



Tips for Productive Homeowner Forums

California law provides that boards must permit members to speak at meetings of the members or the board. The law also provides that a reasonable time limit “shall be established” by the board. The law provides no other guidance on what has come to be known as “homeowner forum.”

When handled properly, the members in attendance become aides to the board, acting as the board’s eyes and ears in the community. When run poorly, members walk out with an “us against them” mentality that accounts for the general negativity towards homeowners associations.

Here are some thoughts on how you can make your next homeowner forum useful:

- 1 SET THE STAGE.** Start by thanking the members for attending. Let the members know why they are there and what is expected of them. They are there to provide comments. If applicable, let them know that there is a time limit. If there are many people in attendance and there is also a full agenda, explain that in order to conduct all the business planned for the meeting, people will need to be brief in their comments and avoid repeating other people’s comments.
- 2 EXPLAIN LIMITATIONS.** Homeowner forum is not an appropriate forum to raise a new issue and seek an immediate resolution. A board member or the manager should explain that the law inhibits the board’s ability to make decisions on matters that were not previously placed on the posted agenda. When a decision is demanded, respond that it can be placed on the agenda for next month’s meeting and that in the future, requests of this nature should be directed to the manager at least ten days before the scheduled board meeting.
- 3 LISTEN AND ACKNOWLEDGE.** Frustration levels among members can be rather high. It is difficult to be told that action cannot be taken outside a meeting or that you have to wait several weeks for a response. Oftentimes, the very best that you can do is allow people to express that frustration and acknowledge the reality of the situation. Even letting people know they have been heard, by summarizing the comments, is a respectful way of letting people know that they are not being ignored. Speaking with fellow board members while a member is addressing the board or blankly staring out into space are the types of behaviors that get members enraged.



- 4 DO NOT ARGUE.** This is by far the biggest mistake that I see being made. The board members get defensive and start explaining why the member is “wrong.” The members are at the meeting to explain things from their perspective. There should not be a “right or wrong.” Instead, there should be a sharing of information. If a member makes an uninformed comment, facts should be provided to dispel the misconception. If sweeping accusations are made, the member should be asked for information to support the claim. Most of the time the response should be “thank you for your comments.”
- 5 ASK IF THE MEMBER HAS A PROPOSED SOLUTION.** Many people show up at the meetings thinking that they can just complain. The dues are too high. My neighbor is too loud. The sky is too blue. The board is not expected to have all the answers. Rather than arguing, ask the complainer what he or she would like to see happen. Explain that the directors are volunteer homeowners and are always looking for creative solutions. Invite the complainer to think about possible solutions and attend the next meeting to provide a proposed plan for the board to consider.
- 6 ADDRESS BAD BEHAVIOR.** If a member is acting in a manner that makes the board uncomfortable, someone should be very direct in pointing out what behavior is inappropriate. If a speaker raises his voice, calmly ask him to lower it. If a speaker stands and waves her arms around, ask her to sit down. Do not allow people to interrupt other speakers. If vulgar language is used, explain that the speaker will not be able to address the board if the vulgar language continues. Explain that you cannot listen to the comments when you are distracted by the behavior. If there are numerous people acting inappropriately, take a five to ten-minute break to allow people to calm down and collect their thoughts. Do not allow people to think that this is the way board members should be addressed. Most people have never been to any other kind of board meeting before and they don’t have any clue how they should act.
- 7 COME PREPARED.** Frequently individual directors have a sense that a number of disgruntled members will be in attendance to discuss one particularly hot issue. Let the manager know ahead of time. Ask the manager to familiarize himself with information that can be provided to help people understand the issue. The manager can also provide a summary in the board packet so that the directors are better prepared to understand why the members are so excited. Allow for more time in homeowner forum so that people can be heard on the issue.

In the end, the goal should be to create a welcoming environment for the members. Those who regularly attend board meetings are the most likely future candidates for the board positions. Setting the right tone and creating clear expectations can result in creating the “community” feel for the current members and for the future, as well.