

Elected Officials Orientation

—By Kim Cekola



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 in a few different ways: a specific educational session for new officials, a tour with educational components, or a compilation of documents in a handbook.

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. 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:

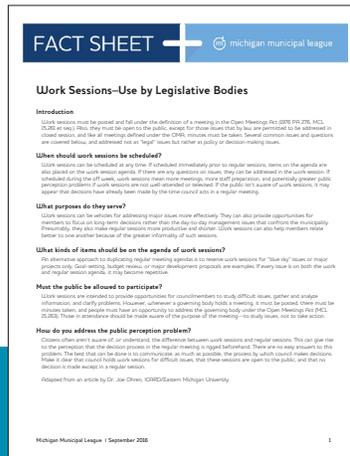
- form of government,
- charter,
- council rules,
- Open Meetings Act (OMA) and
- Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

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, weak 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 councilmembers/trustees/commissioners allowed to miss meetings? Abstain from a vote? When is the public allowed to participate during the governing body's meeting and for how long? Three minutes is a common "speak time" but some municipalities have longer time limits or even none. 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.

Vision/Mission Statement

If your municipality has a vision or mission statement, now is the time to reinforce it. A vision statement expresses the values of a community, as in the following from the Village of Ellsworth:

A community that has opportunities for all residents, a prosperous community that is thriving personally and economically, a destination for visitors and tourists, independent, open-minded, and charming.



Goals/Priorities/Strategic Plan

The Village of Vicksburg’s strategic plan encompasses its vision, mission statement, and priorities.

1. To achieve “Wow!” customer service
2. Vicksburg will continue to provide first-class growth opportunities through sound governance
3. Healthy infrastructure and amenities ensure a quality of life
4. Sufficient and sustainable staffing maximize community impact
5. Better engaged residents through communication and transparency

Organization Chart

An organizational chart is a useful tool showing departments, reporting relationships and how employees and elected officials interrelate. The number of employees in the municipality, the department(s) and their areas of responsibilities should be discussed. As part of an orientation, many communities have a tour of their offsite departments, ranging from the fire station to the wastewater treatment plant.

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 (reimbursement for mileage, education classes, conferences, meals),
- computer/cell phone usage,
- email/texting guidelines,
- council communication with staff,
- media relations (including social media), and
- compensation (e.g., 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/trustees/commissioners required to file a disclosure statement? What are incompatible public offices? What constitutes misconduct in office? Are councilmembers/trustees/commissioners 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 always exhibit appropriate behavior.



Budgeting/Capital Improvement Plan

Of course, the council must approve the budget. The council must 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/trustees/commissioners. 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 Fact Sheets—easy-to-read summaries of municipal topics, often with sample policies or ordinances attached. We currently have 83 titles.



For sample council rules, personnel handbooks, information on budgeting, visioning/strategic planning, the OMA and FOIA, ethics, charters, and the structure of local government in Michigan, contact the League’s inquiry department at info@mml.org. In addition, the League has training programs geared towards newly elected officials—see page 13. [i](#)

Kim Cekola is the research specialist/editor for the League. You may reach her at 734-669-6321 or kcekola@mml.org.

EQUALITY



EQUITY



mml.org/dei | deiteam@mml.org