

Using a Consent Agenda

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One of the best-kept secrets of efficient boards and assemblies is the consent agenda, also known as the consent calendar. Contrary to popular myth, *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised* does not require that every single item be handled with the full pomp and circumstance of a motion, second, debate, and vote. Some decisions are either routine, or are so widely supported that to make approval a separate action would bog the group down.

Enter the consent agenda. By the adoption of a special rule of order allowing for the consent agenda process, a board or assembly can group as many items together as they desire, and adopt them all at once without debate. The consent agenda can be a powerful tool for a board or assembly that is required to give approvals to items that are routine, non-controversial or both.

The secret of the consent agenda's success is twofold: choosing the right items to put on the consent agenda, and educating members so they know how to handle the process. If either piece is missing, the consent agenda loses its effectiveness.

What should be put on the consent agenda? The first time the process is used, it will feel new and members may tend to be overcautious. For most associations, I recommend that only "no-brainers" go on the consent agenda the first few times, so that members can get used to the procedure. It's better to deal with only one or two items and use the process correctly than to start with five or six items and get confused. Approval of the minutes is usually a good item to begin with. If the board or other assembly has been dealing with an issue for some time and all members are familiar with the implications, final approval of that proposal would also be a good item for the consent agenda. Routine matters such as membership acceptance and non-controversial appointments are also ideal candidates.

Where in the meeting should you place the consent agenda? I recommend scheduling it at the beginning, so that the meeting can start out actively supporting its purpose: to make decisions and take actions leading to fulfillment of the association's mission. Be sure to explain the process clearly ahead of time so the members know what to expect.

Here's how a typical consent agenda is handled: The chair places the consent agenda before the assembly and asks, "Does anyone wish to remove any item from the consent agenda?" Since any member who doesn't trust the process can easily remove any or all of the items, it is important (at least at first) that the items not be confrontational or controversial. Similarly, if any member wants a separate vote on any item, or simply wants to discuss an item, that item must be removed from the consent agenda. It's all or nothing. (For that reason, when minutes are to be placed on a consent agenda, it's a good idea to provide the draft minutes well in advance of the meeting; that way, you can include the corrected version on the consent agenda.)

It helps to have each item numbered, so that a member can simply call out "Number 3," or whatever number they want to remove. In such a case, the chair responds: "Number 3 is removed." (At that time, the decision should be made whether to take up the issue immediately after the consent agenda is adopted, or to place it under its "regular" category heading for that meeting.)

The chair then asks, "Are there any other items to be removed?" If there are none, the chair states: "Items numbered (listing remaining item numbers) are before you. If there is no objection, these items will be adopted." (Pause, to see if there is an objection.) "There being no objection, these items are adopted."

Although an issue may be named by its number during the consent agenda process, the minutes should include the items that were adopted along with the full text of the resolutions or other actions, to provide a complete record of the proceedings.

Parliamentary authorities differ on how to handle consent agendas. Rather than leave it up to varying definitions, I recommend that the body adopt the following special rule of order:

"A consent agenda may be presented by the president at the beginning of a meeting. Items may be removed from the consent agenda on the request of any one member. Items not removed may be adopted by general consent without debate. Removed items may be taken up either immediately after the consent agenda or placed later on the agenda at the discretion of the assembly."

A consent agenda can empower your assembly to take care of routine issues efficiently and easily so you can reserve time for more urgent matters – and make faster progress toward your goals.