

# 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 official requires dedication, knowledge and a substantial commitment of time and effort. No matter your motivation or background, as a member of the council/commission you have the opportunity to make important contributions to shape the future of your community. For this reason, becoming a local 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 as well as 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.** Ask your clerk for a copy of the 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 (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, objectives and plans 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 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 this well. Yet, it is imperative to listen actively and accurately to be an effective council/commission member.

## 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 commission member 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.

### **Responsibilities of an elected official**

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, council members 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 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.

Keep your eyes open as you go back and forth to work or to city 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. 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. 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 should also be prepared to receive unsolicited information and criticism from citizens who seek you out.

#### **Read**

Elected officials receive a large amount of printed material: minutes, reports, articles, letters, proposed state and federal legislation and 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 raise 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 determining the projects and programs required to meet community needs. Here,

under public scrutiny (sometimes face to face with 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 mayor or 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 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. 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 the members of the council or commission, the general atmosphere of any meeting should be relaxed, friendly, efficient and dignified. Sarcasm, innuendoes and name calling should be avoided in interactions with the other council members, staff and the public. This does not mean falsehoods, misinterpretations, distor-

tions 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.

### **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 infor-

mation, 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 or city mayor, manager and council communicate the work of the municipality 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 city or village and initiate contact with reporters rather than waiting for them to come to you.

### About the authors. . .

This chapter is based on material originally prepared by Gordon Thomas and Shirley Smith for handbooks the MML has published for elected officials. It has been revised by the Member Resource Services Department.

**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. 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.

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### 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.