

Commissioner's Comments: Meeting Protocol

By Dan Kirkbride, 4/22/09

With county commission activities much in the news these past few months perhaps some citizens have attended commission meetings for the first time. The formality of any public meeting can be daunting. I testified at an interim legislative committee last fall and had my own misgivings beforehand. Did I need to call ahead to get on the agenda? Did I need to sign in to speak? Should I sit in the front or the back of the room? Did I need to introduce myself when my turn came? I realized these were probably the same types of questions Platte County citizens have when they attend one of our meetings.

Platte County Commissioner meetings are similar to meetings of governmental agencies all over the state in that they are subject to the Wyoming Open Meetings Act. The overriding philosophy behind the act is that the public has a right to observe when public business is being conducted. This business is conducted in four types of meetings all of which may be accessed by the general populace.

Regular business meeting. In our case these meetings are held all day the first and third Tuesdays of each month with a quorum (at least two commissioners) assembled. These meetings allow for discussion, deliberation, the presentation of information and day to day administrative activities regarding public business. Collective decisions are made and actual votes taken by the board on various proposals, resolutions, regulations and rules that come forth.

Minutes of these meetings must be taken and published, the meetings must be open to the public and no members of the public in attendance need to give any information about themselves unless they seek recognition.

Special meeting. These meetings are called by the chairman for a time different than the regularly scheduled meetings. The same rules apply as with regular business meetings with a couple of additions. First, notice of the meeting must be given by posting and by notifying regular media outlets who have requested such notice. Second, only the item(s) that have been advertised can be considered.

Emergency meeting. Emergency meetings are also called by proper authority of the board and deal with *matters of serious immediate concern*. Again, the same general rules apply except that no public notice has to be given beyond a minimal reasonable effort. Additionally, the action taken here is only good for 48 hours before it must be taken up before a special or regular meeting of the board.

Non-Action meetings. Sometimes called workshops, these meetings require proper calling by the authority of the board and also allow for discussion, deliberation and the presentation of information. At these times, however, no collective decision, no collective commitment or no promise can be made by the board nor can there be an actual

vote. These meetings do not require notice though they are open to the public. Minutes must be taken but need not be published.

Executive session. During any of these meetings the board may ask that the room be cleared by a motion to move into executive session. Executive session allows a board to consider items for any one of 11 different reasons where confidentiality is of value. Matters concerning potential litigation, personnel or national security are among the reasons. The board need not publish the minutes from these sessions. It can only deliberate in executive session and must come out in public to make any collective decision.

I note the procedure for getting on the agenda of one of our meetings. Typically, citizens call the county clerk (322-3555) in advance to secure an appointment. These are usually in half hour increments. Latecomers may be added to the agenda when it is approved at the start of regular meeting or by a 2/3 vote of the commissioners once the meeting has begun. Sometimes citizens walk in off the street in hopes of having a concern heard. If planned business is completed, this may be allowed. It proceeds only at the board's discretion, however, as "walk-ins" don't allow for the media coverage or presentation of opposing views that would normally be part of public discussion.

Some of our meetings include a portion of time specifically devoted to public hearings where positive and negative views on particular subjects are intentionally sought. These hearings, often involving planning and zoning issues, are advertised well in advance in the legal section of the Platte County Record-Times.

The commissioners invite you to drop in on one of our meetings from time to time to see how business is being conducted and money is being spent and to help you understand the full range of issues dealt with by county government. And when you come, you can feel free to sit anywhere you like.

Dan Kirkbride, Chairman