



# 25 Survival Tips for Newly Elected Mayors

Congratulations on being elected mayor! With your election, you are now one of only 241 mayors in the state of Oregon. And while the number of mayors in this State may be small, we are collaborative, supportive, and here to help.

The Oregon Mayors Association's (OMA) mission is to convene, network, train, and empower mayors. In support of our mission, the OMA has created 25 Survival Tips for Newly Elected Mayors as a way to bridge the gap between what you thought being a mayor was all about when you ran for office, and what it means to actually be a mayor now that the voters have selected you as their community's leader.

## Understand your role as a **1** municipal elected official.

It is particularly important that all municipal officials, both elected and appointed, understand their roles in the city's organization. You should clearly understand the roles, lines of authority, and limitations on the following city officials:

- The mayor;
- The city council (and each individual councilor);
- The city manager, administrator, and/or recorder;
- The city attorney; and,
- The city's department heads.

The roles, lines of authority, and limitations are likely found in your city's charter, municipal code, council rules of procedure, and other administrative rules of policies.

## Do your **2** homework.

**A**s the presiding officer of your city, you should strive to be most informed (or the authority) on parliamentary procedure, council rules, and the regulations related to running a meeting. Read your city's charter, municipal code, administrative rules, internal policy documents, reports from city staff, and your council meeting packet. Before you make a statement, ask a question, take a position on a matter, or cast a vote, make sure that you are properly informed and thoroughly prepared.

**Y**our city should provide you with an agenda packet in advance of any meeting, be sure to read it carefully, and read it well in advance of the meeting. These packets generally contain background information on items that are scheduled for consideration during the meeting. Becoming familiar with the information prior to the council meeting provides two benefits. First, if reading the packet leaves you with unanswered questions, you can share those questions with city staff prior to the meeting so that they can be prepared to answer those questions during the meeting itself. Second, it allows you to make a more informed decision during the meeting.

## Familiarize yourself with your city's operations. **3**

**L**earn as much as possible about your city's operations. For example, find out the basis for your city's utility fees or system development charges, the requirements to receive a land use approval, and the source of your city's revenues. Are there parts of your municipal operations that you don't have any experience with, if so, ask questions and gain at least a baseline understanding of those operations. For example, if you do not know how your city's wastewater system works, ask the city manager and public works director to give you a brief tutorial.

**I**n addition to learning about how the city operates, you also need to familiarize yourself with the critical issues presently facing your city. During your campaign you probably identified several issues that you find concerning, but there are probably other areas of concern that you have not yet identified. For you to be successful in your role, you'll need to know all key issues facing your city, and

work with your council members and city staff to prioritize how those issues will be addressed, and the funding source used to address them.

## Don't be afraid **4** to ask questions.

**D**o not be afraid to ask a “dumb” question, asking questions is how you learn and make informed decisions – both of which will make you a more successful mayor. Some members of your council may have more experience with municipal matters and may not need to ask as many questions as you do, but that does not mean you shouldn't ask the question. The reason for a council is so that the burden of decision making is not on one person, and that decisions are made by a group with different experiences and viewpoints.

## Don't make promises **5** you can't keep.

**W**hile you are the leader of the city council and your community, you have no real authority to make decisions on your own – the decisions you make are group decisions. Any legislative or quasi-judicial decision you make will require the approval of a majority of your city council. If you want a particular action to be taken by the council, you will need to convince a majority of the council that your preferred action is the direction the city needs to go. Promising anyone that the city will take a specific legislative or quasi-judicial action is not recommended.

## Don't try to **6** please everyone.

**T**here will always be members of the public, business owners, fellow council members, city staff, and even friends who dislike a decision or direction. Accept this fact and move on to more critical issues.

## Try to be as consistent as possible in making decisions.

Consistency is the best policy when making decisions. Be wary of setting precedents, instead, rely strictly on policy.

## Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know."

Even the best mayors, the ones who always do their homework, still can't be experts on everything. No matter how familiar you become with city operations and its finances, you will not know the answer to every question you are asked. If a constituent (or anyone else) asks you a question and you don't know the answer, have the courage to say so – but offer to find out the answer and report back.

## Listen to learn.

Listen to everyone, and do so to learn, not to respond. Make sure in listening to everyone, you listen to those persons you may consider adversaries or people who have different opinions than your own. Be open to innovative ideas and new suggestions. Even your harshest critics can have worthwhile ideas

## Adhere to your city's form of government.

Know your city's charter, and the form of government it requires. The charter is your city's constitution, it is the foundation of your government and is fundamental to how the city must function.

**M**ost cities in Oregon operate under the council-manager form of government. Under this form of government, the council is responsible for establishing the overarching policy of the city, while the day-to-day administration of the city is managed by the city manager, city administrator, or in smaller cities where there is no manager or administrator, the city recorder.

**I**f your role, as defined by the charter, is strictly a legislative role, concentrate on setting policy to the best of your ability, and let your appointed city administrative staff perform the jobs that the city is paying them to do – and then hold them accountable for performing those jobs.

**A**s the mayor, you are the leader of your council. Do not let other members of your council, bypass or ignore your city’s form of government. Also be mindful to not let city staff step outside of their respective roles. As mayor, you should insist that all persons involved in your city government adhere to the charter’s established procedures.

## **Value teamwork and consensus-driven goals.**

**H**igh functioning city councils are those comprised of members who work together as a team, respect everyone’s right to have a different opinion, and “agree to disagree” without being disagreeable. Remember, even as a mayor, you are only one vote, everything you and your council does comes down to teamwork.

**C**ouncils that operate at maximum efficacy are those that set consensus-driven goals. Setting goals is important, but it is even more important to set realistic goals. Do not expect to tackle every problem facing the city in one night, one month, one year, or even in one term. Developing realistic and consensus-based goals, as a team, will play a strong role in your ability to achieve desired political aspirations.

Several mayors and cities have found it helpful to hold an annual planning retreat where council members and staff get to know one another better, build a high functioning team, and establish or reaffirm the city's goals for the year.

Annual retreats are also a wonderful way to identify the types of personalities involved in the city's government, learning whether someone is an introvert or extrovert and identifying how a person learns and communicates, allow councils to better understand one another as individuals so that collectively they can operate as an effective team.

## Councils should speak with one voice.

Remember that the city council possesses its power as a group. Once a vote is taken, the council as a body has spoken. When the council has made a decision, try to support that decision, even if it was not the outcome you personally wanted.

## Praise in public, criticize in private.

As the leading elected official in your city, what you do is of higher visibility than what your councilors do. Be wary of where and how you speak negatively of people and organizations. In order to form great working relationships amongst council members and with staff, it is of the utmost importance that you respect them both in public and in private. Do not use the media, social media, or public meetings to disrespect your colleagues or city staff. People are more likely to receive criticism better in private than in front of an audience – no one enjoys being humiliated. Please also remember that it is one thing to provide a person with constructive criticism, than it is to simply criticize them.

## Say **14** thank you.

Always remember to show your appreciation for city staff, they work hard and are dedicated to the well being of the city you lead. And in thanking staff, make sure to thank all staff, not just those you are on a first-name basis with, or those you see regularly before council. A lot of work brought before the city council is performed by persons not in the room, include the staff behind the scenes when expressing your gratitude.

## Make use of available resources and trainings. **15**

There are numerous organizations and agencies available to assist mayors – please remember to make use of them. Examples of organizations that are here to help you include: the [Oregon Mayors Association](#) (OMA), the [League of Oregon Cities](#) (LOC), [CityCounty Insurance Services](#), the [National League of Cities](#), and the [U.S. Conference of Mayors](#).

Take advantage of the excellent training programs available to Oregon mayors through the OMA and the LOC. These programs provide opportunities for you to network with your peers, exchange ideas, and share common concerns. Additionally, recognize the importance of training the city's workforce. While state law requires that certain city employees receive training annually, most of the available training opportunities for municipal employees are voluntary.

## Learn from other **16** experienced mayors.

Identify an experienced mayor who is willing to answer questions you have, share their experience with you, and serve as a support system for you. It is strongly encouraged that you form relationships with mayors throughout the state,

especially those with similar populations and who are facing some of the same issues that your city faces. It is also important that mayors look to other cities that have accomplished the goals that your city is now trying to attain. Receiving quality advice from mayors, regardless of your time in office, could possibly prevent you and your council colleagues from making needless errors.

## Avoid **17** conflicts of interest.

As an elected official in Oregon, you are subject to the State's Ethics Law, which prohibit you from participating in matters wherein you have an actual conflict of interest, and require you to disclose a potential conflict of interest before participating in a matter where such a potential conflict could exist. Additionally, when participating in a quasi-judicial matter, like a land use decision, you need to also be mindful of participating in a decision wherein you have a bias. Information on conflicts of interest, and what steps you need to take as a mayor when you find yourself facing a conflict, can be found in the Oregon Government Ethics Commission's [Guide for Public Officials](#). Advice on how to handle bias in a land use matter can be found in the Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development's [Introductory Guide to Land Use Planning for Small Cities and Counties in Oregon](#).

## **18**. Communicate.

Communication is the key to any healthy relationship, and being a mayor is all about relationships. Don't be afraid to express your concerns or feelings regarding an issue. However, when speaking to others, always remember to be polite and professional. Also, remember to communicate openly and transparently, make sure the left hand knows what the right hand is doing.



## 19 Constituents matter.

Once upon a time you were a constituent. It is important that you remember the level of respect you demanded as a voter. Your constituency expects you to understand their problems and issues to be genuinely concerned about their well-being. In remembering that your constituents matter, please remember to seek their feedback whether it be by making personal calls, attending community events, and stopping to speak with them when they approach you in the grocery store. Constituents expect you to vote to protect their needs and their community for generations to come – to meet this expectation, you need to speak to them.

## 20 It's not about getting even.

Remember that speeding ticket you received prior to taking office? Well, this is not the time to get even. Do not use your new role as mayor to make political or personal attacks on anyone you feel wronged you before or after taking office.

## 21 Remember why you ran for mayor.

Remember to not get caught up in the prestige and hype of being the mayor. As mayor, your sole responsibility is to serve the people to the best of your ability. You obviously ran for office because you believed that you had something good to offer your community members. Now that you are the mayor, the people expect you to work solely for the betterment of their community.

## Do the **22** thing.

**A**lways strive to do the right thing, regardless of popularity. Remember that which is right is not always popular, and that which is popular is not always right. You were elected to make tough decisions.

## Choose only a couple of **23** things to work on at a time.

**Y**ou cannot address all the issues at one time. Instead of trying to make minor improvements to dozens of issues, or achieving an average level of success, instead consider making major improvements to a smaller number of issues, and strive for exceptionalism.

## Be a leader, not just a politician. **24**

**R**emember the adage, “a politician looks to the next election, a leader looks to the next generation.” Yes, you must be a politician to be a mayor, but that doesn’t preclude you from also being a leader – be both!

## Have fun. **25**

**P**ublic service is challenging work, but there are no rules against you having a fun time as mayor. Make a concerted effort to enjoy your term in office, otherwise it may be the longest period of your life. Try to maintain a sense of humor, and don’t take yourself too seriously. Additionally, take pride in the fact that you will have a hand and a voice in the future development of your city.