

**WESTPORT REPRESENTATIVE TOWN MEETING  
CONDUCT GUIDELINES AND EXPECTATIONS**

## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

This document describes the expected behaviors, manners, and courtesies of Representative Town Meeting (RTM) 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 consistent theme throughout these guidelines is Respect: for Westport citizens, for Town employees, for each other, 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.

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, or applicable local, state and federal laws, rules, regulations, or policies.

In addition, these guidelines are not meant to stifle debate or to prevent RTM members from enthusiastically defending issues and positions. 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 guidance 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.

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

### **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**

### **• Participation in 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, courtesy, and attentiveness to others.
- Be visible when speaking or voting.
- Prepare for meetings by becoming familiar with agenda items in advance.
- Respect other people's time. Stay focused and act efficiently during public meetings.

### **• Nonpartisan nature of RTM as a body**

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.

### **• 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. 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**

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. Doing so conveys to those who are being interrupted the sense that their views are not welcomed.

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 ask any questions only after being called upon by the Moderator or Chair.

RTM members sometimes invoke “*Point of Order*” incorrectly to justify an interruption. According to Robert’s Rules, an interruption by calling “*Point of Order*” can only occur if a member believes that the rules of the assembly, or federal, state, or local rules of procedure, are being violated, and must generally be called at the time the violation or breach occurs. “*Point of Order*” is not an appropriate interruption for any other reason, including to voice disagreement with a speaker, or to ask a question of a speaker.

- **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 out of respect for others and so that meetings can start on time.

- **Addressing disruptive or inappropriate behavior**

Should there be a concern about a breach of any of these guidelines, including by unwarranted interruptions or personal attacks, an RTM member may raise it with the Moderator or Chair, including by privately raising the issue, or by calling a *Point of Order* to note a breach at a meeting. It is the responsibility of the Moderator or the Chair to address any breaches, consistent with Robert’s Rules and the Connecticut Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 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 communications 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**

- **Treat all staff with respect**

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. Any concerns about Town employees' performance may be raised either to the employee or to the employee's department head or the First Selectman, but should not be aired in a public meeting.

Part of the job of RTM members is to scrutinize requests we receive from Town departments, 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.

## **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 and cordial to speakers**

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' language and tone of voice may be experienced as intimidating, dismissive, or aggressive. Comments and non-verbal expressions should be appropriate, respectful, and convey appreciation for public participation.

- **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 an RTM member has played an instrumental and ongoing role in formulating an ordinance, the RTM member should disclose this involvement when participating in meetings addressing the ordinance.

## **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 report and comment on RTM actions, and may identify themselves as RTM members when doing so, 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.