

BOARD MEETING ENGAGEMENT

WHY ARE MEETINGS IMPORTANT?

Conservation District (CD) board meetings are where CD business and decisions are made and provide an opportunity for the public to participate, which is required by Montana state law. For these reasons, and many more, it is important that meetings are run effectively with strong leadership from the chair.

Issues with supervisor attendance and engagement negatively affect a CD's ability to operate and could lead to larger issues within the context of the board's fiduciary responsibilities. Addressing any attendance issues early on is important; and according to MCA 76-15-312, three unexcused absences can result in the removal of a CD supervisor. If attendance is not seen as a priority, it can become a widespread issue amongst the whole board by creating a culture of "non-meeting". Tardiness can also be a problem. Even if attendance and tardiness aren't issues, engagement at your CD board meeting can still be.

THE CHAIR MUST LEAD

Although the CD board makes decisions by consensus of the full board, the chair takes the lead and facilitates all board meetings. A skillful chair can keep the board focused and the meeting moving forward while encouraging every board member to participate equally. To assist in this task, CD chairs must be familiar with and use Sturgis Parliamentary procedures when presiding over the meeting.

If meetings habitually "go long" with little to no decisions being made, this could be an indication that a different meeting format may need to be incorporated, or the chair may need to strengthen their skills in meeting facilitation. If there are severe issues with meeting effectiveness, with no improvement over time, the board may want to consider electing a new chair. The same considerations for leadership and skills should also be given to the vice chair position. If the chair is absent, the vice chair should be able to step in and lead seamlessly.

FOLLOW THE AGENDA

The agenda serves as your public notice and is the backbone of your board meeting. Adding topics to the meeting means adding them to the agenda, which needs adequate public notice (see Open Meeting Act document for more information). That, by default, means additional items cannot be added during or immediately before the meeting. The chair's job is to follow the agenda and facilitate staying on time by managing speakers. Supervisors should also be aware of time constraints and respectfully keep their comments focused and succinct, so all supervisors have time to participate. Use the governance calendar to create your agenda and ensure that all necessary action items are included.



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MANAGING THE AGENDA

Do your CD board meetings take longer than they should? Allowing adequate discussion is important, but so is efficiency. A meeting facilitation tool is to add the time that each topic will be introduced to the agenda, always allowing more time than you think it will take. Adding times will help the chair move the meeting along, let the planners know if there is too much content to cover in any one board meeting, and lets the public know when topics of interest will be discussed.

Another tool used by many organizations and government entities is a consent agenda format. This format makes space on an agenda for discussion and decision-making instead of just reporting. A consent agenda bundles all minutes, committee reports, and other informational documents and packages them together. Board members are expected to read through the items before the meeting and come ready to approve those items with one motion and vote. As a note, financial statements are not part of a consent agenda.

COMMIT TO A COMMITTEE

A committee is a subdivision of the CD. With some exceptions, committees can consist of board members as well as other individuals including associate supervisors. The committee's task is to investigate details, research options, discuss issues, and make recommendations to the full board for consideration. Committees are advisory in nature and do not have the authority to make decisions for the board. All committees should take minutes of their meetings, and they should be publicly noticed. Minutes should be included on the agenda of regular board meetings and reviewed and approved by a consensus of the full board. They can be included in a consent agenda or as standalone agenda items. When used strategically, with clear board-approved outlines of their scope of work and authority, the use of committees can significantly improve the efficiency of regular board meetings.

ONBOARD YOUR BOARD

Board engagement starts with the onboarding process. Invest time getting new board members up-to-speed, provide information on your CD's mission, board member and administration roles, and statutes governing the board. Establish open lines of communication and make sure new members have the technology needed to participate in meetings. Investing in new board members establishes relationships and gives new members an opportunity to "buy-in" to the CD's mission and goals.



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HYBRIDIZE

No one can deny the power of in-person interactions. Even so, poor weather and road conditions mean meetings may lack a quorum. The lack of a quorum can discourage engaged board members, which can lead to future disengagement and attendance issues. Low board meeting attendance may also lead to CD business not being conducted properly, such as via e-mail. Hybridizing your meetings means providing electronic options for board members as well as others while still offering an in-person option. In order to hybridize your meetings, you will need the right technology (WIFI, webcam, microphone, monitor, virtual meeting subscription, conference line etc.). Some board members may also need training and their own technology for home offices. Hybridizing your meetings may also encourage more public participation, which can make your board meetings more engaging and keep board members informed. See the Meeting Hybridization 10-minute training for more information.

LOOKING FORWARD TO YOUR MEETING?

Supervisor engagement is the foundation of successful meetings and a CD's ability to make a positive impact in its community. Sometimes, board members attend meetings but may not be engaged, and, in some cases, a lack of engagement can cause attendance issues. While the chair's job is to facilitate meeting engagement, it is every supervisor's responsibility to be personally engaged and encourage their peers to speak up, participate, and volunteer. One great way to formally do this is to include supervisor reports in your meetings. This allows every supervisor to report on relevant issues and information and to engage in their CD meeting beyond just voting.

Disclaimer: This information is provided for general information purposes only and does not constitute legal advice. The information provided should not be used as a substitute for a legal opinion from your county attorney or otherwise retained and qualified legal counsel. If you need advice regarding a specific legal situation, contact your legal counsel.



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Exercise: Board Member Survey

Use this survey at a board meeting to assess board engagement and opinions. Every supervisor should fill out the following survey and return to your staff. Have the staff compile the results and review at the next meeting.

1. On a scale from 1 to 5, 5 being high, what level of preparation and participation do you dedicate to board meetings?

1 2 3 4 5

2. How well do you understand your role as a board member? Are expectations clear?

3. What would you change about the board meetings?

4. Could better organization, including online tools, help you manage tasks?

YES NO

If yes, what tools do you recommend?

5. Do you think you could describe your CD's mission and accomplishments in three minutes (known as an elevator speech)?

6. What should board members do more of? (Examples: site visits, public outreach, member recruitment, committee membership, etc.)

7. What actions should your CD take to keep developing and inspiring your board? (Examples: diversity of board recruits, virtual meeting options, or board education).

