



Breaking Up with Robert's Rules: Alternate Parliamentary Procedures

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The Legal Framework

SECTION 5-7-250. Council meetings; rules and procedures for meetings; freedom of information; emergency ordinances.

(a) The council, after public notice shall meet regularly at least once in every month at such times and places as the council may prescribe by rule. Special meetings may be held on the call of the mayor or of a majority of the members.

(b) The council shall determine its own rules and order of business and shall provide for keeping minutes of its proceedings which shall be a public record.

(c) Procedures for meetings of a municipal governing body shall not conflict with the provisions of the general laws of the state with regard to freedom of information.

(d) *[Emergency Ordinances]*



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The Presentation Framework

- Why does a meeting need rules?
- What does Robert's Rules of Order actually say?
- Why is Robert's a poor fit for a municipal council?
- Should you consider different rules, and if so what should they say?



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The Need for (at least some) Rules

- A council is made up of different individuals, often with very different views, but it still has to decide issues together and as a body.
- Rules keep meetings orderly, fair, and predictable.
- Each member knows how to be heard, and how a decision gets made.
- Rules protect the public's confidence in the outcome.



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Policy Goals for Effective Rules

- Let the majority act, but only after meaningful deliberation.
- Protect the minority's right to be heard.
- Give every member a voice.
- Keep meetings efficient and understandable.
- These goals often pull against each other; good rules should balance them.



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Meet Robert's Rules

- Written in 1876 by an Army engineer, Henry Robert.
- Modeled on the U.S. House of Representatives.
- The default "parliamentary procedure" for groups nationwide.
- Many South Carolina municipalities adopt it by reference.



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The Big Topics in Robert's

- Quorum: The minimum number of members required to do business. Every set of rules has to answer the question of how many members are required, and who counts?
- Motions: A proposal to act, either substantively (the main motion) or procedurally. This is where Robert's gets complicated fast.
- Debate and Voting: The process for acting on motions.



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Why Not Robert's?

- It is designed for large assemblies, with dozens or even hundreds of members. Formality is the point when the room is big, but a seven-member council is different.
- Robert's has over seventy distinct motions and a "ladder of precedence" that ranks them. Members shouldn't need a manual to ask a question.
- Debates stall on procedure instead of substance, and residents in the audience often can't follow what's happening.
- Robert's says nothing about South Carolina law.



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Proposed Simplified Rules

- Keeps the bones of Robert's – quorum, motions, debate, and voting, while cutting the complexity.
- Built around South Carolina law.
- Has three components: (1) the Rules themselves, to be adopted by ordinance; (2) a supplement for context and additional guidance; and (3) a motion reference table to be used in meetings.
- Customizable for your own city or town, with assistance from the Association.



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Agenda

- The clerk prepares the agenda, under the direction of the mayor, manager, or administrator.
- The mayor, or any [two] or more members, can place an item on a regular agenda, with advance notice to the clerk.
- Anything referred, postponed, or left unfinished rolls onto a future agenda automatically.



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Quorum

- The quorum rules follow quorum requirements under South Carolina law.
- For example, the quorum is almost always counted against the entire authorized membership of the body, without reductions for ordinary vacancies.
- In addition, the South Carolina courts have held that a member with an ethical conflict cannot be counted in determining whether a quorum exists.



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Motions

- The model rules have only 12 motions, which should cover nearly every need in a South Carolina municipality.
- There is no ladder of precedence. Instead, the model rules provide that motions will normally be resolved in the reverse order of which they were made.
- The presiding officer is given a fair amount of flexibility, but his or her procedural decisions are always subject to appeal to the whole body.



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The Proposed Motions

- Main motion
- Amend
- Table
- Postpone
- Refer
- Call the question
- Point of Order
- Appeal
- Reconsider
- Executive Session
- Recess
- Adjourn



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How a Motion Works

- A member makes a motion: “I move to approve the contract with ABC Services.”
- Another member seconds it, a signal that it’s worth discussing. Some motions need no second.
- The presiding officer restates the motion so everyone knows what’s on the floor.
- Members debate, and potentially make secondary motions.
- Council votes, and the presiding officer announces the result. The clerk records the motion, the vote, and the outcome in the minutes.



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Table v Postpone

- These two motions often get mixed up; our rules make the difference clear.
- Table: Set a matter aside briefly to handle something urgent in the same meeting (like a scheduled public hearing). Anything still on the table when you adjourn dies.
- Postpone: Push a matter to a later time or meeting.
- Rule of thumb: Staying tonight? Table. Coming back another day? Postpone.



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Voting

- All members must vote, unless they have an ethical conflict.
- Decisions pass by majority of those present and voting.
- Most votes are taken by roll call or show of hands, recorded in the minutes by name.
- A tie vote fails.



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Local Implementation

- If the model rules work for you, you may adopt by ordinance.
- There are a few blanks to complete.
- You can customize the rules, subject to South Carolina law, to fit your council's size and traditional practices. For example, if you want a ladder of precedence, you can do that.
- The Association can help you tailor and adopt it.



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Takeaways

- Simpler rules make for better meetings.
- The rules should be in plain language so everyone can follow.
- South Carolina law should be built in, not bolted on.
- The goals are efficiency, fairness, and transparency, with less friction.



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