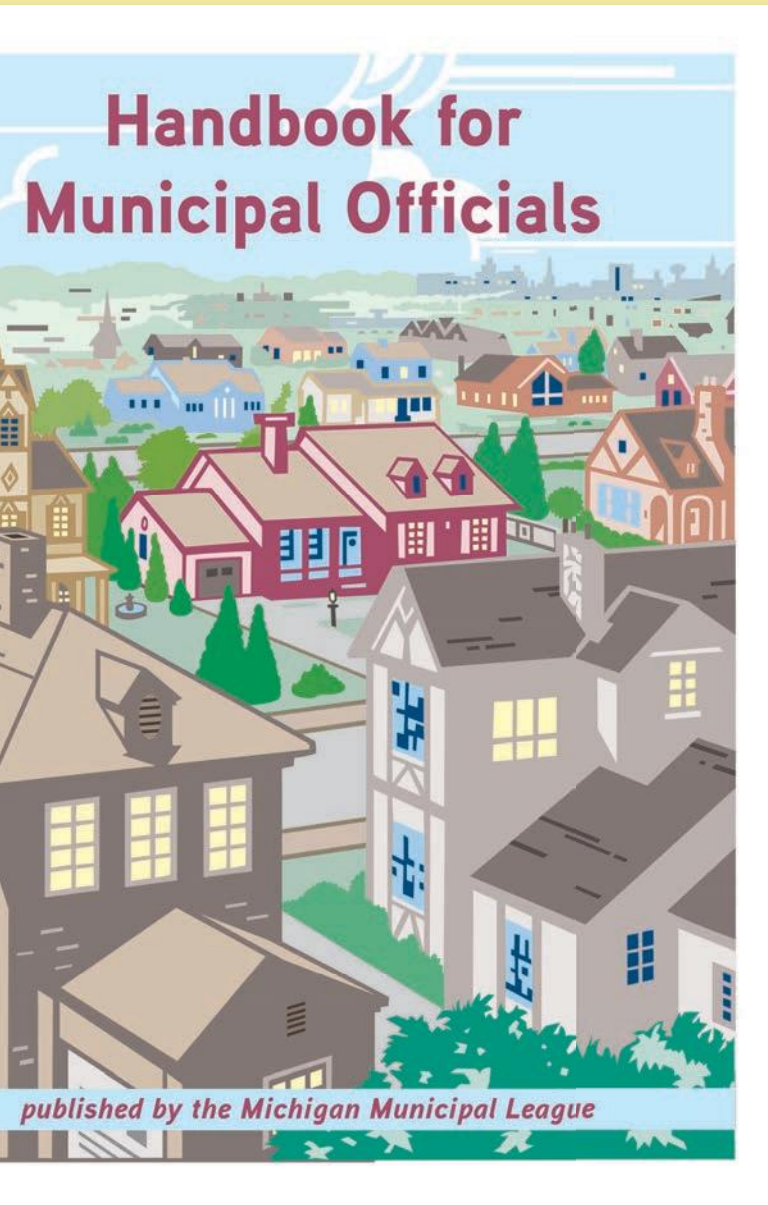


Elected Officials' Orientation: Are You Doing It?



A thorough orientation will provide newly elected officials with the tools they need to deal with what can be an overwhelming job. Most orientations are given by the manager, along with department heads. An orientation can be done a few different ways: a specific educational session for new officials, a tour with educational components, or a compilation of documents in a handbook.

The city of Ionia, for example, plans council orientations over four afternoons, whereas Fremont schedules a one-day session, from 8 am to 2 pm (including a tour). DeWitt has an impressive mandate in the city charter: after every regular city election, the city administrator shall schedule an orientation session for elected officials, administrative officers, and their deputies. Going even further, DeWitt's elected officials are required to certify with the clerk that they have read the city charter.

There are certain things that should be covered in a council orientation, no matter what:

- form of government
- charter
- council rules, and
- Open Meetings Act (OMA)

Form of Government

Explain the type of government your municipality operates under, along with an overview of all forms of local government (council-manager, strong mayor, township, charter township) in Michigan.

Charter

A charter is a local governing document, similar to a constitution. It will tell you how long your terms of office are, how the mayor pro tem is chosen, whether citizens can initiate ordinances, and if they can vote to block the passage of an ordinance they don't like. It will also contain assessing and tax collection procedures, among other things.

Council Rules

How are items placed on the agenda? Are you allowed to miss meetings? Are you able to abstain from a vote? When is the public allowed to participate and for how long? Council rules are individual to the council. Not every city has the same rules, and they can include a range of things from decorum provisions to how boards and commissions are set up. The city of Standish briefly lists the “Council Voting Procedures” on ordinances and Resolutions in a section of its orientation packet named “General Council Information,” and makes the full set of council rules available separately.

Laws Affecting Local Officials

Some laws apply to every aspect of local government—such as the Open Meetings Act (it applies to every meeting you have), and the Freedom of Information Act (it applies to every document you have). These two Acts are particularly important to know and follow because there are civil and criminal penalties for violating them. One needn’t be an attorney to summarize the OMA and provide supporting materials, such as a copy of the Act and League publications “OMA: Definitions and Requirements,” “Calling Closed Meetings,” and “Closed Meeting Minutes.”

Ordinances

Elected officials should know what the “code” is, how to locate it, and the basics of passing an ordinance. What are the voting requirements? Do ordinances need to go through first, second, and third readings? Do they require public hearings? In addition, it just makes good sense for elected officials to know the laws, rules, and policies that their constituents are expected to follow.

Council Policies

Certain policies that affect the council should be pointed out, such as

- travel policies (reimbursement for mileage, education classes, conferences, meals),
- computer usage,
- email guidelines,
- council communication with staff,
- media relations policy, and
- compensation (i.e. per meeting, quarterly, yearly, or none at all).

Employee Handbook

An employee handbook communicates your organization’s mission and culture, and provides the municipality protection from liabilities associated with public employment. The council, as employer, should know the personnel policies of the municipality.

Ethics

Are councilmembers required to file a disclosure statement? What are incompatible public offices? What is misconduct in


office? Are council allowed to go out for meals on someone else’s tab? Accept gifts? Hire a cousin, uncle, or niece? Basic materials on ethics should be provided. The city of Sandusky has prepared a code of conduct handbook for councilmembers that includes council conduct with citizens, city staff, with one another, with boards and commissions, and with other public agencies. The pervasive theme is one of respect through words and actions, and for elected officials to exhibit appropriate behavior at all times.

Budgeting/Capital Improvement Plan

Of course, the council must approve the budget. The council has to make decisions on salaries, on benefits, on services, on improvements, on safety, and the list can go on and on. The budget decision-making process depends on knowledgeable councilmembers. The CIP, or capital improvement plan should be described as a budgetary concern as well.

The League as a Resource

The League publishes two primers on municipal government for our member officials. *The Handbook for Municipal Officials* is for elected officials in home rule cities and villages, whereas *The Handbook for General Law Village Officials* is for elected officials in general law villages. Both are available on the League’s website. The League has other publications that can be of help to first-time officials, like our *One-Pager Plus* fact sheets—easy-to-read summaries of municipal topics, often with sample policies or ordinances attached. We currently have 61 titles.

If you would like copies of orientation materials, contact the League’s inquiry department. We also have sample council rules, personnel handbooks, information on budgeting, visioning, the OMA and FOIA, ethics, charters, and the structure of government in Michigan. Also, the League has training programs geared towards newly elected officials—check our current offerings at mml.org. 

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