

Effective Governance

Below are tips and “lessons learned” gathered from former public servants and intentionally presented in a casual tone.

- Try to enjoy yourself; it’s a unique experience being on the front lines of democracy.
- Remember ordinances are laws; they are not resolutions or policies. Before you grant an exception to an ordinance (and you will be asked to do that fairly often), make sure you have a good reason that you can defend publicly.
- Citizens have the right to expect consistency in policy and in the application of laws and administrative regulations.
- Remember that you represent all the people of your city, not just neighbors and friends. Be wary of personal experiences coloring your public decisions.
- Don’t be misled by the strong demands of special interest groups who want it done now, their way. Your job is to find the long-term public interest of the city as a whole, and you may be hearing from the wrong people.
- Don’t burn yourself out on the little things while still recognizing that they often are important to the public. Save some energy and time for the important matters.
- Staff has dealt with dozens of governing body members and seen some problems over and over so they forget that you are a novice. Don’t be afraid to ask questions.
- Don’t give quick answers when you are not sure of the real answer. It may be embarrassing to appear ignorant, but it can be more embarrassing and damaging, to tell a person something that is wrong.
- Do not introduce issues during a meeting that have not been put on the agenda in advance. This surprises people. If a matter is worth bringing up for discussion, it is worth being on the agenda. Surprises may get you some publicity, at the embarrassment of others, and tend to erode the “team” approach to governance.
- Don’t rush to judgment. Few final actions have to be taken at the first meeting they are considered. Avoid “crisis management.”
- The governing body has to act as a unit otherwise, staff gets confused and very cautious. Develop trust by sharing information, being open to the ideas of other members of the governing body, and by not trying to control what other council members think or do.
- Don’t act as a committee of one; governing a city requires a team effort – practically and legally.
- As an individual Council Member do not make promises you cannot deliver! Most decisions and actions require approval of the governing body.
- Don’t do it or say it if you aren’t willing to read about it in the newspaper.
- Don’t expect to be interested in everything that comes before the governing body. It is appropriate to defer to other members if they seem more interested in the issue than you do. You do not have to express an opinion about every issue.
- Don’t let honest differences of opinion degenerate into personality conflicts.
- Appoint citizen advisory committees when you need them, but be prepared to follow their advice if you use them.
- Take care in your appointments to boards and commissions. Make sure they are capable as well as representative of the whole city.
- Don’t try to out-engineer the engineer.