

Good Manners for Board/Council Members



If you are reading this article it may be because you are a newbie – you have either agreed to serve on a rural utility board or city council for the first time or you ran for office and won! Either way, the hard work has just begun. As always, I like to start with a brief acknowledgment of the difference between being a rural water district board member and being a city council member. Water or sewer districts are basically single interest political subdivisions (SIPS) providing one service and receiving one source of revenue. Cities or towns are multiple interest political subdivisions (MIPS) and while they receive multiple sources of revenue, they must provide multiple services. So being a city council member can involve dealing with more complex issues and larger budgets and more political tension. Also, the fact is that rarely do city council members get appointed to seats. If you are serving on a city council, you probably ran for your seat and odds are that there was some specific issue that motivated you to run. This means that you may have strong feelings or be focused on a single polarizing issue. But no matter which type of seat you hold, you may be new to the job and there are nuances to serving as a successful board member that you need to learn.

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First, a brief reminder in broad terms of the difference between the public and private sector. While the skills you may have developed owning a business or working in the private sector are invaluable, serving as a board/council member is a very different proposition. You are an elected official of a

political subdivision, created under state laws and governed by state laws. You are part of a board/council that acts by majority vote and is subject to rules on all aspects of operation, such as public procurement, budgeting and hiring and firing employees to name a few. You are one of a group of elected officials and while you cast your vote individually, you have agreed to act as the collective governing body of a public entity. This means that after the voting is over, under normal circumstances, you are obligated to uphold the majority decision of the board. You have a fiduciary responsibility to collect and expend public monies in a fiscally appropriate manner. This is very different from the private sector, where the goal of companies is solely to make a profit and unilateral action is the norm.

So what does a new board/council

member need to do in order to serve the constituents? (and by the way, this is a nice refresher for those of you who have been on boards for many, many years and may have forgotten some of the basics).

First of all – and above all – SHOW UP. Yes, show up! The biggest problem with board/council members are the ones who don't show up for meetings. Do not assume that there will be enough other people to show up and make a quorum. A quorum is the minimum number of members necessary to conduct the business of that group. If you have agreed to fill a vacancy but are not committed to attending each and every meeting – please reconsider serving! Because you are not really serving as a board/council member if you fail to show up at meetings, after staff have prepared agendas, reports and information for you to review and the other members plus members of the public have planned on attending. The organizational documents of the district/city will define a quorum but often it is a simple majority. So if you have five board members, three of you probably need to show up in order to legally conduct business. It is crippling to the operations of a district/city if the governing body is unable to act. Mark those monthly meeting dates on your calendar in red and commit to attending. And by the way, telling one of the other board/council members how you want to vote does not count. You cannot act by proxy on a public board! If you absolutely cannot show up due to an emergency, notify staff as soon as possible. If the meeting needs to be cancelled and rescheduled, the other participants need to know as soon as possible. Due to the fact that public notices may be required for meetings, someone will still have to show up and notify the public if the meeting is cancelled. You would not believe the number of times I have sat with boards waiting for a board member to show up to make a quorum, while the manager tried in vain to contact the member(s). And if you miss the meeting, follow up

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with the manager and get copies of the agenda and any draft minutes so that you know what occurred at the meeting. Do your make-up work!

Once you have made the commitment to attend the meetings, there are three key words that can help you be the best board/council member that you can be: EDUCATE, SEPARATE, COMMUNICATE.

EDUCATE!

Before you ever go to your first board/council meeting, you have some serious homework to do. I mean it. This is a public trust and unless you are

prepared to educate yourself about the district/city, you have no business being an elected official. Those may be harsh words but I stand behind them. If you are lucky, your manager will have a new board member packet for you to review. If so, review it! Make an appointment with the manager to go over any questions you may have about the contents and about meeting procedures. If your manager does not have such a packet (and I plan on addressing the role of the manager in assisting board/council members in a subsequent article), then get ready to ask for documents, because there are some basic documents that you should review or at least be familiar with before that first meeting.

There are key documents that you should be familiar with as a public official. If you review nothing else, go to the office and review the minutes of the last twelve meetings and the current budget. That will give you an excellent overview of how the meetings are conducted, how procedures are handled, and what issues are on the table. I strongly recommend that you



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schedule a meeting with the manager and review any questions you may have about these documents as well. If you are not familiar with the budget for a governmental entity....well, then you are going to have to learn a new vocabulary. You need to know the difference between accrual-based and cash-based accounting, what depreciation is, how to read an audit report, etc., etc. The only way that a budget can be approved is by a vote of the board/council and this may be one of the most important decisions that you make all year as a board/council member. So sharpen your pencil!

In addition to these key documents, I like for my new board/council members to review the actual by-laws, or other governing rules of the body. This will help you understand the overall mission of the body as well as the powers that can be exercised. Then get ready to Google. Every board member should at least be familiar with Robert's Rules of Order, the state ethics commission, the open meetings law, and the basic statutes for cities and water districts. All of these are available online. You don't have to

memorize them, but you should be aware of their existence and have a basic understanding of their significance.

SEPARATE!

As a board/council member you have a whole new set of boundaries to negotiate. You have relationships with three key sets of people: the manager, employees, and the public. Another way of looking at it is that you wear different hats for different roles and you have to separate those roles and

responsibilities. You are a member of a policy-forming body and you, as an individual member of that body cannot act separately from that body. The main thing to remember is that even though you cast your vote as an individual board/council member, you cannot act unilaterally in any other capacity. This is a tricky balancing act. While members of the public may contact you, you cannot make statements on behalf of the district/city or make decisions outside of the meetings. You cannot voice your opinion to them or make promises on district/city matters either. You can listen politely, ask questions about their position, gather facts, encourage them to come to the next meeting and share their concerns with the ENTIRE board/council, but you must keep YOUR opinion separate and not act unilaterally. The same goes with district/city employees. They may approach you because of prior personal relationships and want information about performance reviews, ask about raises, ask about promotion consideration. And you must keep that personal relationship

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separate from your role as board/council member. You cannot discuss this information with them individually. You must instruct them to go through proper channels and you must not interfere with the chain of command. They have a supervisor or a manager and that is the person they need to contact.

This is difficult! It is very tempting to act unilaterally and forget that you must separate your prior personal contacts from your job as board/council member. The same separation rules goes for your relationship with the district/city manager. You are a member of a group of elected individuals, who each have one vote but must follow the majority decision. This means that you should not have a separate relationship with the manager. You should never give him direct orders or discuss business with him separately if your goal is to sway or pressure him to act on an issue.

COMMUNICATE!

If you have felt stifled by my advice so far, and feel like your hands are tied and you cannot talk to anyone about district/city business, don't get discouraged. You will have plenty of chances to communicate and share your opinions with the three key sectors at the meetings. In fact, that is your primary function at the meetings. You need to communicate, communicate, communicate. Ask questions if you don't understand the

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budget, share your opinions with fellow board members and the public on important issues. But don't forget – communication is a two-way street. You must remain civil, respectful and polite when members of the public or fellow board/council members may become agitated, voice an opinion you do not agree with or even become personally insulting. In many respects being an elected official is a thankless job and making unpopular decisions is one of the least likeable parts of the job. And communication does not end after the meeting is over either. You must be willing to move ahead and act as a unified board/council even if you are in the minority, and carry out the policies of the district/city. (This of course assumes that no illegal actions are taking place.)

Communicating also includes areas where you may NOT communicate! You must be familiar with the open meetings restrictions and know that certain items such as employee reviews and real estate purchases cannot be publicly discussed until certain conditions are met. You must also be

aware that you will be privy to information that must remain confidential, such as details of litigation or employee personnel file details. So you must NOT communicate with anyone outside of the board/council about these topics. As for the press, you simply cannot communicate with the press as an individual board member or on behalf of the board/council. You should be prepared to have a generic statement that defers those questions to the manager and simply tell the reporter that it is the policy of the board/council not to have individual members make statements on board/council issues outside of board meetings. Then invite them to the next board meeting!

So as you can see, this is a tough job. You have to be dedicated, informed and a team player. You have to voice your opinion, not be offended by criticism and ask questions. You have to work as a team, even when you are out-voted on individual issues and work towards the larger goal of setting policy and seeing that the district/city is well run. Great board/council members are made – not elected – and you can be a good public servant if you want to be. Good luck!

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