

# “I Pledge to Promote Civility..”

By Kim Cekola

The League’s inquiry service hears about really tough situations from our members, such as:

“What can we do about a councilmember who is rude and verbally abusive in council meetings and in the community?”

“...one trustee stomped out of the meeting after being called out for abusive behavior of other trustees and the audience.”

“Our audiences are horribly disruptive and frequently downright rude. It’s to the point where I abhor meetings and I’m pretty sure others feel the same.”

In 2018, the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP), part of the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan, had an encouraging report: “While national political discourse may be becoming increasingly hostile, Michigan officials have generally positive views on local discourse...”

- Discourse among local elected officials: 71 percent say it is constructive; only eight percent say it’s divisive
- Discourse between residents and elected officials: 67 percent say it’s constructive; just five percent say it’s divisive
- Discourse on local policy issues among residents: 38 percent of local leaders say it’s constructive; 11 percent divisive; and 39 percent say it’s mixed

In all three cases, leaders in municipalities of 30,000+ population are more likely to say the discourse is divisive. Similarly, appointed officials in municipalities of all sizes are more likely to say the discourse is divisive.

By 2022, the headline had changed significantly: “Statewide survey finds a majority of Michigan local governments experiencing harassment and other abuse.”

- 47 percent of top elected and appointed local officials report harassment over the last few years, including disrespectful or hostile comments, graphic language or slurs, shouting, and rude or aggressive gestures.
- Such harassment is more common in communities of more than 5,000 residents. . . 67 percent.

I don’t think I need to list more reasons to bolster the idea of individual municipal officials adopting a civility pledge or adopting a Resolution as a board. Granted, these may sound insufficient or even quaint when confronted with harassment or abuse. But it’s a start. And I think this could be a significant one.

*“In the interest of civility, I pledge to promote civility by listening, being respectful of others, acknowledging that we are all striving to support and improve our community and understanding that we each may have different ideas for achieving that objective.”*

A civility pledge or a Resolution, coupled with adopting council rules of procedure that clearly state the reasons why someone may be removed from a council meeting, is a method of dealing with disruptive behavior.

Here is an excerpt from council rules of procedure drafted by the League:

*The president/mayor may call to order any person who is being disorderly by speaking out of order or otherwise disrupting the proceedings, failing to be germane, speaking longer than the allotted time, or speaking vulgarities. Such person shall be seated until the chair determines whether the person is in order. If the person so engaged is called out of order, he or she shall not be permitted to continue to speak at the same meeting except by special leave of the council. If the person shall continue to be disorderly and disrupt the meeting, the chair may order the sergeant at arms to remove the person from the meeting. No person shall be removed from a public meeting except for an actual breach of the peace committed at the meeting.*

It is suggested that there be an ordinance governing disruption of public meetings, prepared with advice of the village/city attorney on the risks, limits, and force allowed to eject members. This ordinance should stipulate the procedure to be followed and the resource to be used for the sergeant at arms function, e.g., local police, county sheriff, etc. By planning in advance how to handle attempted disruptions, you can keep the meeting in order.

Other state leagues and the National League of Cities (NLC) have been promoting civility pledges. The NLC stated, “. . . a growing national effort among municipalities to address rising tensions in civic spaces while ensuring residents continue to have opportunities to engage constructively with their local governments.”

For sample civility pledges or Resolutions, please email requests to [info@mml.org](mailto:info@mml.org). 

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