

# Ways to Help Your Newly Elected Officials Succeed

BY DAVID UNMACHT

I remember my experience as a city councilmember like it was yesterday. I served on the Council of Dubuque, Iowa—for one day. No, I was not elected by the citizens, but was chosen by my fellow 10th-grade students to serve during my high school’s annual student government day.

I did not need a platform or a set of ideals to run on. My motivation for serving was genuine interest, to learn about city government, and, like all high school kids, to enjoy a day out of school. Little did I know at the time that the experience would be a driving factor in choosing my passion and profession of local government.

This month, we welcome a significant number of newly elected mayors and councilmembers. My congratulations to everyone who won—whether it was by hundreds of votes, a few votes, a write-in ballot, or even a coin flip tie-breaker.

It does not matter how many votes you received or if you called heads or tails—you have now passed the democratic test to be an elected official. What matters now is what you do with this privilege. I would like to offer a few ideas to city managers and sitting elected officials to help their newly electeds be successful in their new roles.

First, I have some suggestions for my city management colleagues. For many of you, the steps to welcome new councilmembers are second nature and already underway. But sometimes a change in elected officials is challenging.

Elections can stir emotions because there is debate on the work your city government does and renewed discussion on policy issues. This can feel personal. But once the election is over, it’s time for city staff to inform, engage, and energize newly elected leaders, while helping them transition to their offices.

Here are a few simple suggestions:

- Introduce them to the staff, conduct a city facility tour, and invite them to ride along in a squad car, fire truck, or snow plow.

- Share background information on important issues facing the city, educate them about the Open Meeting Law, spend time getting to know them on a personal level (if you don’t already), and give them an orientation.

- And—maybe most important of all—listen and listen some more to their aspirations, dreams, and goals as you welcome them to their new job. Look for ways to help them realize those dreams.

Second, to the sitting elected officials who are welcoming new individuals to the council, you have a role as well. You have a unique opportunity to be a mentor, colleague, and maybe even a new friend.

Help newly elected officials learn and understand past practice, the value of respect and decorum, and the importance of reading the council agenda packet thoroughly. Teach newly elected officials the importance of listening and respecting all sides of an issue and understanding the difference between staff and elected official roles and responsibilities.

To both staff and experienced elected officials, we encourage you to invite the newly elected officials to open the door to the League of Minnesota Cities and our Insurance Trust. Encourage the new leaders to attend a League training event, follow us on social media, participate in our Annual Conference, serve on an LMC policy committee, visit our building in St. Paul, invite us to attend one of your meetings, visit our website, or call us for help. Let the new mayor and councilmembers know that the League is a resource for all, and we are here to serve you.

A final thought: On page 16 of this magazine, you will find the winners of our Mayor for a Day Essay Contest.

Annually, we invite fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade students in Minnesota to submit essays answering a specific ques-



tion. This year our question was, “If you were mayor for a day, what would you do to make one of your city services even better?” Would you believe 454 aspiring mayors submitted essays? It is not a stretch to say that this is the first formal connection these students have with their city government.

I strongly recommend that all of you newly elected officials—all elected officials for that matter—read the winning essays and approach your jobs with the same creativity, idealism, and imagination that our students have as they present ideas to make their city better. ☑



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