

Chairing a Town Committee

A Guide for Volunteers

SERVING AS A FALMOUTH TOWN COMMITTEE CHAIR

You have been happily serving on a committee for the Town and Falmouth and enjoy working with your fellow committee members. They feel the same way about you, and they notice how well- prepared and collegial you are. Perhaps you volunteer to be the next committee chair or members of the committee recruit you to take a leadership position. Whether you have lots of experience leading committees or have never been a committee chair, you might have some concerns taking on this leadership role. Fear not! Your peers see you as a leader, and with some preparation and a caring attitude you can be an effective and productive Chair. Here are some suggestions for chairing a committee and holding a productive meeting that may be helpful.



Tasks of the Chair

Work closely with your staff liaison to:

- Prepare an agenda
- Take attendance
- Ask for public comment
- See that minutes are taken
- Maintain meeting decorum
- Assign tasks and set deadlines
- Retain record of documents
- Follow laws & procedures

constitute a quorum and note who is present and absent in the minutes. Remember, you can rely heavily on the committee's designated staff liaison. They are there to help you with your volunteer efforts.

MEETING MANNERS

Almost all committee members and chairs try to be prepared, respectful, and good listeners. Nonetheless, committee members can have strong feelings on certain matters, and the issues being considered by the committee may be contentious. If meetings become too heated, if a single member comes to dominate discussion to the exclusion of others, or if committee members are interrupting one another, then the chair should respectfully and kindly intervene. Without good meeting etiquette the committee cannot function at its best, and committee members can become disillusioned and frustrated. It is helpful to sometimes ask people to speak in sentences and not in paragraphs if the discussion needs to reach some sort of conclusion at a meeting.



YOUR FIRST MEETING

Before your first meeting, check in with the Committee and Council liaisons to prepare an agenda with items relevant to past business, new business, and any other matters you think should be covered at the meeting. It's helpful to all

committee members to try to prepare an agenda that can be reasonably completed within the established time frame of your meetings. If the committee cannot complete discussion, then move the uncompleted items to the agenda for the next meeting. You are the person who begins the meeting, so you should arrive early and greet your fellow committee members. Ask for a volunteer to take minutes of the meeting or ensure the designated staff liaison can assist with the minutes. Make certain that enough members of the Committee are present to



GETTING THINGS DONE

Has the Committee formed a consensus that something more needs to be done about an agenda item? If so, make a record of it, and then ask for a volunteer to work on this task and also set a date for its completion.

Remember, the staff liaisons are also there to offer assistance. If no one volunteers, it will be up to you to facilitate the discussion which will lead to either you taking the assignment or encouraging someone on the committee to do so. Otherwise, things have a tendency to remain unresolved, especially if it is complex or there is a thorny problem. Finally, at the end of the meeting, make a "To Do" list with assignments for each uncompleted item, and a date for completion. Make sure you follow through to determine that things are getting done.



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LAWS AND PROCEDURE

You should also be generally aware of the rules and procedures that govern a Committee meeting. Rules and procedures are not traps for the unwary; they are designed to help provide fairness and transparency and uniformity to

Town committee meetings. First, Town committee meetings are public by law. So, what happens during meetings, and the documents generated during committee work, is public. While committee members may discuss matters outside a public meeting, as it sometimes necessary to complete tasks efficiently, by law no more than two committee members may confer outside the public meeting. 13 M.R.S. Sections 402, 403. Communication via e-mail, text, letters, and other recorded means is also considered a public document so it will be important to create a file for these records. Remember, you can also rely on the staff liaison to assist in maintaining this record. If you copy them on your communications, they will take the responsibility to ensure the communication is kept in a safe place as a public record.

In addition, it may be that something the Committee does requires a motion and a vote. For instance, at the beginning of each meeting the Committee should have reviewed the minutes from the last meeting, usually sent to the



Committee in advance of the meeting. The minutes should be reviewed, and if accurate, then one of the committee members should make a motion to “accept” the minutes, the motion needs to be “seconded,” and then a vote of those in favor of the motion must be tallied and recorded. Why is all this necessary? To help ensure that the minutes, a public record of what occurred at the meeting, are accurate.

VIRTUAL MEETINGS

Finally, at least as of December 2020, the COVID-19 virus is active, and face-to-face Town meetings are not being held. Most meetings are being held “virtually” by using Zoom or another virtual meeting technology. The Town has guidance on how to use Zoom and other virtual meeting technology on its website (see resources below).



Helpful Resources

- Find Committee pages, minutes, agendas, staff contacts, archived files, and current information at the Town of Falmouth website: www.falmouthme.org
- Subscribe to the Town’s News & Announcement E-alerts, your Committee list, and other subscription lists to get regular e-mail updates about Town business.
- A Guide to Virtual Meetings can be found at: www.falmouthme.org/home/pages/a-guide-to-participating-in-virtual-public-meetings.
- Stay connected via our social media pages
 - Facebook: facebook.com/FalmouthME
 - Twitter: [@MaineFalmouth](https://twitter.com/MaineFalmouth)
 - Instagram: [@myfavoritefalmouth](https://instagram.com/myfavoritefalmouth)
- Falmouth’s Town Charter & Ordinances: www.falmouthme.org/community-development-code-enforcement-division/pages/town-charter-ordinances

