

PO Box 466

Washington Grove MD 20880

1 February 2025

Dear Mayor Compton and Town Councilors,

I am writing to congratulate you on your adoption of Robert's Rules of Order for the conduct of Town Council meetings and to express my support for doing so. Robert's Rules have defined the process by which most organizations and governmental bodies in the United States have conducted themselves for hundreds of years. And for good reason: the rules

- are clear and easy to understand
- ensure a fair process by which all members of a deliberative body can voice their views and make informed decisions
- protect the rights of the minority and
- provide for an efficient meeting by reducing interruptions and disruptions by those who are not members of the assembly (i.e. not members of the Council).

In fact, the requirement that Town Meetings are conducted according to Roberts Rules of Order is part of our Town charter for exactly the reasons above.

That's why I was surprised to see a letter to the Town Council from a handful of residents raising concerns about the application of Robert's Rules in Town Council meetings. Because the comments in the letter demonstrate a poor understanding about the nature and purpose of Robert's Rules, I thought it was important to respond to the letter to help prevent the spread of misinformation. In my comments below, I am referring to and responding to the letter of January 31, 2025 to the Mayor and Town Council that was signed by Paula Puglisi and four other Washington Grove residents.

At the outset, I would like to acknowledge that as Puglisi, *et al* note in their letter, Robert's Rules as enumerated in *Robert's Rules of Order Revised Newly Revised, 12th Edition*, are detailed and voluminous. However, the rules that govern 99% of all meetings are quite simple and easy to understand. They can be easily summarized on a laminated "Quick Study Guide" such as this [one](#). In fact, the rules you need to know to fully participate in a meeting would fit on a single sheet of paper. There are many printed guides to the rules that can be easily digested. If one is willing to learn the rules that govern the conduct of meetings, it takes but a short time to do so. As you know, the Council recently had such training conducted by a certified parliamentarian, and it took only a few hours. There are also easy to understand videos on the topic available for free on YouTube.

First, I would like to address the request in the letter that residents continue to be allowed to interrupt the meeting to ask questions and to make comments. This is a behavior that began during the 2020 Covid outbreak as the Council meetings moved to Zoom. Although just a few residents do it, it is an extremely bad precedent and should never have been permitted. I applaud the council for finally putting an end to it.

One of the remarkable features of Washington Grove is that residents actually *have* a forum in which we are the deliberative body, the annual Town meeting. During this meeting, any resident can make a motion and (assuming a second) can speak to it. Anyone can speak for or against a motion put forth by another. This is an extraordinary venue to directly express our views publicly that is unusual among Maryland municipalities.

Even without the annual meeting, there are myriad venues for Grove residents to share our views with the Council, including letters, emails, phone calls, and one-to-one conversations. This is how public input works in most municipalities in the State of Maryland.

In addition to these forms of communication and the annual Town meeting, the Town Council, though not required to do so, has provided time at the beginning of every Council meeting for any member of the public to present their views on any topic they wish. In short, there are many opportunities to share views without allowing residents to consume time during the Council meeting.

There are two important reasons why this practice of permitting non-Council members to interrupt the meeting should end.

1. When people who are not on the council interrupt to share their views or question Councilors, the meeting length increases dramatically, making it less likely that residents will be willing to serve on the Council in the future and reducing the likelihood that interested observers will be able to make it through the entire meeting.
2. Allowing some residents to interrupt the meeting is unfair to those who respect the integrity of the meeting and the rules and refrain from speaking even if we feel we have something to say. I find it very frustrating that a handful of my fellow residents are permitted to participate in the meeting as though they held elected office. If even a quarter of those observing the meeting did that, the meetings would be very long indeed. There is a path for those who wish to speak at Council meetings: run for Town Council.

Washington Grove, like most governmental entities in the United States, is a representative democracy. Residents elect Council members to represent us, and it is the Council's job to conduct the affairs of the Town. We are certainly entitled, even obligated, to be informed and to share our views. However, the Town Council meeting is not the place for residents to share views or question Councilors except at specific times designated by the Council.

Next, I'd like to address this statement from the Puglisi letter:

“... our understanding is that if Robert’s Rules are strictly enforced, councilors are now expected to come to each meeting fully informed and ready to declare their position.”

This is incorrect. Robert’s Rules does not require members of an assembly to come to a meeting fully or even partially informed nor with a position established on any issue. As a Town resident, I would certainly *prefer* that my representatives *are* prepared when they meet to discuss Town business, but there is nothing in the rules that requires that. What the rules do is protect debate, and the purpose of debate is to make sure that each Councilor has an opportunity to fully share his or her views and understand the views of other members. In fact, Robert’s Rules allows for virtually unlimited debate unless a 2/3 majority wishes to end it. Council members’ rights to share their views and consider the views of the fellow Council members before a vote are protected, not limited, by the Rules.

I urge the council to stand firm on its decision to use Robert’s Rules as the official guide for conducting Council.

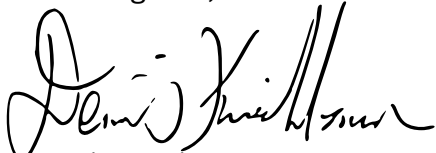
Finally, I have a recommendation related to the conduct of Council meetings over Zoom.

Please turn off the cameras and microphones of everyone but the Councilors and Mayor. Currently during the Council meetings, members of the public are permitted to turn on their camera and microphones. The current practice results in a poor experience for those observing the meeting. There is often background noise from those observing (talking, sighing, coughing, barking dogs) and often observers may be seen lying in bed, smoking, drinking and eating, or engaged in other distracting and disrespectful activities. If an observer with their mic on makes so much as a sigh, the speaker view switches to the noisemaker for a moment or two, which is distracting and disruptive. Turning off the cameras and microphones for all but the Mayor and Councilors would significantly improve not only the observer experience but also the decorum of the meetings of our public

officials. During committee reports and public appearances, the video and mics of those speaking would, of course, be turned on.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts on your meetings and I thank you for your service to the town.

Your Neighbor,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dennis M. Kirschbaum". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "D" and "K".

Dennis M. Kirschbaum

Center St.