

Role Clarity for City Managers and City Attorneys

An interactive discussion on building effective partnerships

CalCities City Managers Conference

Thursday, February 12, 2026

Cities of Petaluma and Pleasanton



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Your Panel

CITY ATTORNEY

Eric Danly

City of Petaluma

20 years as Petaluma City Attorney

CITY ATTORNEY

Dan Sodergren

City of Pleasanton

City Attorney since 2016

CITY MANAGER

Peggy Flynn

City of Petaluma

City Manager since 2019

FACILITATOR

Gerry Beaudin

City Manager, Pleasanton

What is your primary role?

City Manager • Assistant CM • Department Head • City Attorney • Assistant CA • Other

How is your organization structured?

Elected City Attorney • In-House City Attorney • Contract City Attorney

Defining the Roles

The City Attorney

- Legal advisor vs. decision-maker
- Who is "the client"?
- Duty to the law vs. client's goals
- When to say "no" vs. "here's how"

The City Manager

- Operational authority and accountability
- Policy implementation vs. creation
- Managing competing pressures
- Building trust across roles

The Intersection

- Shared accountability to Council
- Joint advice on complex issues
- Navigating gray areas together
- Presenting unified recommendations

Understanding where responsibilities begin and end

Where Friction Happens

Who decides what?

When does a legal opinion become a management decision?

Legal risk vs. policy goals

The attorney sees liability; the manager sees community need

The "client" question

When council and manager disagree, who does the CA advise?

Ethical and political pressures

When electeds push for something legally gray

Speed vs. caution

Operations wants to move; legal wants to review

Public perception

How disagreements appear externally when not managed well

Up next: A scenario discussion and audience poll

Scenario Discussion

THE SCENARIO

The City Council directs the City Manager to implement a new program. The City Attorney believes it's legally questionable - not clearly illegal, but risky. How do you each handle this?

Panel Discussion Points:

- City Attorney: How do you communicate risk?
- City Manager: How do you balance direction vs. risk?
- What does "legally questionable" mean in practice?
- When do you go back to Council?

Let's hear from the audience - whose call is it ultimately?

Whose Call Is It?

Council's call • City Manager's call • City Attorney's call • It depends

What Success Looks Like

Getting Off on the Right Foot

- Early conversations to align on roles
- Setting expectations before the first crisis
- The first 90 days of a new relationship
- Agreeing on communication preferences

The Working Relationship

- Soft skills that matter: candor, no surprises
- How to disagree productively
- Building trust through small interactions
- Mutual respect across different roles

Keeping Council Informed

- Do electeds need to understand this?
- How much should Council see of dynamics?
- When disagreements should surface
- Presenting unified recommendations

Success = Intentional setup + daily habits + council understanding of the framework

Tools and Guardrails

Structures and Processes

Written protocols

Opinion request processes, escalation procedures

Regular check-ins

Standing meetings, informal touchpoints

Defining lanes

When each role "owns" a decision

Communication Norms

Call vs. email

When to pick up the phone

No surprises rule

Flagging issues before they escalate

Sensitive issue handling

Confidentiality and discretion

External Support

Peer networks

MMANC, City Attorneys Associations

Values alignment

Does shared professional ethics matter?

External resources

When to bring in outside help

Top 7 Takeaways

1. Create time to build rapport
2. Talk about who does what with each other, and with Council
3. Set regular meeting time
4. Be flexible and open minded when something comes up
5. Decide early where you will partner on complex topics
6. Build trust by living the "no surprise" rule and being inclusive
7. Talk to peers (to explore options) if things aren't going well

Thank you for joining us today!

Cities of Petaluma and Pleasanton

What will you implement from this presentation?

Word cloud - share your key takeaway

Continue the Conversation



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We're happy to continue the conversation

Your Questions & Discussion

Specific challenges you're facing?

Want more detail on any approach?

Success stories to share?

Thank You

Role clarity isn't about drawing hard lines—it's about knowing when to lead, when to advise, and when to work it out together.

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