

## Council Orientation

Newly elected officials take an oath before they are inducted into office, swearing to uphold the Constitution and to “faithfully discharge the duties of their office.” One might ask: “How are they able to discharge the duties of their office without a full understanding of what those duties are? How do they make governing decisions? How do they find out the rules they have to follow and the rules employees have to follow?” Optimally, they will have an orientation to their new office.

To be successful with the heavy burden they have taken on, newly elected officials need information to perform their duties within a legal framework of local, state and federal government. A thorough orientation to the office will provide them the tools they need to deal with a potentially overwhelming job. Most orientations are given by the manager, along with department heads. An orientation can be done in a few different ways: a specific educational session for new officials, a tour with educational components, or a compilation of documents in a handbook. For example, Ionia plans council orientations over four afternoons, whereas Fremont schedules a one-day educational session, from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., including a tour.

DeWitt has an impressive mandate in the city charter, **Section 2.10 Orientation Sessions**

“After every regular city election the city administrator shall schedule an orientation session for elected officials, administrative officers, their deputies, and others at the direction of their officers. The session shall include a review of local government documents, and shall be open to the public.”

There are certain things that should be covered in a council orientation, no matter what: the form of government, the charter, council rules, and the Open Meetings Act (OMA). One doesn’t need to be an attorney to summarize the OMA and provide supporting materials, such as a copy of the Act and MML publications “OMA: Definitions and Requirements,” “Calling Closed Meetings,” and “Closed Meeting

Minutes.” In addition to these basics, this article will give suggestions as to other components of a new council orientation, based on material from seven Michigan cities.

### City/Village/Township Information

Provide basic information on the municipality, such as the population, geography, history, character, etc.

### Structure of Government

Explain the type of government your municipality operates under, along with an overview of all forms of local government (council-manager, strong mayor, township, charter township) in Michigan.

### Charter

A charter is a local governing document, similar to a constitution. It will tell you how long your terms of office are, how the mayor pro tem is chosen, whether citizens can initiate ordinances and if they can vote to block the passage of an ordinance they don’t like. It will also contain assessing and tax collection procedures, among numerous other things.

A common provision in council-manager government charters is a provision like this one from Plymouth’s charter:

“The Commission and its members shall deal with the administrative officers and employees of the city, solely through the city manager, and neither the commission nor any member thereof shall give orders to any subordinate of the city manager as to the performance of his duties, either publicly or privately. Any violation of the provisions of this section by a commissioner shall constitute misconduct in office.”

[As a side note, elected officials in DeWitt are required to read the city charter and certify it with the city clerk.]

### Council rules/meetings

How are items placed on the agenda? Are you allowed to miss meetings? Are you able to abstain from a vote? When is the public

allowed to participate and for how long? Council rules are individual to the council. Not every city has the same rules, and they can include a range of things from decorum provisions to how boards and commissions are set up. The city of Standish briefly lists the “Council Voting Procedures” on ordinances and resolutions in a section of their orientation packet named “General Council Information,” and makes the full set of council rules available separately.

### Code of Ordinances

Elected officials should know what the “code” is, how to locate it and the basics of passing an ordinance. What are the voting requirements, do ordinances need to go through 1st, 2nd and 3rd readings? Do they require public hearings? In addition, it makes good sense for the elected representatives to know the laws, rules and policies that the electorate are expected to follow.

### Vision/Mission Statement

If your municipality has a vision or mission statement, now is the time to reinforce it. A vision statement expresses the values of a community, as in the following from Alpena:

“Working together, the community of Alpena will become a premier choice as a place to live, work, and vacation. Residents will recognize the community’s continued dedication to all areas affecting the quality of life. The community will continue to be committed to excellence in maintaining its “TREASURES”:

- a friendly town with a safe environment;
- a good place to raise a family;
- enjoyment of natural resources;
- preservation of traditions;
- recreation and cultural experiences;
- employment opportunities.”

### Goals/Priorities/Strategic Plan

The city of Manistee has a council strategic plan that encompasses its vision, mission statement, and priorities. City council has proposed strategic goals for each of these priority areas.

- Competitive position of the city
- Economic development and jobs
- City infrastructure

- Beaches, parks and recreational areas
- Financial stability
- Intergovernmental relationships.

### Organization Chart

An organization chart is a useful tool. It illustrates the structure of your municipality's departments as well as showing and reinforcing the hierarchy of local government roles. Think about a typical municipal organization chart—the electorate is at the top, then the governing body, then the municipal employees. To flesh out the chart, an orientation should include an overview of each municipal department (by the department heads) and a tour of city/village/township hall and off-site departments, such as the fire and police stations. Believe it or not, some people find the wastewater treatment plant the highlight of a municipal tour.

### Laws Affecting Local Officials

Some laws apply to every aspect of local government such as the Open Meetings Act (it applies to every meeting you have), and the Freedom of Information Act (it applies to every document you have). These two Acts are particularly important to know and follow, because there are civil and criminal penalties for violating them.

### Council Policies

Certain policies that affect the council should be pointed out, such as travel policies (reimbursement for mileage, education classes, conferences, meals), computer usage, e-mail guidelines, council communication with staff, media relations policy, and compensation (i.e. per meeting, quarterly, yearly, or none at all).

### Employee Handbook

An employee handbook communicates your organization's mission and culture, and provides the municipality protection from liabilities associated with public employment. The council, as employer, should know the personnel policies of the municipality.

### Ethics

Are councilmembers required to file a disclosure statement? What are incompatible public offices? What is misconduct in office? Are council allowed to go out for meals on some-

one else's tab? Accept gifts? Hire a cousin, or uncle or niece? Basic materials on ethics should be provided. The city of Sandusky has prepared a code of conduct handbook for councilmembers that includes council conduct with citizens, with city staff, with one another, with boards and commissions, and with other public agencies. The pervasive theme is one of respect through words and actions, and for elected officials to exhibit appropriate behavior at all times.

### Budgeting/Capital Improvement Plan

Of course, the council must approve the budget, so information on the budget process is crucial. The capital improvement plan (CIP) should be a part of the budget discussion as well. The CIP is a plan for future capital outlay for improvement such as sewer infrastructure, roads and buildings. A governing body must think about what will be needed in the future, as well as make decision on salaries and benefits for employees and services to its citizens in the upcoming budget year.

### Resources

A list of Resources can be very helpful to a newly elected councilmember/commissioner. It could include websites with general information, such as the State of Michigan website, or websites on complicated topics that warrant further reading and understanding, such as brownfield redevelopment, or tax abatements. Resources can also include a list of municipal employees and contact information, elected State Representatives, or copies of pertinent magazine articles, papers and reports.

### The League as a Resource

The League publishes two primers on municipal government for our member officials. The Handbook for Municipal Officials is for elected officials in home rule cities and villages, whereas the Handbook for General Law Village Officials is for elected officials in general law villages. Both are available electronically on the League's website. The League has other publications that can be of help to first time officials, like our One-Pager Plus'. These publications are one page easy to read summaries of municipal topics, often with sample policies or ordinances attached. We currently have 49 titles. If you would like copies of the cities'

orientation materials used for this article, you may contact the League's inquiry department. We not only have the sample orientation documents, but also many sample council rules, personnel handbooks, information on budgeting, visioning, the OMA and FOIA, ethics, charters, and the structure of government in Michigan.

Another resource is League staff. League staff members are available to visit your community to be a part of the orientation for your new officials. Kelly Stanford, member services manager, will describe the services available through the League and will explain how the League can be a resource to your community.

Caroline Kennedy, manager of field operations for the League's Northern Field Office is available by appointment to present on-site information regarding League services in MML Regions 6 and 7 ("up north"). Upon request Kennedy also provides a three-hour training for newly elected and veteran officials covering mandated functions of either cities or villages in Michigan, including (as appropriate) the council-manager form of government; roles and responsibilities of the presiding officer, elected council and manager; state laws affecting municipal government, including pre-emption and sunshine laws; meeting basics and current issues affecting Michigan communities. The class includes valuable exercises and Q & A participation. Manager and department head attendance is encouraged as appropriate. Kennedy stresses that detailed training on each topic she covers is available through MML and councils/individuals should decide what additional training would most benefit their community and make a training plan and commitment. Kennedy also provides consensus-building training (2.5 hrs) and stakeholder analysis training (2 hrs).

The League has training programs geared towards newly elected officials—see the League Education programs on pages 35-37. We are also partnering with U of M-Dearborn to provide evening programs for newly elected officials in February and March. For more information visit [www.soe.umd.umich.edu/3319/](http://www.soe.umd.umich.edu/3319/).