

Leading our Community: The Challenges

Keep your eyes on the stars and your feet on the ground.

—Theodore Roosevelt

Your decision to run for public office changed your role in the community. You moved from citizen to candidate to local elected official. As a result of your electoral success, you are now part of a leadership team responsible for preserving and improving the quality of life in our community.

And that's a big responsibility!

This orientation program and the accompanying material included in this manual has been assembled to assist you as you assume your new role and the many responsibilities ahead.

The “Givens” of Local Government

Several assumptions guided development of this orientation program:

- **The issues are complex.** From global competitiveness to telecommunications, to changing demographics, to new economic and fiscal challenges, local leaders must grapple with increasingly complex issues while keeping an eye on the basics: safe and secure neighborhoods, clean streets, filled potholes, dependable waste collection and recycling, and on, and on.
- **The demands and expectations are high.** Complex issues and relationships mean intense demands on your time. Citizens expect you to solve problems and ensure a bright future for our community. The increased demands on your time mean less time for other professional responsibilities, your family, and personal interests.
- **Technology has changed the governing environment.** A local government Web site with up-to-the-minute information about issues and actions, along with online government services, is a must for every local government. Many residents are comfortable interacting regularly through online information and services, but you still need to ensure that no citizens are left out.
- **Feedback is instant.** Community blogs, e-mail, and local access television mean that you are constantly connected to your constituents. Your work is more visible than ever before, subject to instant, round-the-clock scrutiny and feedback.
- **National and local politics are tightly connected.** Many national policy issues play out on the local stage, putting extra pressure on hometown leaders. High profile national issues, such as health care reform, environmental regulation, and the impact of subprime mortgages on the economy, are contentious local issues. State and federal mandates, limitations on

local authority, and cuts in once-reliable financial support strain the federal-state-local partnership.

- **Resources are often scarce to meet increasing needs.** Once-reliable federal and state funds have become unpredictable and scarce. Local leaders must find new ways to raise revenue in an increasingly anti-tax and sometimes anti-government environment. Shifts in the national economy also have a significant impact on local economies and local revenue.
- **Teamwork is essential.** While you ran as an individual and got elected on your own, you are now a member of a team. Whether you are the Mayor, a council member elected at large or by ward, you cannot govern, make policy, or lead our community alone. The ideal way to achieve your goals and serve your constituents is to work in partnership with other members of the governing body.
- **Governing is messy.** Your success as a local elected official depends on your ability to balance your ideas with others' views. You must know when to compromise, when to go to the mat, and how to lose gracefully—for the good of the community.
- **You can't please everyone.** Being a leader means making tough and sometimes unpopular choices. Tight budgets, high expectations, increasing demands, anti-government movements, and unforeseen conflicts make the job of leading today's local governments very difficult. It requires a tough skin, a commitment to learning about the issues, a willingness to compromise, an ethical center, and, above all, a commitment to doing what's best for our community.
- **There are no right answers or perfect solutions.** Governing is an ongoing process of weighing options, sharing ideas, seeking feedback and input, assessing facts and data, and making the best possible decision on the basis of the information and resources you have.

This Orientation Program Is for You

This orientation program will provide an overview of roles, responsibilities, and relationships to help you as a local elected official successfully navigate the opportunities and challenges ahead. Whether you are newly elected to office or a returning member of the City Council, this program provides a framework for discussion, for examining processes and directions in our community, and for strengthening your effectiveness as an individual leader and an essential member of the local leadership team.