

Technical Supplement by

MUNICIPAL TECHNICAL ADVISORY SERVICE • THE UNIVERSITY

MTAS

MTAS, an agency of the Institute for Public Service, The University of Tennessee, is operated in cooperation with the Tennessee Municipal League to provide technical advisory assistance to all municipal officials in Tennessee. Assistance is available, on request, in the areas of engineering and

public works, municipal management, municipal law, public information, finance and accounting, law enforcement, personnel administration and ordinance codification. In addition a municipal consultant is assigned to each of seven areas.

So You Just Got Elected...• **WM. GARY HEAD, MTAS District Consultant, Memphis**

So you just got elected Alderman, Commissioner, Councilman, etc.? Now what are you going to do? In the heat of the campaign, you made a lot of promises and dreamed a lot of dreams. It is now time to carry out the planks in your platform.

The prospect is pretty scary. No longer can you gripe about "the gang at City Hall." You are one of the gang and it is you who must guide the progress of your city for the next two or four years.

Where does one go to learn to be an Alderman or Councilman or Commissioner? There is no such thing as a "natural-born city legislator." Obviously, some learn the process quicker and some have more natural political talent than others, but becoming a good city councilman is an activity which never ends.

One thing which you must accept is that the job you have taken on is not a part-time job—mentally, at least. Being an Alderman, Commissioner, or Councilman is a way of thinking and requires the proper attitude 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

No longer can you consider municipal activity relative to how it affects you personally. You must now look at every item from the standpoint of the community as a whole, or at least the entire ward which you may serve.

There are times when it is necessary to do the will of the people, and other times you will feel compelled to rely on your own judgment. When this time comes, take comfort in the fact that you, as a municipal official, are better informed than your constituents.

Therefore, the first suggestion for newly elected aldermen is: **Proceed slowly.** The people who voted for you (all of them did) will now claim the right to the first favor and they will be bombarding you with demands. Remembering that you lack experience in handling requests at the municipal level, you will do well to be courteous, but make no commitments until all aspects of the problems can be investigated.

Many hundreds of times each year new boards take rash action which they live to regret over and over. How many city employees are removed at the organizational meeting of new Boards only to find out that the city operation is severely hampered because this technical knowledge is not available to the Board at a later date. The advice to proceed slowly holds not only for new aldermen, but for old-timers as well. There is no place in municipal government for snap decisions—the stakes are too high.

A corollary to the above recommendation is: **Be careful about bringing prejudices to the Board meeting.** Particularly this is true about matters

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of personnel. To you as a private citizen, a certain official may be the source of great irritation. You may feel that the greatest service you can do your city is to fire him or her, but as an Alderman, you may find that the particular individual is doing an excellent job and is one of the more important employees of the town. However, it is only fair to point out that removal of an incompetent employee should not be put off because each day that passes makes the task more difficult.

The same thing is true to a lesser extent of programs. One small town was spending a disproportionate amount of the city budget on a street cleaning program. Most of the citizenry and some of the aldermen thought that this was a great waste of the taxpayers' money. It later came to light that the cleanliness of the town was one of the cornerstones upon which was built the town's excellent industrial development program. Several industries had located in the town because the cleaning program reflected community pride and efficiency.

Ask for Help When Needed

Please notice that the suggestion is to exercise care. No one would deny an Alderman strong feelings and opinions. In fact, the opposite is true. Officials with bold new programs and courage to back them up are among the greatest needs of today's city, but imagination can be put to work later when the facts are in and experience is gained.

Do not be afraid to admit your ignorance, whether you are a newly elected Alderman or one of many years' experience. Ben Franklin, writing in **Poor Richard's Almanac** in 1755, said, "Being ignorant is not so much of a shame, as being unwilling to learn." Particularly in the early stages of your term of office, admitting that you do not know the answer to the problems will forestall many wrong decisions.

Tennessee officials are very fortunate in that admitting ignorance is neither public nor painful. A multitude of agencies stand by to assist aldermen with almost any problem that occurs. It is necessary, however, to make your needs known to the various agencies.

Good Starting Point: TML

The point of original departure for all city officials should be the Tennessee Municipal League. With offices at 226 Capitol Blvd. in Nashville, the League is always willing to assist with municipal problems.

An agency which is operated in cooperation with the League is the Municipal Technical Advisory Service. MTAS is a part of the University of Tennessee and offers consulting service on a free basis in municipal management, finance and accounting, public relations, engineering and public works, law, ordinance preparation and codification, federal aid, annexation, and housing. The headquarters of MTAS

is at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, but branch offices are maintained in Nashville and Memphis. (See MTAS annual report that follows this article.)

Of major interest to all municipal officials is the field of planning. The Tennessee State Planning Commission offers technical assistance in this. Area offices are located in Jackson and Knoxville, with the main office in the Central Services Building in Nashville.

Don't Forget HUD in Atlanta

A federal agency with which all officials should be familiar is the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Most requests for federal aid will sooner or later reach its offices at 900 Peachtree St., N. E., Atlanta, Georgia 30309.

Industrial development is something about which every city official is excited. The State provides assistance through the Staff Division for Industrial Development, Cordell Hull Building, Nashville. District offices are maintained in Jackson and Knoxville.

Sewerage problems are pressing almost all cities in Tennessee. Two state agencies offer help with this type of problem. The Division of Sanitary Engineering of the Department of Public Health has offices in the Cordell Hull Building in Nashville, as does the Stream Pollution Control Board.

The Tennessee Inspection Bureau, 4304 Harding Road, Nashville, will offer assistance with fire problems and insurance rating services.

There's a New State Office

The State of Tennessee has a new Office of Urban and Federal Affairs, which, though not fully organized yet, offers great promise in the area of coordinating federal aid requests and assisting cities in obtaining whatever federal help is available to them.

Those cities in counties eligible for assistance through the Economic Development Administration will find a great deal of money available for industrial parks, water extensions, and sewerage expansion. The proper point of contact is Economic Development Administration, 226 Capitol Blvd., Nashville 37219.

The point is to seek out the experts and ask them questions, even though the questions may seem "foolish" to you. No expert worthy of the name will ever consider any question "foolish." After all, the way he got to be an expert was by picking other people's brains.

Information obtainable from the above sources is an integral part of the process of **educating yourselves**. This "education" will continue so long as you remain an Alderman. It is a very complicated process and will be composed of many elements. Much of your learning will come from the political interaction between you and your constituents.

Therefore, experience is the one irreplaceable part of your education.

Reading Makes the Difference

However, if you wish to speed the process and make it more valuable, you must **READ! READ! READ!** Never before has there been so much literature about American cities, from the dream-world of far-out planning concepts to technical articles about such day-to-day work as laying water and sewer lines.

It has often been said that the difference between a good city administrator and an average or poor one, is whether he reads the information which comes across his desk. In spite of an excellent formal education, you will find techniques and concepts that you learned a few short years ago are no longer appropriate. The rapidly changing municipal scene can be kept in sight only through the current publications.

Another phase of the process of educating yourselves is to **attend meetings and conferences**. Although you and your community will have limited time and money available for this purpose, seize every possible opportunity to attend meetings. One mayor in the state has to hire a replacement for himself at \$50 per day and pay his own expenses, but he considers the expense worthwhile. He is a thinking individual and knows that when he is helping his community he is helping himself.

The Tennessee Municipal League, Tennessee Citizens Planning Conference, Tennessee Public Works Association, Municipal Finance Officers Association, and the Tennessee City Managers Association have one or more meetings each year in the state. Any or all of these conferences would prove profitable to even a newly elected city official.

Determine Ingredients; Blend

It has been said so many times that it is almost trite but it is nonetheless true: you must **know your city**. It is insufficient that you are known (you had to be known to be elected); but you must be familiar with every aspect of your community and its people. What you don't already know about politics and political behavior, you must study. You should be in constant touch with every group in town and know about their opinions, wants, needs, aspirations, and desires. Your chore is to blend these into a reasonable city operation.

Plato went right to the heart of the matter in 4 B. C. when he said, "Liberty . . . is best managed in a democratic city, and for this reason that is the only city in which a man of free spirit will care to live." You asked for the job of translating this ideal into practice. It is no easy task.

In order for your city to progress, it is necessary to **identify community goals**. As has been previously emphasized, this is not a matter of dreaming:

it is a dynamic process of combining dreams with practical politics. The result should be the highest ideals which the general population will accept.

Daniel H. Burnham, writing in the *Christian Science Monitor*, in 1927, adds this admonition, "Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood . . . make big plans; aim high in hope and work." Fortunate indeed is the politician who can make big plans and have them accepted by the working man. He will last the longest and accomplish the most for his city.

Stay on Lookout for Ideas

Do not hesitate to **take good ideas wherever you find them**, even from your enemies. There is room for, and a need for, all of the progressive suggestions available, from whatever source.

One would never commence a football game or other athletic contest without a clear knowledge of the ground rules; neither should you begin your service as an Alderman without studying the basic precepts of municipal government. It is a source of constant amazement to find the great number of cities which do not possess a copy of the city charter, to say nothing of the few city officials who bother to read it.

The charter is the permission from the State of Tennessee to conduct city business. The city may perform only those acts for which the charter gives express or implied consent. For this reason, **the charter is required reading for all city officials**.

Your city may have a **code of ordinances** or group of individual ordinances. These are your area of responsibility. You should know their contents for several reasons: (1) to be able to tell citizens what the law is; (2) to be aware of omissions; and, (3) to be able to intelligently consider future legislation.

Every city has something nebulous called "general policy." If your city does not have it written out, it should have. In either event, you should be aware of what policies have been followed so that you can continue these policies or change them.

Find Out Why

One thing which incoming officials seldom do, but should, is to **read minutes of previous Board meetings**. Much knowledge can be gained about past actions and the reasons therefor. This information will also form the basis for future decisions.

It should be remembered that the budget is the most important means you have for implementing your programs administratively. Many small towns do not have budgets, but they are necessary in even the smallest of cities. Great care should be given to the meaning of the budget document. Granted that the figures are important, but the budget should further community goals rather than just spend money. If economy is one of the avowed goals, be sure to

start with the largest expenditure and work down to the smallest.

Another significant item which small cities tend to overlook is that **reports, recommendations, and orders should be in writing.** Regular, written reports from department heads will serve not only to keep you informed of the town's progress but will eliminate confusion and misunderstanding over actual performance. Recommendations in writing will enable you to study them at length and, therefore, render better decisions on them. No work ought to be performed by the work force without a written work order from the administrative head of the organization, whether he be Mayor, City Manager, Department Head or whatnot. This one simple suggestion could eliminate most of the personnel problems in any city.

Some Personnel Pointers

Resolve to handle personnel matters in a business-like fashion. An air of mutual confidence should prevail between the Board of Aldermen and the employees. A few simple rules can spell the difference between success and failure in this area. Try to avoid giving orders to individual employees. Pass your complaints, suggestions, and orders through the proper chain-of-command for your city. If you do not understand the organization or are not satisfied with it, professional assistance is available to clarify it.

Employees should be supported in public and criticized in private. If you are unable to follow this rule in good conscience, the employee should be removed from the payroll, but never undermined.

Even though you should be building confidence between you and the employees, this does not mean that they should be allowed to perform their jobs without any system of checks. Written reports have been previously mentioned. Every city should have an annual audit. In addition, some standards for measuring their performance should be maintained. Above all, don't forget to rely on your own eyes and ears, because in the last analysis, responsibility rests with you as an Alderman.

Try to train citizens to take their complaints to the administrative head of the organization. Listen to the complaint courteously, tell the citizen that you will pass it along to the proper person, and suggest that in the future, he call the City Manager, Mayor, etc.

Consider Board Meeting Manners

A few final words are in order about Board meetings. **Take Board meetings seriously but not too seriously.** It may sound elementary, but Board meetings should be held regularly and at the time and

place designated in the city charter. Many towns fail to comply with these provisions. The result is undesirable legally and politically.

Do your homework for the Board meeting. It is very disconcerting to have to wait until the next meeting for a decision when there has been sufficient time for studying the problem in advance.

It is important to strive for a feeling of goodwill and a spirit of good fellowship between members of the Board. This does not mean, however, that all votes of the Board should be unanimous, nor that debate should never take place. It means that when the Board meeting is over, so are the differences. The Board should limit discussion between members to issues, thereby excluding the dealing in personalities.

Maturity is necessary to follow the next suggestion. You should constantly try to sell decisions of the Board to the public, even though you may not agree and did not vote for it. It is unnecessary and undesirable to represent yourself as being for the decision, but you should make every effort to explain the reasoning behind the specific decision and urge the public to comply, as you undoubtedly will.

A last admonition is to attempt to avoid decisions based entirely on whether or not it will affect the outcome of the next election and your consequent re-election. When you are attempting to resolve an apparent conflict between the good of the city and re-election, please read The Athenian Pledge:

We will never bring disgrace to this our city, by any act of dishonesty or cowardice, nor ever desert our comrades; we will fight for the ideals and sacred things of the city, both alone and with many; we will revere and obey the city laws, and do our best to incite a like respect and reverence in others; we will strive unceasingly to quicken the public's sense of civic duty; that thus in all these ways, we may transmit this city, greater, better, and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us.

MTAS Suggests . . .

"For New Officials . . . The Role of Those Who Govern." *Missouri Municipal Review*, Vol. 30, No. 5, May, 1965, p. 84

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"Responsibilities of a Councilman," by Robert H. Chase. *Michigan Municipal Review*, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 6, June, 1965, p. 194

Suggested Readings for New Councilmen and Mayors, A Bibliography. Institute of Government, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N. C., 1959, n.p., Price

Your Job as Councilman. Institute of Public Affairs, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, 1958, 72 pp., \$1