

**WESTPORT RTM CONDUCT
GUIDELINES AND EXPECTATIONS**

DRAFT FOR 8/9/2021 MEETING

Adopted by the RTM

XXX YY, 20XX

Table of Contents

Overview	3
Policies & Protocol Related To Conduct	Error! Bookmark not defined.
RTM Members’ Conduct with One Another	4
RTM Conduct with Town Staff	6
RTM Conduct with the Public	Error! Bookmark not defined.
RTM Conduct with Other Public Agencies	Error! Bookmark not defined.
RTM Conduct With Boards and Commissions	Error! Bookmark not defined.
RTM Conduct with The Media	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Breaches of Order	Error! Bookmark not defined.

This TOC will need to be reviewed when the document is finalized.

Statement of Purpose

This document describes the expected behaviors, manners, and courtesies of Representative Town Meeting members as we carry out our vital commitment to the Town. Section A162-20.1A of the RTM’s Rules of Procedure requires RTM members to conduct themselves in a manner above reproach. The primary purpose of these precepts is to provide more specific guidance, including, in particular, to clarify expectations regarding member conduct at public meetings and in written communications.

The constant and consistent theme throughout these guidelines is Respect: for Westport citizens, for Town employees, and for all elected officials. RTM members sometimes experience stress in making decisions that impact citizens’ lives. At times, the impacts of decisions on the entire community must be weighed against the needs of only a few. Despite these pressures, RTM members are called upon to exhibit appropriate, respectful behavior when engaged in RTM business or when otherwise representing themselves as RTM members. Demonstrating respect for each individual through words and actions is the touchstone that can help guide RTM members to do the right thing in even the most difficult situations.

The RTM strives to engender an inclusive culture. The RTM values diversity not only because diverse communities are stronger and more innovative communities, but also because creating an environment where anyone, of any background, can contribute is the right thing to do.

These guidelines do not in any way supersede the Westport Town Charter, Code of Ordinances, the RTM Rules of Procedure, Robert’s Rules of Order, and applicable local, state and federal laws, rules, and regulations.

In addition, these guidelines are not meant to stifle important debate or to prevent RTM members from passionately defending issues, positions, and proposals that are important to them. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, as well as the Constitution of the State of Connecticut, protects the free speech rights of RTM members just as much as the free speech rights of their fellow citizens. This Code provides specific guidelines to help ensure that RTM members, who hold a unique position of authority in our Town, exercise their First Amendment rights with due respect for one another and for the many different stakeholders in our Town.

Overview

Resources that are helpful in defining the roles and responsibilities of RTM members can be found in the Westport's Town Charter, Code of Ordinances, the RTM Rules of Procedure, and Robert's Rules of Order.

THE RTM AS A BODY STRIVES TO ACT IN A NONPARTISAN MANNER, SEEKING TO DO WHAT IS BEST FOR THE TOWN WITHOUT REGARD TO PARTY AFFILIATIONS

Traditionally, RTM members refrain from mentioning their party affiliations during RTM meetings.

All RTM members should:

- Participate fully in monthly RTM meetings and meetings of RTM committees of which they are members, while demonstrating respect, kindness, compassion, and courtesy to others.
- Prepare for meetings by becoming familiar with agenda items in advance.
- Respect other people's time. Stay focused and act efficiently during public meetings.
- Inspire public confidence in Westport's government.

It all comes down to respect

Respect for one another as individuals . . . for the validity of different opinions . . . for the democratic process . . for the community that we serve.

RTM Members' Conduct with One Another

IN RTM MEETINGS

- **Practice civility, professionalism and decorum in discussions and debate**

The RTM is composed of individuals of diverse backgrounds, personalities, values, opinions, and goals who have chosen to serve in public office for the welfare of the community. Difficult questions, challenges to points of view, and criticism of ideas and information are legitimate elements of a free democracy in action. RTM members, however, should take great care to treat each other with respect and courtesy, even—or especially—when debating the most contentious issues.

Treating one another with respect and courtesy includes avoiding personal attacks on one another.

- **Honor the role of the Moderator and Committee Chairs in maintaining order, and avoid interrupting speakers**

It is the responsibility of the Moderator and Committee Chairs to keep the comments of all speakers on track during meetings. Under state law, RTM and Committee meetings can only discuss items on the agenda. RTM members should honor efforts by the Moderator and the Chairs to focus discussion on current agenda items. Any disagreements about the agenda or the Moderator's or Chair's actions should be voiced politely and with reason, following procedures outlined in Robert's Rules of Order.

RTM members may speak only after being recognized by the Moderator or the Chair, unless the Committee Chair has expressly permitted a more "informal" conversation to take place on a particular issue. In particular, RTM members should not interrupt each other, or other speakers. As tempting as it is to treat every agenda item as a subject of freewheeling conversational debate at committee meetings, doing so often results in some voices dominating the discussion, and all too frequently conveys to those who are being interrupted—whether members of the RTM or of the public—the sense that their views are not welcomed, or even that they are being personally attacked. RTM members should defer to decisions of the Moderator and Chairs, including avoiding interruptions and only speaking when called on.

The admonition against interruptions applies even when an RTM member has questions for a particular speaker. The member should wait until the speaker is finished, and then ask any questions after being called upon by the Moderator or Chair. That may require the member to write down questions and ask them later in the meeting, when the member is called on to speak.

There are two aspects of Robert's Rules that members sometimes invoke incorrectly to justify an interruption:

- **POINT OF ORDER.** According to Robert's Rules, an interruption by calling *POINT OF ORDER* can only occur in the case that a member believes that the rules of the assembly, or federal, state, or local rules of procedure are being violated. *A Point of Order* must generally be called at the time the violation or breach occurs. *Point of Order* is not an appropriate interruption for any other reason. A member may *not*, for instance, call out *Point of Order* to voice disagreement with a speaker, or to ask a question of a speaker, no

matter how important the question may seem or how strongly the member may disagree with the speaker.

- **CALLING THE QUESTION.** Similarly, a member can only make a motion to CALL THE QUESTION after being recognized by the Moderator. It is not to be used as a general interruption.

- **Be punctual**

RTM members have made a commitment to attend meetings and to partake in discussions. It is important for RTM members to be punctual in order for meetings to start on time.

- **Addressing disruptive or inappropriate behavior**

If an RTM member believes another member has breached these guidelines, including by unwarranted interruptions, personal attacks, or the like, the member may raise the breach with the Moderator or Chair, including by privately raising the issue or calling a *Point of Order* to note the breach. It is the responsibility of the Moderator or the Chair to address any breaches, consistent with Robert's Rules, up to and potentially including ejection from a meeting.

IN PRIVATE COMMUNICATIONS WITH OTHER RTM MEMBERS

- **Continue respectful behavior in private**

The same level of respect and consideration of differing points of view that is deemed appropriate for public discussions should be maintained in private conversations among RTM members.

- **Don't forget FOIA**

Avoid emails among a quorum of the RTM or a Committee to avoid unnoticed meetings. ***In particular, do not use "Reply All" to engage in substantive discussions.*** Be aware that all records, including electronic records like e-mails and texts, that relate to the conduct of RTM business, including communications with constituents, may be disclosable under FOIA. You should consult the RTM FOIA handout from the Town Attorney's office for details.

- **Even private conversations can have a public presence**

Elected officials are always on display – their actions, mannerisms, and language are monitored by people around them. Conversations may be overheard, parking lot debates observed, and casual comments noted before and after public meetings.

RTM Members' Conduct with Town Staff

RTM members should make every effort to show respect for Town staff and their contributions to the community.

- **Treat all staff as professionals**

RTM members should treat all Town staff as professionals. Clear, honest communication that respects the abilities, experience, and dignity of each individual is expected. RTM members must remember that Town employees work for the Town, not for the RTM.

- **Never publicly criticize an individual employee**

Part of the job of RTM members is to scrutinize requests we receive from Town employees, and RTM members are always free to disagree with, and criticize, such requests. Yet as a matter of respect, RTM members should take care that disagreement with proposals does not devolve into personal attacks on Town employees. In most cases, concerns about Town employees' performance should be made in the first instance to the employee's department head or the First Selectman.

RTM Members' Conduct with the Public

IN RTM MEETINGS

Making the public feel welcome is a critical part of the democratic process. No signs of partiality, prejudice or disrespect should be evident on the part of individual RTM members towards any individual participating in an RTM meeting. Every effort should be made to be fair and impartial in weighing public testimony.

- **Be welcoming to speakers and treat them with care**

Speaking in front of the RTM can be an intimidating experience for many people. How RTM members treat people during public hearings can lessen or heighten discomfort and can encourage or suppress free expression. RTM members should be aware that their language and tone of voice can be experienced as intimidating or aggressive. Comments and non-verbal expressions should be appropriate, respectful, and convey respect and appreciation for public participation. Even more so than with one another, RTM members should take great care to avoid sarcasm towards or personal attacks against speakers, no matter how strongly the RTM member may disagree with the speaker's words.

- **Ask for clarification, but avoid debate and argument with presenters**

Questions directed by RTM members to presenters should seek to clarify or expand information, not to criticize or debate.

- **Be transparent about ordinances**

RTM members are always free to help petitioners draft potential ordinances for consideration by the RTM. When doing so, RTM members should disclose their involvement.

IN COMMUNICATIONS OUTSIDE OF RTM MEETINGS

- **Speak only on your own behalf**

RTM members will frequently be asked to explain an RTM action or to give their opinion about an issue as they meet and talk with constituents, when speaking before another Town board or commission, when contacted by the media for background and quotes, or when posting on social media. RTM members are free to comment and may identify themselves as RTM members, but should make clear that their comments represent only their personal viewpoint, not those of other RTM members, an RTM committee, or the RTM as a whole (unless they have their specific authorization to do so.)

- **The Moderator is the official spokesperson for the Representative Town Meeting**

The Moderator is the designated representative of the RTM to present and speak on the official RTM position.

- **Social Media**

RTM members have the same rights as any other citizen to use social media to express their views and to participate in public debates. However, RTM members should take care to avoid any behavior on social media that would be inappropriate in any other setting.