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Action minutes serve the city best

By Ann Macfarlane (<https://jurassicparliament.com/author/ann-macfarlane/>) | April 18, 2015



(<https://jurassicparliament.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/city-council.png>) If your council, commission or committee takes detailed minutes of your meetings, we recommend switching to action minutes. Action minutes record what is done at a meeting and not what is said. At Jurassic Parliament, we believe that action minutes serve the city best.

It is natural for elected officials and representatives appointed to public bodies to savor and enjoy reading a record of what they said at meetings. As servants of the public who take their duties seriously, they speak with care and appreciate knowing that what they say has been heard. We believe, however, that the time and effort required to prepare detailed minutes that record specific remarks far exceed the value to the organization and the public. (Quasi-judicial hearings, of course, are another case entirely.)

When a body wants its remarks “on the record,” the scribe or clerk has to spend hours, and yet more hours, transcribing those remarks, reviewing them, editing them, and preparing them for publication. Those are costly hours, hours that in our current tough economic climate could be better spent on other duties.

Once the minutes are prepared, the members of the body have to invest time and energy in turn reviewing the draft minutes. Corrections or changes often have to be made, requiring yet more work. Sometimes there are differences of opinion about whether the content was correctly noted or not. Sometimes people are offended by the way their remarks were written down. All corrections have to be voted on formally by the body. The result can be a big

drawdown of time and emotional energy for modest return.

Finally, detailed minutes make it a challenge to locate key items and decisions within the pages and pages of text. The record is far less functional when it includes remarks as well as actions.

The argument is sometimes made that detailed minutes are important for legislative history. A group with this goal in mind should include recitals and findings about its intentions within the body of the legislation. Legislation speaks for itself.

Robert's Rules of Order offers a simple guideline: minutes should record what is done, not what is said. The minutes should include decisions made, postponements, referrals to committee. They may also include a note that discussion was held, if the group wants to have it clear that they did their due diligence on a given issue. By keeping the minutes to this core of essential facts, energy and effort can be devoted to the larger issues that face all our civic bodies today.

Many of our Washington cities already operate this way, particularly those who record their meetings on audiotape or video, so that anyone concerned can easily hear or see exactly how the discussion went. The website of the city of Issaquah offers fine samples of action minutes. We suggest that action minutes help a city council or public body keep focused on its future goals rather than on the record of its past. The savings in time and energy that accrue from a switch to action minutes are well worth the small sacrifice to individual amour propre.



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