

So you want to be an elected official...

Practical information for
people running for office in
Washington's cities and towns



Why are you running for election to a local office?

This is a question that every candidate will be asked – and a question that every candidate must carefully consider.

Most often, people run for office because they are deeply committed to their city or town and want to influence the community's direction. At times, people run because they are passionate about a single issue or problem. A single controversy – such as a land use or zoning decision – could dominate an entire election campaign.

But once the election is over, things change. Candidates who have won an election based on their position on a single issue soon discover that they are responsible for a much broader array of challenges. The platform they ran on may not even be on the council's agenda. Getting it placed there will only be possible if they are willing and able to work cooperatively with other members of the council, many of whom will have their own issues to champion.

In order to be effective, elected officials must work as part of a team to establish a shared vision for the future, develop goals and plans that make that future possible, and work with their colleagues and constituents to enact the local policies and laws that will ultimately lead to accomplishment.

Holding a public office is an act of service to the public – that is, service to all the residents of a city or town, not just those who share your views or those who voted for you. It is a challenge that requires every office holder to rise above the fray, to reach beyond comfort zones, and to work with others with whom they may have significant differences.

Rising to that challenge is what makes democracy work. It's what makes shaping our shared future possible. It's what others have done before us. And it's what has made our cities and towns places we can be proud of.

Working as part of a team

Getting elected as a councilmember or mayor brings a special status. It also comes with the obligation to look beyond yourself and cultivate the qualities of collaboration, teamwork, and civility.

Elected officials set the tone for the civic life of their community. When elected officials demonstrate how to differ with one another respectfully, find principled compromises, and focus on the common good, community members often will too. When elected officials get mired in blame, recrimination, or division, civic progress can grind to a halt, and the city's sense of common purpose can fracture.

To govern well, elected leaders must help each other and the public stay focused on the future and on the common good. That can be an uphill struggle when the passions of the moment lead to demands for instant solutions, or when there is a deep division over a single issue that threatens to push longer-term problems aside. There will always be occasions when elected officials differ among themselves. But the mark of leadership is the ability to handle those differences in ways that move the agenda forward, build trust, and create a civic culture of mutual respect that makes progress possible.

When elected officials get mired in blame, recrimination, or division, civic progress can grind to a halt.

Roles and responsibilities

Cities provide services that are vital to community health, safety, and economic activity. While specific city-provided services may vary, most cities provide public safety, land use and planning, parks, and public works such as street maintenance and construction, water, sewer, and/or stormwater management. Understanding the role of elected officials is critical to ensure proper planning, oversight, and delivery.

Polymaking vs. administration

Councils are legislative bodies – that is, they are elected to make major policy decisions and pass budgets. The basic job of councilmembers is to find the balance among themselves that represents the best interests of the majority of residents, while respecting the rights of all.

Councilmembers make policies, but mayors (in mayor-council cities) and city managers (in council-manager cities) are responsible for their implementation and administration. Learning the difference between these two key functions – policymaking and administration – and respecting the boundaries between them is critical to a well-run government.

The separation of powers between legislative and administrative functions serves not only as a check on the exercise of authority between the two branches of local government, but also as a way to promote their efficient day-to-day operation and staff direction.

Understanding your city's form of government and classification

Different cities have different forms of government. The most common form of government is the mayor-council form. This form consists of an elected mayor (elected at-large) who serves as the city's chief executive officer and a council (elected either at-large or from districts) that is responsible for formulating and adopting policies. In mayor-council cities, a professional administrator may assist the mayor with day-to-day operations.

Cities by classification & form

Class	Mayor-council	Council-manager	Total
First	6	4	10
Second	5	0	5
Town	68	0	68
Code	147	50	197
N/A	1	0	1
Total	227	54	281

The second most common form of city government is the council-manager form. The council-manager form consists of an elected council, which is responsible for policymaking, and a professional city manager (appointed by the council) who is responsible for administration. The city manager is accountable to the council and is responsible for implementing the council's policies. Although mayors in council-manager cities have no administrative or executive duties, they do serve as the chair of the council and often play a prominent political leadership role.

It is also important to know your city's classification – first class city, second class city, town, or code city. Many state laws differ depending upon the classification, such as the specific powers and responsibilities of a mayor.

First class and code cities have broad home rule powers granted in both the state constitution and statute. Cities may determine their structure and regulate under their police powers, as long as they do not conflict with the state constitution or laws. In Washington, more than 200 code and first class cities have broad home rule powers and have been granted all powers available to other classes of cities.

The third branch

Cities can choose to run their own municipal courts or contract with the county or another city to provide court services. Approximately one-third of cities run their own courts with elected or appointed judges. Full-time judges are elected. Part-time judges are either appointed by the mayor (mayor-council cities) or the manager (council-manager cities), and may be subject to council confirmation. Although the city council may determine the court's budget, the judge is responsible for running the court, including supervising court staff, and is not subject to council or executive oversight.

Working with other jurisdictions

City elected officials' jobs don't stop at the city limits. The city's streets must connect with county roads and state highways. Similarly, cities must work with other jurisdictions and many levels of government to achieve collective goals. In some cases, this can involve complex, technical inter-jurisdictional agreements for services such as public safety, sewage treatment, or other utilities.

Cities must abide by state and federal laws and regulations, and can benefit from state and federal funding programs. There may also be special purpose districts for fire protection, ports, transit, sewer and water, cemeteries, libraries, and a host of other specific functions that interact with city government. Residents have the right to expect that these relationships are well-managed, efficient, and collaborative—and it's up to elected officials to make this happen.

Celebrating community achievements and promoting civic pride

City elected officials also serve as champions for civic achievement. By appearing at ribbon-cutting ceremonies, participating in charity events, and attending celebrations of student achievement, elected officials bring recognition and attention to the values of civic engagement and individual accomplishment. This might not be in the elected leader's official job description, but it is an important part of how elected leaders can bring out the best in their communities and strengthen the traditions that build civic pride.

Ethics

You may think of yourself as an ethical and law-abiding person, but that may not be enough to keep you on the right side of the law once you are elected. There are specific laws and high ethical standards of conduct for elected officials, and becoming thoroughly informed about them is important.

All city officials must abide by strict laws regarding ethics in government. These laws aim to prevent favoritism and ensure that elected officials are truly serving the public rather than reaping personal benefits from their positions.

State laws that city elected officials must abide by include:

No special privileges – Elected officials must pay the same fees for permits or services as any other resident. They cannot receive or give any special privileges, discounts, or exemptions or use any city resources for private purposes. For example, a city official cannot borrow a city pickup truck for the weekend or arrange for it to be used by a friend or relative.

No gifts or rewards from private sources

– Elected officials may not receive gifts that are in any way connected to their public service. For instance, if a councilmember votes for a specific project and a constituent sends a thank you gift of tickets to a concert or game, the tickets must be returned.

No disclosure of confidential information

– Elected officials may not disclose confidential information or use it for personal gain. This means that you may not accept a job or engage in a business that might require you to disclose confidential information you gained from your city position.

No conflicts of interest – Elected officials may not have any financial interest in any public contracts made through their office with the city they serve. This includes contracts for employment, sales, leases, and purchases. (There are limited exceptions to this rule in small cities with a population under 10,000.)

In addition, elected officials may not vote on any matter that would have a personal direct financial impact on them. This prohibition does not include matters that have a general impact, such as taxes or utility rates.

Conflicts of interest can also include “remote” interests – interests that would not personally benefit you, but might benefit people or organizations with whom you have a special relationship. For instance, if you are on the governing board of a nonprofit organization seeking a contract with the city, you must disclose your interest and you may not vote on that contract or attempt to influence the votes of others.

Open public meetings

The Open Public Meetings Act (OPMA) requires that all council meetings (and meetings of planning commissions, library boards, and other public bodies) be open to the public, except under special circumstances, such as discussing a lawsuit, a confidential personnel issue, or a real estate transaction.

This also means that elected officials cannot meet informally and make decisions out of the public eye. Whenever a quorum of the council is present, city business cannot be the topic of discussion unless the public has been notified and the meeting is open to them.

If this act is violated, there may be personal penalties for the elected officials involved. In addition, any final action that is taken in a meeting which did not comply with the Open Public Meetings Act is null and void.

Public access to records

The Public Records Act (PRA) gives any person full access to a wide range of information about how government does business. Most information relating to the conduct of government that is prepared, owned, used, or retained by a city is presumed to be a public record that must be made available to the public for inspection and copying. This includes papers, photos, maps, videos, and electronic records (such as email, text messages, and social networking sites). It also includes reports that are prepared for government by hired contractors.

All cities must make these records available for everyone. There are a limited number of exemptions from disclosure for some personnel records and other confidential matters.

Required OPMA and PRA training

Under the Open Government Trainings Act, every elected local or statewide official that is also a member of a “governing body,” must receive both open public meetings and records trainings. This must occur no later than 90 days after taking the oath of office or assuming duties. “Refresher” training must occur at intervals of no more than four years.

Implementing policy

Adopting a city budget

One of the most challenging tasks for local elected officials is developing and adopting annual city budgets. They can be complex and technical documents that are important expressions of a city's vision, values, priorities, and strategic goals. Budgets are also a tool for evaluating past performance, as elected leaders and staff make note of what was accomplished in the past year and how actual costs compared to estimated projections.

Mastering the budget process can be a steep learning curve for newly-elected leaders. There are guiding state laws about the timing and content of city budgets. Once in office, elected officials soon find that the budget is such an important policy document that they can't be effective unless they fully understand it, and can explain it to their constituents.

Budgets are important expressions of a city's vision, values, priorities, and strategic goals.

Comprehensive planning, growth management, and environmental protection

Every city needs to plan for growth in order to provide a healthy future for its residents. Cities adopt comprehensive plans that spell out a specific vision for how the city will develop, while protecting critical natural resources and open space. Engaging the community in the process of developing a comprehensive plan ensures that everyone works together to create a shared vision for the future, and that everyone takes part in the work of achieving it.

Twenty-nine counties and the cities within them are required to or have chosen to create plans that conform to the state Growth Management Act (GMA). Once adopted, a city's comprehensive plan is used to guide decisions about zoning, subdivisions, and other regulatory matters. Local codes can create incentives for the kind of growth a city wants by providing such things as density bonuses for projects that provide affordable housing or preserve natural areas.

State and federal environmental laws and regulations also affect local comprehensive planning, because they require protection of certain natural resources such as clean drinking water and critical wildlife habitat. Learning about these laws and how they affect your city is an important part of an elected leader's job.

Keeping the comprehensive plan in mind – and keeping it in the public eye – ensures that the city stays focused on creating the future residents want for the next generation and beyond.

Publications and resources

Publications

You can find many materials, publications, and other resources online. Below are a few highlighted publications that may be of value to you even before becoming an elected leader.

Association of Washington Cities, wacities.org

- *Mayor & Councilmember Handbook*
- *Small City Resource Manual: A guide for Washington's small cities and towns*

Municipal Research and Services Center, mrsc.org

- *Running for local elected office (resource page)*
- *Knowing the Territory: Basic Legal Guidelines for Washington City, County, and Special District Officials*

Training opportunities

After getting elected, there are regional workshops, statewide conferences, and eLearning opportunities to help you learn important laws and hone skills to become a more effective leader.

Highlighted trainings include:

- **OPMA and PRA eLearnings**
AWC and MRSC have two eLearnings available 24/7: Open Public Meetings Act and Public Records Act

Certificate of Municipal Leadership



AWC's Certificate of Municipal Leadership (CML) program recognizes mayors and councilmembers for accomplishing training in five core areas:

- Roles, responsibilities, and legal requirements
- Public sector resource management
- Community planning and development
- Effective local leadership
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion



The Association of Washington Cities (AWC) serves its members through advocacy, education, and services. Founded in 1933, AWC is a private, nonprofit, nonpartisan corporation that represents Washington's 281 cities and towns before the state legislature, the state executive branch, and with regulatory agencies. AWC also provides training, data and publications, and services such as the AWC Employee Benefit Trust, AWC Risk Management Service Agency, AWC Workers' Comp Retro, AWC Drug and Alcohol Consortium, AWC GIS Consortium, and AWC JobNet.

Promoting communication between cities and towns and developing broad public understanding of the important roles of cities and towns is part of our vision.

Association of Washington Cities
wacities.org

Copyright © 2025 by Association of Washington Cities
All rights reserved.