

Writing a Public Comments Policy

Written by Julie Elmore

Tuesday, January 31, 2023 04:06 PM

My husband often reminds me to plan for the worst and hope for the best. This has served me well when writing policies, keeping in mind policies should be proactive and not reactive. Waiting until something has happened and then writing a policy may sometimes be necessary, but I would much rather avoid it and have things in place before they are needed. While our library has been very fortunate to not have faced challenges or people wanting to express their “concerns” over library materials and/or programs at public meetings, we have seen it happen at other places. It could only be a matter of time. What if it did happen to us?

Our first instinct was “really, who is going to come here to complain?” In the last ten years or so, we have only had a handful of people ever attend a meeting and it was usually over something related to children’s behavior. If someone wants to talk, just let them have their peace. Then we thought what if SEVERAL showed up and everyone wanted to speak and we were the next YouTube video in the making. Looking at current policies and procedures, we quickly realized nothing concrete was in place to guide the board in the event several people showed up wanting to air lengthy concerns at a public meeting. And even in the best case scenario where we were packed to the rafters with library supportive citizens, we needed to have something in place to allow commentary, but also be able to move forward with other business. So, as the Director, I did what all library workers do best, I turned to other colleagues and libraries and started to review other policies. After a lot of “borrowing language” from them and thinking of a few what-if scenarios, we crafted our new “Public Comment” policy. The following are a few areas we discussed and wanted to make sure were covered in our policy.

TIME LIMITS

Our board is a volunteer board and wanting to respect their time and ability to conduct regular board business, we decided to limit the amount of time public comments could take. We also had to consider how long each individual member of the public would have to speak. Most policies we reviewed allowed 15-30 minutes of dedicated time in meetings and allotted 2-5 minutes for speaking length. Ultimately, the board decided on three minutes per person and a max of 30 minutes. That allows upwards of 10 people to speak, however, we did include that the chair of the meeting could move to two minutes per person allowing 15 speakers if necessary. In order to make sure many voices were heard, the board also opted to not allow any person to yield their time to any other person. This way no one person collected everyone’s time and wound up speaking for 20 or more minutes.

PRIORITY

Keeping in mind our library represents our community, during our discussions, we considered if a large number of people requested to speak, who do we most want to hear. Should a group

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from outside of the service area come in, would they monopolize the discussion and squash local residents' opinions? Therefore, we added a caveat where normally requests to speak would be granted in the order a patron signed in, however, priority may be given to residents of the library taxing district. We further added that in the event that not everyone was able to speak, then they would be considered signed in for the next meeting. This was to allow everyone an opportunity to speak on something they felt passionately about, but at the same time allow meetings to move forward. If someone feels passionately enough to attend a board meeting twice for an opportunity to speak, clearly, they deserve to be heard.

THIS AND THATS

While not in our policy, procedurally we will put public comment at the beginning of each meeting agenda. This way, if people felt the need to speak about something coming up on the agenda, their voice could be heard before board members vote. Additionally, this public comment time is designed for stating comments only. The policy was written to state that the board will not respond to questions or requests for action from any speaker and that this was the only time during the meeting for comments. Both of these were included in order to allow board business to proceed and to allow time for the board to process any comments through thoughtful deliberation. Other boards utilizing consent agendas may want to consider placing commentary after they have conducted their routine business.

We also considered what happens if no one was present when public comment was announced, but then showed up 10 minutes into the meeting. Since we allow for 30 minutes, do we need to pause and allow them to speak? Again trying to get ahead of potential issues, the board included that participants must sign in 5 minutes before the meeting begins. While this new policy may not cover every scenario, we feel we are one step forward in being prepared for the worst. Of course, we are also still hoping for the best and that this is just a policy that never needs to be used.

Julie Elmore, 2022 ARSL Advocacy Committee

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