

Effective Governance: Pointers for Council Members

Roles and Responsibilities

- Your primary role is helping to build and maintain a sense of community.
- Important questions to help you understand your role:
 - What is it that the governing body can do in our community that no other individual or group can do?
 - How does the governing body add value to the community?
 - If the governing body is not looking at the big picture, who is?
- If you define your role primarily in terms of providing constituent services, you have decided to become a customer service representative rather than a member of the board of directors.
- Be aware of the origin of your images about elected officials. Congress and state legislators are not always the best models for local elected officials.

Working well with each other

- Your most important constituents are other council members. Nothing gets done without a majority.
- Compromise and negotiation are the tools of the political craft. Except when sitting as a quasi-judicial body, beware of acting like judge and jury. You are a member of a legislative body where compromise and negotiation are prized.
- Working with other council members to accomplish something is incredibly rewarding. But it may mean giving up some of what you want. Keep your focus on what you are trying to accomplish. The emotions of politics and dealing with citizens can take you off track.
- Your toughest job initially will be learning how to get other council members to consider "your" issues. There are formal ways to get items on the governing body's agenda, and there are informal ways to interest other council members.
- Your next toughest job will be learning how to influence other council members. Learn how to engage your colleagues without enraging them.
- Sometimes you have to be satisfied just to have the governing body consider an issue you are interested in. You will not always get your way.
- For the sake of effective meetings, every council member does not have to speak on every issue.
- Governing bodies that are willing to ask themselves: "What could we be doing to make ourselves more effective"? are doing their community a favor.

Civility and courtesy for getting things done

- In council-manager government, the mayor's role is to facilitate discussion.
- Nothing is accomplished by getting another council member angry.
- Being able to shake hands with other council members at the end of each council meeting sometimes takes a lot, but it will be worth it in the long run.
- How you conduct your business as a governing body conveys as much as what you accomplish.
- When councils are divided, more talk about the issue may not be of benefit. In these cases, relying on voting to replace talking can be very useful.
- Citizens will respect your position, but you must earn the respect of your council colleagues.
- Saying things on television or in public that are transparently political or self-interested diminishes your respect among your colleagues. Don't forget, you are not in Congress or the state legislature.

Effective partnerships with staff

- If you want to work with staff as partners, you have to treat them as partners; and vice-versa. Trust must be earned regardless of your position.
- If you see yourself primarily as a watchdog, then you have minimized the likelihood of developing a close working relationship with the staff that is there to assist the governing body and citizens.
- Spend as much time letting staff know how you want them to conduct business as you do setting policy priorities.
- It's OK to look to other cities/counties for ideas, including internationally.

Building a sense of community and encouraging citizen engagement

- Compelling political agendas are built on dreams (and fears). Has your governing body given itself the opportunity to share dreams for the community?
- Governing body members who can connect what is politically acceptable with what is administratively feasible add tremendous value to the governing process.
- It is normal for political values to conflict, and more often than not, there are many "right" solutions to controversial policy issues.
- Citizens are very rational when their interests are not affected. When interests are at stake, the most you can expect is that the parties will see that their interests will have to be assessed against the interests of others.
- One of your roles is to bring together opposing community groups to develop understanding and resolve issues between them.
- Invest in the future; respect the past.

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These thoughts are based on his experience on the Lawrence, Kansas City Council, 1991-1999, including two terms as mayor.

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