

# How Do I Get New Councilmembers Up to Speed?

In a recent election, the residents of my community voted into office four new members of a six-member council. These new councilmembers have different occupations and backgrounds, and they also have different issues that they want to tackle now that they've been elected. I should have been better organized for the new officials, and now I am struggling to prepare an information packet and orientation session for them before it is too late, as the new members already are making their own way through the local government's maze of policies and regulations. I have lots of questions, too. Should I, for example, hold one orientation session or more than one?

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**How should a manager get new councilmembers prepared for their new responsibilities?** Three practitioners tell what they do to brief newly elected councilmembers on their responsibilities.

I have done a number of the things to prepare elected officials for their positions. In addition to the list below, I conduct mini seminars for members of the governing body starting the week after election up to and including their swearing in. Each week, I put on a two-hour study session. The schedule is generally this:

1. Identification of roles. Who are the players—elected and nonelected? What does the mayor do? What are the mayor's official duties; what is not part of the mayor's duty? We do the same for the commission and the councilmembers. I compare the duties of the city manager and the staff. I show what our tools are. This includes city code, state statutes, planning documents, and budget.

2. Budget and finance. I give a short course on finance. What are the documents? How do you read them? What are they telling us? I ask the clerk/finance director to outline the accounting reports. I outline the budget process and ask the auditor to explain the audit process. The financial adviser describes the bond-financing process.

3. Planning. I describe the land use guidelines my community uses; these include a summary of the planning and zoning ordinance. The subdivision ordinance is outlined, and how the two work together is described. I explain how the comprehensive-plan process drives the whole planning process.

4. Strategic planning. Here I stop talking. I want the “new” governing body to start talking to me. What do we want to be and where do we want to go? I use the ICMA strategic planning book as a guide or foundation. I do not use the process outlined in the book, however, because it is a more formal process than can be completed in the two hours allocated for this session. I recognize the recently elected councilmembers are just new to the game and don’t know or want to commit to the process described in the book.

What is important, though, is getting them to think as a group and talk as a group about who they are, where they are going, and what they want to be when they get there. The value of this exercise to me is so important that I would drop all the others if I could do only one session. The result of their work gives me the outline of what they want me to do as the city manager, and I can go back to them in a later work session and revisit strategic planning. In the past two job interviews I have had, I told the councilmembers that if they did not want to go through at least this step, I didn’t want to work for them. I was hired anyway!

5. Economic development. I have asked economic development spe-

cialists from the state Department of Commerce to talk about growing the business sector. They describe the partnership and who all the players are in economic development. In one area where the county provided the economic development service, that person came and accomplished the same objective.

6. Emergency management. In the last place I worked, we had a proactive county emergency management director. I asked her to share what she thought the council ought to know. It worked out extremely well. Later, we conducted a drill in which the newly elected members participated, and they got a lesson in working with real press contacts, in what they should and shouldn’t say, and in how to behave! It was important to me to address this since in Kansas we have windstorms that can be quite damaging.

7. Mock council meeting. I have never done this, but I always plan for it since we may get more commissioner change that I expect. One year, I had planned for four members to change and later I did have four members change. Getting them into a situation in which they can practice but still be able to call time-outs in a mock council meeting and ask why we do things this way or that would be helpful. It is a way for new members to hear and retaining members to rehearse (reinforce) the meeting procedures.

I know some managers who try to work through this list of topics one-on-one. I have some one-to-one time, but I also ask the sitting members of the governing body to be the mentors of the newly elected members by describing how they deal with the issues peer to peer. Including the current members of the governing body into these sessions is important to the success of the process. A newly elected maverick can be tempered by a “we don’t do things that way” from a fellow commissioner better than if it came from me.

I am sure there are other subjects

that could be covered. Each jurisdiction should look for the hot buttons and train through them.

—Larry Paine  
City Manager  
Concordia, Kansas  
citymanager@concordiaaks.org

**T**he goal, of course, is to bring new councilmembers up to speed as quickly as possible so they can step into their new jobs and be effective members of the council team.

In Abilene, we begin this process as soon as a candidate files to run for office. We provide every candidate with a complete agenda packet for each council meeting so they can better acquaint themselves with current issues. Most candidates attend council meetings before the election, and this year several candidates even attended our council workshop on water planning issues that was held during the summer months.

After the election, we offer new councilmembers a one-day orientation that provides an overview of city government operations, policies, and current issues. We spend half of the day reviewing such issues as protocols for conducting council meetings; legal issues that include open records, financial disclosure, and conflict of interest; the budget process, and so forth.

City staff participants include the city manager, city attorney, city secretary, and assistant city managers. Staff experts also provide overviews for several targeted areas. The economic development director discusses current and future projects and initiatives; the administrative services director explains issues with the city’s self-insurance fund; and the information coordinator provides a short training session on media relations.

Each participant receives a personal tabbed notebook that offers further resources on each of the orientation topics. Where applicable, reprints of articles are included to provide a more in-depth look at some topics. Included, for example, is an article from *Public Management* magazine entitled

“Six Reasons Why It’s Best to Work Through the Manager.”

During that day-long orientation, Abilene staff also share lunch with the new councilmembers, an occasion that offers a more informal team-building opportunity. After lunch, we take the councilmembers on a tour of city facilities, from the wastewater treatment plant to the vehicle maintenance shop. We have found that these behind-the-scenes tours have been extremely interesting and enlightening for the councilmembers.

The feedback we have received from councilmembers who have participated in these sessions has been positive. It helps them start off on the right foot with their council service. They have a better grasp of what they are facing as elected officials and the issues with which they will deal.

—Larry Gilley  
City Manager  
Abilene, Texas

[larry.gilley@abilenetx.com](mailto:larry.gilley@abilenetx.com)

**C**ity and town managers often find themselves and their cities in a position of awkward transition after an election. Successful candidates may have a wealth of experience in municipal government or absolutely none at all. Many ongoing projects may flounder or die because the newly elected commission or the councilmembers don’t fully understand them or see them as a product of a past administration, possibly a rival.

So...how should a manager prepare new councilmembers for their new responsibilities?

The process can actually start before the election. I have found it helpful to offer to meet with all candidates to answer any questions they may have about the city, specific issues, or the role of elected officials. This serves as an initial orientation session and results in a smoother transition from candidate to elected official.

I am aware of some managers who set up group orientation sessions for all candidates (both incumbents and new candidates) before the election. Although this process ensures that all

candidates have access to the same information, it will most likely require buy-in from the incumbents.

Following the election, there are a host of opportunities to bring newly elected officials up to speed. I have found the following process to be very helpful in keeping the business of the city on track.

First, the city attorney conducts a group training session for all elected officials and another session for the appointed board and commission members on legal issues. In Florida, we have perhaps the most stringent sunshine (open meetings) law and public records requirements in the nation. These issues, quasi-judicial procedures, and charter requirements serve as the basis of this briefing. This session is also videotaped so that new board and commission members who are appointed throughout the year can receive training.

Second, I hold a full-day training session for all governing board members on the most important issues they will be dealing with in the upcoming year. Individual presentations are given by me and by the department directors. Every elected official is given a large three-ring binder containing all of the background material so that they may review this information at their leisure. This process also serves as a refresher for incumbents and has significantly helped to bring newly elected officials up to speed with the history and background on these issues.

Third, I invite all newly elected officials to meet with me and each department director to discuss issues and processes related to the individual departments. Each meeting is scheduled and lasts usually between one and three hours. This process allows the newly elected member to become better acquainted with me, the directors, and the functions of each department, and it provides them an opportunity to ask questions one-on-one.

In addition to this substantive process, I spend time with each new commissioner advising about when the commission meets, providing them with keys to city hall, and showing

where to pick up mail. The intent is to make them feel comfortable as soon as possible in their new environment.

Coincidentally, the Florida League of Cities Legislative Day occurs a week after our new officials are sworn into office. Each year, I encourage all commissioners to attend this training. In addition to providing for a legislative update, this creates a setting for the newly elected officials to get to know me and each of the incumbents on a more personal basis, away from city hall. By carpooling for this eight-hour round trip and attending meetings and meals as a group, we have an in-depth opportunity to start working together as a team.

One of the most difficult areas for new commissioners and for managers is recognizing the line between policy setting and administration in a council-manager form of government. New commissioners come on board, full of enthusiasm, and frequently think that all city employees work for them. They are excited and want to get things done, and sometimes they end up giving directives to staff at all levels. Even though most cities have severe charter restrictions regarding directives by elected officials, this issue has arisen in virtually every city where I have worked for the past 30 years.

It is an extremely awkward situation for a manager to deal with these types of situations after the fact. After all, the elected official is a boss of the city manager. It is even more uncomfortable for rank-and-file city employees to be given these types of directives. They are often unclear about the role of elected officials and want to please them, but they also don’t want to go around their supervisors in the chain of command.

Early on, I sit down with each new commissioner and discuss our respective roles. I liken our board of commissioners to a board of directors in the private sector. The board sets policy and provides the big-picture vision for the future of the city. Like the CEO in the private sector, the city manager, through staff who report to the city manager, carries out the

day-to-day operations, implements the board's policies, and moves the organization along to accomplish the board's vision. It is not productive for a private sector member of a board of directors to be giving directives to staff; the same holds true in the public sector. I have had varying degrees of success with this approach.

Elected officials who have longevity on the commission have been very successful in publicly and privately encouraging newly elected officials to focus on the policy-making role of the legislative branch of government. Development of this mentoring or peer relationship can be extremely helpful if the newly elected member is reluctant to communicate with the city manager or is even distrustful of staff.

A final area of difficulty for many newly elected officials is coming to understand that they have no individual power. The power they derive in office is based on their ability to garner support from the other com-

missioners when it's time to vote. Directives to the manager are a function of the collective voice of the board. Otherwise the entire organization could be going in as many different directions as there are elected officials. This is another area where elected officials with longevity on the board can be a big help in acclimating new officials to their role.

In summary, the dynamics of every group of elected officials are different. What may be workable with one may not be workable with another, and the manager must be adept at reading situations and learning what types of communication are most effective with each new group of elected officials. Flexibility and a well-versed knowledge of issues will serve all managers well in easing the transition with a new council.

—Ellen Posivach  
City Manager  
Tarpon Springs, Florida  
[ellenp@tampabay.rr.com](mailto:ellenp@tampabay.rr.com)