

# Managing Controversies in the Media

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It is not always possible to predict what will spark a controversy in municipal government. Sometimes a governing body will pass a multi-million dollar item without questions or comments from elected officials, the public, or the media, but then will spend two hours debating a \$5,000 appropriation for street furniture. Go figure.

There are some items that are especially prone to producing controversies that will play out in the media. Let's look at three of them: 1) anything to do with garbage; 2) personnel matters; and 3) planning, zoning and development issues.

Why does garbage stir up such intense arguments? People don't want garbage near them. The New Jersey public always opposes landfills, incinerators and transfer stations. If you want to avoid controversy, do not propose or support any of these garbage facilities in your community. Anything dealing with garbage produces hostile and emotional arguments from the public. What's even worse – the media sense immediately that anything dealing with landfills, transfer stations or incinerators will keep them supplied with nasty headlines, negative editorials and dramatic video for weeks, months or even years. Generally, the only way to end this kind of controversy is to cancel the proposed garbage project.

Personnel matters are also likely to produce controversy. Politics is about the distribution of scarce resources, which include public sector jobs. These positions normally have health and pension benefits, salary increases and

promotions to higher ranks. We always need to remember that many members of the public have neither jobs nor benefits nor opportunities for promotion. They also pay for our salaries and benefits. The public's general view of municipi-



*NJN Senior Political Correspondent Michael Aron interviews League past president and Mayor of South Bound Brook Jo-Anne Schubert.*

pal employees is negative. Journalists sense that the public is eager to read articles and watch TV segments about public sector salaries, sloth, corruption and arrogance. The fact that many print journalists are underpaid and professionally frustrated only increases the likelihood that they would love to write a story about one of us.

There will always be minor personnel controversies. The best way to avoid

or mitigate major personnel controversies is to make personnel decisions with due consideration for how the media and the public would perceive what you are doing. Especially if you are a mayor, you have to be willing to act decisively in cases involving wrong-doing by municipal personnel. You must discipline, suspend or terminate wrong-doers at once, whatever the civil service regulations allow in the given case. Otherwise, the public will believe that you endorse the wrong-doing or, worse, may be involved with it yourself.

Planning, zoning, and development controversies arise frequently, because people are resistant to change in their neighborhoods. If there's been a vacant lot for 50 years, they believe the lot must remain vacant. For years, the operative acronym was "NIMBY," short for "Not in my backyard." In our more intense times, the new slogan is "Build absolutely nothing anywhere near anyone," better known by the acronym "BANANA."

The media love to cover stories about public meetings that involve hundreds of screaming, angry, residents who oppose a new development. The best way to prevent this kind of controversy is to prevent it before it happens. In Bayonne, Mayor Joseph V. Doria's Administration offers developers the option of presenting their proposals to a technical review committee before they go before the planning or zoning board. At the technical review meetings, municipal officials offer their frank advice to developers to change their proposals, if needed,

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before they go to a televised public meeting. This advice can include such ideas as adding more off-street parking or reducing the size of a proposed building. The smarter developers modify their proposals accordingly, in order to reduce the chances for public hostility during the televised hearings. The technical review committee is an idea worthy of use by other municipalities.

I would like to conclude with rules that municipal officials should follow when dealing with the media.

Always tell the truth. Unless someone's life would be endangered by the truth, don't lie to the press. If you lie once, they will never believe you again.

Answer media questions unless the issue is a confidential personnel matter, an issue for the lawyers, or the subject of negotiations. If this is the case, try to explain why you can't talk about something, at least not at the moment. Never say "no comment." It looks as though you have something bad to hide. "No comment" is a signal to the reader that you are evil.

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Another important point to understand is that the medium is the message. Before you deal with a reporter from a particular medium, try to remember the main way in which that medium conveys the story. In the print media, the radio, and the Internet, words matter most. For these media, choose your words very carefully. On television, visuals matter most. For TV, try to think of something that would offer good images. You don't get a second chance to make a first impression. The negative words printed in a story never go away. The images videotaped for a TV news story cannot be erased from the viewer's mind.

About the worst thing you can do is to slam a door in a reporter's face

while the cameras are running. Door-slamming is a signal to the reader that you are guilty and have something bad to hide. This door-slamming activity is guaranteed to be shown repeatedly through multiple news cycles. Unless you want to become an infamous figure for millions of TV

message. Even then, the newspaper is under no legal obligation to print an advertisement with which it disagrees.

Municipalities need to have clearly designated spokespeople and a system for responding to media inquiries or referring them to the appropriate parties.

**The best way to avoid or mitigate major personnel controversies is to make personnel decisions with due consideration for how the media and the public would perceive what you are doing.**


viewers in New Jersey and surrounding states, don't ever slam the door in a reporter's face while the TV cameras are running. For TV, remember that dramatic is bad and boring is better. Fortunately, most municipal employees have no interest in becoming the evil stars of the nightly news.

Remember that the perception is the reality. In the battle for public opinion, what the public and the media perceive to be the truth is what really matters.

There's freedom of the press for anyone who owns one. Those who control the media control the message that goes in print, on the air, on the cable, or on the Internet. They are under no obligation to believe what you say or even to carry your side of the story. Municipalities can try to get their message across directly through municipal cable TV stations and municipal websites. In rare situations during controversies, municipal governments sometimes buy ads in newspapers to explain policies, because it's the only way to guarantee that the newspaper will print your

Always ask reporters what their deadlines are and then tell them you will call them back. In that way, you will know how much time you have to develop responses to their questions. Knowing how much time you have gives you the opportunity to consult with your municipal colleagues about an appropriate response to media inquiries.

Always expect the unexpected. The most likely unexpected thing to happen is that someone in municipal government will leak a story to the media. When this happens, use all of the above tips. Just remember that you will have to use all of them quickly and suddenly. It is not the reporter's fault that he or she has received leaked information. It's the fault of one of your colleagues who is either trying to look important or trying to advance a personal agenda. You have to understand that reporters receive leaks on a regular basis. For this reason, you may need to give local journalists you work with T-shirts emblazoned with the slogan, "I'm a journalist. I gotta take a leak." ▲



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