

BOARD DECISIONS NEEDED FOR ORGANIZATIONAL POSITION-TAKING

- as developed by Suzi Wilkins Berl; River Network

One assumes that NGO position-taking occurs with the following given parameters:

- the organization is a nonprofit conservation organization;
- the organization has a mission statement that guides its work;
- it has an experienced Executive Director, who carries out the day-to-day operations;
- it has a working Board of Directors which sets the organization's policy; and
- the organization has a Strategic Plan and an annual Work Plan, both of which have listed protection policy work as a programmatic goal.

Public Positions:

Most organizations take public stances on issues from time to time. A Board needs first to determine its "persona" and "tone". What kind of public "face" do you wish to present? (i. e. how strident do you wish to appear?) What kind of rules do you wish to adopt as you interact with public officials, area businesses and other members of the public?

What subject matters do you wish to address? Will you limit yourselves to only water and pollution issues? to growth and sprawl matters? to natural resource issues? Having your organization's priority work clearly articulated (per a Strategic Plan or other such planning tools) will help set this scope of issues. Many groups develop background papers (a/k/a "white papers") to help them articulate the issue and the scope of the problem, so that when the opportunity to speak out arises, they have a framework from which to work.

What procedure should your group take for taking a public position? A Board needs to establish the parameters that the group should take (i. e. allowing the Executive Director "free rein"? clearing statements with the Board President or Executive Committee or with the Policy Committee?, etc.) Will your organization take legal action? If so, are the procedures you follow different that taking a position?

Spokesperson(s)

Who is authorized to speak publicly on behalf of the organization? Usually, the Executive Director and the President share this responsibility. Sometimes, the chairperson of the Policy Committee (if one exists) may also be designated. (Indeed, the leadership of a group would never want to be in a position of opening the paper one morning and reading that your organization has taken a position publicly of which you had no knowledge. Even worse, would be a position that someone has taken that runs counter to your group's!)

Scenarios: "Official" Spokesperson(s):

- #1: The Board passes a resolution naming the *Board President* as the "official spokesperson" for the organization. He/she can designate a member of the Board or the Executive Director to be an official spokesperson, at a particular time/event, if he/she is unable to be present; or
- #2: The Board passes a resolution naming the *Executive Director and the Board President* as "official spokespersons" for the organization. Either of those two persons can, in turn, designate a member of the Board to be an official spokesperson, at a particular time/event, if they are unable to be present; or
- #3: The Board passes a resolution naming *the Executive Director, the Board President and the Policy Committee Chair* as "official spokespersons" for the organization.

Scenarios: "The Sign Off":

Who:

- #1: The Board establishes a policy that the *Executive Committee* will review all "major" public policy statements or legal action; or
- #2: The organization establishes a *Policy Committee* to review and approve all public policy positions or legal action the organization takes. It meets several times a year, as needed, by conference call to discuss specific policy opportunities that arise; or

#3: The Board establishes a policy that the full Board will review all “major” public policy statements.

Scenarios: Process:

#1: The Board sets a policy that the spokesperson calls all members of the decision-making group to inform them of the position-taking opportunity and reads the statement; or

#2: The Board establishes an email “review process” by which the statement is submitted to the “decision-making body”, which then reviews it, determines if it’s appropriate and proposes any language or tone changes. The decision-making body then votes on the statement. There is a “default mechanism”: if the proposer does not hear from any of the decision-makers within a 48-hour period, he/she will assume it’s a “yes” vote to proceed.

Scenarios: Content of Statement:

Types of Statements:

The Board establishes a policy indicating those types of public statements or actions on which it needs to “sign off”:

- letters to top-level public officials;
- any legal action (a complaint, an “intent to sue” letter, a suit, etc.)
- letters to the editor or media releases that include technical parameters; or
- public hearing remarks or major policy speeches.

Conversely, it may wish to iterate those statements on which it need not “sign off” (e.g. “motherhood & apple pie” information) given in, say, a Rotary speech, an educational talk to a school group, a general radio interview, etc.

Back Up Materials:

Many times, organizations streamline the process by compiling a series of “*Background Papers*” or “*White Papers*” on which it bases its position-taking. These papers might include:

- wetland loss in the state;
- water quality degradation;
- non-point source pollution; etc.
- urban sprawl’s impact on habitat loss;
- water quantity & instream flow;

These papers articulate the problem in the state and are often accompanied by a general *Resolution Statement* that clarifies the organization’s concerns. These two documents streamline the position-taking process, as they provide a framework for the organization and its position.