

Communication and Trust:

A Recipe for Successful Council-Manager Relations

Christopher Good

Reno, Nevada, is enjoying a renaissance. With an average annual growth rate in the Reno/Sparks municipal service area of 2.8 percent, the “Biggest Little City in the World” is getting bigger all the time. Major economic development projects are injecting growth and energy into the core of the downtown, along the banks of the Truckee River.

The *Uptown, Downtown Artown* summer arts festival brings not only tourists but city residents to the downtown, while a full-scale effort is under way to clean up and maintain the public infrastructure in the busy casino strip just a few blocks north of the river. Living space is being developed in a previously vacant, historic downtown hotel, and there are plans for retail, restaurant, and cinema developments along the city’s riverwalk.

This burst of energy has been ushered in by an activist city council and a manager who put the council’s vision to work. Such teamwork has not always been evident in Reno, but City Manager Charles McNeely has helped the council to establish priorities.

There had been a 25-year struggle to “do something” in the downtown, on the river. “We needed to work with elected officials to identify a vision for downtown,” McNeely says. “I saw it as my job to take that vision and craft a plan.” Another major issue he identified was to improve the effi-

ciency of the city organization. Fundamental to both problems, he says, was the need to build a better relationship between the council and staff.

Communication Fosters Trust

“Across this country, there are elected officials who want to be involved,” explains McNeely. This certainly applies to Reno. “There’s an image of an entrenched bureaucracy. To be successful, you have to work in partnership with the policymakers and make sure you’re responsive to their needs.” Reno’s mayor and council are active and involved, but establishing that line between policy and administration has been and still is important.

Mayor Jeff Griffin says that line is now clear. “I’m used to running a business,” Griffin says. “You have to make it clear whose role is whose. I don’t want to be the city manager, and Charles doesn’t want to be the mayor. The council sets policy and goals, then backs away and allows management to function.” Councilmember-at-Large Pierre Hascheff agrees: “Now we have less management at the council table and more accountability for the city manager.”

McNeely makes a point of taking councilmembers on an annual retreat to set long-term goals as a team, and he also meets individually with each member on a regular basis. He says he has worked to avoid a common pitfall: taking sides with some policymakers against others. “I have a responsibility to communicate regularly with every one of them,” he says. “I don’t take sides or go through one member of the council to get to the whole group.”

Seven people sit on the council, and McNeely points out that they each have their own issues and concerns. “I meet with them individually to discuss their ideas,” he says. “But that’s not where we decide on a way to tackle the problem.” That comes later, when he can bring issues before the entire group. “This council is good about that. We discuss things one on one, but policy questions

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always go before the whole council.”

Building a Better Reno, Phase I

When McNeely started in Reno, he asked each councilmember about his or her vision for the city 10 to 15 years down the road. Responses were surprisingly similar. Major issues facing the local government included the need to improve customer service, long-range planning, and efficiency.

He took councilmembers’ comments and resolved them into six priorities for the first year: community and youth services; strategic plans; redevelopment along the Truckee River corridor; a drop-in social service center; the railroad tracks running through the downtown, to be depressed with the agreement of

the Union-Pacific Railroad; and a comprehensive street rehabilitation program.

The council was given a plan, a list of specific items to pursue that had grown from these six priorities. The plan was called “Building a Better Reno”—a phrase with which most people in Reno are now well familiar. The plan has called for the involvement of all parts of the city organization and the creation of some new responsibilities.

An Ombudsman Office of Citizen Assistance was established for citizens who didn’t know where to take their questions or problems with local government. Annual goal-setting and planning sessions for the council and the management team also were established, and McNeely eats lunch with a group of randomly selected employees once a month. Strategic planning has been made a key part of the city’s planning process and includes the training of key people throughout the organization.

Building a Better Reno’s first phase included the creation of the Permit Place, a one-stop shop for property owners and developers to obtain their required permits, as well as to get answers to their questions. Staff also established the River Corridor Action Plan for five blocks along the Truckee River. The city’s redevelopment agency put out



Redevelopment along the Truckee River resulted in Riverwalk in downtown Reno, Nevada.

a request for proposals from master developers to construct a center of commerce and culture where vacant buildings and empty lots formerly existed.

"We set goals; we laid out what we wanted from staff," explains Mayor Griffin. "We came back later and said, how did we do? We met them. Now we're setting new goals."

Lessons Learned in Phase I

Councilmember Pierre Hascheff says the process has shown the council the importance of sticking to the goals it had set and of allowing staff to take risks. "We still need to improve the way we reward staff for being entrepreneurs," Hascheff says. "If you want to stimulate creative thinking, you have to be willing to reward employees."

The city manager says he has learned lessons, too. The biggest problem he sees with the Building a Better Reno program has been one of communication. Getting all of the city departments on board and convincing them that things were actually changing has been a big challenge. Also, bringing the public into the process early is important. "You have to communicate your message, then communicate some more," McNeely says.

The redevelopment project has been

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controversial at times, with many members of the community raising important issues related to historic preservation of Reno's older buildings. Getting people to participate in the decision-making process can be difficult, but after all, McNeely points out, it is the residents' community, and they deserve to have a voice in determining its future.

"It's been a learning process," McNeely says. "And outreach to the public is a big part of the next phase of the program."

Building a Better Reno, Phase II


"Building a Better Reno, Phase II"—also known as *Our Town, One Town: Neighborhoods to Downtown*—represents the council's direction for staff for the next one to two years and has grown out of a goal-setting session. The program entails two campaigns: first, to continue the redevelop-

ment effort along the Truckee River; and second, to focus on neighborhood services, reaching out to residents through an innovative system of neighborhood advisory boards (NABs) that will respond to residents' issues and concerns.

The coming months will see staff work on traffic, recreation programs, park services, and public safety issues that are important to residents in neighborhoods. Reno has appointed NABs to represent the interests of people who live in neighborhoods in seven sections of the city. Some citizens have been more active than others, and staff support has been stretched thin. In early 1998, however, the community relations division employed two neighborhood services coordinators, who are dedicated entirely to the neighborhood programs. The council has approved \$350,000 for the NABs to direct toward their neighborhood priorities.

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Identifying council priorities and crafting them into concrete programs that can be implemented effectively is the role of the city manager, McNeely says. Sitting down with each councilmember, getting a sense of how each member envisions the future of his or her community, was invaluable. Talking to residents and listening to their frustrations with or praise for the local government also helped make the mission clear. "Coming in as an outsider, you can do that," McNeely says. "You can bring a different perspective to the issues facing a community and piece together an objective view of what works and what doesn't."

But the most important part of establishing trust between a manager and a council is bringing back results. And clarifying the council's vision, giving staff specific responsibilities, and holding councilmembers accountable are other measures that are helping to build a better Reno. 

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Reno's future is being guided by the work of its council and city manager.