

Managing Volunteers in a City

By John Brenne, Pendleton City Councilor

As a long-term city councilor, I look back at all the people I've met through city service and realize that most of them have been volunteers. Our recent mayors, Joe McLaughlin, Bob Ramig, and Phil Houk, were and are all volunteers. City volunteers come in all shapes, sizes, and ages. They can be young—i.e., a community service worker doing lawn work to pay back the community for a minor offense—or they might be older—a planning commission member who is staring at seven decades.

Throughout any city government, whether members of the city council, youth commissions, the budget committee, the parks commission, or the motel tax committee—most groups contain many, if not all, volunteers. When you think about it, many smaller cities in Oregon would not be able to function without volunteers. A considerable challenge for any city is managing all of the volunteers that help make a city go. This includes recruitment, orientation, training, placing, and recognizing volunteers for their service, and unfortunately, removing a non-functioning volunteer.

From our city's experiences over the years, here are some key points to follow when managing volunteers:

Recruitment

Most city council volunteers are easy to recruit—they declare their candidacy, and the public is charged with making a choice. Most city commissions are filled by mayoral appointment, confirmed by the council. Usually, the mayor is contacted by interested persons who want to serve, so he or she has an extensive list of interested persons for all city committees and commissions. City department heads should be encouraged to make a list of tasks that could be done by volunteers, and create job descriptions for those tasks. I would suggest that volunteer job descriptions be advertised in a city newsletter or in the local paper or radio station under "Volunteer Opportunities." Most newspapers in Oregon run a "Volunteers Wanted" list.

Orientation

Potential volunteers should fill out an application for the volunteer job. As part of the application, the city should ask permission to do a background check on the potential volunteer. My suggestion is to have the police department do the background check, and then include a check of the National Sex Offender Public Registry (which is available on the Internet at no cost).

It is good practice to ask all volunteers to attend a two or three hour orientation, which reviews the city charter, explains city functions, includes a tour of city facilities, and gives volunteers a chance to meet staff.

Cities should also consult their insurance policies to make sure their city has volunteer coverage (liability/accident).

Training

It is crucial that volunteers receive relevant training for their job. Depending on a city's needs, each volunteer should be given a job description listing duties and information they need to know to perform their volunteer assignments. While these assignments are varied, some examples are: public greeter at a city library or aquatic center; filer; *(continued on next page)*



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transcriber; phone answerer; computer operator; coach for athletic events; fund raiser; trail maintenance person; bailiffs in courtrooms; Neighborhood Watch & Fire Corps volunteers; volunteers in the Fire Sleeper Program; mediation volunteers helping neighbors resolve disputes; juvenile peer court volunteers; beach clean-up; and janitorial.

The more information a volunteer has, the more effective they can be. However, the flip side is the issue of confidentiality—it can be important that some information is not shared beyond a volunteer work site in the city. Some cities require a volunteer to sign a confidentiality statement.

Placement

Most volunteers will clearly indicate where or how they wish to volunteer. Sometimes they are not able to do a particular job, so it becomes necessary to find something else. The volunteer should always have a supervisor—a person the volunteer can communicate with for questions and support.

It occasionally happens that a volunteer is just not suited for volunteer work because of inability to do the job, they are too verbal, or they cannot accept supervision and cause dissention. A volunteer should never be disciplined in public, and discipline should be as positive as possible. If the volunteer is serving on a high profile committee or commission, care needs to be taken to avoid embarrassment and hurt feelings. A good practice is to suggest to the person that a change needs to be made because work is not being accomplished, the committee needs a more balanced approach, or that the volunteer can be more effective in another setting.

Recognition

Across Oregon, several cities make extensive use of volunteers. The following is a small sampling of city staff and councilors, illustrating how some cities use volunteers, their recruitment practices, and how volunteers are recognized.

- Mike Claassen, a city councilor in Bandon (pop. 3,235), said that volunteers in his small city give thousands of hours to beach clean-ups, citizen committees, and parks and recreation department activities. He says this volunteer time equals the work of 10-15 full-time employees. Claassen also notes that 65 percent of Bandon's residents are retirees, which is a great pool to recruit volunteers from.
- Corvallis City Manager Jon Nelson utilizes more than 80,000 volunteer hours per year, or the equivalent of 40 full-time employees. Corvallis has volunteers in their library, parks & recreation department, in courtrooms as bailiffs, and in most city departments.
- Hillsboro City Manager Sarah Jo Chaplin said that thousands of hours are given by volunteers, amounting to the equivalent of 8 full-time employees.
- Cottage Grove's Theresa Cawn counted 24,408 hours in 2006-07 given by 130 volunteers. She also found a Web site which valued each volunteer hour at \$19.51. Obviously, that is a huge hourly amount of money being generated by volunteers in Cottage Grove.

All the city officials contacted for this article believed strongly in recognizing and thanking volunteers. They have dinners, give certificates, write newspaper articles of recognition, host barbecues, luncheons, and give awards. While it is fair to choose an outstanding volunteer each year, I believe thanking all volunteers with a certificate acknowledging hours and activities performed is very much appreciated. I also believe that a simple thank you each time you encounter a volunteer is a good way to recognize someone.

In these increasingly complex times, with budgets getting tight and tighter, the extensive use of volunteers may become commonplace. Volunteers are an invaluable resource and cities should treat them well plus use them effectively. ■

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