

Contributing to AETP: Board meeting summaries

AETP (Alaska Energy Transparency Project—www.akenergytransparency.org) informs electric cooperative members about their utilities' policies and decisions, so they can be more engaged and help shape Alaska's energy future. We are particularly interested in educating members about the work of cooperatives' elected boards of directors—these bodies are meant to represent members' interests and play a crucial role in setting policy.

Board meetings provide important opportunities for members to find out about issues facing the cooperative, how their board and staff intend to address them, and to voice their own opinions on these issues.

Summaries of board meetings make it possible for members who cannot attend to learn about these issues and decisions. It is especially helpful to have summaries that go beyond the published meeting minutes, which don't appear for at least a month and are often very bare bones. Such summaries help create a lasting record of what is said and done, and how board members vote on important issues.

AETP is happy to work with anyone interested in covering board meetings. We can provide whatever level of editorial support you prefer—we can run summaries exactly as you submit them or make suggestions about format and what to include, look at grammar and spelling, or make suggestions about wording. As discussed below, AETP also has templates to aid in creating meeting summaries for each of the four Railbelt cooperatives (HEA, CEA, MEA, GVEA).

What follows is an introduction to cooperative board meetings and some guidelines for writing up summaries of them.

Covering a cooperative board meeting: What to expect

General guidelines:

Railbelt co-op board meetings can usually be broken down into the following parts, although the specific order varies from board to board:

1. Member comments.
2. Safety minute/energy fact. Injury reports are sometimes given at this time.
3. Passage of consent agenda—these are items that require board approval but not discussion. They can include the meeting agenda, expense reports, committee or staff reports, and previous meetings' minutes.
4. CEO/GM reporting.
5. Staff presentations and reports.
6. Discussion, debate, and votes on resolutions.
7. Executive Session (not always, but for most meetings).
8. Board member comments.

Of these, 1, 4, 5, and 6 are the parts likely to include items of interest.

Who's who:

The key people to identify are the members of the board, the general manager, and any staff making presentations in which you are interested. You may want to note if any members of the board are absent. There will usually be at least 5-10 staff present at a board meeting—unless they are making a presentation of interest, don't worry about who they are.

Executive Session:

After new/old business, boards frequently go into executive session (except GVEA, which does executive session before the public portion of the meeting). This is a part of the meeting where "sensitive" information is discussed, and everyone aside from board members and invited staff have to leave. Boards must state the reasons they go into executive session, but these are just generic categories. Some, but not all, boards will list specific topics discussed in executive session on the agenda. Unfortunately, many Railbelt cooperative boards spend significant portions of their meetings in executive session.

Boards cannot pass resolutions in executive session—if they make any decisions requiring action, they have to return to open session to vote. If a board expects to vote on something after executive session, they will probably note it on the agenda (CEA is good about this, MEA and HEA are less reliable).

However, none of the coops have a mechanism for readmitting remote attendees after the end of executive session (if you attend in person, you may be able to wait outside the room where the board meets). If you feel it is important to be present a vote after executive session, you can ask the person running the meeting to notify you when they go back into public session—this may or may not work.

Attending a meeting:

If in person, make sure you know the location and where you can park. You also may want to decide if you will hang around during executive session.

If online, leave an extra five minutes for logging in—most co-ops use Microsoft Teams, which can be super slow to get you into the meeting. Be patient. You do not need Teams to join a meeting—you can do so through a web browser.

The AETP board meeting template for each cooperative (see below) includes instructions on how to join a meeting virtually. Please note—for CEA and MEA you need to register in advance to attend remotely.

Some boards ask guests to acknowledge their presence at the start of the meeting. Don't worry—they are just doing this for the minutes.

Time Commitment:

This varies considerably, from co-op to co-op and month to month. As a rule, HEA meetings tend to be the longest (up to 3.5-4 hours without executive session), MEA are the shortest (often under 2 hours). CEA and GVEA are somewhere in-between, but vary from month to month.

If you can't commit to attending the whole meeting, you can at least cover the parts that are meaningful to you.

MEA and CEA post audio of their meetings a few days after they occur. This can be useful for filling in gaps, although following the audio is always harder than watching the meeting live (especially in figuring out who is speaking).

Preparation:

It is always helpful to look at the agenda before the meeting starts—this will let you know what topics will be covered and if there is anything of particular interest that day. Of course, sometimes very innocuous looking agenda items can turn out to be very interesting.

CEA and GVEA post meeting packets along with the agendas, usually 2-3 days before the meeting. These will include slide decks that will accompany reports and draft resolutions, along with other materials. Definitely worth a look if you have time. This also makes it easier to take notes on reports, since you can go back to the slides later if you want.

HEA and MEA post the General Manager's reports after meetings, but these are only a few pages long. They do not share other slides.

The first meeting you attend may a little tricky to follow, but after you have been to a couple, they will make more sense.

Covering a Board Meeting: Tips for Preparing a Summary

Basic Tips.

First, be prepared—look at the agenda and see if there are any items of particular interest on it. Be ready to cover these when they come up.

Second, keep your ears open. Interesting or revealing items can crop up unexpectedly during meetings. This is particularly true during the Manager's report and when the board asks the staff questions.

Three, there is no single way to do this and you don't need to capture everything. Focus on what matters to you—what issues do you think are important? It's helpful for others if you capture discussion of key questions, but you are likely listening in for a specific reason. It's okay to emphasize that in your coverage.

What to cover:

This is really a question of what you want to include. Some sections, such as safety minutes and energy facts, are probably not worth noting. Ultimately, it's up to you. Sometimes it helps to ask yourself—what is happening that members SHOULD know about?

As mentioned above, the following parts of the meeting are most likely to be of interest:

1. Member comments
2. Manager's report

3. Committee reports
4. Discussion of specific resolutions/board decisions.

1. Member comments. You may just want to capture the general thrust of comments and how many people speak on a given issue—this is particularly true when a lot of members speak.

Are they calling on the board to take specific actions or policy directions? This is probably worth noting. For example, three members called on the board to increase its carbon reduction goal. Or two members commended (or criticized) the board for a recent decision or action.

How much detail you go into (names of individual speakers, specific points they raise) is really up to you.

2. Manager's reports. These tend to be a mixed bag—some is just basic reporting (sales to different classes of members, financials versus budget). But sometimes really interesting trends or policy decisions can be mentioned during this section, especially in response to board questions. This is worth sticking around for—you can't tell what will be included from the agenda. Staff reports may be made here or later in the meeting, if they are connected to a specific resolution.

3. Committee reports—this depends on the cooperative. CEA has very active committees that carry out a lot of board work, so these reports can be interesting. For other cooperatives, it really depends on which committee is reporting (like a Renewables Committee) and if you are interested in that subject.

4. Discussions of specific issues/staff reporting. This is when the board considers Old/New business. A lot of what goes on here may be of limited interest—revisions of board policies, housekeeping. But there may be substantive issues as well—it is useful to check the agenda ahead of time, to see if there are any items of interest.

Templates:

AETP has created a special meeting template for each of the four Railbelt cooperatives. Each is designed to conform to the agenda order and type of materials covered at these meetings. These templates are a starting point, available if you want to use them, but they are just an aid for your convenience.

A Few More Helpful tips:

The meeting templates can be adjusted as needed—you can prefill parts based on the agenda.

If there is an element of the meeting that is of particular interest, consider recording it (I use the voice memo feature on my phone)—that way you can go back and catch things if they happen quickly.

During member comments write down the name of each member when they introduce themselves—you won't know if what they have to say is of interest until after they start speaking, but then it is too late to catch their name.

Be ready to capture votes—it is important to how individual directors vote on contested issues. It is helpful to have a list of Directors' names ready in these cases, so you can mark “yes” or “no” next to them as the vote unfolds.

However, the overwhelming majority of votes are unanimous. In many cases, you can actually miss the “vote” because it is not conducted as an actual voice vote—the Chair will just say something like, “Is there any opposition to X? Hearing none, the motion passes.” But if there is any sense of disagreement, they will take a voice vote.

If you are planning to comment during meeting, you need to register for CEA, GVEA, and MEA. MEA will also usually ask if there is anyone who wants to comments during meeting. HEA does not have a sign-up mechanism—they will simply ask if anyone wishes to address the board. Member comments are always very near the start.

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