

## **New Officials' "Tips"** In Order of Ranking

1. **Understand Your Role** - Learning the basic differences between “policy” and “administration” and understanding your role as a policy-maker. Focus on “what” is to be accomplished, not “how” (leave that up to the staff). This also means understanding the roles and job duties of each key staff member. Adhering to your city’s form of government and encouraging others to do likewise is also an important part of “knowing your role”. A new elected official should request an orientation session to meet staff members and other elected officials. This session would help you understand your role.
2. **Familiarize Yourself With the Basics** -This involves reading and knowing your City’s Charter, the basics of *Robert’s Rules of Order*, the City’s organizational structure, becoming familiar with the City Code, reviewing the City’s Personnel Policies and Procedures, becoming familiar with the City budget, etc. It also means becoming familiar with the city’s basic operations. You will want to learn about the services your city provides, who provides them, and learn a little about how they are provided. Know whom to contact if you have questions. We recommend that you attend the newly elected officials academy conducted by MTAS
3. **Civility and Teamwork Are What It’s All About** - Learn to be civil in all relationships, especially when dealing with fellow Board members; don’t let your Board become dysfunctional. Learn to disagree without being disagreeable. You will need to work as a member of a team. Do not let differences of opinion ruin your ability to work with the group, and don’t let them deteriorate into personality conflicts. Once you have voted on a subject support the decision even if it did not go your way (remember to be supportive of the broader concept that decisions are being made by a democracy). As a member of a team you will want to strive for “synergy.” That’s when the skills of the whole Board are greater than the sum of the individual skills of each board member. There is enormous strength when the board can speak with one voice!
4. **Stay Focused On The Future** - Too many board members spend an inordinate amount to time criticizing what has happened in the past or overly critiquing the current situation. But you are now a key community leader, and leaders look ahead. They stay focused on the future. They know how to move the community forward. Remember, as a board member your job is not only to solve problems but also to find new opportunities and to take advantage of them, to create new initiatives.
5. **Do Your Homework** - Learn as much as you can about items on your agenda. Beware of the “virgin paperclip” (that’s the paperclip that has never been taken off of the agenda papers you are given, thus indicating that review of items has not occurred). Prepare in advance those questions you need answered in order to make a good decision (meet with staff ahead of time if questions are sensitive). Ask for help!

6. **Trust Your Staff** - One difficulty related to serving as a board member is the tension that comes from being responsible for the city but not being there all the time to know what's going on. So in order to be effective you must learn to trust the city staff. Remember that they may do things differently than you would, but that's OK. There is "more than one way to skin a cat." Your trust will free them up to do the best job possible. If you express distrust in them they will develop a fear of failure, which will lead to inaction. They will only do the minimum necessary to get by, because they are afraid of being criticized. So trust them until you find out otherwise (and then take appropriate action). Judge for yourself the effectiveness of your staff. Do not use "campaign rumors" and innuendo to judge others
7. **Communicate** - You must strive to be accessible and easy to approach by citizens, the media, staff, other board members, legislators, etc. You will want to communicate in a number of ways with a variety of individuals. For example, you will need to hear from your constituents in order to keep in touch with what they desire and to let them know about services provided by the City. You will also want to let the staff know what you are thinking and vice versa (you will want to know what's going on at city hall). You will want to let TML know what your City needs and how you can communicate with legislators to help achieve that, and so on. Communication will be vitally important to your success and the success of your City during your tenure.
8. **Learn the Art of Good Debate** - Many scholars believe that the quality of decision is a function of the quality of the debate that produces it. In order to facilitate good debate board members need to keep an open mind, participate in the debate by expressing their opinion, and then looking for a solution or product that is greater than the board started with.
9. **Learn All You Can and Participate in Training Opportunities** - This involves not only asking questions, but learning about resources which are available to you and taking advantage of them such as MTAS, TML, etc). As a part of the learning process you will also want to take advantage of training opportunities that are available to you (MTAS, TML, etc).
10. **Don't Make Promises You Can't Keep** - Remember that you are a part of a democracy and what you want to accomplish may not be what a majority of the board wants to accomplish. You will need the support of a majority to accomplish your goals, so don't promise something until a majority votes to go along with your idea. And don't try to please everyone - recall that you work for the city as a whole, not for select groups. This being the case it is normally impossible to make everyone happy. Accept this fact and move on.
11. **Don't Let Your Position Go To Your Head** - As a board member you now hold a significant and important role in your community. Through your tenure don't forget who "owns" your city - the citizens do. You are merely a representative of theirs. You will be "carrying the torch" for only a short period of time, so stay humble and remember that you are there to serve, not to be served!

12. **Serve As An Advocate For the City** - Citizens want to be a part of something that is successful and positive. You can help inform them about the positive aspects of your city's operations. You can help establish a positive image for your city, in part because now that you are on the board citizens will look at you and equate the "City" with the manner in which you behave, and they will believe what you tell them. So be a positive advocate for what's happening.
13. **Have "Another Life"** – Don't let your new role completely occupy your life. Keep it in perspective. Sometimes the best board members are very busy people who have all kinds of other interesting things going on in their lives. You can become so wound up in your new role that you lose track of the big picture. Remember, you can't change everything but you can contribute your share.
14. **Participate With Other Cities** - You will want to actively support organizations that represent and serve cities. For example, you will want to attend meetings of the *Tennessee Municipal League* and maybe even the *National League of Cities*. These organizations are yours, and they exist to lobby for and serve all cities. The success of these organizations depends on member participation. Occasionally you will be asked, for example, to contact a legislator or to serve on a study committee. It is very beneficial for your city to have you interact with officials and experts from other cities. In this way you can learn from the efforts of others while you support efforts to strengthen all cities.
15. **Devote Time to An Annual Retreat** - You will find that a variety of day-to-day decisions occupy all of your discretionary time as a board member. This being the case you won't have time to stand back and discuss the "big picture." You will need to set aside time to do this. An annual retreat is a good opportunity to meet in an informal atmosphere, without the normal agenda, to set goals, discuss lingering issues, develop new initiatives, etc.