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New Hampshire Town And City

25 Tips for Newly Elected Local Government Officials

New Hampshire Town and City, March/April 2019

By Modified with permission from the Texas Municipal League.

1. Allot ample time to be effective in your public service role. Your most important responsibility as an elected official is participation at board, alderman and/or council meetings, but attending meetings isn't enough. Research, study, and discuss the issues; keep yourself informed.
2. Pace yourself. Prioritize the meetings you attend. Recognize the need to spend time with your family and achieve a healthy work/life balance.
3. Deliver on your promises. Most major decisions and actions require approval of the governing body, which takes a majority vote.
4. Treat your colleagues, constituents, and staff with fairness and respect. People come to you with issues that are important to them. Do what you can to resolve their issues or suggest other resources that might be helpful.
5. Allow your city or town staff to do their work and handle operations. Your primary role is to set policy and direction for your municipality.
6. Take your budget preparation role seriously. The budget is your policy development tool and road map. It determines what your city or town does or doesn't do in the coming year. When budget cutbacks are necessary, ensure adequate funding for activities that are vital to municipal operations.
7. Be aware of the little things. While little things can go unnoticed, it's often those tiny details that require the most attention.

8. Establish policy statements. Written policy statements let the public and staff know where they stand, and help the governing body govern. Written policy statements also provide a process to develop consensus.
9. Maintain the infrastructure. Make certain you are keeping up with what you have before taking on new projects. Deferring maintenance costs to the future burdens the next generation of leaders.
10. Be comfortable telling people that you don't know the answer to their question. It's better to tell constituents that you need to research an issue rather than provide inaccurate information.
11. Always keep the long-term interests of your city or town top of mind. Don't be hurried into action or misled by the demands of special interest groups who want it done their way, right now.
12. Be open and honest with your colleagues. It's unwise to spring surprises on your fellow local government officials or municipal staff, especially at formal meetings. If a matter is worth discussing, it should be placed on the agenda. Surprises often cause embarrassment, create distrust, and erode the team approach to governance.
13. Respect and don't bypass the system. If you have a city or town manager or other chief administrative official, follow policy and avoid personal involvement in day-to-day operations.
14. Don't let others bypass the system. Insist that people work with your staff first. If direct contact with elected officials is necessary, ensure it happens with the governing body as a whole and not on a one-on-one basis.
15. Formalize your personnel rules and regulations. Make sure they're clear. For example, if you don't pay for unused sick leave when an employee is terminated, put it in writing.
16. Familiarize yourself with the New Hampshire Right-to-Know Law (RSA 91-A). Respect the letter and intent of this law.
17. Keep your constituents informed through a regular editorial in the local newspaper, radio interviews, or news releases. Be friendly in your interactions with the news media. Effective communications keep citizens engaged and fosters civic pride.
18. Keep your city and town staff informed, particularly those on the front line who have frequent contact with the public or are in a decision-making role.
19. Appoint citizen advisory committees as needed and be prepared to follow their advice. Appointing your opposition to a desired committee helps them work for you, instead of against you.
20. Hire the best people you can and give them as much responsibility as they can handle. Support and inspire them to succeed.
21. Encourage your employees to look for new ideas and better ways of doing things. Listen to what they have to say.
22. Make sure your city or town has a solid financial accounting and reporting system in place.
23. Remember that your municipality does not operate in a vacuum. You must work within the intergovernmental system to be effective. Keep in contact with school, county, state, and federal officials. Use the New Hampshire Municipal Association as a resource.
24. Keep your eye on state (and federal) legislation that can negatively affect your city through unfunded mandates or by eroding your ability to make decisions locally. Read NHMA's *Legislative Bulletin* for weekly updates on key state legislation and regulations.

25. Budget money for your officers and employees to attend NHMA workshops and conferences. NHMA provides excellent learning opportunities and personal contacts who can be valuable to you, your staff, and elected officials. Read NHMA's *NewsLink* for updates on upcoming workshops, webinars, and other training and educational opportunities.

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