Tips for Municipal Elected Officials



COLORADO
MUNICIPAL
LEAGUE

This publication is inspired by *52 Tips for Successful Public Service*, by Ernie Mosher, former executive director of the League of Kansas Municipalities.

CML thanks the current and former Colorado local elected officials who contributed to this document, as well as all elected officials who inspire us every day with their leadership, hard work, and commitment to public service.

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A note from your CML colleagues



The Colorado Municipal League (CML) is proud to represent and serve 270 cities and towns all across the state.

We have the pleasure of working with elected officials and municipal staff members from communities of all sizes and from all four corners of Colorado, and have met some remarkable leaders. We asked current and former elected officials to share their tips for effectively serving as a municipal elected official and compiled their responses into this resource. We think that it will be of tremendous value to those who are new to their role as elected officials as well as to those who are more experienced.

It is our hope that these suggestions will both strengthen your vision for your community and give you the confidence to lead the way there.

We would like to offer special thanks to Bailey Epperson, a student at the University of Colorado Boulder and former CML research intern, for all of her help in compiling this publication.

BEHAVIOR AND CONDUCT

Read your municipality's codes, ordinances, and charter. Educate yourself on your community's history and comprehensive plan. It is your duty to understand your municipality's guiding documents.

Familiarize yourself with your municipality's code of conduct or other expectations of good behavior. People are observing how you handle yourself — even outside of formal meetings. Your integrity is important, no matter where you are.

Make the transition from candidate to elected official in a timely fashion. It is important to help establish working relationships with colleagues.

Your vote is important! Always be prepared for meetings by taking the time to read background and supporting material for the topics that will be discussed. This will help you make an informed decision that represents all interests and perspectives.

Do not be afraid to speak up and ask questions. It is helpful to gain all the information and perspectives, especially if you are not familiar with the topic.

Remember who your bosses are. Be passionate and enthusiastic about your opportunity to serve the people. You are elected to represent the entire municipality, not just one constituent or group.

Allow time to hear from multiple groups of constituents before deciding on a policy matter. Some groups are loud, so make sure they are not the only voices you hear.

Humility helps! Public servants are held to a high standard, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Be humble in all your dealings. This will help you maintain a genuine connection with constituents and colleagues.

Be OK with honest differences of opinion. Avoid letting respectful disagreements devolve into personal attacks.

Take care of yourself. You are allowed to have a life outside of your board or council duties! Keep healthy habits, nurture relationships with family and friends, and make time for personal development and interests.

FIDUCIARY DUTY



Be able to connect the dots between the budget and policy goals. Budget priorities should be a direct demonstration of the policy priorities of your municipality.

Understand the different funds and the legal restrictions that apply to them.

Think long-term. A multi-year projection helps in developing and maintaining the municipality's budget and needs. It also will aid in budgeting for future expenditures.

Periodically review your municipality's adopted financial policies. Intentional financial policies allow municipal staff the freedom to make decisions with the confidence that they are implementing council or board vision.

Read and follow state and municipal laws concerning conflicts of interest. Take care to avoid giving even the appearance of impropriety.

Be aware of Colorado's Amendment 41. This amendment creates a gift ban for government officials as well as their immediate family members. Local charters and ordinances must comply but may vary, so be knowledgeable about specific rules in your municipality.

STRATEGIC GOVERNING



Be consistent. Allow adopted policy statements to guide you in making fair decisions. At the same time …

Embrace change. Learn the difference between best practices and "the way we have always done it." Be willing to innovate, learn, and grow.

Create a vision for your community and empower staff to implement the vision.

Learn how to evaluate recommendations from staff or other experts. Remember, by not making a decision, you are still making a decision — and it may not be the best one.

Utilize resident boards and commissions. Delegating certain tasks to volunteer boards can assist the governing body in focusing on the bigger picture.

Schedule a board or council retreat. Take time occasionally to look inward at how you are governing. What processes can be improved, streamlined, or even terminated? What policies can be adopted or edited? How can you govern better?

THE POWER OF SPEECH

Publicly praise. Openly compliment department heads, staff, and residents when they have gone above and beyond for the betterment of the city or town. This increases morale as well as creates a positive relationship between officials, residents, and the press. Nominate those who put forth special efforts for a Sam Mamet Person of the Year Award.

Avoid public criticism of municipal employees. Work with the city or town manager or administrator to direct information to employees and handle issues.

Be aware of and follow the Open Meetings Law. Remember that meetings can include emails, phone calls, social media, and other means of communication. Follow the guidance of your municipal attorney.

Avoid surprising your fellow elected officials and staff at public meetings. Use the agenda to inform both the public and your colleagues about what will be discussed, and to allow your staff to be prepared.

Attend all available governing body meetings. Attending meetings and studying agenda materials will help determine how your vote will affect your municipality. It also increases your knowledge and awareness of specific municipal matters.

Vote. Recusal from a vote can be used to avoid a conflict of interest; however, you were elected to make decisions and should vote on all other motions.

Open the dialogue with all people! Keep an open dialogue, even with opponents, to understand which issues can be agreed upon and where focus could be directed.

Learn to listen. Communication goes two ways, and it is the governing body's duty to be willing to listen to your constituents as much as you inform them.

Avoid making promises you cannot keep. Newly elected officials often will become the channel for complaints and grievances by residents. It can be beneficial to gain more insight from these residents; however, it is advisable to avoid promises and negative relations with other elected officials as a result.

Rise above gossip. Refrain from spreading rumors. Be transparent in your communication about public policy and remain discreet in personal matters.

Be willing to ask for help. Whether it is asking for clarification from staff before making a decision, turning to your Colorado Department of Local Affairs regional manager for grant assistance, or giving the Colorado Municipal League a call, you have resources available to you to support you in your mission. Pick up the phone, email a colleague, or grab a cup of coffee with someone who can offer support or advice.

NETWORKING & RELATIONSHIPS



Communicate, collaborate, and compromise! The ability to work with other officials and staff is required to effectively spearhead projects and municipal goals.

Once a vote is taken, move forward in unity. Progress depends on the ability to continue to focus on new and emerging issues collaboratively. Officials must work together to be effective rather than be divisive over past decisions.

Adopt protocols for elected official behavior. Any adopted policy should have clear guidance concerning consequences should the standards be violated.

Respect the chain of command within your municipality. Be sure to leave personnel matters to the city or town manager or specific supervisors. You get to be the visionary, so take advantage of your opportunity to focus on the big picture.

Be a good neighbor. Create relationships with neighboring governments and recognize you all have the same goal — to serve the public.

Learn from other municipalities' successes — and mistakes. There are 272 municipalities in Colorado that can be useful resources when investigating new programs or projects.

Keep a flexible agenda and an open mind! Flexibility and compromise allow for more achieved goals and accomplishments for all involved.

Seek opportunities to engage. Every day is a chance to build your network through community engagement. Informal engagement is advantageous in initiating new projects and maintaining genuine relations with residents.

Attend the CML annual conference and other training events to learn more about different projects, plans, and strategies, as well as to connect with other officials. Learn more at *www.cml.org*.

MEDIA OUTREACH

Keep a positive relationship with the media. The news media can be a great resource, or a source of tribulation.

Be proactive with your messaging. Preemptively reach out to reporters and news media if a potential issue or story needs to be discussed. Acting in advance can help ease the pressure.

Be accurate on social media. Social media channels may contain misinformation and can interfere with open meetings laws. A single response with a link to official information or to contact your PIO can be the best response.

During a crisis or emergency, help supply correct information to residents to keep them updated and informed. This will also help establish trust between you and your constituents.

Send a unified message. Provide consistent information to the media and keep lines of communication open to handle follow-up inquiries similarly.

Be concise. Media articles often use short quotations. Be concise to ensure you are quoted correctly.

Stay informed about current developments. The media will mainly focus on current matters, which may lead to questions for you. Be prepared for an accurate response, however ...

Be cautious with direct answers. If you are unsure of an accurate answer, do not provide one that may be misleading. It may be inconvenient to be portrayed as uninformed; however, it can be more damaging to be inaccurate on record.

Ask for time. You can always request more time to garner more information on a subject you are unsure of. This will allow you to provide a thoughtful and knowledgeable response.

MOST OF ALL

Enjoy yourself.
It is a privilege and an honor to serve your community. Allow your enthusiasm to be infectious, maintain your sense of humor, and celebrate successes every step of the way.

TOP 10 RESOURCES

1. CML website

Visit the Issues page on CML's website, *www.cml.org*, to find a list of municipal topics ranging from affordable housing to water/wastewater to provide you with the information you need.

2. Training

CML offers professionally led workshops and webinars throughout the year. Program descriptions, dates, and registration information are featured in the *CML Newsletter* and on CML's online training calendar. Visit *www.cml.org*. Miss a workshop or webinar? No problem. Visit *www.cml.org* for past training materials.

3. Informative videos

CML has a video library featuring valuable information and content in a quick and concise way. The Take 5 video series explains five things about an important municipal subject in less than five minutes. Videos addressing municipal leadership, budgeting basics, urban renewal, water, transportation, and more can be found at *www.cml.org*.

4. CML annual conference

Each year, nearly 1,200 municipal officials, other key decision-makers, and CML associate members attend the CML annual conference, which offers more than 40 educational sessions and valuable networking opportunities. For details, visit *www.cml.org.*

5. Statehouse Report

The *Statehouse Report* contains timely legislative information released while the General Assembly is in session and is sent to all municipal elected officials.

6. CML spring outreach and fall district meetings

Each spring and fall, CML staff hits the road for a series of meetings to give you an opportunity to visit with us and your regional colleagues in your own backyard and to share your concerns and priorities. Keep an eye on *www.cml.org* or the *CML Newsletter* for dates and other details.

7. Publications

CML offers a wide range of publications addressing municipal topics. Newly elected officials may be interested in reading *Colorado Municipal Government: An Introduction; Open Meetings, Open Records: Colorado's Sunshine Laws and Municipal Government*; and *Ethics Liability and Best Practices Handbook for Elected Officials.* For more information, visit *www.cml.org*.

8. Periodicals

As a municipal official, you will automatically receive the *CML Newsletter*, a biweekly publication that provides timely information on key issues and upcoming trainings, and the award-winning *Colorado Municipalities*, a quarterly journal that offers more in-depth coverage on topics of municipal interest. These periodicals are also available electronically via *www.cml.org*.

9. State of Our Cities & Towns

The annual *State of Our Cities & Towns* report provides information gathered from member cities and towns on a particular topic. Reports and accompanying information can be viewed on *www.cml.org*.

10. CML Executive Board

The 21-member CML Executive Board is your voice in the overall management and direction of CML. Board elections are held each June at the CML annual conference, and the board meets monthly. For a complete list of board members, meeting agendas, and minutes, go to *www.cml.org*.

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