

A Guide to the WSFS Business Meeting

Edited for Dublin 2019: An Irish Worldcon by Jared Dashoff

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Worldcon members can find the current World Science Fiction Society (“WSFS”) Constitution in the Worldcon Souvenir Guide—but how is the content of the Constitution created or modified?

The WSFS Constitution is amended, and other rules pertaining to Worldcons and WSFS are made, by the WSFS Business Meeting. The meeting takes place over the course of each Worldcon, with sessions beginning at 10 a.m. each day, beginning on the second day of the convention.

Every Attending Member may attend and participate in the Business Meeting. This is where motions are made, proposals debated, and votes on them taken. There are no delegates, board of directors, or anything else. You represent yourself.

Supporting Members can propose business (see below for how to do so) but may not attend the Meeting. All proposed business must have at least two sponsors. Sponsors may be either Supporting or Attending Members. (Of course, a proposal can have more than two sponsors.)

The meeting is conducted by a staff consisting of the Chair, the Parliamentarian, the Secretary, and the Timekeeper. Sometimes there are additional officers. The officers are appointed by the chair of the convention.

The meeting is run in accordance with, in descending order, the [WSFS Constitution](#) and [Standing Rules](#); such other rules as may be published in advance by the current Committee; the customs and usages of WSFS (including the [Resolutions and Rulings of Continuing Effect](#)); and the current edition of *Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised*. This ensures that debate is structured and allows for proper consideration of the rights of individuals, minorities (particularly strong minorities, defined as more than one-third of the attendees), majorities (majorities have rights, too), super-majorities (requiring a two-thirds vote to kill motions or close debate, which protects against wasting the meeting's time), and absentees.

This guide presents some common questions about the Business Meeting with slightly simplified answers.

Are proxies allowed? Can I participate remotely?

Only Attending Members can participate in the Meeting. Proxies are not allowed, nor is any form of remote participation. You must be present in person to debate, make motions (except items submitted in advance), and vote.

How do I submit a proposal?

Any two or more Attending or Supporting Members can submit business to the meeting. To submit a proposal, send it, along with the name and membership numbers of at least two sponsors, to BusinessMeeting@Dublin2019.com. You may also contact us at that address in advance if you need help crafting your proposal into the correct format.

The deadline for submitting proposals to the 2019 WSFS Business Meeting is 16 July 2019. New proposals after that date will generally not be considered, subject to the provisions of Standing Rule 2.1.

When is the Business Meeting?

There are three (occasionally four) sessions of the WSFS Business Meeting scheduled at each Worldcon. For 2019, sessions will begin at 10 a.m. on Friday, August 16; Saturday, August 17; Sunday, August 18; and possibly Monday, August 19.

This does mean the meeting runs at the same time as other programming. A Worldcon once tried to schedule the Business Meeting at 8:30 a.m. The idea was so unpopular that the rules were changed to require that the meeting never start before 10 a.m. In 1993, the starting time was changed to noon, and screams were again heard for wasting so much valuable Worldcon programming time.

How long is the Business Meeting?

Sessions usually last between 90 minutes and 3 hours. There are occasional breaks.

Where is the meeting being held?

The Business Meeting will be held in the Stratocaster room in the Gibson Hotel. Upon entering the hotel, signs will point you to the Stratocaster.

What is a Preliminary Business Meeting and do I have to attend that?

The first meeting is called the Preliminary Business Meeting, and it is where the agenda is settled, debate time is set, and new proposals may be killed for the duration of the current Worldcon by being Postponed Indefinitely or Objected to Consideration. The best way to ensure that a matter sees substantive debate is to attend the Preliminary Business Meeting. Changes to the Standing Rules, and resolutions (but not constitutional amendments) may be debated and voted at the Preliminary Business Meeting. Reports may also be given at the Preliminary Meeting.

What about the other sessions?

The second meeting is the Main Business Meeting, where substantive debate and votes take place on constitutional amendments, starting with those passed on from last year and then considering new proposals.

The third meeting is the Site Selection Business Meeting, where the results of the Worldcon Site Selection are announced, and any remaining business is also dealt with. This meeting begins with mostly ceremonial business, which consists of hearing the formal results of Site Selection and the initial presentation by the winning bid. The meeting also provides formal time for the subsequent years' bids to take questions about their bids. However, if constitutional business is not completed at the Main Business Meeting, then after dealing with Site Selection and winning bid presentation, the meeting goes back to work debating and voting on substantive matters.

If there is still insufficient time during these sessions to resolve all pending business, an "overflow" session will be scheduled for the final day of the Worldcon.

What are Objection to Consideration and Postpone Indefinitely?

Object to Consideration ("OTC") is the 12-ton block that drops on proposals that are so unpopular that they can't even muster a 25% vote in favor of discussing them. When an item of new business comes before the meeting, before there is any debate and before any amendments have been proposed (and stated by the Chair), any member may rise (possibly interrupting other members because OTC has a high "precedence," or priority in debate) and say, "I object to the consideration of the question." This motion means, "I think this is such a bad idea that I want us to kill it right here, right now, without debate." The motion to Object to Consideration is undebatable. Furthermore, once the OTC has been lodged, there is no further discussion of the proposal.

The Chair will then ask for a vote on whether to kill the proposal. If three-quarters of the people voting vote against consideration, the original proposal is killed without debate and without an opening statement from the maker of the motion.

Postpone Indefinitely is a slightly milder procedural motion to kill new proposals. It requires a two-thirds vote to kill a proposal, but it also allows each side (those opposed and those in favor of considering the proposal) two minutes each to make a case for why the proposal should or should not be considered. If the meeting votes to postpone something indefinitely, it is effectively dead for the remainder of that Worldcon, although it can be re-introduced the following year.

Note that voting in favor of consideration does not necessarily mean one is in favor of the proposal. It means merely that there is interest in debating it, whether just to hear the makers' arguments, make different arguments against the proposal, or offer amendments to modify it.

What is the voting procedure?

Once debate time has ended or a vote to “Call the Previous Question” (end debate) passes, the meeting proceeds to vote on the issue. Voting on non-controversial items is normally done by “Unanimous Consent”. If the Chair says something like, “Without objection, [X] will be done” it means, “If there is anyone who thinks we need to take an actual vote, say so now.” Unless someone raises an objection or rises to get the Chair’s attention, the meeting will proceed, without further discussion on the issue. Note that it isn’t necessary to insist on a vote solely for the sake of form. It is common to let unanimous-consent motions go through on things where it is known that one side doesn’t have the votes to defeat the proposal.

Instead of an “ayes and nays” voice vote that often leads to people trying to shout each other, we use an “Uncounted Show of Hands”. The Chair will call for the affirmative and the negative sides in turn, and members raise hands to show their support for one side or the other. These shows of hand are not counted. If the result is not conclusive, or if enough members call for a “Division” (meaning a counted vote), the Chair will proceed to a “Standing Serpentine Vote”. Those in favor of a motion will stand and then count off one by one, starting at the front and moving back and forth across the room, working toward the back (thus. “serpentine”) until everyone who wants to vote has done so. One by one, everyone calls out a number one higher than the one previous, then sits down. This method generally makes the total obvious by the end.

Abstentions are not counted. An abstention is not a vote against a proposal. It is actually not a vote at all; it’s the same as if the abstaining person was not even in the room. For example, if 200 people are at the meeting and 30 people vote yes, 10 vote no, and everyone else doesn’t vote at all, the motion passes 30-10, and the fact that there were 160 other people present who didn’t vote doesn’t matter.

Why are there all of these complicated rules?

The rules enable us to examine proposals in a structured format that allows for proper consideration of the rights of everyone. Particularly in large groups, discussion and debate without a structure that is fair generally turns into a free-for-all. Remember that “fair” does not mean “I get what I personally want.” In a deliberative assembly run in a democratic manner, although sometimes you don’t win, you and everyone else must play by the same rules.