

My grandfather has been the Town Chairman of Spring Grove for the past 25 years. Having the opportunity to speak with him about this topic helped me better understand the workings of town governments and what strategies help to ensure that local government can run smoothly, fairly, and most importantly, help maintain civility. In order to maintain civility in local government, town officials should work with citizens to implement strategies to increase education on how the town government functions, increase communication to citizens, and increase transparency.

One of the most important things that citizens can do to help maintain civility is educating themselves on how their local government functions. Other than town governments, there is “no other form of government [that] is as connected to the people,” according to the Wisconsin Towns Association. This sentiment remains true throughout all towns in the state of Wisconsin, including Spring Grove. My grandpa explained it similarly, pointing out that the town government belongs to the public. This is why it is important for citizens to understand how it functions and the influence they have in it. In Wisconsin, town government is composed of an elected town board - one town chairperson, and two to four supervisors. Furthermore, the board is assisted by a treasurer and an elected or appointed clerk. As a unit, the town government completes many tasks and provides municipal services such as elections, property tax administration, and road construction and maintenance. Citizens staying informed about their local laws, elections, and government updates helps citizens uphold their end of maintaining civil discourse in town government.

One strategy that is most essential for town officials to implement is allowing for open communication. In Spring Grove, town citizens are able to directly contact leaders, including my grandpa. He says that “everyday he gets a call from someone with an issue.” In utilizing direct communication strategies such as this, he is able to resolve issues quickly and efficiently, leading

to increased citizen satisfaction and avoiding a decrease in civility. Direct communication between officials and their constituents also allows for more citizen input to be heard and considered. Because of the closeness the citizens have with the government, it allows for direct influence. For example, according to the Wisconsin Towns Association, powers such as approving the tax levy are directly allocated to the people. Another form of communication that can help maintain civility is inviting and encouraging citizens to attend town meetings. Monthly meetings in Spring Grove are held, open to the people, and even include time that is set aside at the beginning of the meeting, specifically for citizen input. Citizens can use this open floor time to make their voices heard.

A final strategy that local governments can employ to ensure civility is transparency. Transparency is the government's obligation to be held accountable by the citizens and be honest about the business they are conducting. This is essential in maintaining civility because if there is an appearance of secrecy behind closed government doors, it can foster rumors and incivility. It can also lead citizens to feel less confident in their town's government and its capabilities, which furthers a negative relationship between citizens and town officials. In order to prevent this from happening, town officials should utilize open meetings, like in Spring Green, in order to allow citizens to see what decisions the town government is making. They should also implement strategies such as publicly posting meeting agendas and meeting minutes on their websites or social media pages in order to ensure that all citizens have access to the information. Using more modern forms of communication, like social media and websites, in addition to more traditional print media, like newspapers, is also more likely to reach younger generations that may be less inclined to be aware of or participate in their local government.

Maintaining civility is essential in order to have a successful and efficiently functioning government, especially in one as close to the people as town government. By increasing education,

communication, and transparency, town officials can help foster a close-knit community where the people are heard by their local elected representatives and actively participate in their local government.