

Successful city councils

chapter 3

City councils make laws that impact every community member. That's a very important authority — one that requires sound judgment and the willingness to learn a great deal about issues, opportunities, and the larger legal framework in which city councils operate. A good orientation for new councilmembers — and ongoing training that keeps councilmembers up to date — can help people work together as a team and achieve the goals that inspired them to run for office.

Orientation for newly elected officials

Many newly elected officials are overwhelmed by everything they need to learn and are surprised by the amount of time it takes to perform the duties of a councilmember or mayor. Some may also be surprised to discover the limits of their role in making decisions and setting city policy. That's why a thorough orientation is essential. It should include clear information on what councilmembers can and cannot do, and about the larger framework in which city governments operate.

In addition to a thorough orientation at city hall, newly elected city officials are strongly encouraged to attend AWC's Elected Official Essentials Workshop and stay connected through AWC's trainings throughout their career. Additionally, AWC offers a wide variety of eLearning resources that are available on-demand on our website.

The following are some ideas about what an orientation for newly elected officials should cover.

Learn the basics of city government

Newly elected councilmembers need a broad overview of city functions, including finance, public works, public safety, and other departments. It's a good idea for the mayor, city manager, or city administrator to arrange a tour of the physical facilities and set up meetings with department heads. If this is not done as a matter of routine, newly elected councilmembers can suggest it.

Review the long-range plan

If the city has a long-range plan, the next step is to review the plan, its goals, and future projects with newly elected councilmembers.

Review important documents

The mayor or other city staff could compile the following documents (if the city produces them) for newly elected officials to review:

- Current operating budget and capital budget
- Comprehensive annual financial report
- Information on key programs and services
- Organization chart, staff roster, and contact list
- Primary planning documents
- Map showing city boundaries, buildings, and facilities
- Mission statement and goals
- Council rules/meeting procedures

- Meeting minutes for the last twelve months
- Local municipal codes
- Work program and significant staff reports from the last twelve months
- Personnel policies and other administrative policies
- Facts about the city: population, form of government, incorporation date, number of employees, total budget, total debt, etc.
- List of governmental agencies providing services or affecting the city through regulatory or other powers
- Calendar of important events

Types of council meetings

Under Washington’s Open Public Meetings Act (OPMA) there are two types of council meetings:

- **Regular council meetings:** These meetings are regularly scheduled for general and routine business, including the enactment of ordinances.
- **Special meetings:** These meetings have a more limited agenda than regular meetings—usually business that cannot be postponed. Written 24-hour notice must be given to the press and other councilmembers.

In conjunction with regular or special meetings, the city may hold:

- **Public hearings:** A chance for residents to express their opinions, usually on a single topic.
- **Executive sessions:** Closed meetings limited, by state law or local ordinance, to a few items, including personnel, legal issues, or property acquisition.
- **Work sessions:** Intended to provide opportunities for councilmembers to study issues, gather and analyze information, and clarify problems.

Every city councilmember needs to know and understand Washington’s open meeting law. Read more about this in Chapter 5 and visit MRSC’s website for practical guidance on the Open Public Meetings Act (OPMA) and the Public Records Act (PRA). Under the Open Government Trainings Act, all elected officials and certain appointed officials must complete training on the OPMA, PRA, and records retention within 90 days of taking office and every four years thereafter.

Ordinances, resolutions, orders, and motions

A city council has a variety of options available for taking legislative action, including ordinances, resolutions, orders, or motions. Here’s what those terms mean:

Ordinances

An ordinance is a local law of a city, prescribing general rules of conduct. Ordinances may be used for a variety of purposes, including administrative actions such as establishing new offices in the city, or they may be used for actions that control the conduct of the public. An ordinance usually deals with matters that are permanent and general in nature. For example, when a city is enacting a zoning code, an ordinance must be used.

Resolutions

A resolution is less formal than an ordinance and generally is an expression of the opinion or intent of the official body concerning some particular item of business. Usually, a resolution deals with matters that are temporary or special in character. An example is a resolution of intent to establish a local improvement district (LID).

Orders

An order is used to direct a specific action to be taken on behalf of the city. For example, an order could be used to authorize the mayor to sign a contract. Orders still require a vote and are recorded in the minutes. Once an order has been complied with, it no longer has effect.

Motions

A motion is a proposal made at a city council meeting by a member asking that the council take a particular action. The proposed action may be substantive or it may express a certain view or direct a particular action be taken, such as an investigation. A motion, once approved and entered into the record, is the equivalent of a resolution.

When to use an ordinance and when to use a resolution

If a state statute requires that an ordinance must be used to take some type of action, then of course an ordinance must be used. If no particular form of enactment is specified, then either an ordinance or resolution will be sufficient.

Making public policy

Legislative bodies are elected to make day-to-day and long-term decisions that impact the city's direction. This happens through the making of public policy.

City councils are asked to make policy about a variety of issues including, but not limited to:

- The level and array of services to be provided;
- Which taxes should be imposed and at what level;
- Determination of land use; and
- The community's vision and what policies should be adopted to achieve that future vision.

Day-to-day decisions are an ongoing policymaking process and are how the city council responds to the community's immediate needs. This short-term policymaking process occurs through adoption of ordinances and resolutions.

City councils work towards achieving the community's vision for the future through long-term policymaking and strategic planning. More information about planning for the future can be found in Chapter 4.

Public policy decisions should be the result of a deliberative process.

Good public policy should:

1. Reflect the desires of the community
2. Be fair
3. Be based on good research
4. Be achievable
5. Have identified and measurable outcomes

A poorly planned process or an unthinking reaction in response to a particular issue can result in policies that lead the city down an unintended path. To help avoid this, councilmembers should listen to the arguments both in favor of and in opposition to proposals in order to fully address an issue and discuss alternatives before making a decision.

Codification

Codification means the editing, rearrangement, and grouping of ordinances under appropriate titles, parts, chapters, and sections in a municipal code book. It can be helpful to consolidate various ordinances of the city's code in a single chapter or section arranged by subject matter to make them easy to find.

Parliamentary procedure

Parliamentary procedure provides for an orderly, predictable process for proposing, amending, approving, or defeating legislative motions. RCW 35A.12.120 provides that a city may adopt, by ordinance or resolution, its own set of rules governing the conduct of council meetings, or it may adopt formalized rules such as Robert's Rules of Order. Many cities have adopted Robert's Rules, along with additional rules on issues such as abstentions and motions for reconsideration. Having clear parliamentary rules — and following them consistently—reduces the chances of a council action being challenged or declared illegal.

Using council committees & citizen advisory groups

Committees are a great way for a council to divide and conquer tough issues that require a lot of time.

The most common city council committees are:

- Budget and finance
- Public safety
- Community development
- Public works
- Parks and recreation

While these are typical committees, the choice of whether and which type of council committees to have is up to the local council.

Cities can also appoint citizen boards, commissions, and task forces on a broad range of issues. Some of these boards are designated by statute for a specific purpose, such as a building code board of appeals. However, councils can create citizen commissions or advisory groups on any topic.

Citizen commissions and advisory groups can provide a broad range of ideas and expertise on an issue and, equally important, a communication channel between elected officials and the community.

Know the law

- [RCW 35.21.500 - 35.21.570](#)—Codification