



It's a Board Meeting

Under the Open Meetings Act (OMA), the only place a township board can do its business is in a public meeting of the township board. Board meetings are the business meetings of the township board, and it's in the best interest of the township as a whole that the board conducts its business in an organized, productive and business-like manner.

The public, however, can interact with the township at any time, going to the township offices, phoning or emailing the township or specific officials, or visiting the township website—even buttonholing board members at the grocery store.

Township board meetings are not “town hall meetings” where everyone has a say in the decisions, and they are not meant to be extended complaint sessions or arguments. This is something that many people, including township boards themselves, lose sight of, especially nowadays when national politicians regularly use the term “town hall meeting” to refer to a public forum. But that does not represent the form of local representative government we have in Michigan.

A township board meeting is not a debate or equal time situation for the public or individual board members. The public does not have a vote in the board's decisions, and they have the legal entitlement to express their opinions at a board meeting only during the public comment period or a specific public hearing.

The idea that all concerns, complaints, opinions, etc., must be expressed at a board meeting is not mandated by law or recommended from a practical standpoint. By their nature, board meetings can put either “side” on the defensive in a very public place.

In reality, many issues the public brings to a board meeting are better handled—in the interests of the public— by township officials or staff in the office during business hours. Comments or questions raised by the public at board meetings are, for the most part, not specific township business that must be transacted by the board. They are often issues involving administrative procedures, and there is no question that this is an important aspect of a township doing its business properly. But until or unless it rises to a level that must be addressed by the board, such a question or concern can and should be addressed by the appropriate township official or staffer following township policies and practices in a business-like and customer service-oriented approach.

If it is appropriate for a board member or staff member to address a member of the public's concerns, then it's usually something best handled in the office, where officials or staff can meet with the person individually to respond to their concerns, with the appropriate resources or information at hand.