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New Hampshire Town And City

Excellence in Local Government: Building on Commitment, Civility and Cooperation

New Hampshire Town and City, March/April 2019

By

In New Hampshire, our system of local government depends heavily upon dedicated men and women who are willing to accept the responsibility of public service, often on a volunteer basis. These hard-working people devote incredible amounts of time and effort to what can be, at times, be a thankless job. We are fortunate in New Hampshire to have so many wonderful local officials and employees. Every role in local government is an important role. When the work of local government is done properly, many citizens may not realize how much effort it took, and results can be taken for granted. When problems arise, however, local officials are quick to bear the brunt of public discontent, regardless of the cause. The willingness of local officials to take on this challenge is what makes our system of local government possible.

Local officials have a lot on their plates from the moment they are elected or accept an appointment. First of all, there is a lot to learn. New board members or officials quickly realize how much there is to know about their communities and about state and federal law, local ordinances, and the functions of their boards or positions. No matter how long an official has been involved in municipal government, there is always something new to learn. Laws change, practices and policies shift, and new priorities arise. Over time, officials must perform their day-to-day duties while keeping one eye on the future as they map out their goals. It can be very challenging to stay ahead of all this (or even

to stay current!), and it is natural at times to become narrowly focused on immediate issues and short-term results. An action plan, a working knowledge of the extent of the board's legal authority and a focus on results all contribute to productivity. These things are important for all officials.

Of equal or perhaps greater importance, however, is a clear sense of the larger goal of all local government service: protecting and promoting the welfare of the community. With this ultimate goal in mind, questions about who is in charge and what the limits are of a particular board's or official's authority become somewhat less important. In fact, despite the best intentions, a focus on the "territorial" aspects of local government can actually make it more difficult to reach the true goal of public service.

Perhaps a more beneficial approach is one focused on commitment, civility and cooperation in local government. These general principles were the basis of a set of 39 aspirational guidelines for public board members developed in 1967 by the late Fred Riggins, former chairman of the Phoenix, Arizona Planning Commission (see sidebar). Forty years later, the Riggins Rules still ring true. Although certain references reflect the times in which Mr. Riggins lived (for example, all-male references and an assumption that a jacket and tie are standard attire), the wisdom of the guidelines is as relevant today as it was then.

Commitment

Before accepting any position, it is always a good idea to find out how much time will really be required. If a person decides to accept a position, other board members and the citizens in the community have the right to expect this person to show up on time and prepared to most, if not all, meetings. There may be additional work required between meetings as well. After all, local government must continue to operate, even during the summer months and holiday seasons. In addition, the public has the right to expect board members and officials to be accountable for their actions while they hold a position of trust in the community.

Civility

The most productive boards are those operating in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Local officials are frequently called upon to make difficult choices. Tensions can run high when a board is faced with the unpleasant task of choosing the "least bad option." Reasonable people can (and do) disagree on important issues. These differences of opinion are inevitable but don't have to be disastrous. It is often helpful in these situations to remain calm and thoughtful, with personal emotions in check, and with an open mind. This is not always easy. However, when board members are able to remain respectful of one another, it is far easier to resolve the issue than when tempers flare. Effective boards are populated with members who can each hold a minority viewpoint when voting on an issue and then openly support the majority decision once it has been made.

Cooperation

Local government is a system made up of many boards, officials and employees. Each is a part of the whole, but this does not mean that they will agree on everything. Many facets of this system are designed to ensure that more than one set of minds considers an issue, such as the give and take on a town budget between a board of selectmen, an official budget committee and the voters. In the heat of the process, it can be easy to get caught up in "who is in charge" or "who is right." What is really important, however, is that a good decision is made for the community at the end of the process. It can be much easier to reach that goal when board members can communicate effectively

and remain open to the possibility that alternate solutions may exist. Of course, giving in merely to avoid confrontation or disapproval is not helpful, but compromise is necessary at times to reach the best result.

Although written decades ago, these rules still hold true today. These rules are a reflection of how one person viewed his position and responsibility as a board and commission member. Our local officials and employees across New Hampshire have a long tradition of excellence in public service. We look forward to a future where that tradition remains strong.

This article, written by C. Christine Fillmore, first appeared in the September, 2007 edition of *Town & City Magazine*.

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