

# 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.

### On being an elected official

Being well informed, listening carefully and knowing how to make decisions will enhance those qualifications you need to succeed as a public official: integrity, intelligence and a genuine concern for people.

### 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 web site at [www.legislature.gov](http://www.legislature.gov). It can also be retrieved through the MML web site, along with a index of the act prepared by the MML. You must have your password to access this ebook:

[www.mml.org/members/pdf/glv\\_index04.pdf](http://www.mml.org/members/pdf/glv_index04.pdf)

- **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 the General Law Village Act .
- **Know your village.** Know its history, its operations and its finances. Review all reports from the village president (and/or manager if your village has one), department heads and citizen boards and commissions.
- **Become familiar with the village plans.** Review the master plan, the parks and recreation plan, 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 and the National League of Cities frequently send 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.

### **Listening**

- Although seventy percent of our waking day is spent in some form of communication, and at least six hours a day is spent listening to some form of oral communication, we don't always do it well. Yet, it is imperative to listen actively and accurately to be an effective trustee.

### **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 for which it 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 and determine priorities**

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.

Keep your eyes open as you go back and forth to work or to village hall, taking the opportunity to look for problems. Use a different route to see more than just one area. There is really no substitute for first-hand observation.

### **Talk with citizens**

Direct interaction with your constituents is both politically and practically prudent. Village 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 don't know well or at all. Be sure to include people representing various economic levels, professions, occupations and cultural backgrounds.

In talking with citizens, be concerned primarily with listening. Avoid arguing or defending existing positions. Your attitude should reflect a genuine desire to secure information.

In addition to seeking information in a person-to-person setting of your choice, you will also receive unsolicited information and criticism from citizens who seek you out.

### **Read**

Trustees receive a large amount of printed material: minutes, reports, articles, letters, recommendations, proposed state and federal legislation and much more. Much of this relates to problems and possible solutions, and some of it may help you discover the needs and wishes of your constituents. A letter or a newspaper article may reveal a problem that had not surfaced previously. Problems in other communities that are spelled out in journals and other printed sources may pose the question, “Do we have that same problem in this community?”

### **Establish priorities**

Having defined the problems and needs of the community, it is important to establish the priority of each. How is this done – remembering that the resources, both human and financial, of any municipality are limited? Even if resources were unlimited, there are a number of activities that would not – and should not – be engaged in by the local government.

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 meeting 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 general public – the order in which items will be considered during the meeting. This agenda may allow the general 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** intended to ridicule another person. Regardless of the actual relationships between trustees, 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. 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.** Of note are court decisions more narrowly defining the Open Meetings Act to include a committee in the definition of a public body.

The MML advises members to post notices of meetings of committees.

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.

### **Appoint 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, not on the basis of their particular point of view, but based on whether they have an open mind, are willing to listen and are not afraid to express themselves.
- Try to reflect the diversity of the community on each board.
- Don't select appointees simply to pay back someone who has done you, or the village, a favor.

### **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 village 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 village 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.

### **Respect the relationship with village 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.

### **Meet with citizen groups**

From time to time, trustees are asked to meet with organized groups of citizens such as a parent/teacher organization, a subdivision association, service clubs or the chamber of commerce. Sometimes you may be asked simply to listen. At other times you may be asked to speak or to discuss a problem. The time spent with these groups can provide valuable insight and build support in the community.

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 15 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. It could be dangerous. 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 in spite of 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 in the paper or on the TV screen the same day. An unguarded comment about a person or about someone's idea may be indelibly printed, much to your embarrassment. 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.
- **Don't ever 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.

#### **About the authors...**

**Gordon L. Thomas** (*deceased*) was mayor of East Lansing from 1961 to 1972. He was a past president of the Michigan Municipal League and was an honorary life member. He served on the governor's Advisory Committee on Local Government. Dr. Thomas was on the faculty of Michigan State University from 1945 and taught speech and communications from 1960 until his retirement. He was a co-author of *Conducting Public Meetings*, a manual to assist presiding officers.

**Shirley S. Smith** (*retired*) had a 30-year career with the Michigan Municipal League that included directing its research and serving as secretary-treasurer of the MML Foundation.

#### **Member Resource Services**

The Member Resource Services Department is comprised of many different services of the League, including educational services, publications, web and graphic design, the business partnership program, and information services. This department provides member officials with resources and educational opportunities on a vast array of municipal topics.