

Best Practices for Councilors at City Council Meetings (2018)

The following are some guiding principles for all City Councilors at City Council meetings (including full Council meetings, Committees of the Whole, and Committee meetings):

Before the meeting

- Read materials in advance of each meeting.
- When making requests for additional materials or information, copy the President or Committee Chair on all requests.
- Become familiar with and follow the Rules & Orders of the City Council 2018-2019, Robert's Rules of Order, and, for Land Use matters, the Statement of Good Practices for Communications with Councilors Regarding Land Use Petitions.

At the meeting

- Arrive on time.
- Notify the President (for full Council) or the Committee Chair (for committee meetings) and the appropriate clerk if you are going to be absent, late or leaving early.
- Dress appropriately (business attire for full Council meetings and Committee of the Whole meetings and Committee meetings where a public hearing will be held or a significant public turnout is expected; business attire or business casual for all other meetings).
- Address fellow Councilors by title (Councilor Smith); staff members by Mr. or Ms. followed by the last name (Mr. Jones or Ms. Jones); and members of the public by "sir" or "ma'am" (unless you know their name, in which case use Mr. Jones or Ms. Jones).
- Raise your hand if you wish to speak and wait to be recognized by the President or Committee Chair.
- Stay on point when speaking - remain on topic and be concise. Try not to repeat what has already been said.
- Listen attentively to all speakers – fellow Councilors, staff members and members of the public.
- Feel comfortable engaging in robust debate on issues but do so in a respectful manner (disagreeing without being disagreeable).
- Always remember that we are in public setting acting as representatives of the city and that our words (and sometimes actions) are being recorded.
- Avoid the use of cell phones and other electronic devices during meetings for anything other than reviewing meeting materials electronically, calendaring items or similar tasks directly related to the meeting.

After the meeting

- Meet individually on a periodic basis with the President and Committee Chairs to provide and receive feedback on meetings.
- If there is an issue or concern about how a meeting has been run or something that has happened at a meeting, first address it directly with the President (if a full Council meeting) or the Committee Chair (if a Committee meeting), preferably in person. If dissatisfied with the outcome, then contact the Vice President or the President Emeritus (in the case of the full Council) or the President (in the case of a Committee).

Best Practices for Chairing City Council Committees (2018)

The following are some guiding principles for chairing City Council Committees:

Background

- The Newton City Council involves all of its membership in its decision-making.
- It is the function of Council and Committee leadership to enable all 24 members to make effective and timely decisions, and the Committees to be the place where most of the work gets done so that Council deliberations can be reserved for those matters where all Council members need to be equally involved and informed.
- These practices are subject to review and updating and are intended to respond to the requirements of the Rules & Orders of the City Council 2018-2019.

Leadership Communication

- Maintain an open dialogue with the President and Vice President. Committee Chairs should alert the President when there are controversial and/or time sensitive issues, items that will be on second call, and matters in need of procedural clarification.
- Each Committee Chairs should work closely with the Vice Chair on all aspects of planning, running and reviewing meetings. Welcome and encourage the different perspectives that the Vice Chair may offer.
- If the Chair happens to be involved in a heated dialogue at a meeting, the Vice Chair should help defuse the issue.
- Encourage the Vice Chair to provide honest feedback, constructive criticism, and suggestions for improvements.
- Remember that Committee Chairs serve their Committees by communicating well and frequently.
- If the Chair and Vice Chair are unable to be at a meeting, the Committee member with the most seniority on the Council should serve as the chair of the meeting.

Agenda Management

- Communicate regularly with your Committee clerk (good communication is essential for agenda development, meeting preparation, and report generation).
- Map out a schedule of meetings for the calendar year with an understanding of the goals for the year and each meeting.
- Prepare an agenda for each meeting that includes topics to be discussed and the estimated length of the discussion for each item.
- Plan so that no meeting is normally longer than three hours.
- Work with department heads and others who will present at the meetings to review presentations so that they are well-organized and complete. Presentations should not go forward (except with rare exception) unless complete materials are provided to Councilors as part of the Friday packet. As set forth in the Rules, “[n]o item not listed on the docket or agenda, or for which supporting documentation has not been supplied at least 48 hours prior to the Committee meeting, shall be taken up in committee without a majority of those committee members present voting to suspend the rules.”
- Be mindful of the workload of department heads and staff.

- Group similar items that can be discussed together to consolidate the docket and avoid duplicate discussions.
- Develop agendas early to allow for ample notice to attendees and lead time for City staff.
- Review the requested invitees for a docket item and, if necessary, invite others that you feel should attend.
- Discuss items with the person docketing the item in advance of meetings.
- Anticipate the types of questions that will come up with each docket item and the people who are most likely to have the answers.
- For all docket items on the agenda, confirm that the person who has docketed the item is prepared to present, the appropriate back up materials are available for the packet, and all necessary personnel have been notified.
- Take advantage of opportunities to have joint meetings for items that are referred to multiple committees to save time for the presenters, allow for a consistent and comprehensive discussion of the item, and eliminate duplicate meetings on the same topic.

Know the Rules

- Become familiar with the Rules & Orders of the City Council 2018-2019, Robert's Rules of Order, and, for Land Use matters, the Statement of Good Practices for Communications with Councilors Regarding Land Use Petitions
- Make sure that all items are discussed within a year of their docketing as required by the Council Rules.
- Committee Chairs should be knowledgeable about important deadlines associated with their individual committees. For example, Land Use and Zoning and Planning have legal requirements about when public hearings need to be held and what happens if action is not taken on an item within a particular time.

Department Head Communication

- Keep an open dialogue with department heads under the purview of your Committee.
- Try to schedule a regular call or meeting (it may be every other week, monthly, or every couple of months, depending on schedules and needs) with department heads who frequently present to your Committee.
- Develop and share with department heads the standards that you have for the type and delivery time of back-up materials you expect to accompany items.

Committee Education

- Encourage committee members do their homework by reviewing the city's ordinances and speaking with the appropriate department head or staff member before docketing an item (many issues can be resolved with a phone call to the appropriate person instead of docketing an item).
- Periodically arrange informational presentations on topics related to the purview of your Committee if you think it will make later work on the topic more effective.

At the Meeting

- Dress appropriately (business attire for Committee meetings where a public hearing will be held or a significant public turnout is expected; business attire or business casual for all other meetings).
- Begin on time.

- Arrange with the Committee clerk for extra copies of materials to be available for meeting participants and members of the public.
- State that meetings are audio and/or videotaped and introduce Councilors and staff.
- State at the outset of the meeting what is intended to be covered, with an estimate of the time when the meeting will end.
- Monitor the pace of the meeting to make sure that there is appropriate time for discussion for each item while ending on time.
- Assess the interests of the audience before the meeting and manage expectations for public comment (including whether any public comment will be taken and, if so, how it will be done) and Committee and Council action.
- Address fellow Councilors by title (Councilor Smith); staff members by Mr. or Ms. followed by the last name (Mr. Jones or Ms. Jones); and members of the public by “sir” or “ma’am” (unless you know their name, in which case use Mr. Jones or Ms. Jones).
- Reserve comment until other members of the Committee have spoken, unless to clarify matters of background or procedure.
- Make sure that all Councilors get a chance to speak before allowing others to speak again (and start with Committee members first).
- Politely guide Councilors who are straying off point or talking for a lengthy period of time to remain on topic and be concise while not limiting their right to speak on the issue.
- Set and enforce clear rules for public comment at public hearings, while always remaining calm and polite.
- Always remember that we are in public setting acting as representatives of the city and that our words (and sometimes actions) are being recorded.
- At the end of each meeting, offer Councilors a preview of items to be discussed at the next meeting and in the future.

After the meeting

- Make sure Committee Reports are prepared in accordance with the Rules.
- If ordinances or other materials requiring law department review are to be reported, make sure that the materials have been reviewed for legal form and character.
- If financial items are involved, make sure they have been reviewed by the Comptroller.
- Review presentations with department heads and other presenters to evaluate the presentations and provide constructive feedback for improvement.
- Meet individually on a periodic basis with the President and Committee members to provide and receive feedback on meetings and suggestions for improvement.