

# Section 1: Local Government

## Chapter 1: Welcome to Public Service

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

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

### Be 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:

- **Become familiar with your city or village charter.** It is the governing document of your municipality. Think of it as the constitution of your city or village.

- **Know the duties and limitations of your office and of the municipality.** This requires familiarity with the state and federal constitutions, local ordinances and the court cases interpreting them—as well as your city or village charter.
- **Know your city or village.** Know its history, its operations, and its finances. Review all reports from the mayor/ president (and/or manager if your municipality has one), department heads, and citizen boards and commissions.
- **Become familiar with your municipality's plans.** Review the master plan, the parks and recreation plan, the infrastructure and economic development plans. There may also be a number of other documents outlining the goals and objectives for your city or village.
- **Be aware of current state and federal legislation, pending court cases and other factors that affect local issues.** The Michigan Municipal League frequently sends material 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 of opinion. Making decisions is not always easy; it takes hard work and practice. However, each councilmember must eventually “stand up and be counted.” It is this process by which your constituency judges you and for which it will hold you accountable.

### **Fulfill Your Responsibilities**

The specific duties of village and city officials are spelled out in the charter of each municipality. However, all elected officials share certain responsibilities.

**First and foremost, councilmembers 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 councilmembers’ responsibility to:

**Identify community needs.** Each city and 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 municipality and the relative importance of each.

**Observe.** Take a tour of the community with the rest of the council, the manager (if your municipality has one), and department heads. Such a tour is especially valuable for newly elected officials. They often discover areas 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, and the firmness required to resist changing the programs to meet the momentary desires 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, 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:

- **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 mayor or 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 members of the council themselves to bring up additional items of business for discussion. Your copy of the agenda may come with a packet of background material. These should be read before the

meeting, to assist you in decision-making.

- **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 the rules of procedure the council has adopted.** This will keep the meeting moving smoothly and efficiently, with a clear indication of each item's disposition.
- **Eliminate personal remarks.** The general atmosphere of any meeting should be relaxed, friendly, efficient, and dignified. Sarcasm, innuendo, and name calling should be avoided in interactions with the other councilmembers, 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—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 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 councilmembers 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. Councilmembers 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.

**Select the best possible people to serve on citizen 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.

- Choose people with open minds, 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 city/village manager.**

If your municipality 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 city/village is to be run. The manager and staff *execute* this policy—they do not determine the policy. Councilmembers, on the other hand, should not wander through city/village hall, making sure that tasks are performed or that directives are carried out.

In actual practice, a clear-cut separation is difficult. Councilmembers do direct the 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 separate. 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 councilmembers 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 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 councilmembers are well informed.

**Establish and maintain relationships 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 city or 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.

**Establish formal citizen engagement policies 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, lying, and 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 don’t 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 may come back to haunt you later.

**Be positive in your attitude toward the press.** The media can help the president or mayor, manager, and council communicate the work of the municipality to its citizens. 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 city or village and initiate contact with reporters rather than waiting for them to come to you.

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