some decisions are not worth the effort."

- Suggestions for Harmonious Meetings

MANAGEMENT AGREEMENT

FREE: Sample Community Management Contract

Download your Free Sample Management Contract

Google the CAMblog

Search

Posts by Topic

- [CAM Mashup \(146\)](#)
- [Management Companies \(83\)](#)
- [CAM Industry \(44\)](#)
- [Associations & Boards \(41\)](#)
- [Technology \(38\)](#)
- [CAM Managers \(35\)](#)
- [Accounting \(32\)](#)

[see all](#)

suitable to HOA and Condo meetings. It works great for board meetings, committee meetings, and especially General Membership meetings.

TOPS Founder, [Jeff Hardy](#), used Martha's Rules in more than 90 communities his company managed: *"To me, Martha's Rules of Order seem to make the most sense for Condo/HOA BOD meetings. There is really no reason for a board meeting to go longer than 2 hours. In fact, most board meetings could be done in an hour or less if they followed Martha's Rules and observed the recommendations for effective meetings."*

Conducting a Meeting Under Martha's Rules

Before each meeting, anyone who wishes may sponsor a formal proposal. The proposal follows [a standard format](#), stating a summary, the full text of the proposal, background, pros and cons, and possible alternatives. This proposal must be submitted prior to the meeting, and is included in a meeting packet that is distributed to the entire group prior to the meeting.

Once a person has sponsored a proposal, they are responsible for it. The group may not discuss or vote on the issue unless the sponsor is present. The sponsor is also responsible for presenting the item to the group.

"There is really no reason for a board meeting to go longer than 2 hours. In fact, most board meetings could be done in an hour or less if they followed Martha's Rules"
- Jeff Hardy

After the sponsor presents the proposal, a pre-vote is cast for the proposal, prior to ANY discussion. This vote is called a "sense" vote, wherein the group can get an idea of how everyone feels about the issue. The Sense vote is very simple (back to the Romans again):

- Who **likes** the proposal? (represented as a thumbs up)
- Who **can live** with the proposal? (represented as a sideways

Follow us on
Social

thumb)

- Who is **uncomfortable** with the proposal? (represented as a thumbs down)

The surprising result of a straw vote such as this is that it helps move the group toward action much more quickly.

- If all or most of the group likes or can live with the proposal, it is immediately moved to the next stage, a formal vote, with no discussion necessary.
- If most of the group is uncomfortable with the proposal, it is postponed for further rework by the sponsor.
- If some members are uncomfortable, they can state their objections, and the clock for a brief (10 minute) discussion begins. At the conclusion of the timer, the meeting facilitator calls for a vote on the following question: "Should we implement this decision over the stated objections of the minority, when a majority of the group feels it is workable?" A "yes" vote would lead to a majority rule, and a no vote would postpone the decision for future rework by the sponsor.

Just as Robert's Rules has gone through a number of revisions, so too have Martha's Rules. [The latest version](#) is posted on the website of the Madison Community Cooperative. Here is their miniature toolkit for shorter and more focused board meetings:



MADISON COMMUNITY COOPERATIVE

MINIATURE TOOLKIT FOR SHORTER AND MORE FOCUSED BOARD MEETINGS

Adopted 2/19/92

- A. This policy will be printed on the back side of every Board meeting agenda.
- B. All agenda items shall have an individual sponsor, noted on the agenda, and shall be denoted as Informational (no discussion required), Discussion (no vote), or Decision (vote at this meeting).
- C. Items shall not be discussed unless that sponsor (or a designated proxy) is present to introduce the item. A written proposal for all agenda items requiring a vote must be included in the Board packet in standard proposal format unless items come up which require emergency action.
- D. The Board must vote to approve inclusion of emergency items before they are discussed.
- E. The Facilitator will ask the sponsor of each item to briefly introduce it in 3 parts:
 1. A summary of the proposal.
 2. A brief background statement: why is it important, what events led up to this?
 3. What action is requested of the Board at this meeting?
- F. During discussion of the item, the suggested role of the facilitator is to:
 1. Keep a speaker's list and call on members in turn,
 2. Limit unfocused discussion; bring discussion back to the issue at hand if it strays off track,
 3. Ask for a motion on decision items if there is none,
 4. Help the group move toward a decision; restate areas of agreement to the group and clarify issues needing further work,
 5. Watch for the moment when you can ask for a vote,
 6. Watch the emotional vibes in the meeting if bad vibes are getting in the way, ask the group to stop and address emotional issues first, and
 7. Keep items within pre-set time limits; when the timekeeper announces we've hit the limit for an item, ask the group to vote on a definite time extension (i.e. _Should we table, vote, or discuss for another 10 minutes?_)

Staying on Track

In the end, the most important elements of keeping a board meeting short, on track and helping board members make decisions or give management guidance on issues relies on the following:

- An effective meeting leader who keeps control of the meeting.
- A written agenda published in advance and distributed to board members, and where required, to the community members too.
- Setting time limits for each item on the agenda.
- Voting or making some kind of a decision on an issue when it is first discussed and not putting off a decision till later in the

meeting when a second discussion would likely happen again.

- Prevent members from expressing the same opinion already expressed by another member. (This is where taking a straw “sense” vote could move an issue towards resolution, like an official vote.)

Martha's Rules of Order is one option of how you can conduct faster, more efficient meetings, but there are [other alternatives](#). Even if you are locked into Robert's Rules due to constraints in the community documents, incorporating the above steps can help make meeting time a little less painful for you. Thumbs up for that!

Sources:

- [Building United Judgement: A Handbook for Consensus Decision Making](#)
- [Democracy in Small Groups: Participation, Decision Making, and Communication](#)
- [We, the Students and Teachers: Teaching Democratically in the History and Social Studies Classroom](#)
- [Consensus Decision Making and its possibilities in Libraries](#)
- [Madison Community Cooperative](#)



A big book of Practical advice from community association management professionals

Get My Free eBook!

Tweet

Share

13

Like 9

Share

G+1

1

Topics: [Associations & Boards](#)

Like what you've read? **Subscribe to the CAM Blog!**

You might also like



CAM Mash Up: This Week (Jun 15 - 21, 2015)



CAM Mash Up: This Week (July 3, 2016)



CAM Mash Up: This Week (August 14, 2016)



What Apple's fight with the FBI has to do with your Board of Directors

[Recommended by](#)

Jim Slaughter 4/18/2015, 12:32:49 PM

While many of these rules are excellent and could help make any meeting better, as an attorney who works with many community associations (and past President of CAI's College of Community Association Lawyers), I'd be cautious of throwing out Robert's Rules of Order without some research. A number of states have statutes that require community association boards and membership meetings to

follow Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised (and such language is including in the model acts from the Uniform Law Commission). Further, many associations have language in their governing documents, such as bylaws, that they will follow a specific parliamentary book and, if so, such language should be followed. Lastly, even Robert's recommends less formal rules for smaller boards and committees, such as no seconds to motions, no limits on debate and the chair can debate and vote. For an article from CAI's Common Ground on "10 Meeting Myths in Community Associations" visit <http://www.jimslaughter.com/10-Meeting-Myths-in-Community-Associations.cfm>

Jim Slaughter, Author

The Complete Idiot's Guide to Parliamentary Procedure Fast-Track
Notes & Comments on Robert's Rules, Fourth Edition
www.jimslaughter.com

← Reply to *Jim Slaughter*

Andrea Drennen 4/19/2015, 9:23:57 AM

Jim, Thank you for your comment. Of course if you are required by law or the documents of your community association then the community should absolutely follow Robert's Rules. My own does so. Thank you for sharing your article. Any way that any community can help reduce the stress of meeting times is a huge plus in my book!

← Reply to *Andrea Drennen*

First Name

Last Name

Email

Website

Comment

Subscribe to follow-up comments for this post



[Privacy & Terms](#)



Submit Comment

[TOPS CAM Blog](#)

[About](#)

[TOPS Software](#)

[TOPS Professional](#)

[Customer Care Center](#)

[Manage Subscriptions](#)

[FAQ](#)

© 2015 TOPS Software | [Privacy](#) | [Legal](#)

