



It is essential for elected officials to read the materials provided and come prepared for council meetings.

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The golden rules for new council members

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Being a council member is harder than it looks from the outside. You need to know about a host of laws and court decisions — not to mention a multitude of acronyms, like EIR, CIP, and RHNA. You must wear many hats and make decisions on things you may have never heard of.

What is the appropriate role for you in each moment? How can you excel in the full range of the job? A strong council-manager relationship is a good way to start. Here are some basic rules to remember.

Don't do it alone

Teamwork turns policy into practice. It is not your job to solve specific problems as an individual council member. The council sets policy and hires competent staff to carry it out. When you receive community complaints, understand that you have only one side of the story. The **city manager** should provide the council with an orderly way to handle community concerns. You should rely on that process and communicate to constituents that staff will handle their complaints according to council policy.

Great teammates share the credit: Acknowledge the hard work of your colleagues and staff. While you might have offered an idea that was implemented, you did not do it alone. It takes the council acting as a body, along with staff, to put your idea into action.

Learn the art of compromise

Negotiation and compromise are at the heart of effective governance. Identify shared interests and focus on those. Remember: City staff are duty-bound to carry out the council's decisions. Do not go to staff to get a minority position implemented. If there is a disagreement within the council on a directive, collectively resolve the issue so that it is clear to all parties.

Make sure to follow California's **open meeting laws** in your communications with other council members. If you don't know the rules, ask the city attorney.

Model civility and listen well

The way you act determines how things get done — if at all. Treat everyone with respect, **listen to understand**, communicate well, become informed about the issues, assume the best intent of others, and articulate your views with valid information. These guidelines also apply to staff coming before the council with an agenda item and members of the public speaking at the podium. Know the rules for dealing with disruptive speakers and stay focused on the business at hand.



An essential quality of an effective council member is the ability to respect, listen to, and understand local issues and the public's concerns.

Focus on the long-term

A council's job is to enhance the *entire* community over the long term while paying attention to the needs of today. Focus on improving the roads, water, public safety, planning, and the basic public services that people expect to function well. These fundamentals frequently comprise 90% or more of a city's budget.

A vision for the future, a multiyear strategic plan, and **long-range financial forecasting** provide context and a foundation for the council's decisions. Have a roadmap that the

council embraces and executive staff agrees can be executed. This can help manage public expectations and the many demands coming to the council. Don't promise what the city cannot do.

Council members often have ideas for a new initiative outside the goal-setting process. A majority vote of the council should decide whether to pursue the new idea, after hearing from staff on cost and feasibility. It's important to recognize that anything added to the staff's plate typically comes at the expense of something else.

Prepare yourself and others

Read the materials provided and **come prepared for council meetings**. Ask staff questions before the meetings, even if you want the information provided at a meeting. Don't spring surprises on them at council meetings: *They are on your team*.

It's also your job to help residents understand how the system works. Problems that may appear to have simple solutions are often not simple at all. State and federal laws, court decisions, administrative agencies, and municipal charters can all tie the hands of councils.

Communicate through the city manager

Think of the city manager as a chief executive managing a large organization. They are responsible for hiring professionals to do the work that supports council priorities. Communicating through the city manager helps ensure all council members receive the same information.

When individual council members contact department staff directly, they may receive

incomplete or wrong information. Staff can get confused as to who their boss is (it's *not* the council), which can blindside and undermine the city manager.

Follow the city manager's guidance on how the council should communicate with staff. When they give the green light to communicate with other staff, respect their guidelines, and understand that the only person you can hold accountable is the city manager.

As an employer, the council should take time for an evaluation conversation each year with the city manager and any other council-appointed positions. This is a good way to ensure that everyone is working in alignment.

Keep cool during turbulence

Pandemics, fires, social unrest, earthquakes, and heavy rain events happen. Stay calm and trust the professional emergency managers. Expect the city manager to keep you informed, but don't interfere or get into the trenches. You need to show the public that you have confidence in the city's ability to respond. City staff should brief the council on the respective roles of staff and council during an emergency so there is no confusion in the moment.

Don't let the loud voices derail the council

It's human nature to think that those who speak up are speaking for the entire community. They may or may not be. You represent many people who are just living their lives, taking their kids to school, going to work, and expecting city hall to take care of business. Don't let a few people with loud voices derail the council. Consider the entire community's interests when making decisions.



California city officials listening to a presentation during the 2024 Cal Cities City Leaders Summit.

Learn something every day

We live in a fast-paced, complicated world. Assume that there is much you need to learn and go about doing it. Take advantage of opportunities through the [League of California Cities](#), the [Institute for Local Government](#), [other local government associations](#), and [others](#). Engage with people in neighboring communities. Keep up with changes to state laws and maintain good lines of communication with your legislative representatives.

Give the council a tune-up

Set aside time to stop riding the bike and check it for loose parts. Consider an annual retreat to review meeting operations, the city's strategic plan, and governance norms. Being effective as a council means not only having the “what” (policies, vision, goals, strategic plan) but the “how” (collegial teamwork, norms, and practices).

This is a good time to review the council's procedures handbook for possible updates. Having a handbook that clearly states roles, norms for working together, procedures, and what constitutes a local issue subject to council consideration is worth its weight in gold. A good handbook can make meetings go smoothly, help the public understand when and how they can speak, and establish clear expectations for conduct.

Councils that **get the most done** have a clear vision, shared goals, and a collaborative relationship with the manager and staff based on respect, trust, communication, and accountability.

Keep the community in mind

Each of you wants to leave your mark. But you cannot do that alone. It takes you, the rest of the council, staff, and all the residents you can get involved. Always consider what the right thing is to do for the well-being of the community and organization and keep your actions, personal and professional, above reproach.

When you're finished, we hope you can look back and ask, “How did we get so much done?” And by the way: You can enjoy the journey while doing it.

This is an update of 2005 article, “The Value of Getting Back to the Basics” by former Fremont Mayor Gus Morrison and Jan Perkins. Gus was a remarkable leader who treated everyone the same. He was all about the team in getting things done for the

community.