



Memorandum

TO: RULES AND OPEN
GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

FROM: Councilmember Cohen
Councilmember Davis

**SUBJECT: EFFECTIVE COUNCIL DISCUSSION
AND DEBATE**

DATE: February 11, 2021

Approved

Date 02/10/21

RECOMMENDATION

Improve the efficiency and effectiveness of Council discussions that will build consensus, inform decision-making and improve public engagement by implementing the following:

1. Agenda items should have an orderly speaker rotation among Councilmembers that starts with an initial limit of 10 minutes from each Councilmember who wishes to speak followed by successive rounds of discussions in 5-minute increments.
2. The Rules and Open Government Committee should review the order of items on the agenda and place items that may generate considerable public comment to minimize the uncertainty of timing and excessive waiting. The "Time Certain" designation shall be used when appropriate to aid the public in scheduling their participation in providing input to the council on key policy discussions.

BACKGROUND

The overall effectiveness of our Council can be vastly improved by bringing some simple parliamentary procedures forward. As we heard from the public at our February 3rd committee meeting (and have heard many times previously), the uncertainty of when an item will be discussed leads to less public engagement and more dissatisfaction with the Council as a governing body.

There are typically two types of Council agenda items: reports from staff and policy decisions. In a public meeting setting, the purpose of each of these items is different. A report is the chance for staff to update Council regarding progress on their workplans or goals. Councilmembers should use the time to ask clarifying questions and make some statements that express their values. By keeping focused, these questions can be asked within a fixed amount of time so that the overall agenda doesn't get too far off track. If additional time is needed, Councilmembers can meet with staff individually outside of the meeting.

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For policy decisions, a back and forth debate is particularly important, because the ultimate goal is building majority support for a certain point of view, refining the motion to create better policy, and making sure everyone understands all points of view and implications of the vote. Hearing from more Councilmembers in a shorter period of time facilitates better debate and may help lead to a decision in a shorter period of time by allowing the Council to learn whether or not there is a consensus building toward a majority vote. The result would be more efficient governance and better public engagement.

Over the years, there have been discussions about whether to limit the time that individual Councilmembers can speak on an agenda item. There is a general feeling that on important issues, nobody should be limited to a certain amount of time. On the other hand, in order to facilitate an efficient and effective debate among the entire Council in order to build consensus, making sure everyone has an opportunity to participate within a certain period of time will foster goodwill and better teamwork. On some items, it is important that all 11 members of the council have an opportunity to ask questions and respond to one another.

Our Council is very cordial, with each member pressing their button (raising their hand in Zoom) and waiting their turn to speak. It is important to continue to foster this positive environment. Limiting each member's time to 10 minutes initially and then 5 minutes subsequently when there is another member waiting will facilitate a back and forth discussion that allows each member to react to other members' questions and comments and creates a forum for healthy debate and discussion.

None of these recommendations would supplant normal Roberts Rules of Order. For example, Points of Order/Privilege or Motions to end debate or Call the Question would still be entertained at any time during discussion.

The signers of this memorandum have not had, and will not have, any private conversation with any other member of the City Council, or that member's staff, concerning any action discussed in the memorandum, and that each signer's staff members have not had, and have been instructed not to have, any such conversation with any other member of the City Council or that member's staff.