



MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

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WELCOME TO BEING AN ELECTED OFFICIAL IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

By Dave Bartholomay (Mayor of Circle Pines, Minnesota 2001 – present)

Elections bring a new group of people making the transition from 'citizen' to 'elected official'. Here's what my 20 years' experience as Mayor of Circle Pines, Minnesota has taught me on how to be successful as an elected official in a community, whether that be in a city, a county, or a school board role.

Peter Block, in his book *Community – The Structure of Belonging*, says that 'local government has two primary responsibilities. One is to sustain and improve the infrastructure of its community: roads, traffic, transportation, public safety, code enforcement, economic development, master planning, environment, and more. City managers and civil servants are well trained to do this and mostly do an excellent job at it. The other role of government is to build the social fabric of the community. Elected officials are in a key position to engage citizens in the well-being of the city.'

This frames the biggest challenge facing people fresh off a victory. As you shift from campaigning to leading/serving, appreciate that being an elected official is a tremendous opportunity to serve your friends and neighbors while always working to improve your community. Live by the local Rotary slogan: Service before Self! This is less about your grand ideas and big promises, and more about discovering your own path to working well with others to improve your community, in often small and steady ways.

Here's a big surprise: being an elected official is really not all about you and certainly it is not about you being the smartest or the loudest or the biggest bully. Rather, it is about focusing on how you can best serve everyone in your community, not just those who supported your candidacy. Local government has a lot of moving pieces, and you will find yourself continually learning in this job. The finances and the long-term needs are daunting, and sometimes you may find yourself changing your mind as you learn more about a topic - that's OK and more easily defensible if you can clearly articulate what you have learned and how it changed you. Work hard to be transparent and open, honest, and authentic. The public wants to understand what is happening and possible in their community, as well as what you are doing with their money and with the power that they bestowed on you. There will be times you disappoint some of your citizens (and friends). Do your best to explain factors that you didn't initially know or appreciate before.

Be optimistic and ask good, fair questions to bring issues out into the light of day. Residents watch Council meetings hoping to learn from your discussions; don't embarrass your community through outrageous words and 'gotcha' behavior. Focus on being civil in your discussions, and be measured in your public comments. Be cautious about what you say and how you say it, leaving the door open for more dialogue in the future. People, especially young folks, are watching and learning from you, so there is no need to be mean. Treat people with respect, even if they aren't giving it to you in return!

Appreciate that good ideas can come from all sorts of places, including those you may view as your 'opponents'. Be the leader who can figure out a way to work with those you differ with, and give all people an opportunity to say their piece and listen respectfully to their ideas. You may actually share a concern but just have different ideas on how to deal with it. Work hard to see if there is a middle ground that gets at the heart of the issue. Because compromise is not a four-letter word, and it is a big part of what makes a good local government.

Work with and trust the staff. I've heard some elected officials denigrate their staff and say 'staff just want to spend money and raise your taxes'. Nonsense! They are professionals whose job is the day-to-day operation and improvement of your community. Don't forget that elected officials are supposed to stay up at the 'policy' level and not micromanage at the 'operations' level. Be focused on building that social fabric, bringing people together, creating new connections in a community that get citizens involved and caring about their community.

I strongly believe all communication from an elected official to staff should go through the lead staffer (City or County Administrator, School Superintendent) who is usually the only person directly hired and supervised by the elected board. Let the Administrator do their job managing the operations of the organization, and practice good leadership yourself by not sending concerns or pressures directly to any other employee because it might conflict with existing priorities.

Being an elected or appointed official is a very important role in your community. Your job is to get out and about, gathering ideas and being a positive force as you improve your community. Citizens decide if they like the direction of their elected officials, or if they feel they need to make changes.

Candidates often end up in a messy struggle to lift themselves up and push their opponents down. They make promises and sometimes sow division. Elected officials, on the other hand, need to be the adult, the one to calm down, to reach out to others, and to lead a search for common ground and reasonable compromises to create lasting solutions.

Treat your position with dignity and respect, and I've found that you will be appreciated and trusted by your community for your hard work. Stay in the role of candidate and your slinging will make your base happy and get you some headlines, but you won't achieve the real goal: the satisfaction of using your talents to work with others to improve the sense of community and hope that your citizens need so much in these divisive times.