

What strategies can be implemented by town officials in collaboration with citizens to maintain civility in local government?

Maintaining Civility Within Local Governments

In the process of democracy, civility is a crucial element in bringing communities together, especially within small, rural governments. However, political differences have recently become increasingly divided, often leading to controversial interactions within these same local governments. For rural towns in Wisconsin, where close-knit communities play a significant role, nurturing civility in local governments is imperative for effective decision-making and community solidarity. In the heart of rural Wisconsin lies a unique network of communities where civility and cooperation are deeply ingrained values. However, like any community, maintaining civility in local government requires ongoing effort and collaboration between town officials and citizens.

The first strategy to maintain civility in local government is to foster a welcoming environment for citizens; for many governments, this includes implementing an Agenda Guidance policy, where local agencies include language on their agendas to ensure the free expression of all viewpoints. Local agencies allocate specific time limits for speakers and suggest effective communication approaches, such as leading with key points and indicating agreement instead of repeating similar views. Additionally, a welcoming environment encourages participation free from heckling, applause, or confrontation, both verbally and non-verbally. Body language is vital in conveying receptiveness or intimidation. Prohibiting disruptive behavior such as clapping, booing, or shouting during meetings demonstrates mutual respect and fosters genuine dialogue. Addressing the fear of public speaking is also crucial, as it

may hinder individuals from sharing their ideas. Allowing heckling, even silence or lack of applause, can discourage participation and detract from productive discussions. Ultimately, communities striving for mutual respect must reject all forms of disruptive behavior, whether verbal or non-verbal, to promote meaningful engagement and decision-making processes.

The second strategy to maintain civility in local government is to shift from debates to dialogues and encourage active listening during such dialogue. While debates often focus on winning arguments and defending positions, dialogues prioritize exploring various aspects of an issue to understand the bigger picture and find optimal solutions with minimal unintended consequences. Encouraging active listening is another crucial strategy for the implementation of a dialogue. All meeting attendees should respect each other's right to be heard and give full attention, refraining from interruptions and distractions like phones. Decision-makers should model attentive listening by repeating core points made by speakers, signaling respect for their perspectives even if there's disagreement. Creating an equitable process for sharing views ensures everyone has an opportunity to contribute, fostering a respectful and inclusive atmosphere. Disruptive behaviors like private conversations or smartphone use during meetings should be discouraged to maintain focus and respect for the discussion. Demonstrating genuine interest in public input and respecting constituents is essential for fostering a civil and productive local government environment.

The third strategy to maintain civility in local government is to have a plan once tensions start to rise. One such plan for de-escalation is by following the CLARA model: (C) Calm and Center Yourself, maintaining composure and avoiding aggressive postures; (L) Listen actively, allowing individuals to express their concerns without resorting to personal attacks; (A) Acknowledge shared feelings and values, demonstrating understanding without necessarily

agreeing; (R) Respond clearly to the issue at hand, making requests or proposals to address concerns; and (A) Assess the situation, knowing when to seek additional assistance or remove individuals if de-escalation efforts fail to restore order. Additionally, officials can opt for a recess to allow emotions to settle or, in extreme cases, eject disruptors from public meetings. This step-by-step approach aims not to win arguments but to calm situations and maintain order, aiming to foster constructive dialogue and decision-making within the community.

Institute for Civility Founders Cassandra Dahmke and Tomas Spath state, "Civility is claiming and caring for one's identity, needs, and beliefs without degrading someone else's in the process." Maintaining civility in local government requires a multifaceted approach that involves collaboration between town officials and citizens. By fostering a welcoming environment that empowers citizens, promoting active listening through a dialogue-oriented approach, and implementing effective conflict-resolution protocols, rural Wisconsin communities can nurture a civil culture. These strategies aim to strengthen community bonds and enhance the effectiveness of the local governing processes.

REFERENCES

“Promoting Civility in Our Public Spaces: A Primer for Local Officials.” Extension | University of Nevada, Reno, extension.unr.edu/publication.aspx?PubID=5268. Accessed 28 Apr. 2024.

“Promoting Civility at Public Meetings: Concepts and Practice.” Institute for Local Government, 10 Apr. 2012, www.ca-ilg.org/promotingcivility. Accessed 28 Apr. 2024.

Tips for Promoting Civility in Public Meetings What Is Civility? 2011.

“What Is Civility? - the Institute for Civility in Government.” The Institute for Civility in Government, 2013, www.instituteforcivility.org/who-we-are/what-is-civility/.