



Consent Agenda: Finding Time for Your Council to Discuss What Matters

To free the Council's time for discussing matters the council can actually have an effect upon (i.e. the future), a consent agenda is a tool that eliminates as much as ½ hour or more of reviewing what has happened in the past - things the Council can do nothing about.

The consent agenda is a SINGLE ITEM that encompasses all the things the Council would normally approve with little comment. The minutes. The financials (yes, the financials!). Program reports or Executive Director reports. Perfunctory items such as formal approval of a contract that has already been talked to death at past meetings.

All those items combine to become one item for approval - The Consent Agenda.

Your Council agenda might therefore look like this:

Council Meeting Agenda

A. Welcome

B. Consent Agenda

1. Minutes of prior meeting
2. Contract update
3. Financial report
4. Project status report
5. Executive Director report

C. Discussion Item

Change recommended for XYZ Program

As a single item on the agenda, the consent agenda is voted on with a single vote - to approve the consent agenda. The key to the Consent Agenda's effectiveness, though, is that there is **NO DISCUSSION** of that item! That's right. All those things that would have taken 2 minutes here, 5 minutes there, 1 minute here - they are off the table in one vote.

The vote sounds like this:

Mary: I move to approve the consent agenda.

Ann: I'll second that motion.

Chair: There is a motion and a second to approve the consent agenda. All in favor, signify by saying "Aye."

That's it. **NO discussion.** And all those items that previously took ½ hour or more have now all been approved. Because there will be no discussion of these items individually, using a consent agenda requires that Council materials be provided in plenty of time for Council members to read them all. AND it requires that they read those materials!

Handling Items That Require Discussion or Clarification

Sometimes a Council member will read the Council materials related to the Consent Agenda, and he will have a question he would like answered before he votes. Or he feels the issue still requires discussion before he would feel comfortable voting. Those are two distinct scenarios, and they receive two distinct treatments.

Items for Clarification or Questions

For items that require clarification, or for which a Council member has a question, that clarification must be requested before the meeting. An item cannot be pulled from the consent agenda just to have a question answered. That sort of information gathering should happen **ONLY** before the meeting. In that way, the person being asked the question has time to gather the information. (There is nothing worse than having an issue tabled for the next meeting, only because a question could not be answered then and there.) In addition, that clarification can then be sent to all Council members, so everyone has the same information before the meeting. This is particularly useful for clarifying the minutes, which often takes absurd amounts of time that could otherwise be spent in more meaningful discussion.

Items for Discussion

If there is an item about which a Council member disagrees, or believes that item requires discussion, then a request is made at the Council table to pull that one item from the Consent Agenda, and to add it to the regular agenda as an item to be discussed. The remainder of the Consent Agenda items are voted on and approved, and only that single item is held out for discussion.

"Mr. Chairperson, I would like to request that the Item 'c' be pulled from the Consent Agenda for discussion."

"All in favor of approving the Consent Agenda, minus Item 'c,' signify by saying Aye."

Then Item 'C' will be discussed as a regular discussion item at the next Council meeting.

The Results

As a result of using a consent agenda, you will learn and your Council will grow. First, you will learn that much of what you have been spending time on at Council meetings is either perfunctory or has already happened and is therefore nothing the Council can do anything about. That is often an eye-opener for a Council. But then, your Council will have room to grow. You will have time to discuss the only thing that matters - the results you want to see in the community. The difference you want to be making. The values and parameters that will guide that work. The various ways you want to engage the community in that work, and the reasons for that engagement.

It is a Council holding itself accountable first for the end results it wants to see in the community, and then the means for accomplishing that.

And that may just make your meetings downright fun.