

call to order

Public Comment

*—J. Michael Blaska, Parliamentarian & Chief of Staff,
Wisconsin Counties Association*



County boards are charged with making decisions on many controversial issues such as iron and frac sand mines, new taxes and multi-million dollar structures to name a few. These types of issues often stir the emotions of the general public.

Members of the public have called and complained that their county board would not allow them to speak at the county board meeting. The obvious response is, “well of course you can’t speak at the board meeting, you are not a member of the board.”

I am unable to speak on the floor of the Wisconsin State Assembly or Senate. If I have an issue with a particular bill or legislation, then it is my job to contact my representative or any state elected representative.

The county board is under no obligation to allow public comment at a county board or committee meeting. Wisconsin has a representative form of government in that citizens elect county board supervisors to represent us. If someone has an issue, they can contact their elected representative. In Wisconsin, there are large boards of supervisors compared to other states that have a commission form of government with five or seven members. The average size of Wisconsin boards is twenty-two with the smallest at seven and the largest at thirty-eight members. With larger boards, the public has access to more county board supervisors.

I have never been a strong advocate for allowing public comment at board meetings. It sends the wrong message. It gives the public a false sense that they are contributing to the outcome at that meeting. By the time a resolution or ordinance gets to the board, the details have been worked out, a solution has been found or a compromise has been reached. If the board is interested in public comment and value the public’s input, it occurs at the committee level.

A good process is to refer all resolutions and ordinances to the appropriate standing committee. Wisconsin counties utilize a strong committee structure to conduct their business. The majority of the policy formation work is done at the committee level. Committees may hold hearings, consider input from county staff and the public, debate and amend as appropriate. It is at the committee level where public comment can have the most impact prior to the committee making a recommendation to the full board.

The public should be required to register when public comment is allowed. A registration form should require a name, address, subject matter, and whether they are for, against or speaking for informational purposes only.

County board rules should specify the time allotted for each member of the public – two, three or five minutes. The rules should also specify if public comment is an agenda item and whether comments are limited to items on the agenda or on any subject matter. Some counties

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allow the public to comment on every item on the agenda when the agenda item is up for discussion. When that is allowed, I would argue the only difference between a board member and the public is that the board member can vote and receive per diem.

When public comment is allowed, members of the board should not be allowed to ask questions of the speakers. When an exchange of questions is allowed, it could be considered debate, which should be limited to board members. In addition, open meetings law violations could occur if dialogue is allowed with questions back and forth between board members and the general public when commenting on a matter not on the agenda.

Holding a public hearing is different than allowing public comment. Wisconsin State Statute requires counties to hold public hearings prior to adopting certain policies. A registration process should also be used for public hearings and it is permissible for board members to ask questions of the speaker.

Public comment is very important to the legislative process. I prefer it be done at the committee level and through letters, phone calls, questionnaires, and constituent meetings.

That said, public comment on *Call to Order* is always welcome.

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