

Five Biggest Mistakes of the Newly-Elected Councilor

By Kirk Mylander, Staff Attorney, City County Insurance Services

Newly elected councilors brim with energy and good intentions. Sometimes, however, a new council-person's enthusiasm can lead him or her to make avoidable mistakes. Here are the top five mistakes of the newly-elected, and quick tips on how you can get things done the right way.

1. Assuming You Are THE LEADER

- You ARE a leader, and you deserve to be commended for that. But many city councilors mistakenly assume that they are THE LEADER, and forget that their power only comes from acting together with their fellow councilors.
- Remember, you are part of a leadership *group*. Stay away from individually managing city staff, and resist the urge to make quick changes by taking management duties upon yourself.

Success Hint: You're a councilor now, you get to leave the day to day stuff to others!

2. Anyone Who Votes Against You Commits an Ethics Violation

- Of course you're right. But keep in mind that even though you were chosen by the voters, reasonable people may still disagree with you.
- Remember, the best way to implement the agenda you campaigned on is to convince other councilors of the benefits of voting with you. Scaring your co-councilors into following your lead by reporting them to the Oregon Government Ethics Commission is not a strategy for long-term success.

Success Hint: Oftentimes honey really is better than vinegar.

3. Protecting the Public From Unpleasantness with Executive Sessions

- Of course *you* can handle the truth. And, as an elected official you will now be a part of what goes on behind the closed doors of executive sessions.
- Remember, though, that Oregon's "open meetings" law means that aside from a few narrow exceptions (staff discipline, litigation, purchasing property) the public gets to observe you in action, taking care of the people's business.

Success Hint: Before going into executive session, don't turn to the audience and shout "You can't handle the truth!"

4. Not Protecting Staff From Unpleasantness with Executive Sessions

- Hey, we don't doubt that your staff member messed up... and you are totally justified in being upset. But be careful where you express that sentiment.
- Remember, one of the exceptions to the open meetings law is staff discipline, and unless the staff member in question wants a public discussion, it's there for a reason. If you have a problem with staff, get an executive session put on the agenda more than 24 hours before the next council meeting, and say your piece then.

Success Hint: The "public comment" period is not designed for councilors to comment publically on the job performance of city staff.

5. Starting a Blog to Publicize All of the Above

- You absolutely are allowed to communicate with your constituents! Of course that is a dignified aim of any noble public servant such as you. But be careful of what communications you stamp with your political seal of approval, which happens when you "approve" comments to your blogged wisdom.
- Remember, blogs are magnets for the disaffected to anonymously vent their frustrations with city management, city staff, councilor ethics, and "what really happens" during executive sessions.

Success Hint: When you host their post, their words are your bond.

More Resources For Success

To learn even more common mistakes and quick steps for city council success, sign up for one of OLLI's "Governing Basics for Elected Officials" training seminars, co-sponsored by City County Insurance Services. You'll learn a lot and laugh a few times in the process. ■

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