

Thirty Tips for Newly Elected Mayors and Councilmembers

1. Allow yourself enough time to be effective. Just attending council meetings isn't enough—you must study and discuss the problems and keep yourself informed on what's going on. To do even a fair job takes a lot of time.
2. Pace yourself. Limit the number of meetings you have. Set some priorities, recognize the need to spend time with your family, and don't burn yourself out. Recognize that life—and the city—is dependent on a lot of things we have little control over.
3. Don't make promises you can't deliver! Most major decisions and actions require approval of the governing body, and this takes a majority vote.
4. Treat everyone the same. Be consistent! And always deal with people as if you will have to deal with them again. Even if you don't, someone else will.
5. Don't spend most of your time checking on what your city staff has already done. Your primary job is to provide policies and direction for the city. For example, instead of spending time reviewing invoices, make sure you have a good purchasing practice through which invoices are generated in the first place.
6. Take your budget preparation job seriously, for it determines what your city does or doesn't do for the coming year. It's the biggest policy development tool available to govern the city. And when budget cutbacks are essential, don't cut back on those activities that are vital to the critical operation of the city.
7. Be alert for the little things. They are the things that always seem to grow and come back to get you.
8. Establish policy statements. Written policy statements let the public and the city staff know where they stand. They help the governing body govern, and writing them provides a process to develop consensus. "That's the way it's always been done" is not good enough to either stay out of trouble or to get things done.
9. Maintain the infrastructure! Make certain you are adequately keeping up with what you now have before taking on any new projects. Deferring maintenance costs to the future simply shifts your troubles to those who follow you in the future.
10. Don't give quick answers when you're not sure of the real answer. It may be embarrassing to appear ignorant, but it can be more embarrassing to tell a person something that is wrong.
11. Don't be stampeded into action. Don't be misled by the strong demands of special interest groups who want it done now, their way. Your job is to find the long-term public interest of the city, and you may be hearing from the wrong people.
12. Don't spring surprises on your fellow councilmembers or your city staff, especially at formal meetings. If a matter is worth bringing up for discussion, it should be put on the agenda. Surprises may get you some publicity at the embarrassment of others, but they tend to erode the "team" approach to governance.
13. Don't bypass the system! If you have a city manager or other chief administrative official, stick to policy and avoid personal involvement in day-to-day operations.
14. Don't let others bypass your system. Insist that people such as bond dealers or equipment suppliers first work with your city staff. If direct contact with councilmembers is advisable, this should be with the council 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. Once the rules are established, councilmembers should avoid the temptation to get involved in personnel matters.
16. Familiarize yourself with the Open Meetings Act and the Public Information Act, and be sure to complete the state-mandated training in both. Respect the letter and intent of both acts, and don't underestimate their importance and seriousness.

17. Keep your constituents informed through such means as a weekly editorial in the local newspaper, radio interviews, or news releases. Be friendly and deal effectively with the news media. Lack of proper communications is one of the biggest problems of cities.
18. Keep your employees informed, also—particularly those on the front line who make decisions or are in frequent contact with the people.
19. Appoint citizen advisory committees as needed, but be prepared to follow their advice. Appointing your opposition to a useful committee can let them work for you, instead of against you.
20. Hire the best people you can and give them as much responsibility as they can and will handle. There is always the possibility that they will get you into trouble at first, but if you stand behind them, eventually they can keep you out of trouble.
21. Charge your employees with being responsible for new ideas and better ways of doing things. Listen to what they have to say.
22. Have your city attorney attend your council meetings, but don't expect the attorney to know all the answers right on the spot. Give the attorney the chance to research the matter.
23. Don't simply ask your city attorney whether or not you can do something. Sometimes, the most appropriate question is, "How can we legally accomplish this objective?"
24. If yours is a typical city, don't expect your city attorney to be an expert on every issue; city government is too complex. On occasion, you may need outside counsel, and it will be a good investment of public funds.
25. Elected officials should accept their leadership responsibilities, such as selling new programs to the public.
26. Make sure you have a good financial accounting and reporting system. Some cities have gotten into financial troubles simply because they spent more money than they had available and nobody knew it.
27. Don't act as if the city operates in a vacuum. We must work within the intergovernmental system to be effective. Keep in contact with your federal, state, county, and school officials. Use the Texas Municipal League.
28. Don't let a consultant take your place. You are the one who will be around to hear criticisms if things don't turn out right. The consultant should realize this. Even though we expect their best judgment, they should expect us to want to look over their shoulders.
29. Don't be hesitant to budget money for your officers and employees to attend TML workshops and conferences. These provide excellent learning opportunities and personal contacts that can be very valuable to your city.
30. Finally, define what "trouble" means to you. We must realize that we work in a fish bowl environment and that most of the things we do affect people. Many times, they will be affected in a manner they don't like. If "trouble" means having someone mad at you, you're in the wrong business! We should handle each item in a straightforward way that we know or believe to be correct. If things don't turn out the way they should—after all, even public officers and employees can make mistakes—no one can accuse you of improper motives, and you will know you did what you thought was proper. ★

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