

COMMUNITY LIVING

Conducting board meeting? Get a grip

By Pamela Dittmer McKuen | Special to the Tribune
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It's one thing to preside over a community association. It's another to preside over a meeting, which can be intimidating to anyone unaccustomed to addressing an audience. Community associations have lots of meetings.

"I've heard many people say, 'I'll be the vice president but never the president,' because they don't want to conduct the meetings," said **Lillian Bjorseth, a Lisle-based communications consultant, coach and author.**

"There's a fear factor," said Mike Reilly, president of the 1,085-home White Eagle Club in [Naperville](#). "They're afraid they're going to do something wrong or they won't know something they think they should know or they might upset a resident and get a bad reaction."

Running a productive meeting and doing it with confidence takes some skills, "but they are learnable skills," he added. "It gets easier with time."

If you're a new or jittery president, here's some advice from those who know the feeling of a gavel in their hands:

Prepare an agenda. This is a schedule of reports, tasks and topics in the order they will be covered. The best agendas specify the amount of time to be spent on each topic, perhaps 7:30 p.m. to 7:40 p.m. for pool repairs, and an approximate time to end the meeting, said Bjorseth.

"An agenda helps people know what to expect and it cuts down on questions," she said. "If you don't have one, people become concerned that their particular issue won't be heard. They won't hear anything else that goes on because they're waiting for it to come up."

Avoid surprises by addressing only the items on the agenda, not new ones that pop up during the meeting, she said.

Stay the course. The purpose of the board meeting is to transact association business. Set the proper tone by starting on time, said Bjorseth.

"You're always communicating," she said. "Being laggardly communicates nothing positive."

Pass out copies of the agenda and follow it, said Marc Garrison, president of Private Holding Group LLC, a management company in Chicago.

"Most boards get into trouble when they stray from the pre-determined agenda and allow non-topic discussions to occur," he said.

Owners may try to join the discussion or create debate. Remind them that the meeting is for the board only, and that owners will have an opportunity to comment at a set time before or after the meeting, said Reilly.

You don't have to know everything. At the 13-unit Evelyn Condominium Association in Uptown, board members are assigned to specific tasks or projects.

"It gives them a chance to 'own' some issue and a chance to speak during the meeting," said

board president Shannan Bunting. "In many cases, it falls to the manager to give us the finer details or a quote or the status of a project, but we do our best to get all the board members involved."

When people see that the meetings are efficient and don't drag on for hours, they are more likely to pitch in, said Bjorseth.

"No one expects you to have all the answers all the time," said Marcia Caruso, president of Caruso Management Group in Naperville. "Say that you don't know, you'll find out and get back to the person. Then do it."

Don't let the manager run the meeting. It's your job. "Ideally, property managers should be very involved in the process and preparation, but minimally involved in conducting the meeting," said Garrison.