

## Introduction for Selectboard Members

This overview is intended to provide a common base of understanding about what it takes to be an effective selectboard member, and why the entire board should care that each member is effective.

**Selectboard as a Team.** Selectboard members were elected to a Selectboard, not to some independent seat. Constituents, although they are diverse, have a right to expect the Board to function effectively as a team. A board member can and should feel comfortable in expressing diverse opinions and in arguing a point. The key is to show respect for fellow board members, to be willing to move ahead once the issue is thoroughly discussed, and to live with the results of the vote.

**Board Members as Individuals.** Each board member provides a unique perspective and has his or her own areas of interest. It is appropriate when first joining the board and at annual retreats thereafter, for individuals to share with the group their background and their special interests. This can help board members understand a fellow member's perspective and may allow an individual to take the lead on issues within his or her area of interest. The best board is one in which members have strong individual identities yet work effectively as a team.

**Constituent Requests.** Once elected, a board member rarely meets anyone who will admit to not having voted for him. Members will frequently receive requests that seem on the surface to be reasonable. In most cases, Town staff can resolve constituents' problems. Occasionally, a board member will hear only part of a story, and what seemed to make sense doesn't. The main requirement of fielding requests is to get the basic information from the person making the request. The board member can assume that the administrative staff will get back to him or her within 24 hours, on the first working day following a holiday or weekend. Depending on the complexity of a request a member can pass it on directly to a department head or to the Town Manager's staff.

The key to answering constituent requests is to be specific in what the board member will do, i.e. promise a timely response, look personally at the problem, etc., while avoiding a commitment to "fix" anything.

**Board Commitments.** A board member should never attempt to speak for the entire board, particularly outside board meetings. It is inappropriate to promise that the Board will do something until the board as a group has a chance to discuss it.

**Balance.** The single most difficult job of a board member is to balance diverse interests and search for common interests. It is easy for a board member to react to groups in isolation without considering the larger consequences of his or her actions. For example, a senior group may request that additional hours in the recreation center be restricted for adult use. Before responding to this problem, it is important to at least consider who else might be affected. While this approach seems like common sense, it is too often overlooked in the decision-making process.

Recognizing and considering citizen input is crucial, but it is equally important to develop perspective. If 10 people call on an issue in a town of 8,000 inhabitants, does this indicate a landslide public concern or a well-organized phone campaign? When someone tells a board member that "everyone in town feels this way," the member must trust his or her own judgment and seek a few more opinions. Boards can seldom do everything that everyone wants, but it should try to do most of the things that most people need.

**Leaders versus Messengers.** Board members need to be leaders, not just messengers for their constituents. It is necessary and appropriate for board members to inform the Board of the concerns and opinions of their constituents, but board members also need to educate constituents and help them understand the bigger picture. On some issues, a member may need to take a leadership role contrary to the views of his or her constituents. These issues will not arise often, but it is important to remember that the great leaders took risks and led their constituents rather than followed them.

**Process versus Product.** Board members must balance the value of public input and discussion in meetings with the value of decision making. Adequate meeting time must be allowed for public input and council discussion, but the flow of the meeting must continue so that every item on the agenda receives equal attention. Allowing repetitive public comment or prolonged council discussion on early agenda items short-changes the later items. Good decisions are seldom made after midnight.

**Staff Attacks.** If the staff does something wrong, board members should not hesitate to tell the manager. Such revelations should not occur in a public meeting, however. Seldom is anything gained by publicly humiliating the people the Board depends on to provide town services. In addition, board members might find that some of the staff have more constituents out there than they do.

**Tuesday Night Tunnel Vision.** Board members tend to base their entire perception of how the town operates on what happens on Tuesday nights at board meetings. It is important to keep in perspective that the town staff provides hundreds of different services to hundreds of citizens every day. Difficult problems come up and are resolved. Customers are treated with courtesy and respect. While the issues discussed on Tuesday nights at Board meetings are important, they should be kept within the context of the entire operation.

**This Too Shall Pass.** During times of conflict, it is hard for the Board not to take problems home for a sleepless night or two. While not diminishing the seriousness of these issues, board members should keep in mind that they will fade away to be replaced by other issues. Can you remember the conflicts you were dealing with three months ago? What may at the time have seemed insurmountable today is probably a dim memory. The key is to keep a positive and humorous perspective and not give yourself ulcers.

Adapted from Loveland, Colorado's Orientation Guide as it appeared in *Public Management Magazine*, April 1990