



CITY OF BLOOMINGTON COMMON COUNCIL

AGENDA
SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON COUNCIL PROCESSES
WEDNESDAY | 12:00 PM
15 May 2024

*Hooker Conference Room (#245), Showers Building, 401 N. Morton Street
The public may also access the meeting at the following link:*

<https://bloomington.zoom.us/j/81775421856?pwd=4ZoxLPCIT2UKhe12aBdEzV8Z2Z3rQgg.1>

Chair: Isabel Piedmont-Smith

1. Agenda summation
2. Types and Frequency of Council Meetings
 - a. Proposal to Council regarding scheduling of Regular Sessions and discussion meetings after the summer recess
 - b. Recommendations regarding criteria and process for scheduling such meetings
 - c. Recommendations regarding structure of discussion meetings
 - d. Public comment
3. Committee Work Plan for Remainder of 2024
 - a. Review of Board and Commission purpose/mission statements (possible Title 2 changes)
 - b. Requirements for Annual Reports from Boards and Commissions (possible Title 2 changes)
 - c. Board and Commission member code of conduct
 - d. Other goals for the year
 - e. Public comment
4. Updates
 - a. New position in Clerk's Office
 - b. Upcoming proposal to merge transportation-related commissions
 - c. Board and Commission training (liaisons and members)
5. Other business
6. Adjournment

Introduction:

In striving for greater effectiveness and consensus-building within our City Council, it's imperative to assess our current meeting structure and explore alternative methods that foster collaboration and forward thinking.

(Some) Pain Points of Business Meetings under Robert's Rules:

1. Lengthy and rigid procedures often stifle open dialogue and creativity.
2. Emphasis on formalities can alienate certain members and deter meaningful participation.
3. Strict adherence to parliamentary rules may prioritize process over substance, hindering the exploration of innovative solutions. This also favors those who master the process rather than e.g. those with the best ideas.
4. Tendency towards adversarial dynamics, undermining the spirit of cooperation and compromise.
5. TIME – much of it is wasted on procedures and motions, often unnecessary but the core issue is that we as a body do not often have enough time on a week to week basis to collectively engage with the set of issues we are looking at.

Consensus-Building Activities (CBAs) as an alternative:

Drawing from contemporary organizational literature, such as "The Consensus Building Handbook" by Lawrence Susskind and "Getting to Yes" by Roger Fisher and William Ury, consensus-building activities emphasize collaborative problem-solving and mutual understanding.

CBA encourages active listening, brainstorming, and the exploration of shared interests to reach mutually beneficial outcomes.

By fostering a culture of trust and cooperation, CBA cultivates a more inclusive decision-making process and promotes buy-in from all stakeholders.

The goal is not necessarily to arrive at a unanimous decision but to find a solution that everyone can support or at least live with. I.e. a solution ~~problem~~ that no one feels the need to vote "no" to.

Some key aspects of consensus building include:

- Active Listening: Ensuring that all participants feel heard and understood, which can help in identifying common ground.
- Open Dialogue: Encouraging open and honest discussion about different viewpoints to understand the interests behind positions.
- Inclusive Participation: Making sure all stakeholders or affected parties have a chance to contribute to the discussion.
- Problem Solving: Focusing on finding solutions that address the concerns of all parties rather than winning an argument.

- Flexibility: Being open to changing one's position in light of new information or understanding others' perspectives better but similarly, being flexible with approaches and rules so as to allow all of the above.

There are lots of other alternatives. I just think that CBAs may be the best fit. Or at least a good base for us to riff on.

How Might This Work for the Bloomington City Council?

First, Consensus Building Activities (CBAs) should not or perhaps cannot (?) replace current business meetings governed by Robert's Rules of Order for formal decision-making and legal compliance. Instead, CBAs should be used as a complementary process, particularly in the following scenarios:

- Complex or contentious issues: When the council faces complex policy decisions or particularly contentious issues where a broad consensus is beneficial. For example our recent resolution calling for humanitarian aid in Gaza.
- Strategic planning: For long-term strategic planning where input from various stakeholders can provide valuable insights and foster community buy-in. For example our discussions on the convention center.
- Community-sensitive decisions: In cases where decisions have a significant impact on the community, and there is a need for deep community engagement and input. For example ideas around closure of Kirkwood.
- Innovative solutions seeking: When seeking innovative or creative solutions for city problems, and a diverse range of ideas and perspectives is desired. For example legislation aimed at helping those experiencing homelessness.
- Enhancing Public Trust and Transparency: To enhance public trust and transparency in the decision-making process by involving community members and stakeholders more directly.

CBAs would typically be scheduled separately from regular business meetings. They could be planned as special sessions focused on specific topics, allowing for more in-depth discussion and a collaborative approach. Thinking of them in this way, we would not necessarily need to change Title 2 of municipal code to adopt an approach like this. We can simply use special sessions and structure them with CBA best practices in mind. Notably, we have already used CBA type activities with the Office of the Mayor on a handful of occasions and these have been relatively productive and efficient discussions.

The outcomes from these CBAs could then be brought to the formal council meetings for consideration and official action via formal resolutions, ordinances etc.

It's important to integrate CBAs into the city council's schedule in a way that complements and enhances the existing decision-making processes, without overburdening the council's agenda or disregarding the necessary formal procedures required for official actions.

Regular Working Sessions as Platforms for CBAs?

Implementation: The council could schedule regular working sessions or town hall meetings specifically dedicated to exploring topics through CBAs. These sessions would not be for making formal decisions but for open dialogue, brainstorming, and building consensus on various issues before they become formal agenda items or legislative proposals.

Format: Each session could focus on a specific theme or challenge facing the city, inviting input from council members, the mayor, residents, and relevant experts or stakeholders. The format could be flexible, adapting consensus-building techniques to ensure productive and inclusive discussions. These could range from small breakout groups to larger facilitated discussions, all aimed at gathering diverse perspectives and finding common ground.

Alternatively, we could set the agenda by saying that any topic that three people want to discuss be placed on the agenda. Then the president uses discretion and codified power to determine what is on agenda if too many things are wanting to be discussed. This could be done before the meetings.

Outcome: The ideas and consensus formed during these sessions could be documented and used as a foundation for drafting future legislation or council actions. This proactive approach to legislation development ensures that proposals are well-considered, broadly supported, and reflective of community needs and values.

These meetings can include updates by invitation, public participation, workshopping, small group discussions etc. Or they could be done in a town hall format. Lots of options.

Focused Regular Meetings for Efficient Legislative Action

We could then streamline our business meetings to only include: first readings, public comment relevant to those things being read for first readings, second readings, and introductions of any resolution. By concentrating regular council meetings on legislation that is ready for a vote – or that statutorily is required to be read twice, the council can ensure that these meetings are efficient and focused. This leaves more room in the council's schedule for the aforementioned working sessions, where the groundwork for these legislative items can be laid through CBAs.

Integration with CBAs: Before an item reaches the regular meeting agenda for a vote, it would have been thoroughly discussed and shaped through CBAs by the entire council. This means that by the time legislation is considered in a regular meeting, it has already undergone a comprehensive consensus-building process, increasing the likelihood of broad support and reducing the time spent on debate during the formal meeting.

Enhanced Visibility and Collaboration Through Mayor-Council Interactions

We could invite the mayor to all of these working sessions. Transforming the interactions between the mayor and the council into public, collaborative sessions ensures that governance is more transparent and inclusive. These sessions, possibly part of the regular working sessions or town halls, would allow the mayor and council to discuss initiatives, challenges, and opportunities in a format that encourages public participation and oversight.

Commented [1]: To allow discussion or public comment at first reading, we would have to amend BMC 2.04.300

Commented [2]: Perhaps not all legislation needs to go through the CBA process, for example routine interlocal agreements (e.g. Animal Shelter operations) or largely technical code updates (e.g. the 4 UDO ordinances we passed 4/10/24)

CBAs could be a central feature of these interactions, serving as a structured approach to discussing and resolving issues collaboratively. This would not only enhance the quality of the discussions but also ensure that a wider range of perspectives is considered in the decision-making process.

Making these interactions public and regular would increase accountability and ensure that decisions are made in the best interest of the community. The outcomes of these CBAs and collaborative sessions could be tracked and reported back to the public, further enhancing transparency and trust in the council's work.

Integrating CBAs into these aspects of the council's operations could transform how governance is conducted in Bloomington. It would encourage a more open, participatory, and effective approach to addressing the city's challenges, ensuring that decisions are made through a process that values consensus, inclusivity, and the collective wisdom of the community.

Proposed Hybrid Meeting Structure:

First week of every month Traditional business meetings utilizing Robert's Rules of Order for formal decision-making and procedural matters. We would only hold a second meeting by vote at the first business meeting. We should default to "not" having a meeting rather than defaulting to having one and having to dispense with it. This could be changed in code.

Intervening Weeks: Open-door consensus-building meetings focused on dialogue, idea-sharing, and collaborative problem-solving. These could happen on different days of the week and in different locations.

Consensus-building sessions may include structured activities such as facilitated discussions, workshops, and group exercises aimed at exploring innovative solutions and building consensus. By alternating between structured business meetings and consensus-building sessions, the council can strike a balance between efficiency and inclusivity, fostering a more dynamic and participatory decision-making process.

This hybrid approach leverages the strengths of both traditional parliamentary procedures and modern consensus-building techniques, promoting a culture of constructive engagement and collective problem-solving within the council.

Some things to read:

Susskind, L., & Cruikshank, J. L. (2006). *Breaking Robert's Rules: The New Way to Run Your Meeting, Build Consensus, and Get Results*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Susskind, L., McKernan, S., & Thomas-Larmer, J. (Eds.). (1999). *The Consensus Building Handbook: A Comprehensive Guide to Reaching Agreement*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Commented [3]: How would the record-keeping be handled? Would we ask the Clerk's Office to take minutes or less detailed memos to summarize the discussions?

Commented [4]: And if we only have time to read one of these, which one would you recommend? :-)

Fisher, R., Ury, W., & Patton, B. (2011). *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

Innes, J. E., & Booher, D. E. (2010). *Planning with Complexity: An Introduction to Collaborative Rationality for Public Policy*. London: Routledge.