

Section 1: Local Government

Chapter 1: Welcome to Public Service

The flush of election victory has faded a little and you've taken the oath of office. Now you're probably asking yourself, "What do I do next?"

Serving as an effective village official requires dedication, knowledge, and a substantial commitment of time and effort. No matter your motivation or background, as a member of the village council you have the opportunity to make important contributions to shape the future of your community. For this reason, becoming a municipal elected official can be one of the most rewarding experiences of your life.

Being Well-Informed

There is no substitute for thoroughly understanding the issues and the federal, state, and local laws affecting these issues. As a public official, you will receive an enormous amount of information. It is important to be able to handle this material efficiently and effectively.

For starters:

- **Read the General Law Village Act (1895 PA 3)**—the charter for your village. It can be downloaded from the Michigan Legislature website at legislature.mi.gov. It can also be retrieved through the League's website, along with an index of the Act prepared by the League.
- **Know the duties and limitations of your office and of the village.** This requires familiarity with the state and federal constitutions, local ordinances, and the court cases interpreting them—as well as the General Law Village Act (GLV).

- **Know your village.** Know its history, operations, and finances. Review all reports from the village president (and/or manager if your village has one), department heads, and boards and commissions.
- **Be familiar with the village plans.** Review the master plan, the parks and recreation plan, and the infrastructure and economic development plans. The village may also have a number of other documents outlining its goals, objectives, and plans.
- **Be aware of current state and federal legislation, pending court cases, and other factors that may affect local issues.** The Michigan Municipal League frequently sends materials to help you stay up to date.
- **Talk to people with differing points of view and relevant information.** Your constituents, officials in neighboring villages, cities, and townships; and county and state officials will all have important and different perspectives on each issue.

Making Decisions

No government official can always make decisions that please everyone. Honest people have honest differences in opinion. Making decisions is not always easy; it takes hard work and practice. However, each trustee must eventually "stand up and be counted." It is this process by which your constituency judges you and holds you accountable.

Responsibilities of an elected official

The specific duties of village officials as established in the GLV Act are set out in the next chapter. However, all elected officials share certain responsibilities. First and foremost, trustees must remember they are elected to make decisions **as a collective body**, not to act as individuals or apart from the council. Together, as well as individually, it is their responsibility to:

Identify community needs

Each village is unique, with its own set of problems, and each person has a different view of the relative importance of those problems. You must discover the specific needs of your village and the relative importance of each.

Observe

Take a tour of the village with the rest of the council, the manager if your village has one, and department heads. Such a tour is especially valuable for newly elected officials. They often discover parts of the village never seen before, learn where the legal boundaries are, and see where major trouble spots are now and where they might develop. There is really no substitute for first-hand observation.

Establish priorities

Each request should be examined in terms of citizen demand, financial cost, benefit to the entire community, availability from other sources, and even political expediency. A balance should be maintained between the flexibility required to reorder priorities when conditions require, and the firmness required to resist changing the programs to meet the momentary whims of special interest groups in the community.

Participate in formal council meetings

The council meeting is the final step in determining the projects and programs required to meet community needs. Here, under public scrutiny, sometimes faced by

suspicious and distrustful citizens, the municipal lawmaker must transact the business of the community based on established priorities and data that have been gathered and analyzed.

In council meetings, it is important to:

- **Look attentive, sound knowledgeable**, and be straightforward and meticulously honest.
- **Be familiar with a systematic and efficient way to handle business brought before the council.** The president, manager, or clerk will have prepared a concise and easily understood agenda outlining for you—and the public—the order in which items will be considered during the meeting. This agenda may allow the public and the trustees themselves to bring up additional items of business for discussion. Your copy of the agenda may come with a packet of background material prepared to assist you with your decision.
- **Bring all appropriate documents, notes, and memoranda to the meeting.** Arrange the material in the same order as the agenda so pertinent information can be found easily.
- **Have a reasonable knowledge of parliamentary procedure and of the rules of procedure the council has adopted and follows.** This will keep the meeting moving smoothly and efficiently, with a clear indication of each item's disposition. However, too much attention to procedure can slow down the meetings with complicated rules.
- **Eliminate personal remarks** The general atmosphere of any council meeting should be relaxed, friendly, efficient, and dignified. Sarcasm, innuendoes, and name

calling should be avoided in interactions with the other trustees, staff, and the public. This does not mean falsehoods, misinterpretations, distortions, and challenges to your integrity or honesty should be left unanswered. They should be answered—and sometimes vigorously—but these rejoinders should address the facts rather than the qualities, or lack of them, of the person being addressed.

Interact with Citizen Boards and Commissions

Establishing commissions, boards, and other citizen committees is often helpful in resolving the complex issues facing village councils and is an important means of encouraging citizen participation. The purpose of these groups is to sift and analyze data and then make recommendations. These types of boards are created at the discretion of the municipal body and should be set up with care. The board members should know exactly what they are responsible for, what their authority is, and what they are supposed to accomplish. The board should have bylaws or meeting rules that establish basics such as how members are appointed, how long they serve, and the number that constitutes a quorum. Both board members and trustees should **keep in mind that citizen boards are advisory in nature, and that the ultimate decision making authority rests with the council.** Court decisions can narrowly define the Open Meetings Act (OMA) to include a committee in the definition of a public body; thus, according to the OMA, committee meetings must be posted and all OMA regulations followed.

The council's decision may not always coincide with the board's recommendation. Trustees must be concerned with the total system and the effect of these decisions on other policy

areas. Changes recommended by a planning board, for example, may not have considered traffic problems that would be created.

Appointments to Citizen Boards and Commissions

It is important to select the best possible people to serve on village boards and commissions.

- Select people who will have the interest, time, and energy to devote to the responsibilities assigned to that board.
- Look for citizens interested in the welfare of the entire community, rather than those with a narrow interest or an axe to grind.
- Choose people with an open mind, who are willing to listen, and are not afraid to express themselves—not based on their particular point of view.
- Try to reflect the diversity of the community on each board.

Work with the Village Manager

If your village has a manager, the functions of the council and manager are clearly differentiated—at least in theory. The council is the legislative body that must, within the confines of the village charter and appropriate state and federal laws and court decisions, formulate policy by which the village is to be run. The village manager and staff *execute* this policy—they do not determine the policy. Trustees, on the other hand, should not wander through village hall, making sure that tasks are performed or that directives are carried out.

In actual practice, a clear-cut separation is difficult. Trustees do direct the village manager from time-to-time to follow certain administrative practices, and the manager does, at times, influence policy. The council and manager should discuss this interaction and, wherever possible, establish clear guidelines to help keep

these functions separated. Each must recognize that occasionally these functions will overlap.

The council is responsible for policy decision making. This is not always easy or pleasant, but it is necessary. As much as possible—except in routine matters—the trustees should make the decisions themselves with as much help from citizens, the manager, and the staff as they can secure. They shouldn't pass this responsibility to the manager with instructions to "take care of the matter" unless there is a policy to serve as a guideline.

It is the manager's responsibility to implement policies and programs and to supervise, hire, and fire employees. This doesn't mean the council is powerless in these areas. It can direct the manager to execute its wishes. Noncompliance can result in dismissal of the manager. The manager acts as the liaison between employees and the village council. She or he must see that both are well informed about what the other is thinking and doing. Misunderstandings are far less likely to occur if both employees and trustees are well informed.

Relationship with Employees

Perhaps one of the most important jobs of the council is to hire, evaluate, and retain competent staff—and to compensate them fairly. This three-part chore may require the assistance of other professionals. An evaluation process between the council and the manager, if your village has a manager, or directly between council and department heads if there is no manager, is the tool to keep everyone working on the same page. Fair compensation avoids the revolving door.

The second step is to trust the staff's professional judgment and to recognize its authority and responsibility. Staff is hired for its expertise. They have the training,

experience, and information the council does not—and need not—have.

Talk with Citizens

Direct interaction with your constituents is both politically and practically prudent. Municipal officials need to be accessible, concerned, and open minded—and you will be if you talk not just with friends, but also with people you do not know well or at all. Include people representing various economic levels, professions, occupations, and cultural backgrounds. Be prepared to receive unsolicited information and criticism from citizens who seek you out.

Citizen Engagement Policies

Establish formal engagement strategies for important policy initiatives and planning projects. Effective engagement strengthens the community, improves government-citizen relationships, builds capacity, and eases program/policy implementation.

Because project and policy-based engagement can sometimes be a long and challenging process, the League makes the following recommendations for smoother civic participation:

- Develop a vision and goals for what engagement should look like.
- Start engagement in the project/policy ideation phase and continue through plan formation and implementation.
- Build a diverse team of residents and community stakeholders representative of the community to guide public engagement activities.
- Build capacity by developing local leaders and partnering with organizations and community groups.
- In partnership with the stakeholder group, build a campaign around the work, develop a project timeline, and celebrate

accomplishments to keep the momentum going.

- Document activities in traditional and social media, evaluate engagement strategies, and make changes accordingly.
- Have fun! Stay open minded, positive, and energized throughout the process.

Meet with Citizen Groups

One of the most pervasive criticisms of government is that it is too far removed from the people. Any effort you make to meet with citizen groups will help reduce this complaint.

Tips for meeting with citizen groups:

- Find out as much as possible about the group before meeting with them.
- Prepare thoroughly.
- If you are asked to give a speech, be brief. Ten to fifteen minutes is plenty. Allow enough time for questions from the audience.
- Be forthright and willing to meet issues head-on without dodging or flinching.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. Faking it may bring about embarrassing repercussions later.
- Don't promise to take action. If the rest of the council doesn't agree, if some legal obstacle crops up, if, after further investigation, it seems that the first set of facts was not accurate, you will find it impossible to follow through despite your best intentions.
- Be warm, friendly, and interested in the citizens' concerns. Follow up on requests for action even if it is to inform the group that a requested action is not possible.

Cooperate with other governmental units

More and more of the problems a council must face extend beyond the legal boundaries of the municipality. Many—water and wastewater treatment, solid waste disposal, healthcare, and drug abuse, for example—cross municipal, township, county, or state boundaries and must be solved either at a higher level or cooperatively by several different units. Working with other units and agencies may be easier if you initiate meetings rather than wait for them to occur.

Communicate with the Media

If you have had little or no experience with members of the press, whether newspaper, radio, or television, you may suddenly realize that public figures live in a different world than the rest of us. Anything you say in public—whether seriously or jokingly—can appear online, or on the TV screen the same day. A poor choice of words, made on the spur of the moment, may be used to distort your opinion on a public issue. It is important to learn to work with the press effectively and comfortably.

Tips for working with the media:

- **Be honest.** Covering up or distorting statements and actions are guaranteed to establish poor relations with the press.
- **Never say “No comment.”** It is always better to say that you don't have all the facts yet and are not prepared to publicly discuss the issue at this time.
- **If you do not know the answer to a question, say so.** Offer to refer the reporter to a staff person with more information or offer to call back later with more details. If you are going to call later, be sure to ask when the reporter's deadline is, and call promptly.
- **Be consistent.** Do your best to maintain the same position on

public matters from one meeting to the next. If the facts have changed, or you have thought through an issue and come to a rational change in opinion, be sure to carefully explain that to the media.

- **Be cautious.** Even though you may trust a reporter, remember that reporters have a story to get and that what you, as a public official, say or think or do is news.
- **Do not make statements “off the record.”** They will only come back to haunt you later.
- **Be positive in your attitude toward the press.** The media can help the village president, manager, and council communicate the work of the

village to the citizens of your community. A good working relationship can be established if the council is open in its dealings with the press. Under the Open Meetings Act, the press is entitled to attend **all public meetings**. Provide members of the press with copies of reports, recommendations, and other documents related to the business of the village and initiate contact with reporters rather than waiting until they come to you.

Chapter by League staff based on materials provided by **Gordon L. Thomas (deceased)**, former mayor of East Lansing, and past president and honorary life member of the League.