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Commentary: Congratulations on Your Election to Local Office: Now, On Being Effective

by Vincent Long

Now that the candidate lunches are over, the campaign workers have gone home, and the yard signs are heading to the recycling bin, reality may be starting to set in. And given the nature of campaigning, it's about time for a dose of reality. As the jubilation fades and the campaign promises you made are still fresh in your mind, you may be feeling like the dog that caught the bus: exhausted, overwhelmed, and asking yourself, "Now what?"

You can take comfort in the fact that you probably are not the first newly elected official to ask this question. In fact, you might ask yourself variations of this question throughout your tenure in office. Whether you are dealing with a new state mandate or a seemingly impossible local issue, you might ask yourself, "What do I do now?"

Making the transition from candidate to elected official is the first of your many challenges. It probably seems a bit unfair that just when you were getting the hang of being a candidate, you now have to become an effective legislator—and fast! Gone are the days of the 30-second sound-bite solutions that are the friend of the political outsider. Your messaging about the change that you would bring, whether it was positive or negative, worked. It bought you the overnight distinction of being an insider, "one of them." Your first instinct may be to continue to campaign, to distance yourself from your colleagues on the commission or council. The qualities it took to be an effective campaigner, however, are much different from those required to be an effective elected official.

Focus Is on You

To be effective now will require endless prodding, compromise, and political skill to balance the different points of view of members of the governing body in order to get anything done for your community. You are now one member of a collegial body. You will soon experience one of the unique dynamics of being an elected official. That is, in short order, the general public's individual perception of you will diminish, and you will inherit the larger perception people have of the overall governing body—good or bad.

Even veteran politicians sometimes do not fully appreciate this because of their tendency to surround themselves with a relatively small universe of people who like and support them, who share their

political ideologies, and who are much closer to the finer nuances of local politics and personalities than most. You may have been an effective campaigner by railing against government or by inspiring voters with uplifting messages about your leadership, but the campaign season is over! Your focus should turn immediately to making your governing body better, which will in turn make you a more effective member of the body as well as more effective in the eyes of the public.

The good news, arguably, is that at no level of government save the local level can one well-equipped elected official have as great a positive influence and bring about more dramatic results. The bad news is that the stakes have never been higher. Local governments today face unprecedented challenges and are directly impacted by the significant challenges facing state governments. Many states that grabbed the lifeline of federal stimulus funds to offset declining revenues are now facing billions in operating budget shortfalls as stimulus funds disappear.

Newly minted state legislators elected in the most turbulent midterm election in recent memory will be eager to make good on their own campaign promises and will most certainly launch aggressive new reforms. These new reforms are unlikely to tackle such chronic problems as fixing the antiquated tax structures that plague many states; and at the local level they will probably look like the same old cost shifts and unfunded mandates. Unfortunately for locals, the convergence of two conditions during an economic downturn—the loss of state tax revenues and an increase in demand for services—will make the normally tough issues at the local level even more difficult. This is what has been described as the new normal.

In your own backyard, a seemingly endless array of competing and often conflicting issues will contend for limited resources and will ultimately require the action of your governing body. You and your colleagues on the governing body will go to great lengths to weigh the issues, values, and perspectives of the community to attempt to reach what is in the public interest. Unfortunately, determining the public interest is difficult if not impossible when dealing with most issues of public policy. This is due simply to the fact that people hold different beliefs, interests, and preferences.

Making the aggregation problem still more difficult is that voters—individually and collectively, even in relatively homogeneous populations—can have drastically different and contradictory political preferences. Fulfilling one interest requires that another interest be denied or at least temporarily set aside. Thus, there is no one public interest but many public interests. The most difficult task facing you and the governing body will be to consider as many of these interests as practical to determine any kind of clear mandate for local government policy.

The most common and difficult example of weighing contradictory public interests is the taxpayers' strong and explicit demand for lower taxes, which coexists with the continuing demand for more spending for their favorite local government programs. Of course, when you compile all of the interests, you will find that every program is either mandated by the state or is someone's favorite. Attempting to satisfy conflicting demands is where elected bodies and their professional staffs will spend an inordinate amount of their limited time. It is important for you as an elected local official to appreciate that, at its worst, public policy is determined not by doing what is best for the community but by doing what a few people who make the most noise want.

Balancing Public Interests

The paradox that drives this unfortunate outcome is the worst-kept secret in all of government: that is, "residents who take an active role in a political issue are those with a personal stake in the outcome. Residents who will benefit only from better or more efficient government seldom make

their voices heard. The result often times is that political pressures and ultimately political decisions are made, which tend to be self-serving for those personally affected and involved.” Truly balancing public interests—interests that are shouted from the lectern at meetings of the governing body as well as interests that have not been voiced—is critical because it promotes the public trust, which is the foundation for everything you do in local government. Without it, citizens will not give the assent needed for your body to truly lead and achieve meaningful progress in your community.

Because of the level of cynicism about government today, actively promoting the public trust is essential. Even when local governments operate at the highest levels of efficiency and transparency, they experience a unique set of perception issues, the most chronic of which can be generalized by the following description: Anytime the elected governing body makes a broad policy recommendation or implements a program or policy that specifically benefits an individual or is consistent with that individual’s interests and beliefs, that individual perceives that the local government is doing the right thing, has all of the facts, and has acted in the best interest of the entire community. In sum, that person is left with a positive perception and the belief that the elected body “gets it.”

Conversely, when the elected body takes a policy direction or implements a program that adversely affects the special interests of an individual or is counter to that person’s specific beliefs, that person is left with the perception that the elected officials made the wrong decision, did not consider all of the facts, and acted contrary to the interest of the community as they satisfied someone else’s special interest.

To address this perception and other frustrations, elected officials may be tempted to just simply adopt the popular refrain: “Let’s run it like a business.” Officials might at first think that this practice indicates a better approach to decision making, one that is driven by the bottom line and that assumes you can avoid those sticky questions of equity, fairness, and the role of government that pervade public policy because they do not appear on a balance sheet. This catchphrase can be a good one politically, for a short time, but in practice it is problematic.

After 16 years of working with commissioners and conducting training sessions, I think that the frustration experienced by many newly elected officials—particularly those who have worked and enjoyed success in the private sector—is the failure of government to conform to their experience or perception of what it takes to run a successful business. Most people would agree that the basics of running a successful business include the ability to make strategic decisions to best position a company in the market, to deliver the product that (as closely as possible) reflects what customers want, and to make a profit at the price point the customer is willing to pay. The happy customer of a business does not care about the compensation of the board of directors or the chief executive officer or the benefit package for the company’s employees.

The business of local government is different. Can we learn from the private sector? Yes! In fact, it is imperative in this environment for local governments to learn from other high-performing and innovative organizations, those in both the public and private sectors. But as a reality check, remember what it takes to run a successful business, and imagine attempting to do so amid just a few of the following conditions that are pervasive in local government:

- Your customers (citizens) have a large number of diverse wants and needs that are not consistent and are often contradictory.
- The work of your business (local government) is either not profitable or is too difficult; otherwise another business (the private sector) would be doing it.
- You are not judged by how much money the business makes but by how little you spend.

- There are endless rules and regulations that constrain the flexibility of the business to deploy people, money, and other resources—and are intended for that purpose.
- All of the meetings of your board of directors (the elected body, in other words) are publicly noticed and probably even televised.
- Every business decision you make is subject to the debate of all of your customers.
- Individuals whose interests are counter to the success of the business are invited to participate and weigh in on behalf of other public and private interests.
- The members of the board of directors of the business likely have fundamentally conflicting views of how the business should be run and, perhaps, even what the fundamental purpose of the business should be in the first place.
- Any actions of the board of directors (any indiscretions of employees or any imaginable event associated with the daily business operations) are reported and delivered to the homes of all of your customers every morning (or immediately via any number of electronic media).

These are just a few of the business conditions that exist for local governments. Can you imagine running a successful business in this environment? The dominant principles of equity (in the public sector) and profit (in the private sector) drive important cultural differences that are key to both sectors fulfilling their distinct missions. Efficiency and effectiveness, of course, are keys to the success of business in both sectors; and, as in any effective business, the board of directors (in this case, the individual members of the elected governing body) will need to develop a thorough understanding of the inherent complexities as well as the unique environment of the business of local government.

Traits for Effectiveness

To be an effective local elected official requires no expertise in government or business. In fact, there have been and continue to be local elected officials from all walks of life who lend their unique talents and perspectives to the governing of their local communities—and whose communities are better because of their service. These elected officials sometimes have different backgrounds, personalities, and political philosophies, but professional managers and longtime observers of local government recognize that they share several traits common to effective elected local government officials:

- A passion for being the best steward of the community during their time on the board, commission, or council and for making the community better than it was.
- A desire to focus not only on the immediate challenges of the day but also on a vision for the future of the community.
- An ability to solve problems as well as to add to the problem-solving capacity of the community.
- A recognition that as an elected official you represent all of the citizens of the community, those who voted for you and those who did not.
- A facility for getting things done for constituents while promoting the collegial nature of the governing body.
- A thorough understanding of the issues before the governing body and an appreciation of the effect of your actions on all of the various stakeholders in the community.
- An adherence to behaving ethically during the performance of your duties and an avoidance of even the appearance of impropriety.
- An appreciation of the role of the professional manager and an understanding of the separation of executive and legislative responsibilities.
- An understanding of the roles and responsibilities of not only your governing body but also of state government officials, constitutional officers, local governments, and other general- and single-purpose governmental entities.
- A commitment to being a continuous learner of what it takes to be a better local elected official.

Because I am an administrator, a reader might expect that my final word of advice to elected officials is that they should just have blind faith in the skills of the professional administrator, or they should go out and find one whose style mirrors their own and everything will be okay. Far from it. Too many well-intentioned elected bodies and good administrators have parted ways because of an expectation that either of these options is realistic or sustainable.

My advice is simply that an effective council-manager relationship is critical to effective governing. To successfully navigate the unique and inherent complexities of the business of local government, amid the unprecedented pressures of the new normal that I have described, requires a team approach. This begins with an understanding and an appreciation of the respective roles and responsibilities of each and an active commitment by each to work the relationship.

When the relationship does work, there is no one group more able to assist the administrator in effective management than the governing body, and no one is more able to assist elected officials in effective governing than the administrator.

James M. Banovetz, ed., *Managing Local Government: Cases in Decision Making*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: International City/County Management Association, 1998).

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