



BUILDING COMMUNITY MOMENTUM

Turning worthwhile opportunities into informed leadership, credible support, and practical action.

How Good Boards Make Decisions in an Angry Room

Public pressure is part of local leadership. The responsibility is to hear it without allowing the emotional temperature of the room to make the decision.

Most local board meetings are not dramatic. Then one is. The parking lot is full. Extra chairs are brought in. People stand along the walls. Someone organized neighbors on social media. The applicant has an attorney and technical experts. People are whispering before the meeting starts.

Then public comment begins. A neighbor is afraid. Someone is angry. Someone accuses the applicant of lying. Someone questions the board's motives. A speaker gets applause. Another gets shouted down. Five or seven people at the front of the room are expected to listen to all of it and make a consequential decision. **This is where governance becomes leadership.** The goal is not to become unemotional. It is to remain capable of **thinking while everyone around you is feeling.**

1 Know what decision you are actually making

Angry rooms make issues bigger. A setback request becomes **'Do you care about families?'** A livestock facility becomes **'What kind of community do we want to be?'** A housing project becomes **'Are developers going to control this county?'** Those may reflect important concerns, but they can also pull a board away from the decision actually before it. Before the meeting becomes contentious, members should know: What exactly are we deciding? What standards apply? What discretion do we have? What facts are material? What is outside our authority? What conditions can legitimately be imposed? **A board that loses sight of the actual decision becomes vulnerable to making a different decision than the one in front of it.**

ASK YOURSELF: Could every board member explain in one or two sentences exactly what the board is deciding tonight?

2 Listen for information, not just positions

Public comment often arrives as a position: **'Stop this project.'** **'Approve it.'** **'We don't want this here.'** The board needs to listen underneath the position. Is there a drainage problem the applicant overlooked? Important traffic information? A factual claim being challenged? A concern that could be mitigated? An inconsistency with the ordinance? Or is the speaker restating a preference the board already understands? All citizens deserve respectful treatment. But **not every comment contributes the same amount of decision-relevant information.** A board's job is to recognize the difference.

ASK YOURSELF: What did we learn from this comment that we did not know before the person stood up?

3 Separate volume from weight

Twenty people making the same argument does not necessarily create twenty pieces of evidence. Two hundred petition signatures demonstrate something important: **a lot of people oppose the project.** They do not necessarily demonstrate that the factual claims behind the opposition are correct. Likewise, a room full of supporters does not prove a project is appropriate. Good boards recognize public sentiment without confusing it with evidence. They also remember that organized attendance is not a statistically representative sample of the whole community. **The people most affected or most motivated are usually the people most likely to show up.**

ASK YOURSELF: If exactly the same evidence were presented to us in an empty room, would we reach the same conclusion?



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4 Don't make the decision while emotion is making itself felt

The most dangerous moment may come near the end of public comment. Board members have been sitting under pressure for two hours. They are tired. Someone has accused them of corruption. A neighbor they have known for 30 years is upset. The easiest way to make the discomfort stop may suddenly feel like the right decision. That is precisely when discipline matters. A good chair can slow the process down, restate the question, summarize the evidence, ask staff or counsel for clarification, separate factual questions from value judgments, take a recess when appropriate, or continue the matter when material information genuinely requires investigation. **Do not confuse the desire to relieve pressure with clarity about the right decision.**

ASK YOURSELF: Am I moving toward this decision because the evidence supports it - or because I want the tension in this room to end?

5 Have the courage to own the decision

Eventually, deliberation ends. Sometimes the right decision will please the room. Sometimes it will anger the room. Sometimes a board should deny a project despite economic benefits because the facts and applicable standards do not support approval. Sometimes it should approve a project despite intense opposition because legitimate concerns have been addressed and the evidence supports approval. The objective is not courage for courage's sake. It is **reasoned courage**. A strong board can say: We heard you. We considered what you brought us. Here are the facts and standards that mattered. Here are the tradeoffs we considered. And here is why we made this decision.

ASK YOURSELF: Could I explain and defend my reasoning tomorrow to someone who strongly disagrees with my vote?

From an Angry Room to a Reasoned Decision

A strong decision process gives the board something to return to when the emotional temperature rises: know the question, listen carefully, sort and test information, weigh competing interests, deliberate independently, decide from the governing standards, and explain the reasoning.

KNOW THE QUESTION	LISTEN	SORT	TEST	WEIGH	DELIBERATE	DECIDE	EXPLAIN
What are we deciding?	What are people telling us?	Evidence, opinion, fear, or fact?	Is it credible and relevant?	What rights and tradeoffs matter?	What do members believe and why?	What do standards support?	Can we clearly say why?

The goal isn't to make the room happy. The goal is to make a decision you can still defend after the room is empty.

THE EMOTIONAL PRESSURE TEST

WOULD I THINK THIS IF THE ROOM WERE EMPTY? If no, understand what changed.

DID I LEARN SOMETHING - OR DID I FEEL SOMETHING? Both matter. They are not the same.

IS THIS A NEW FACT OR ANOTHER VERSION OF AN ARGUMENT WE HAVE ALREADY HEARD? Repetition can create psychological weight without adding evidence.

AM I AFRAID OF MAKING THE WRONG DECISION - OR AFRAID OF PEOPLE BEING ANGRY WITH ME? Those are very different fears.

WHO ISN'T IN THE ROOM? Remember the interests entrusted to you beyond tonight's audience.

WHAT WOULD I TELL THE NEXT BOARD? Would you want this same reasoning used as precedent when a different project and different crowd appear?

THE CHAIR MATTERS

A strong chair protects the quality of the process. The chair establishes expectations for respectful participation, protects citizens' opportunity to speak, prevents personal attacks from taking over, keeps discussion connected to the matter before the board, uses staff and experts appropriately, slows things down when clarity is being lost, and moves the group toward a decision when enough information exists.

A weak process allows the room to govern. A strong process allows the board to govern.

WHAT GOOD GOVERNANCE SOUNDS LIKE

"What evidence do we have about the actual likelihood of that impact?"

"Is there any new information we need to consider?"

"How does this compare with the standard in the ordinance?"

"What could reasonably mitigate that concern?"

"I want to separate my personal preference from what we're responsible for deciding."

"Before I vote, I want to explain what mattered most to me."

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Good governance means listening with empathy, evaluating information with curiosity, weighing competing interests fairly, and remaining emotionally steady enough to make a reasoned decision when doing so becomes uncomfortable. The measure of a good board is not whether everyone leaves happy - it is whether the process was fair, the relevant information was understood, and the board can explain why it decided what it did.

AgStrat helps communities and economic-development organizations prepare elected officials, appointed boards, chairs, and other leaders for consequential development decisions - including the economic understanding, decision frameworks, coalition building, and leadership preparation needed before the room becomes contentious. AgStrat also works with project leaders preparing worthwhile projects for public approval. To start a conversation, contact virgil@agstratsolutions.com.

Listen | Sort | Weigh | Decide | Explain