



Welcome to Local Government

A column by Circle Pines Mayor Dave Bartholomay in the Quad Community Press on December 1, 2015

The local elections last month had some interesting results both in Circle Pines and Lino Lakes. Here's what my experience has taught me on how to be successful as an elected official in a community:

First, appreciate that being an elected official is a tremendous opportunity to serve your friends and neighbors while always working to improve your community. Live by the local Rotary slogan: Service before Self! This is less about your grand ideas and big promises, and more about finding ways to work well with others to improve your community, in often small and steady ways.

Here's a big surprise: being an elected official is really not all about you and certainly is not about you being the smartest or the loudest or the biggest bully. Rather, it is about focusing on how you can best serve everyone in your community, not just those who supported your candidacy. Local government has a lot of moving pieces and you will find yourself always learning in this job. The finances and the long-term needs are daunting, and sometimes you may find yourself changing your mind as you learn more about a topic - and that's OK!

Work hard to be transparent and open, honest, and authentic. The public wants to understand what is happening in their community, as well as what you are doing with their money and with the power that they bestowed on you.

Be optimistic and ask good questions to bring issues out into the light of day. Residents watch Council meetings hoping to learn from your discussions; don't embarrass your community through outrageous words and behavior. Focus on being civil in your discussions, and be measured in your public comments. Be cautious about what you say and how you say it, leaving the door open for more dialogue in the future.

Good ideas can come from all sorts of places, including your 'opponents'. Figure out how to work with those you differ with, and give all people an opportunity to say their piece and listen carefully to their ideas. You may actually share a concern but just have different ideas on how to deal with it. Work hard to see if there is a middle ground that gets at the heart of the issue. Because compromise is not a four letter word, and it is a big part of what makes a good local government.

Work with and trust the city staff. I've heard some elected officials denigrate their staff and say 'staff just want to spend money and raise your taxes'. Nonsense! They are professionals whose job is the day to day operation and improvement of your community. Don't forget that elected officials are supposed to stay up at the 'policy' level and not micromanage at the 'operations' level.

I strongly believe all communication from an elected official to city staff should go through the City Administrator, who is usually the only person directly hired and supervised by the City Council. Let the Administrator do their job managing the operations of the city, and practice good leadership yourself by not sending concerns or pressures directly to any other city employee.

Being an elected or appointed official is a very important role in your community. Your job is to get out and about, gathering ideas and being a positive force as you improve your community. Citizens decide if they like the direction of a Mayor and City Council, or if they want to make changes.

Treat your position with dignity and respect, and I've found that you will be appreciated by your community for your hard work.