



call to order

Session

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

Wisconsin county boards are required to meet the third Tuesday in April after the election to organize and transact business. This generally includes taking the oath of office, electing officers, and adopting procedural rules for the two-year term. Most boards adopt their own procedural rules and then adopt the latest edition of *Robert's Rules of Order (Roberts)* as their parliamentary authority. In order to enforce or implement procedural rules, it is important to define a “session.”

It is important because *Roberts* states that it is improper to *Postpone* something beyond the next regular session. It also states that a motion that was defeated, or *Postponed Indefinitely*, cannot be brought up a second time during the same session.

To define a session, it is also important to define a “meeting,” “recess,” and “adjournment.” *Roberts* defines a “meeting” of an assembly as a single official gathering of its members to transact business for a length of time where there is no cessation of proceedings unless for a short recess.

A “recess” is a short intermission or break that does not end the meeting. Proceedings are immediately resumed at the point they were interrupted.

And finally, an “adjournment” terminates the meeting and may terminate the session. If another meeting has been set for a definite time to continue the same business or order of business, the motion to *Adjourn* does not end the session.

Have you heard the term *Adjourn Sine Die* (pronounced “sign-ee dye-ee)? The translation is

“adjourn without day.” In practice, this means a group adjourns without the expectation of meeting again. For example, after several months of meeting, a task force or commission created for a special, specific purpose might *Adjourn Sine Die* when they have completed their work and there is no need to meet again.

A session of an assembly, unless otherwise defined by the bylaws or governing rules of the organization, is a meeting or series of connected meetings devoted to a single order of business, program, agenda, or announced purpose. When there is more than one meeting, each meeting is scheduled for the purpose of continuing business at the point where it was left off at the previous meeting.

Roberts goes on to state that in a “permanent society whose bylaws provide for regular weekly, monthly, or quarterly meetings that go through an established order of business in a single afternoon or evening, each meeting of this kind normally completes a separate session...”

With this explanation and the definition, one could easily come to the conclusion, as some do, that each county board meeting constitutes a session. The reason that county board meetings are not scheduled for the purpose of continuing business at the point where it left off at the previous meeting. There is a whole new agenda for each meeting, which does not fall into the definition of session.

If each county board meeting is a session, then it would be out of order to *Postpone* something to the next meeting. Further, every time a question was defeated,

it could be brought up at the next meeting and this is not practical.

The *Roberts'* definition of session is easily applied to state or national organizations that hold annual or biennial conventions. Each convention, which may have several meetings for several days, is considered a session.

It is easy to argue that a session should coincide with the term of the county board members. Members gather on the third Tuesday of April to elect officers and procedural rules for their term of office, which is two years. Furthermore, resolutions are often numbered numerically with the calendar year for the two-year period. Motions are often *Postponed Definitely* to the next meeting or subsequent meetings. In addition, once an item has been defeated, members

should not be able to renew the motion at the next or subsequent meeting, which they could do if each meeting was a session.

Roberts is designed to apply to all types of meetings, but its application is not always suitable for governmental meetings. The term session is subject to interpretation and *Roberts* acknowledges that any organization has the right to determine what constitutes a session. Every board, in adopting their procedural rules, should define a session. County boards have defined a session as one year. They also could define it as each meeting, the two years coinciding with the term of the members, or whatever the board determines.

In my opinion, a one-year or two-year session makes the most sense for county boards in Wisconsin.

Source: Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, 11th Edition



Stafford Rosenbaum, LLP is ***proud to represent*** the **Wisconsin Counties Association**, the **Wisconsin Towns Association** and the **League of Wisconsin Municipalities** as amici curiae (friends of the court) in the *Murr v. Wisconsin* lawsuit challenging St. Croix County zoning ordinances.

The case was heard by the Supreme Court of the United States on March 20th, 2017.

Could this affect you? Get the case overview and latest details at: staffordlaw.com/murr