

Guyana

Building Effective Local Governance

A Guide for Local Councilors



The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) was established in 1983. By working with political parties, civic organizations, parliaments and other institutions, NDI seeks to promote, maintain and strengthen democratic institutions in new and emerging democracies. The Institute is headquartered in Washington, D.C., and has a staff of 150 with field offices in Africa, Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, Haiti, the Middle East and the former Soviet Union.

NDI has supported the development of democratic institutions in more than 60 countries. Programs focus on six major areas: political party training, election processes, strengthening legislatures, local government, civic organization and civil-military relations.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	iv
Introduction	1
What is Democracy?	2
Guyana Local Government	4
Effective Communication	7
Effective Meetings	10
Intergovernmental Relations	14
Citizen Participation	16
Ethics in Government	20
Effective Committees	23
Community Development	26

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Many of these chapters were suggested by Guyanese directly involved with local government or involved in enhancing the skills and knowledge of Guyanese throughout the country. A draft of this *Guide* was circulated widely throughout Guyana, and NDI owes a special thanks to those who graciously provided their comments, critiques and support during its production. Responsibility for the final text rests with NDI. The Institute appreciates any comments, corrections or suggestions for future editions.

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INTRODUCTION

On August 8, 1994, Guyana successfully conducted local council elections in its six municipalities and 65 neighborhood districts, electing 1,238 officials nationwide. The local elections represented a major step forward in Guyana's democratic development, building on the foundation established in the pivotal 1992 national elections.

Building Effective Local Governance: A Guide for Local Councilors is designed to provide you, the newly elected official, with the basic tools to perform your job as effectively as possible. This *Guide* is a practical approach to providing better services for your community — it attempts to demonstrate how to turn your thoughts and ideas into reality.

Building Effective Local Governance: A Guide for Local Councilors is one element of the National Democratic Institute's (NDI) ongoing effort to assist Guyana's transition to democracy. NDI began working in Guyana in 1990, when the Institute joined with the Electoral Assistance Bureau (EAB) to conduct Guyana's first national election monitoring effort and implement a voter education program.

In November 1994, NDI worked with officials from the Ministry of Public Works, Communication and Regional Development to conduct orientation seminars for the Neighborhood Democratic Councils. Throughout the program, councilors asked questions, many of them raising similar concerns about their role as elected officials, their relationship with their community, and their role in community development.

This *Guide* directly responds to requests made to NDI by local officials in Guyana who asked for a resource guide explaining local government laws, the responsibilities of local councilors and the tools necessary for local councilors to perform their job effectively and responsibly. Although the resource guide is available to every elected official in the country, it is the first such reference tool written especially for you, the local leader in Guyana.

Working for the public good requires a cooperative effort, which is not always easy to accomplish. As an elected official, you will be measured by how you handle meetings, how you work as a team within your council and how effectively you address citizen concerns. Ultimately, you will be judged by how efficiently you and your council provide services for your community. This *Guide* attempts to build individual skills, which will in turn build the skills and effectiveness of each council.

Most local councilors serve out of a sense of commitment and responsibility to their community. With little or no pay, you often work long hours to accomplish the development goals residents have long needed. As your community's leader and decisionmaker, you can use this guide to work with your elected team to reach these goals.

democracy

WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?

SERVING THE PEOPLE: LOCAL DEMOCRACY AT WORK

The word democracy stems from the Greek language: *demos* (the people) and *kratos* (govern). Essentially, democracy means rule by the people. While each country must apply universal democratic principles to its own situation (to build institutions and develop ideals that make sense in light of its own unique growth and development), every genuine democracy shares certain fundamental beliefs.

The hallmarks of a democracy include the following principles:

- *individual rights*: protection of each individual by the government — the government ensures equal opportunity for all;
- *citizen participation*: citizens may vote, attend council meetings, pay taxes, challenge government decisions, and otherwise involve themselves in their government's affairs;
- *political tolerance*: majority rule obliges the majority to respect the rights and interests of minorities of all kinds;

- *transparency/openness in government*: citizens have the right to witness, examine and challenge government decisionmaking and actions; and

- *citizen protection*: the rights and liberties of citizens are protected from unjustified action from any individual arm of the government.

Democracy is a group activity. It involves working, collaborating and negotiating with the people in your community. Success depends on elected officials (such as you) inviting and welcoming public comment into your activities and decisionmaking.



A democratic society is based on equality for all. Equality means that all people are accorded equal opportunity, and will not be discriminated against because of their race, political beliefs, religion, ethnic group, gender or sexual orientation. It also emphasizes tolerance of all political parties, and ensures citizens' right to organize and speak out. Democracy does not end with free and fair elections (although elections are an important element) — but it is a series of beliefs by which the government and its citizens live.

AM I UPHOLDING DEMOCRACY?

- Am I inviting citizens to attend all council meetings?
- Do I make my decisions after considering the wants and needs of citizens?
- Do I invite citizens to challenge or debate my decisions?
- Do I respect all citizens, despite my personal beliefs?
- As an elected representative, do I try my best to inform citizens of my activities?
- Do I tolerate and respect the beliefs of other political parties?

local government

GUYANA LOCAL GOVERNMENT

WHAT IS ... A NEIGHBORHOOD DEMOCRATIC COUNCIL?

Neighborhood Democratic Councils (NDCs), which were legally established in 1990, replaced all previously existing forms of local authorities — such as village, country and rural districts. While NDCs were created in 1990, elections were not held until August, 1994, when a total of 1,131 councilors were elected. In the year since elections, approximately 65 of the 129 statutorily established NDCs have begun operating. Each of the 65 NDCs has elected its own chairperson and vice-chairperson.

NDCs operate under *Local Government Laws, Chapter 28.02*, which were written in the late 1940s, before the country achieved independence. Like many local governing authorities throughout the world, NDCs were designed to provide services to their communities and to represent citizens at other levels of government. They were established to resolve the immediate problems of the community as well as to move the community forward, toward meeting larger development goals. Finally, they were designed to be accountable to the people in their neighborhood, the people who elected them.

NDCs are authorized to do many different things — they can enter into legal contracts, borrow money, set fees and issue licenses. NDCs have the authority to collect rates and taxes from the citizens within its area (or “jurisdiction”). Taxes collected from citizens are used to pay for services such as water and electricity, and operating costs for the council. Taxes collected by the council can also be allocated for specific development projects that benefit the entire community, such as a new school or bridge.

Councilors do not implement projects themselves, but rely on the local government administrator, more commonly known as the executive officer or the overseer to administer them. The executive officer, hired by the council, acts only at the direction of the council and is accountable to the council for all projects.

WHAT IS ... A REGIONAL DEMOCRATIC COUNCIL?

Regional Democratic Councils (RDCs) were established in 1980 under Section 73 (1) of the Constitution to manage and develop each of the country's 10 regions. An RDC comprises between 12 and 36 elected members. A total of 203 Regional Democratic Councilors were elected on October 5, 1992, at the same time national parliamentary elections were held.

RDCs, which operate under *Local Government Laws, Chapter*

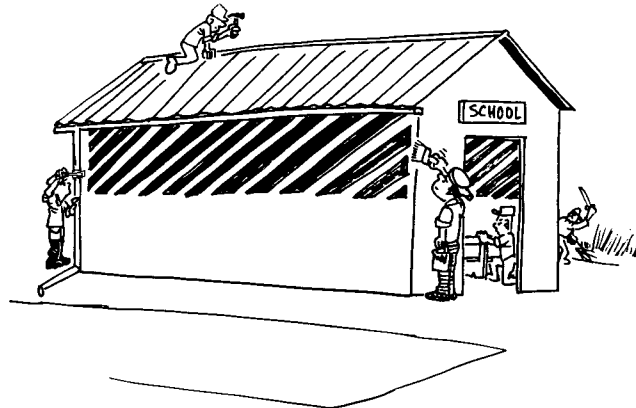


28.01, are designed to carry out the policies of the central government and to represent the citizens of their region. RDCs work with their region's Neighborhood Democratic Councils to understand the needs of each neighborhood and to represent the NDCs accurately to the central government.

Parliament funds the activities of Regional Democratic Councils, each of which provides a budget to Parliament, which then approves and appropriates the money. The law stipulates that once approved by the Parliament, those monies can only be expended for the purpose for which they were budgeted. The RDC monitors the expenditure of funds appropriated by Parliament. Section 76 of the Constitution allows RDCs to raise their own revenue, but this is not presently enacted by Parliament.

The execution of projects and the delivery of services is conducted by the administrative or executive arm of the council, which is directed by the regional executive officer, who is accountable to the RDC and ultimately, to Parliament. All RDC councilors have a right and a duty to question the propriety of any expenditures authorized by the regional executive officer.

Regional and Neighborhood Democratic Councils maintain a cooperative relationship. RDCs hold some degree of authority over the Neighborhood Democratic Councils in terms of their budgets and development proposals. Since Neighborhood Democratic Councils represent a new governing authority, however, some aspects of the relationship between the two remain under review by the government.



HOW DO NEIGHBORHOOD AND REGIONAL COUNCILS DIFFER?

Size: Neighborhood Democratic Councils (NDCs) encompass a much smaller area and fewer people than their regional counterparts. The number of neighborhoods varies from region to region. Region 1, for instance, includes two neighborhood councils. Region 6, however, encompasses 16 neighborhood councils. Because of the small area (or "jurisdiction") over which they govern, neighborhood councilors are expected to be in close contact with their neighbors (or "constituents"). NDCs were designed to receive ideas and proposals directly from the people; ideas originate from the local community, not just the national government in Georgetown.

Income: Neighborhood Democratic Councils receive their revenue directly from residents in order to pay for services such as trash removal and road maintenance. The income is derived from taxes, property assessments, tolls, and fees for providing other services. The national government funds Regional Democratic Councils in order to carry out the policies and decisions of the national government.

HOW ARE NDCs AND RDCs ALIKE?

Projects for both councils are executed by the administrative or executive arm. An RDC is staffed by a regional executive officer; each of the NDCs is administered by an overseer or executive officer. The executive arm of the council acts only at the request of the council, and only upon the majority decision of that council. Both councils report the activities and finances of the council to the citizens they represent through public forums.

communication

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

YOUR ROLE

Whether you live in an area without telephones or in a place that exchanges information through electronic means, communication is, and always will be, your most effective tool to get things done in your community. In other words, communication gets results.

Elected officials are expected to know the people in their area: their needs, their opinions and their attitudes. As their representative, you will need this information to make informed decisions. Likewise, you will want to keep citizens informed of what you are doing, and how you are solving the community's problems.

Understanding your community is one of your primary responsibilities as an elected official. You can measure your job performance through citizen complaints, their expressions of gratitude and their suggestions. Elected officials should act like sponges — they should soak up information from citizens and use that information on which to base good decisions. How you communicate with citizens is vital to your ultimate success.

WAYS TO COMMUNICATE: TALKING AND LISTENING

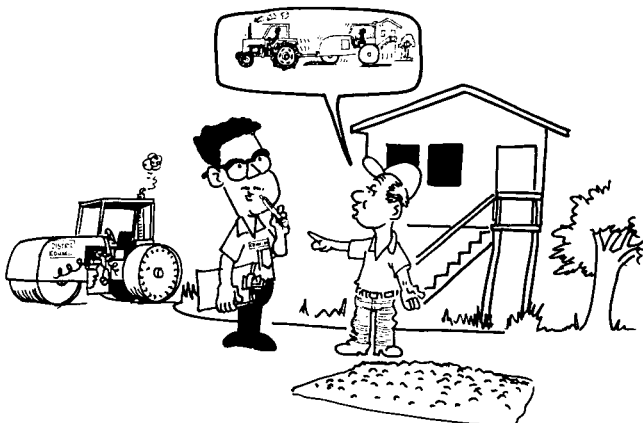
Good communicators are good listeners. Citizens will want to know that you are, in fact, listening to them. They want to know that the person they have elected has heard them, and that their concerns will be taken even higher in the government.

Become an active listener. When listening to citizens (particularly their complaints), make sure that you:

- *Ask "why"* — public officials need to get to the root of an opinion or complaint; by asking "why," you can delve further into the reason behind an issue, which in turn helps you understand and clarify the problem.

- *Repeat their statement* — condense it, then repeat it; this action shows that you understand the issue, and gives the citizen an opportunity to correct any misunderstandings; and

- *Thank them for speaking up* — it is only through listening to and understanding citi-



zen input that you, an elected official, will begin to really comprehend the needs of your community.

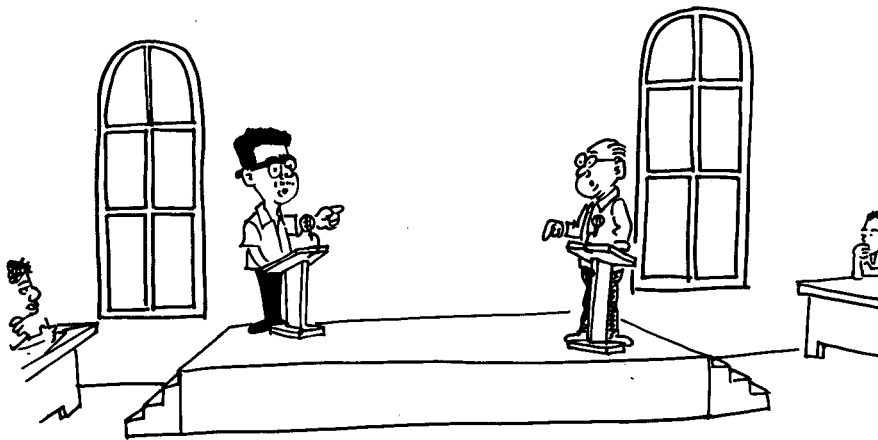
When speaking to one person, to a crowd, or to the council, remember: be focused and be brief. Focus on making your case convincingly and concisely. Be brief and do not ramble; less is more. Make sure to explain the benefits that a given course of action will mean to your audience. Try to understand your audience, and make your point.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION

Public opinion about different issues can help guide you in doing your job. The public's perception of how you and your local government system work together is equally important. Whatever you do or say contributes to the image of the entire council, regardless of your political party. Often, the gap between public perception and reality can be very wide. Remember, as an elected official, you must always be aware not only of reality — what you think or what may actually be happening on any given matter — you must also be aware of how an issue will appear to the public.

HOW SHOULD YOU TALK TO THE PUBLIC?

- *Publicly support the performance of your administrator* (clerk or overseer): do not criticize your civil servants in public — negative comments concerning their performance should always be made in private.
- *Respect council decisions, even if you do not agree with them*: do not criticize other councilors in public — citizens want to know that council members are working together to solve community problems; it is appropriate to express alternative views, but it is unseemly to attack the motives or the character of other councilors.
- *Have facts on hand*: provide citizens the facts on which you or the council based your decision (*i.e.*, “We only have 110,000 Guyana dollars remaining in the budget for maintenance projects. Although we understand the road needs to be repaired, the majority of citizens we polled support fixing the bridge first.”)
- *Acknowledge problems and explain the options for solving them*: let the public consider ways to solve their own problems.



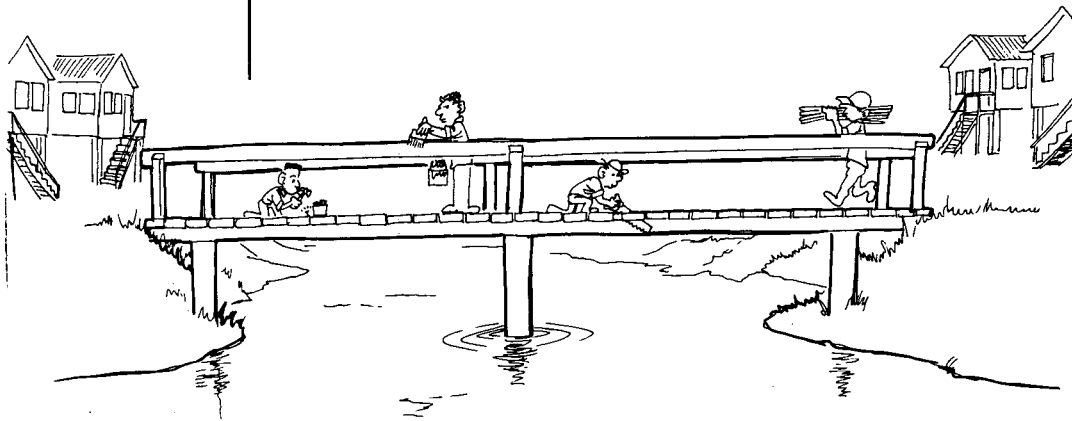
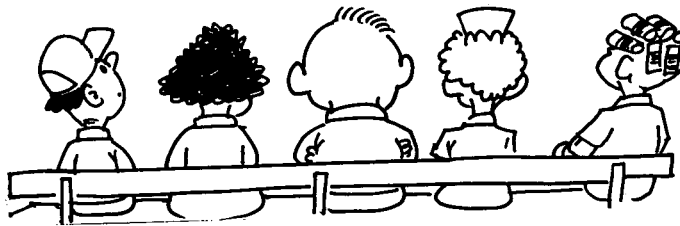
■ *Base arguments on fact:* never base an argument on personal disagreements. Debates, particularly during public council meetings, should be based on the merits of the issue at hand, not the personality contesting the issue.

HANDLING COMPLAINTS

Elected officials should establish an organized method to handle complaints. By creating a uniform system, you also create a neutral process to which each citizen can approach with confidence that his/her concern will be handled fairly and in the same manner as a neighbors concern.

Consider appointing one or two council members to draft guidelines for responding to complaints. Some councils adopt a

"response time," or a maximum amount of time (*i.e.*, two weeks) within which the council will respond to all complaints. Whether or not the council has resolved the problem, a short note acknowledging the citizen's complaint and explaining actions taken to date is usually appreciated.



If Mr. Citizen were to express a complaint (either written or verbal) concerning potholes in the roads, you may want to consider sending him/her stating the following:

Dear Mr. Citizen:

Thank you for your letter dated January 5, 1995. The Blue Sky Neighborhood Democratic Council understands that there are many problems concerning the poor condition of the roads in our community. Like you, many residents are frustrated with the state of road disrepair. We agree that patching up and resurfacing the roads should be our number one priority over the next year.

In response to your concerns, we have written/spoken with the appropriate officials in the Ministry of Transportation, and they have told us that they hope to provide us with an answer soon. We expect a reply within the next few weeks, and we will be in contact with you shortly.

It may be necessary for us in the Blue Sky community to utilize our other resources to fix the pavement at Main Street ourselves. This would mean using revenue generated by the new market stall to hire a construction company to make the necessary repairs. This option will receive further consideration at the public hearing scheduled for February 1.

Thank you for taking the time to express your concerns. We look forward to seeing you at the next monthly council meeting on January 24.

Sincerely,
Blue Sky Neighborhood Democratic Council

meetings

EFFECTIVE MEETINGS

YOUR ROLE

As a community leader and elected official, you will spend a lot of your time in meetings. While they are sometimes tiring, meetings are also necessary. How then, can you make the most of your time and reach decisions in the most effective and painless manner? Holding better meetings can produce more informed policies, and more accountable government; they can also lead to more public confidence in local decisionmakers.

Ask yourself (and the council):

- Do our meetings often last far longer than they should?
- Do we forget the rules more often than we use them?
- Does the chairperson only acknowledge certain people (usually of his/her own party)?
- Do the same people dominate every meeting?
- Do some people go on and on (often making the same point over and over)?
- Do you delay action on some items only to hold them over to the next meeting?
- Do you sometimes make decisions without having all of the information?
- Do members of the audience act bored, restless or angry?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, then ... your council needs to improve its meetings.

Each meeting should set certain defined goals. Avoid holding a meeting just to meet: meeting is not a goal in itself. Will the council make final decisions on a project? Do you need to share information with other council members or the public? Do you need to make a decision on staff salary? There are different meetings for different purposes, and you need to think through the goal of each meeting. In addition to statutory monthly meetings, some councils also hold: special council meetings, committee (or working groups) meetings and public hearings.

According to the *Local Government Laws, Chapter 28.02*, **special council meetings** may be called by the chair or by three members of the council to take immediate action on specific items. Special council meetings are used only for emergencies, and should be called sparingly.

A **committee (working group) meeting**, more commonly known as a select committee, is designed to study a specific issue. This small, multiparty group gathers information, debates the issue and votes on a course of action to be recommended to the entire council. Once that recommendation is made, the council debates the issue again, questions are raised and answered, and the entire council votes on the proposal. Working groups and committees are ideal for handling difficult issues or making tough decisions. Like regular council meetings, committee meetings should be open to the public.

At a **public hearing**, citizens are allowed to address the council — to air their feelings about an issue. No decisions are made at this time. The council invites anyone who is interested (*e.g.*, citizens, community group representatives, school/church leaders, etc.) to publicly provide their opinions on a proposal or project. A public hearing examines one issue at a time and is designed specifically to allow the community a chance to put forth its opinions. Hearings allow you to learn how citizens think about an issue and obtain information before making a decision.

How to improve your meetings:

- plan your *agenda* carefully and circulate it in advance of the meeting;
- consider *time limits* for each comment (*e.g.*, two-five minutes);
- keep the discussion *focused* on the question at hand;
- remember the *goal of the meeting* at all times;
- record the proceedings of the meeting accurately; and
- thank participants for attending, for contributing their ideas and for listening to one another.

Agenda — an agenda is an action plan. It informs both the councilors and the public of what to expect and for which issues they need to prepare. Agendas are crucial to the organization of your meeting, and particular care should be taken in drafting it. It need not be lengthy or detailed, but it should be clear. Each member should be provided a final agenda at least

three to seven working days before the meeting. All agendas should be available to the public.

- Designate someone to draft the agenda.
- Establish regulations about *where* (e.g., council office, community center) and *when* (i.e., three to seven working days) meeting agendas will be posted for the public.
- Designate responsibility for posting the agenda for the public.
- Plan carefully — consider different aspects of an issue before determining where it should be placed on the agenda, such as the immediacy of the issue, public opinion and relative cost to the entire neighborhood.

Time Limits — Time limits help focus discussion while conserving the council's meeting time and energy. Consider time limits for public comment and/or for each member of your council. A standard time limit practice allows each councilor to speak once for a specified amount of time, and twice only after everyone has had the opportunity to speak once.

- Designate a time keeper.
- Vote on the amount of time each councilor may speak (i.e., five minutes for minor issues, 10 for controversial issues).

Stay Focused — Remember to debate only the question at hand. Be optimistic and upbeat. Do not dwell on past problems or insist that everyone support your ideas. Rules of procedure (like parliamentary procedure) for meetings are meant to keep assemblies focused.

- Allow debate only on the question or motion that is before the council.
- Follow an order: permit each councilor to speak once; councilors may speak a second time only after everyone else has had one opportunity to speak. Asking questions represents the only exception: councilors may question the current speaker (or the person who has "the floor") concerning their viewpoint.

- Speak only to other members; do not allow disruptions or comments from anyone outside of the council.

Remember the Goal — What should be the end result of this meeting? Is it a decision, is it a plan, or is it to delegate responsibilities?

- Ensure each councilor understands the goal of the meeting.
- Alert the chairperson if the council sways from the intended goal.

Record the Meeting Accurately — People who are engaged in debate are sometimes unable to remember the actions or decisions made by the council. Meeting records (or “minutes”) are designed to accurately describe the actions taken at a meeting, not what was said.

Meeting minutes should include: the date, time and place of the meeting; the names of those present; action taken on the minutes of the previous meeting; exact wording of each motion and the name of the person who made the motion; the result of votes on the motions; names and topics of guest speakers (if any) and the time of adjournment.

- Designate someone to record the meeting (*e.g.*, secretary, administrator, etc).
- Provide copies of the minutes to each councilor several days prior to the next meeting.
- Maintain a file of all meeting minutes.
- Allow the public to review the records.

THE ROLE OF THE CHAIRPERSON (PRESIDING OFFICER)

The chairperson of the council conducts the meeting. He/she supervises the organization’s business and activities. During the meeting, a chairperson’s role is to:

- call the meeting to order and follow the agenda;
- maintain order;
- keep debate focused on the question at hand;
- maintain objectivity;
- ensure that personal comments are avoided;
- allow everyone (who wants to) to speak once;
- allow councilors to speak a second time only after everyone else has spoken once;
- promote tolerance; be fair to all, regardless of political party or personal opinion;
- abstain from voting unless needed to break a tie; and
- always, always remember to thank people for attending, and remember to introduce any newcomers. Encourage participation.

relations

INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS

YOUR ROLE

The principal purpose of local government is to provide services to the people who live within its jurisdiction — services that help make everyday life easier, more tolerable, and sometimes even more enjoyable. Often, providing services can be more effectively and efficiently handled as a group project rather than as an individual endeavor.

Local governments all over the world are performing their jobs under similar circumstances — their citizens are demanding more services while their central governments are providing less and less financial and practical support to help them meet those demands. As a result, councilors and local administrators must always be looking for ways to do more with less. Councilors should also try to protect, as best they can, local needs as a priority on the national government's agenda.

National governments worldwide are often quick to lower support to local governments, but slow to provide local governments with increased authority to carry out their projects. Since the national government will always be in the position of providing funding to the local jurisdictions, local officials should establish strong working relationships with their national counterparts. If the local community maintains a sound and solid partnership with the national government, it stands a better chance of receiving favorable support.

ESTABLISHING STRONG WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

■ **Develop close personal and political relationships with national government officials who can influence local affairs and budgets.**

One of the jobs of a member of the national legislature is to represent local interests. Build a strong relationship with the regional councilor for your area; meet with your region's representative as regularly as possible concerning local government issues that require national government attention.

Similarly, introduce your fellow councilors to contacts you have made at the regional or national levels; as you build your relationships with other officials, it is important that everyone be able to associate names with faces, regardless of political party. Local officials are more likely to gain access to elected or appointed national officials if they are familiar with all of the members of the council.

When meeting with national officials, try to limit the discussion to a single issue. State your case clearly and repeat it at the end of the meeting.

Leave a brief written summary of the points you have made and a short description of the action you hope the meeting will produce. Follow up a day or two later with a letter that expresses your appreciation to the official for having arranged the meeting and a request that you be advised of any action that may be taken concerning the issue.

■ **Encourage stronger ties with other neighborhood or regional councils**

No matter how effective your neighborhood or regional council may be, working together with other councils makes you even more effective. When you combine your jurisdictions, you speak for more people, which results in greater influence on national decisionmaking. If you are a member of a neighborhood council, be sure to visit the regional democratic council office when you can, as well as the district development office.

In many countries, the national government lacks the resources (*e.g.*, as time, money and personnel) to adequately help local government do its job. Your constitution mandates a “marriage” between national and local governments — for better or for worse. Establishing a good working relationship with the national government makes both national and local government operate as effectively as possible.



participation

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

YOUR ROLE

Democracy depends not only on elections, but also on a political environment in which citizens actively participate in the public decisionmaking process. Democracy allows competing interests to express themselves freely. In order to accomplish a dialogue, citizens must be informed about government plans and activities so that they can participate.

Your responsibility as an elected official is to ensure that citizens have every opportunity to become involved — that all of your meetings and financial records are open to the public, and that citizens have an opportunity to tell you what they think about different proposals. Although opening your doors may seem intimidating at first, increased openness in government usually leads to trust — citizens trusting and empowering you to do the right job. By involving citizens in the political process, you are also able to demonstrate your responsiveness and accountability.

Some officials are reluctant to provide a forum for civic participation in government, believing that citizen participation may lead to criticism. Freely expressed ideas and opinions, including dissent and disagreement, are part of democracy. Citizens should be allowed to scrutinize and criticize ideas and proposals. Remember, though, that the majority of criticism is directed at an idea, not at you.

HOW SHOULD CITIZENS BE INVOLVED?

There are many avenues for citizen involvement. You can conduct an informal public opinion survey, hold an open forum at your regular council meeting, or hold public hearings, among other options.

A **public opinion survey** is as simple as taking a piece of paper, a pencil, and walking around your neighborhood asking questions. Ask objective, non-threatening questions about the needs, wants and opinions of citizens of all political parties, ages, genders and ethnic backgrounds. Ask the questions using the same words for each person — if you change the wording, you might also change the intent or slant of the question, which will result in differing interpretations. Do they support spending the available money on the bridge repair or on the potholes? What project do they think the council should work on next? How can the council be more responsive to their concerns? The information you gather will help guide you and your fellow council members in setting priorities.

Open forums are usually conducted before regular council meetings, during which citizens may raise any issue they believe need action. An open forum normally runs 30 minutes to one hour. Whether a period for dis-

WHY SHOULD WE ALLOW CITIZENS TO PARTICIPATE IN GOVERNMENT?

As an elected official, you want the support of the people — not just the backing of your political party, but the support of other parties and of many people within your community. By involving citizens, you and your council can:

- allow citizens to share responsibility for development plans;
- increase citizen understanding of community needs;
- increase citizen support;
- improve citizens' lives; and
- make better decisions with more information.

cussing a road repair or new paint for the school, this is a time set aside for citizens to raise these issues. A councilor should be assigned to compile a list of concerns raised so that they may be addressed at some point during regular council meetings. Look for patterns to the questions — do most people bring up crime as a pressing need or do they complain of bad roads? Finding a pattern can help guide you in determining your goals for the coming year. Open forums are easy when they are held before a regular council meeting — councilors are already assembled and the forum is set.

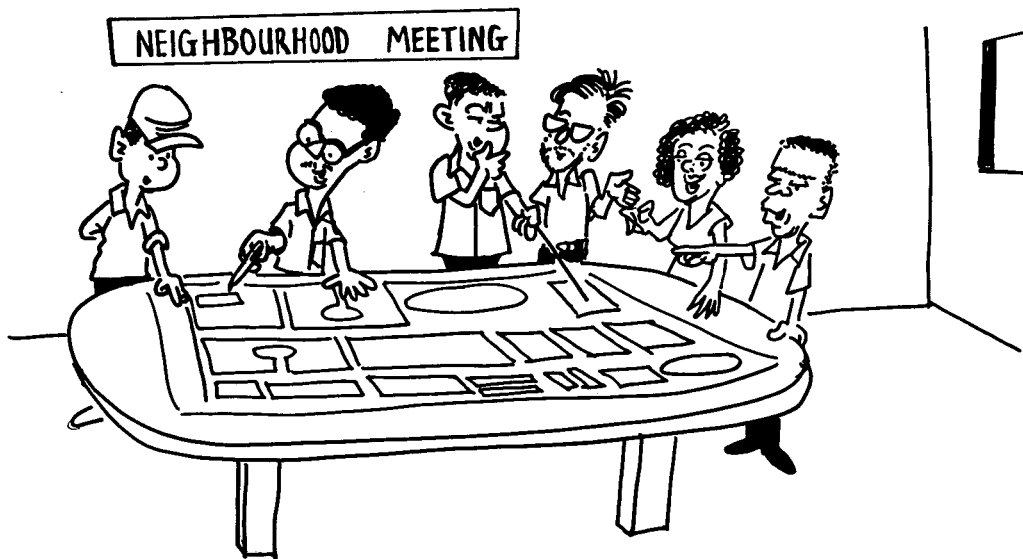


PUBLIC HEARINGS

Public hearings are often used for controversial or important issues — issues that require additional input from citizens, experts and administrators. Consider, for instance, holding a public hearing on development issues before the council budget is drafted. Ask for citizen input on priorities for the upcoming year — is there more support for increased educational facilities or more support for infrastructure repairs? A public hearing may be informal or formal — any format with which you, your council and your neighbors are most comfortable.

Why hold public hearings?

- to communicate with citizens;
- to inform and educate citizens;
- to gather information from new sources;
- to allow citizens a voice in matters that affect them;
- to highlight an issue;



- to learn the scope of the problem;
- to judge the political climate;
- to defuse a controversial subject; and
- to learn how a proposal may affect citizens

As for any meeting, there are three basic steps to holding a public hearing: prepare, implement and follow-up.

Prepare

- Set a date (two to three weeks in advance of the hearing).
- Post a notice of the hearing; if possible, send it to interested individuals.
- Personally invite citizens (or “witnesses”) to speak; tell them that their views are important and that they should organize their presentations carefully in advance.
- Make a list of the witnesses; follow the list; make it available to everyone.
- Consider imposing a time limit for statements.

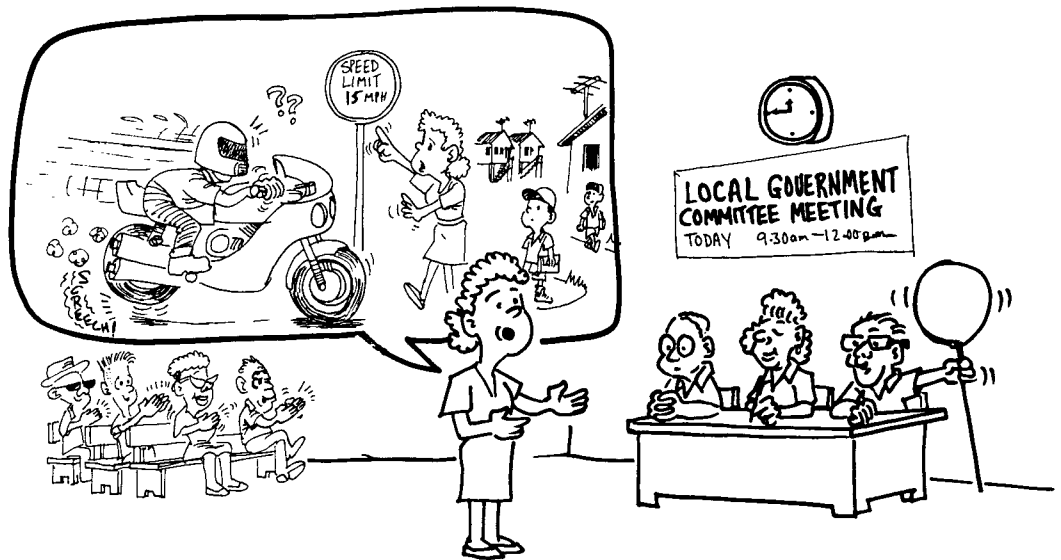
Implement

- Introduce the council; explain the purpose of the hearing.
- Have witness lists available.
- Respect and acknowledge all witnesses, despite their views.

- Take notes and ask questions.
- Ensure everyone has been heard.
- Do not allow any disruption; everyone deserves to be treated with courtesy and civility.
- Use active listening skills.

Follow-up

- Produce a short report on the citizen remarks.
- Make these reports available to the public.



ethics

ETHICS IN GOVERNMENT

YOUR ROLE

Public office is a public trust: citizens trust you for the term of your office to represent them and their collective interests. As an elected official, you will be expected to be a model citizen: to pay your taxes, to involve yourself in neighborhood projects, and to live your life within the law. A public servant, whether paid or unpaid, is held to a higher standard than the average citizen.

As an elected official, you will be involved in the policy decisionmaking process that affects the citizens in your neighborhood. How you make your decisions will determine whether you will continue to enjoy the support of your community.

The public must have confidence in its government and believe that its elected officials are working for the community and the nation. As an elected official, you will want to reassure your community that you are basing your decisions on what you believe is good for the entire community; you must be fair and impartial. They want to know that you are working for their benefit, not just your own. You are entrusted with the authority and the resources to work for your community, and they need reassurances of your integrity and fairness.

Elected officials are constantly faced with tough ethical issues when making decisions. Decisions that will benefit you personally (*i.e.*, by increasing your personal income or improving the street in front of your house) can be very tempting. Favors, gifts or promises of financial bonuses are sometimes

used in an attempt to influence elected officials. As a decisionmaker and as a leader of your community, you may be faced with such temptations. Yet, are those gifts and promises right? In accepting such gifts, are you working to benefit you or your community? In accepting such gifts, how will the community perceive you? Only you can answer these questions, and only you can establish your personal ethical standards. In determining what is right and wrong, elected officials must constantly think through each situation. Consider asking yourself certain questions. In accepting this gift, who will benefit — me or the community?



If I accept this gift, will I still be trusted by the community? What will the person or business seeking my favor want in the future? Will I be considered fair and impartial by the community?

Knowing the right course of action to take is not always easy. How do you make the right decisions while earning the trust of the community? The following case studies will help you review ethical issues that you may face when making policy decision. The choices you make on these issues will determine how the public judges your character.

Case Study #1

You are the chairperson of the Public Works Committee. There is a proposal before your committee to install a new water pipe in your neighborhood. Now you must decide which construction company will win the contract to do the work. Three businesses have bid on the project, including your brother's company. What do you do?

First and foremost, consider how the public will view this project. What do they want? Naturally, they will want the most economical and the most efficient contractor to handle the job. After all, it is public money (*i.e.*, their

FIVE METHODS TO GAIN PUBLIC TRUST

- Open all meetings of the council to the public; citizens must be able to observe the process by which decisions are made if they are to participate in, understand and ultimately support their government.
- Ensure that the community is adequately informed of all council meetings and of your activities. You and your council may want to consider adopting a rule to post a public notice about council meetings at least seven days before any meeting.
- Allow the public to review all meeting records (or "minutes"). Decisions and actions taken by the council should be public knowledge.
- Publicly acknowledge possible conflicts between your personal interest and public responsibilities. Withdraw from council debate or abstain from voting if it may appear to the public that you will show favoritism. Avoid even the appearance of conflicts of interest. Refrain from voting if it may appear that you, or your immediate family, may personally gain from a project.
- Maintain an open door policy. An accessible schedule demonstrates your accountability to the public and your role as the people's representative, through which citizens believe they have a voice. Consider establishing "public office hours" either at the council office or at home. Ask people for their views and allow them to bring any issue to your attention.

Even citizens who disagree with you will respect your integrity and honesty if you are open and impartial in reaching your decisions.



money) that you will be spending to complete the project. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, they will want to know that all options were considered and that all bidders for the project were reviewed with equal, objective criteria.

As a councilor with close ties to one of the bidders, you will want to consider your role in the selection process. What role should you play that meets the highest (and ethical) standards — a role that gains the trust of your community? Most councilors would decide to withdraw from the process altogether. In any discussion about the project, for instance, they would excuse themselves from the proceedings because of a conflict between their personal ties and public responsibilities. They would defer to their colleagues to decide the issue on its merits.

Acknowledging potential conflicts between your personal ties and public duties will only increase your citizen support. By withdrawing from debates and votes on the project, you take the high moral ground: you cannot be accused of wrongdoing or favoritism, and will win the support of citizens and councilors alike.

Case Study #2

Mr. and Mrs. Citizen are very concerned, and sometimes even angry, about the dismal state of road repair. There are potholes everywhere. They think that the council has misspent public money and that councilors are padding their own pockets. It is budget time again for the council, and the budgets in the past have been drafted in the privacy and safety of the closed council office. Mr. and Mrs. Citizen want to know where the money is going and how it is being spent. What do you do?

First and foremost, how do you gain the trust of Mr. and Mrs. Citizen? Why are they so angry? Why do they believe the council has misspent money? Do they have any facts to back up their claims? Regardless of how the citizens arrived at that conclusion, your role as an elected official is to win back their confidence and support, so that you can work with them toward shared development goals.

As a first step, include them in your work. Explain to them how the money has been spent, and how the budget process works. Next, consider opening the budget process to the public. If the process has traditionally been open only to councilors, including citizens will help demonstrate the rationale behind the expenditure of public money and your role in the process. Set a date for a budget meeting and invite the public. Allow the community to comment and to express their opinions. In the process, you will: inform and educate your community; learn the views of your constituents; allow them to be a part of local decisionmaking; and gain the support of your community.

committees

EFFECTIVE COMMITTEES

YOUR ROLE

Most councilors in an elected assembly, such as a council, take part in (or "sit") on a committee. Out of a council of 12 members, for instance, your council may create three committees of four people each. A committee can be used to examine an issue in more detail; divide work evenly; review proposals before the whole council considers the issues; or perform routine council tasks, such as drafting agendas.

Committees are an excellent forum for you to learn more in depth about the needs of your area, as well as examine proposed projects before they are submitted for formal review by the entire council. In other words, through committee work you can become an expert, thereby increasing your influence on the council.

Most councils or assemblies have more work to do than can ever be accomplished at its monthly meetings. You, as an elected official, want to have the most information possible before you commit public money or resources to a project. Usually, additional research or detailed studies are necessary before the whole council can make an informed decision on an issue. Committees, each of which perform different tasks, are an effective way to divide the work evenly among all councilors.

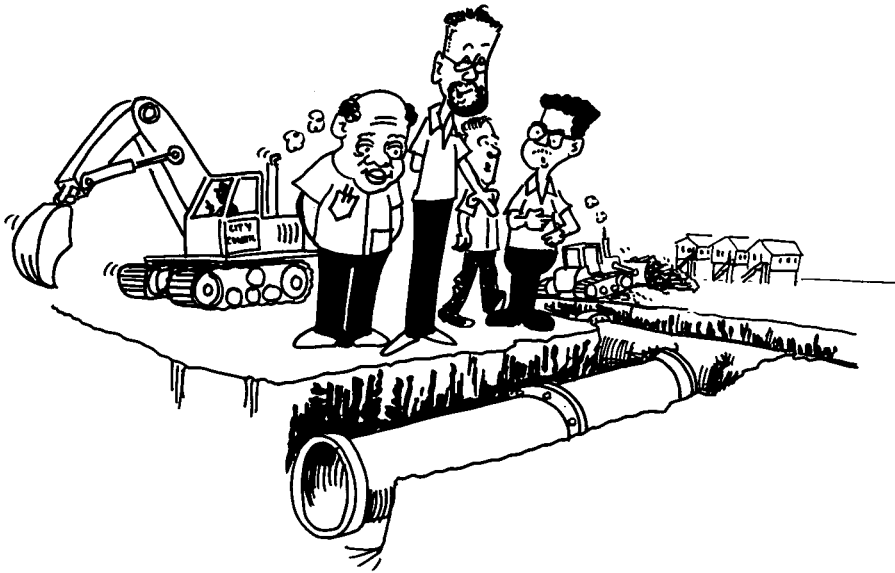
COMMITTEE TYPES

Standing Committee: a regular, established committee with jurisdiction over specific subject areas, such as land use, financing and public works. Each councilor is a member of at least one standing committee, each of which lasts for the duration of each council period. Sometimes, standing committees are required by the law of a country.

Ad Hoc Committee (Select Committee): a committee established for a limited period of time and usually for an investigative purpose, which when completed, ends the term of the select committee.

You may want to consider opening your committee meetings to the public, or holding a public hearing on specific proposals your committee is considering.





COMMITTEE OVERSIGHT

As an elected official, you will want to make sure that your administrator or overseer is carrying out the decisions the council has made. To accomplish this oversight responsibility, your council or committee will monitor (or "oversee") the administrator or executive officer to ensure that he/she is fulfilling his/her duties within the law and that projects are faithfully being carried out as determined by the council. Toward this end, you may want to consider establishing certain procedures as detailed below.

- *Requiring standard reports from the administrator.* Does the council need additional reports on activities to keep abreast of progress? Sometimes bi-weekly or monthly reports to the council can help members informed of a project's status.
- *Inviting the administrator to appear before the council to answer questions.* Provide a specific question and answer period at each monthly meeting for the administrator to report on projects and to answer questions from the councilors.
- *Visiting sites where council projects are being undertaken.* Schedule council or committee members to visit a project together, and to talk to the construction foreman or whoever is responsible for performing the work. Through this activity, councilors will see firsthand how a project has progressed and what else needs to be done, enabling them to inform citizens with an up-to-date, first-hand status report.
- *Talking to citizens to determine if community services are being performed to their satisfaction.* Is the new water pipe providing enough water? Has the maintenance crew been by to look at the repairs that need to be done in the road?

development

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

YOUR ROLE

Creating and maintaining a favorable physical and cultural environment where your community can grow and prosper is the goal of every local government official. Developing your community is what your job is all about. How well you did it is the standard by which your success as a local government leader will be judged.

A good community development effort is usually based on good long-range planning, so that street and utility improvements, business development, population growth and environmental projects can all be handled in ways that complement each other. If your neighborhood or region already has a development plan, review it and discuss it with your council colleagues and with your neighbors. If it needs to be updated or modified, make revisions that produce a relevant management tool.

A development plan will:

- keep you and your council focused;
- create and image of a focused, action-oriented council, which leads to increased support from the community; and
- provide your council a guide by which to measure progress.

CREATING A COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PLAN

If your community does not yet have a plan, seriously consider preparing one. Start by creating a "vision" of what you want your city to be by the end of the planning period — for example, an agricultural center, a regional trade center, or simply more "developed" in terms of creating an accessible, central location for your community. Once you have envisioned a plan and a set of goals, initiate programs and projects that will help achieve your objectives.





Drafting a community development plan is an excellent way to involve and interest the public in local government. Through this exercise, you will find out what direction they want the community to go. Inviting them to become part of the project will create more support for the end product — a useful thing to have when you are seeking the popular and political support you will need to implement it in the future.

GOAL SETTING

Start with a vision for your community that will be acceptable to a majority of your neighbors. People are more likely to agree on a broad goal, such as “creating a safe neighborhood for everyone.” In this manner, many people can contribute, in their own way, their personal resources and efforts toward influencing the big picture.

- Adopt the agreed upon goals at the next council meeting. Formally adopting a development plan or goal will give your plan more weight and authority within the community.
- Consider establishing a separate committee on your council to handle the planning.
- Consider holding public hearings or informal public forums to discuss and to brainstorm different ways of achieving your goal. Including the community will give your plans more support, and new and innovative ideas may surface from surprising sources.
- Delegate specific jobs to members or volunteers in the community, as well as to council members. Ensure that a time-frame has been allotted for each activity, and that a budget has been established for each step.
- Implement the plan, and use regular evaluations along the way.

- Remember to solicit feedback from the community, through public hearings, public forums, or surveys. In addition, you may want to consider requiring regularly scheduled reports from councilors or from your administrator.

SOME THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

Major problems like crime and unemployment will not disappear overnight. A community development plan is a long-term process, and often the results of your work will not be apparent for several years. The pace of progress is often slow and the improvements incremental. Instant gratification is a rarity; try not to become frustrated with a deliberate and cautious course of action.

And finally, remember that compromise will always be part of creating a town plan. Achieving consensus is crucial to your plan's success, and reaching a consensus will always mean compromise.