



So you want to be an elected official...

Practical information for
people running for office in
Washington's cities and towns



Introduction

Why are you running for election to a local office?

This is a question that every candidate will be asked – and a question that every candidate must think carefully to answer.

Most often, people run for office because they are deeply committed to their community and want to impact the community's direction. At times, people run because they are passionate about a single issue or problem. A single controversy – such as a land use or zoning decision – could dominate an entire election campaign.

But once the election is over, things change. Candidates who've won election based on their position on that one issue soon discover that they are responsible for a much broader array of challenges. The issue they ran on may not even be on the city council's agenda. Getting it placed there will only be possible if they are willing and able to work cooperatively with other members of the council, many of whom will have their own issues to champion.

To be effective, elected officials must work as part of a team to establish a shared vision for the future, make plans that make that future possible, and work with their colleagues and constituents to enact the local policies and laws that will ultimately lead to accomplishment.

Holding a public office is an act of service to the public – that is, service to all the citizens of a city or town, not just those who share your views or those who voted for you. It is a challenge that requires every office holder to rise above the fray, to reach beyond comfort zones, and to work with others with whom they may have significant differences.

Rising to that challenge is what makes democracy work. It's what makes shaping our own shared future possible. It's what others have done before us. And it's what has made our towns and cities places we can be proud of.

Working as part of a team

Getting elected as a city councilmember or mayor brings a special status. It also comes with a special obligation to look beyond yourself and cultivate the qualities of collaboration, teamwork, and civility.

Elected officials set the tone for the civic life of their community. When elected officials demonstrate how to differ with one another respectfully, find principled compromises, and focus on the common good, citizens often will too. When elected officials get mired in blame, recrimination, or division, civic progress can grind to a halt, and the city's sense of common purpose can fracture.

To govern well, elected leaders must help each other and the public stay focused on the future and on the common good. That can be an uphill struggle when the passions of the moment lead to demands for instant solutions, or when there is a deep division over a single issue that threatens to push longer-term problems aside. There will always be occasions when elected officials differ among themselves. But the mark of leadership is the ability to handle those differences in ways that move the agenda forward, build trust, and create a civic culture of mutual respect that makes progress possible.

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Roles and responsibilities

Cities and towns provide services that are vital to community health, safety and economic activity. While the specific services that a city provides may vary, most provide public safety, land use and planning, parks and public works such as street maintenance and construction, water, sewer and/or stormwater management. Understanding the role of elected officials is critical to ensure proper planning, oversight and delivery.

Learning the difference between these two key functions – policy-making and administration – and respecting the boundaries between them is critical to a well-run government. The separation of powers between legislative and administrative functions serves not only as a check on the exercise of authority between the two branches of local government, but also as a way to promote their efficient operation.

Policy-making vs. administration

City councils are legislative bodies – that is, they are elected to make major policy decisions and pass budgets. So the basic job of city council members and mayors is to find the balance among themselves that represents the best interests of the majority of citizens, while respecting the rights of all.

City councils make policies, but mayors (in mayor-council cities) and city managers (in council-manager cities) are responsible for their implementation and administration.

The third branch

Cities can choose to run their own municipal courts or contract with the county or another city to provide court services. More than 100 cities run their own courts with elected or appointed judges. Although the city council may appoint the court's judge and determine the court's budget, the judge is responsible for running the court, including supervising court staff, and is not subject to council or executive oversight.

Understanding your city's form of government

Different cities have different forms of government. The most common form of city government is the mayor-council form. This form consists of an elected mayor (elected at-large) who serves as the city's chief executive officer and a council (elected either at-large or from districts) that is responsible for formulating and adopting city policies. In many mayor-council cities, there is a professional administrator on hand to assist the mayor with the day-to-day operations of running the city.

The second most popular form of city government is the council-manager form. The council-manager form consists of an elected city council, which is responsible for policy making, and a professional city manager (appointed by the council) who is responsible for administration. The city manager is directly accountable to, and can be removed by, the council. Although mayors in council-manager cities have no administrative or executive duties, they do serve as the chair of the city council and often play a prominent political leadership role.

There is one city, Shelton, that has the commission form of government. Three elected commissioners function collectively as the city legislative body and individually as city department heads. Although one of the commissioners also has the title of mayor, he or she has essentially the same powers as the other commissioners.

It is also important to know your city's classification – first class city, second class city, town or code city. Many state laws differ depending upon the city classification, such as the specific powers and responsibilities of a mayor.

Working with other jurisdictions

City elected officials' jobs don't stop at the city limits. The city's roads must connect with the county's, the state's, and with federal highways. Similarly, cities must work with other jurisdictions and levels of government to achieve many other regional goals. In some cases, this can involve complex, technical inter-jurisdictional agreements for services such as public safety, sewage treatment, or other utilities.

Roles and responsibilities

Cities must abide by many state and federal regulations, and can benefit from special state and federal funding programs. There may also be special purpose districts for fire protection, cemeteries, libraries and a host of other specific functions that interact with city government. Citizens have a right to expect these relationships to be well-managed, efficient, and collaborative, and it's up to elected officials to make this happen.

Celebrating citizens' achievements and promoting civic pride

City elected officials also serve as champions for civic achievement. By appearing at ribbon-cutting ceremonies, participating in charity events, and attending celebrations of student achievement, elected officials bring recognition and attention to the values of civic engagement and individual accomplishment. This might not be in the official version of the elected leader's job description, but it is an important part of how elected leaders can bring out the best in their communities and strengthen the traditions that build civic pride.

Knowing the law

Ethics

You may think of yourself as a law-abiding, ethical person, but that may not be enough to keep you on the right side of the law once you are elected. There are specific laws and high ethical standards of conduct for elected officials, and being thoroughly informed about them is important.

Even the smallest city's officials must abide by strict laws regarding ethics in government. These laws aim to prevent favoritism, and ensure that elected officials are truly serving the public rather than reaping personal benefits from their positions. State laws that elected city officials must abide by include:

No special privileges – City officials must pay the same fees for permits or services as any other citizen. They cannot receive or give any special privileges, discounts or exemptions, or use any city resources for private purposes. This means, for instance, that a city official cannot borrow a city pickup truck for the weekend, or arrange for it to be used by a friend or relative.

No gifts or rewards from private sources – City officials may not receive gifts that are in any way connected to their public service. For instance, if a council member votes for a specific project and a citizen sends a thank you gift of tickets to a concert or game, the tickets must be returned.

No disclosure of confidential information – City officials may not disclose confidential information, or use it for personal gain. This means that you may not accept a job or engage in a business that might require you to disclose confidential information you gained from your city position.

No conflicts of interest – City officials may not have any financial interest in any public contracts made through their office with the city they serve. This includes contracts for employment, sales, leases and purchases. (There are limited exceptions to this rule in small cities with a population under 10,000).

In addition, city elected officials may not vote on any matter that would have direct financial impact on them in particular. This prohibition does not include matters that have a general impact, such as taxes or utility rates.

Knowing the law

Conflicts of interest can also include “remote” interests – interests that would not personally benefit you, but might benefit people or organizations with whom you have a special relationship. For instance, if you are on the governing board of a nonprofit organization, and it is seeking a contract with the city, you must disclose your interest, and you may not vote on that contract or attempt to influence the votes of others.

Open public meetings

The Open Public Meetings Act requires that all city council meetings (and meetings of planning commissions, library boards, and other public bodies) be open to the public, except under special circumstances, such as discussing a lawsuit, a confidential personnel issue, or a real estate transaction.

This also means that city council members cannot meet informally and make decisions out of the public eye. Whenever a quorum of the council is present, city business cannot be the topic of discussion unless the public has been notified and the meeting is open to them.

If this Act is violated, there may be personal penalties for the elected officials involved. In addition, any final action that is taken in a meeting which did not comply with the Open Public Meetings Act is null and void.

Public access to records

The Public Records Act gives citizens full access to a wide range of information about how government does business. Most information relating to the conduct of government that is prepared, owned, used or retained by a city is presumed to be a public record that must be made available by the city to the public for inspection and copying. This includes papers, photos, maps, videos and electronic records (such as email, text messages, and social networking sites). It also includes reports that are prepared for government by hired contractors.

All cities must make these records available for citizens to see and copy on request, though citizens may be required to pay for copying charges.

There are a limited number of exemptions from disclosure for some personnel records and other confidential matters.

Implementing policy

Adopting a city budget

One of the most challenging tasks for city elected officials is the development and adoption of annual city budgets. They can be complex and technical documents, but budgets are important expressions of a city's vision, values, priorities, and strategic goals. Budgets are also a tool for evaluating past performance, as elected leaders and staff make note of what was accomplished in the past year and how actual costs compared to projections made when the budget was written.

Mastering the budget process can be a steep learning curve for newly-elected leaders. There are guiding state laws about the timing and content of city budgets, and these laws vary depending on a city's size and form of government. Once in office, elected officials soon find that the budget is such an important policy document that they can't be effective unless they fully understand it and can explain it to their constituents.

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Planning for the future

Comprehensive planning, growth management, and environmental protection

Every city needs to plan for growth in order to provide a healthy future for its citizens. Cities adopt comprehensive plans that spell out a specific vision for how the city will develop while protecting critical natural resources and open space. Engaging citizens in the process of developing a comprehensive plan ensures that everyone works together to come up with a shared vision for the future and shares the work of achieving it.

Twenty-nine counties and the cities within them are required to or have chosen to create plans that conform to the state Growth Management Act. A city's comprehensive plan, once adopted, is used to guide decisions about zoning, subdivisions,

and other regulatory matters. Local codes can create incentives for the kind of growth a city wants by providing such things as density bonuses for projects that provide affordable housing or preserve natural areas.

State and federal environmental laws and regulations also affect local comprehensive planning, because they require protection of certain natural resources such as clean drinking water and critical wildlife habitat. Learning about these laws and how they affect your city is an important part of an elected leader's job.

Keeping the comprehensive plan in mind – and keeping it in the public eye – ensures that the city stays focused on creating the future citizens want for the next generation and beyond.

Publications and resources

Publications

You can find lots of materials, publications and other resources online. Below are a few highlighted publications that may be of value to you even before becoming an elected leader.

Association of Washington Cities, www.awcnet.org

- Councilmembers Handbook
- Mayors Handbook
- Small City Resource Manual: A Guide for Washington's Small Cities and Towns
- The Ten Commandments of Community Leadership

Municipal Research and Services Center, www.mrsc.org

- Getting Into Office: Being Elected or Appointed into Office in Washington Counties, Cities and Towns
- Knowing the Territory: Basic Legal Guidelines for Washington City, County, and Special Purpose District Officials
- In-Focus e-newsletter
- Webpages on local government issues such as open government, personnel, public works and finance

Training opportunities

After being elected, there are workshops and conferences to help newly elected officials learn important laws and hone skills to become more effective leaders. Training opportunities are available at regional workshops, annual conferences and online.

The Association of Washington Cities Certificate of Municipal Leadership program is structured so elected officials receive training around four core competency areas:

- Roles, responsibilities and legal requirements
- Public sector resource management
- Community planning and development
- Effective local leadership



AWC is a non-profit, non-partisan association serving Washington's 281 cities and towns. We represent cities in Olympia, provide training and leadership development, technical assistance, and various insurance programs.

Promoting communication between cities and towns and developing broad public understanding of the important roles of cities and towns is part of our vision.

Association of Washington Cities
awcnet.org

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