

Chapter 3

Successful City Councils

City councils make laws. That's a very important authority – one that requires sound judgment and the willingness to learn a great deal about issues, opportunities, and the larger legal framework in which city councils operate. A good orientation for new councilmembers – and ongoing training that keeps councilmembers up to date – can help people work together as a team and achieve the goals that inspired them to run for office.

Orientation for newly elected officials

Many newly elected officials are overwhelmed by all they need to learn, and surprised by the amount of time it takes to be a councilmember or mayor. Some may also be surprised to discover the limits of their role in making decisions and setting city policy. That's why a thorough orientation is essential. It should include clear information on what councilmembers can and cannot do, and about the larger framework in which city governments operate.

In addition to a thorough orientation at city hall, newly elected city officials are strongly encouraged to attend AWC's Elected Official Essentials workshop held in January of even numbered years.

The following are some ideas about what a local, do-it-yourself orientation for newly elected officials should cover.


Learn the basics of your city government


Newly elected councilmembers need a broad overview of city functions, including finance, public works, public safety and other departments. It's a good idea for the mayor or city manager to arrange a tour of the physical facilities, and meetings with department heads. If this is not done as a matter of routine, newly elected councilmembers can suggest it.

Understand the long-range plan

If the city has one, the next step is to review the long range plan, its goals and future projects.

Resources

Elected Official Essentials workshop, AWC, offered even years 

Mayor's Handbook, AWC/MRSC, February 1999 (pdf, 452kb) 




Councilmember's Handbook, AWC/MRSC, January 2000 (pdf, 690kb)



Key to Symbols

 – Legal citing

 – Internet resource

 – Print publication

 – Training/conference

 – Who to call

Review important documents

Ask your mayor or other staff to compile the following documents (if the city produces them), and find out if there are other documents they think you should read:

- Current operating budget and capital budget
- Information on key programs and services
- Comprehensive annual financial report
- Organization chart, staff roster and phone list
- Primary planning documents
- Map showing city boundaries, buildings and facilities
- Mission statement and goals (if they exist)
- Council rules/meeting procedures
- Meeting minutes for the last twelve months
- Local municipal codes
- Work program and significant staff reports from last twelve months
- Personnel policies and other administrative policies
- Facts about your city – population, form of government, incorporation date, number of employees, total budget, total debt, etc.
- List of governmental agencies providing services or affecting your city through regulatory or other powers
- Calendar of important events

Types of council meetings

Under Washington's Open Public Meetings Act two types of council meetings are held:

- **Regular council meetings:** These meetings are regularly scheduled for general and routine business, including the enactment of ordinances.
- **Special meetings:** These meetings have a more limited agenda than regular meetings – usually business that cannot be postponed. Written 24-hour notice must be given to the press and other councilmembers.

In conjunction with regular or special meetings, the city may hold:



- **Public hearings:** A chance for citizens to express their opinions, usually on a single topic.
- **Executive sessions:** Closed meetings limited, by state law or local ordinance, to a few items, including personnel, legal issues, or property acquisition.

Every city councilmember needs to know and understand Washington's open meeting law. Read more about this in chapter 5, page 36.

When to use an ordinance and when to use a resolution

If a state statute requires that an ordinance must be used to take some type of action, then of course an ordinance must be used. If no particular form of enactment is specified, then either an ordinance or resolution will be sufficient.

Resources

Local Ordinances for Washington Cities and Counties, MRSC, May 2000 (pdf, 452kb)  

Ordinances, resolutions, orders and motions

A city council has a variety of options available for taking legislative action, including ordinances, resolutions, orders or motions. Here's what those terms mean:

Ordinances

An ordinance is a local law of a city, prescribing general rules of conduct. Ordinances may be used for a variety of purposes, including administrative actions such as establishing new offices in the city, or they may be used for actions that control the conduct of the public. An ordinance usually deals with matters that are permanent and general in nature. For example, when a city is enacting a zoning code an ordinance must be used.

Resolutions

A resolution is less formal than an ordinance and generally is simply an expression of the opinion or intent of the official body concerning some particular item of business. Usually a resolution deals with matters that are temporary or special in character. An example is a resolution of intent to establish a local improvement district (LID).

Orders

An order is used to direct a specific action be taken on behalf of the city. For example, an order could be used to authorize the mayor to sign a contract. Orders still require a vote and are recorded in the minutes. Once an order has been complied with, it no longer has effect.

Motions

A motion is a proposal by a member, made at a city council meeting, that the council take a particular action. The proposed action may be substantive, or it may express a certain view, or direct a particular action be taken, such as an investigation. A motion, once approved and entered into the record, is the equivalent of a resolution.

For more information relating to the procedures for adoption of local ordinances and resolutions see the *Local Ordinances for Washington Cities and Counties*.

Making public policy

Legislative bodies are elected to make day to day as well as long-term decisions that impact the city's direction. This happens through the making of public policy.

City councils are asked to make policy about a variety of issues including, but not limited to:

- The level and array of services to be provided;
- Which taxes and at what level they should be imposed;
- Determination of land use; and
- The community's vision and what policies should be adopted to achieve that future vision.

Day to day decisions are an on-going policy-making process and are how the city council responds to the community's immediate needs. This short-term policy making process occurs through adoption of ordinances and resolutions.

Long-term policy making and strategic planning is how city councils work towards achieving the community's vision for the future. More information about planning for the future can be found in chapter 4.

Public policy decisions should be the result of a deliberative process. A poorly planned process – or “knee jerk” reaction in response to a particular issue – can result in policies that lead the city down an unintended path. To help avoid this councilmembers should listen to the arguments in favor and in opposition to proposals to address an issue and discuss alternatives before making a decision.



Six Keys to Good Policy

1. Good public policy should reflect the desires of the community
2. Policies should be fair
3. Policies should be based on good research
4. Policy objectives must be achievable
5. Outcomes must be identified and measurable
6. Acknowledge mistakes, regroup and revise policies as needed

Know the law

RCW 35.21.500 – 35.21.570 –
Codification

Resources

*Local Ordinances for Washington
Cities and Counties*, MRSC, May
2000 (pdf, 452kb)  

Examples of code publishing
companies (AWC does
not endorse any particular
company.)

- American Legal Publishing
Company, 1-800-445-5588
 
- Code Publishing, Inc., 1-800-
551-2633  
- General Code, 1-800-836-
8834  
- Sterling Codifiers, 1-800-338-
7458  

Codification

Codification means the editing, rearrangement, and grouping of ordinances under appropriate titles, parts, chapters, and sections in a municipal code book. It can be helpful to consolidate various ordinances of the city's code in a single chapter or section arranged by subject matter so that they are easy to find.

Cities can prepare a codification of their ordinances. Unfortunately, many small cities find this to be a large expense.







Algona City Hall

Parliamentary procedure


Parliamentary procedure provides for an orderly, predictable process for proposing, amending, approving or defeating legislative motions. A city may adopt, by ordinance or resolution, its own set of rules governing the conduct of council meetings, or it may adopt formalized rules such as Robert's Rules of Order. Many cities have adopted Robert's Rules, along with additional rules on issues such as abstentions and motions for reconsideration. Having clear parliamentary rules – and following them consistently – reduces the chances of a council action being challenged or declared illegal.

Resources

Mayor's Handbook, AWC/MRSC, February 1999 (pdf, 452kb)  


Councilmember's Handbook, AWC/MRSC, January 2000 (pdf, 690kb)  


Resources

Boards and commissions,
Governance webpage, MRSC 

Effective communication
and citizen involvement ,
Governance webpage, MRSC



List of city and town statutorily
required boards under certain
conditions; Governance, Board
and Commissions webpage,
MRSC (pdf, 38kb) 

List of city and town optional
boards and commissions;
Governance, Boards and
Commissions webpage, MRSC
(pdf, 44kb) 

Items available from MRSC Library (Library loan request form)

“CP Technique No. 2: Using
Advisory Committees,” from
*Citizen Participation Handbook
for Public Officials and Other
Professionals Serving the Public*,
Institute for Participatory
Management and Planning, 2000

“Working with Advisory
Groups,” Ch. 12 in *The Public
Participation Handbook: Making
Better Decisions through Citizen
Involvement*, James L. Creighton,
Jossey-Bass, 2005

Using council committees and citizen advisory groups

Committees are a great way for a council to divide and conquer tough issues that require a lot of time.

The most common city council committees are:

- Budget and finance
- Public safety
- Community development
- Public works
- Parks and recreation

While these are typical committees, the choice of whether to have council committees and the type, is up to the local council.

Cities can also appoint citizen boards, commissions and task forces on a broad range of issues. Some of these boards are designated by statute for a specific purpose, such as a building code board of appeals. However, councils can create citizen commissions or advisory groups on any topic they choose.

Citizen commissions and advisory groups can provide a broad range of ideas and expertise on an issue, and, equally important, a communication channel between elected officials and the community.