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### Avoiding micromanagement

## How to negotiate "the line" between council and staff

There's a "key" concept that city managers are taught at public administration schools that dates back to 1908 when the council-manager form of government was invented. **Martin Vanacour**, city manager in Glendale, Az. and instructor for the International City-County Manager Association (ICMA), describes it this way:

"Essentially it says there's a line between the manager and the council and that the manager will do administration and the council will do policy," he explains. "One minute after the deal was struck, the mayor crossed over and the manager crossed over."

In small cities, this metaphorical line can be particularly hard to distinguish because there is often much more familiarity between those involved in running city government, and there may be opportunities for casual interaction that don't exist in a large city bureaucracy. Both the elected officials and the appointed officials that *Small Cities* interviewed on this topic agreed that negotiating the line between policy and administration is a continuous struggle to find the right balance. Leaders in one Colorado small city have given a lot of thought to "the line" and volunteered their comments on how they negotiate it. City Manager **Jim Landeck**, Mayor **Don Parsons**, and Council member **Kathleen Novak**, have worked together for nearly eight years in Northglenn, (pop. 33,000), a 30-year-old suburban Denver community.

Parsons, who has been mayor for 2 years and leads an eight-member council from four wards, says his perspective is influenced by his many years of experience as president of a public utility. He likens the council to the company's board of directors, with a couple of big differences.

"Board members are often multimillionaires with lots of business experience," he notes. "Council members can be school teachers making \$23,000 and in a position to supervise a city manager making \$82,000 a year. And most elected officials have not run a multimillion dollar business, which is what a city government is."

Parsons says if council members get into "dotting the i's and crossing the t's, I am quick to remind them that's not our function. Our function is to tell staff what our philosophy is, our goals and objectives, and their job is to get us

Novak, who is active in the National League of Cities and a consultant in organizational behavior, thinks a manager needs to teach a council what its job is by helping them address "what's most important instead of what's most pressing."

"We've spent time arguing at length in council about the size of signs in the right of way and just a few minutes on a budget issue," she recalls. "Fortunately, our mayor reminds us we're not here to micromanage. We shouldn't be choosing the paper for the recreation brochure or instructing staff where to put pictures in city hall. If we've hired a competent staff, they should be able to do it."

However, she does admit the micromanagement trap is easy to fall into because "the line" is not always a matter of black and white. Recently, the Northglenn council was considering pilot programs for automated trash pickup and soon "we found ourselves debating the color of these boxes. On the one hand, it's micromanaging, on the other, it's an image issue...we fall into this all the time."

Tenure is one answer to understanding and appreciating the difference in policy and administration, she notes. "When a newly elected official doesn't know much about the complex water issues we have here in Colorado, or the budget process, the natural human tendency is to grab onto something you feel you know about and say something so the citizens will think you're doing something."

One answer she advocates is education of the newly elected official. In Northglenn, new council members are walked through every department and view a video on the budget process. **(Read about the budget video at [www.smallcities.org](http://www.smallcities.org))** Novak, herself, is writing a new member's handbook, which will address the appropriate interaction with staff.

### City manager perspective

Landeck, who was promoted to city administrator from public works director, says he is direct and open on the issue of "the line." He has developed a set of rules that work for him, his staff, and council. They include:

- The elimination of council liaisons to each department. Landeck says this previous structure created a conflicting order of authority because the department heads thought they should be taking some of their direction from the liaison. If the liai-

son gave direction different from the group direction, it was disruptive because the department heads wouldn't complain for fear of losing their jobs.

"Things deteriorated until I went to council and said to have a truly effective, efficient organization, you've got to let the manager manage. If you dilute my authority and dilute my direction, I can't get the job done that you want done."

- One-on-one discussion. If a council member wants something done that the whole council hasn't agreed on, Landeck explains that he can't redirect resources unless it's a collective decision. He then asks the council member whether he wants to discuss it in a council meeting or by polling the others individually.

"A lot of this dialogue has to start with the council. They have to be willing to sit down in their policy meetings or executive sessions and talk openly and candidly without being offensive."

- Discussion with department heads and clear direction. Landeck says he has a couple of standing rules. One is that a council member can make a request to a department head but it can't be for redirection of a policy or group effort. Secondly, council members are entitled to the same information and assistance from a given department that the average citizen is. If a request is for more than that, department heads are to turn the issue over to Landeck.

"Sometimes I find out an issue is of concern to more than one council member so I act as a facilitator to get it into a long range plan."

- Use of the orientation process to explain the role of the manager. Newly elected and appointed officials are invited in to review where the council has been, its current projects, its future projects, its long-range plans. Landeck says it can take six months to a year for a new official to understand the operational side of city government.

Landeck notes that councils today are composed of some very skilled council members "and we have to find a focus for that energy and skill, but it's not in the day-to-day operations of the city."