

How to be an effective Board Member

1. **Learn all you can about your District**, but do not actively and excessively acquire knowledge at the expense of relationships. Relationships are not “transactional” in the same manner as requests for records or other information.
2. **Devote sufficient time** to your office and to studying the present and future problems of your District and its communities. Make recommendations to the Board as to policy for eventual direction to the Fire Chief.
3. **Don't burn yourself out** on the little things, but recognize that they are often important to the public. Save your energy and time for the important matters. Remember the trick to forgetting the big picture...
4. Don't let honest **differences of opinion** within the board degenerate into personality conflicts. You are part of a team.
5. Remember that **you represent all the people** of your District and each of its communities, not just neighbors and friends. Be wary of personal experiences coloring your public decisions.
6. **Don't act as a committee of one**: Governing a District requires a multiple team effort—practically and legally. Be a team player and leader. But don't hesitate to join certain committees.
7. **Take your budget preparation job seriously**, for it determines what your District does or does not do for the coming year and will also influence what happens in future years. Don't write “blank checks.”
8. **Establish policy statements**. Written policy statements let the public, and the other District officials and staff know where they stand. The policy statements help the board govern, and writing them provides a process to develop consensus and a team atmosphere.
9. Make decisions on the basis of **public policy**, and be consistent. Treat similar situations similarly, and avoid favoritism.
10. Focus your attention on ways to **prevent problems**, rather than just trying to solve them as they occur. Filling potholes is one approach to governing; developing plans to prevent them is more effective.
11. **Don't be misled by the strong demands of special interest groups** that want something done now, their way. Your job is to find the long-term public interest of the District as a whole, and you may be hearing from the wrong people.
12. **Don't be afraid of change**. Don't be content to just follow the routine of your

predecessors. Charge your appointed officers and employees with being responsible for new ideas and better methods. Listen to what they have to say and support good ideas.

13. **Don't give quick answers** when you are not sure of the real answer. It may be embarrassing to appear unknowledgeable, but it can be more embarrassing, and damaging, to give incorrect information. Just say "I'll get the answer and get back to you."

14. **Don't rush to judgment.** Few final actions have to be taken at the first meeting at which they are considered. Avoid "crisis management."

15. As an individual Board Member, **don't make promises you can't deliver!** Most decisions and actions require approval of the entire board as well as other elected officials with an interest in the subject.

16. Remember that you have **legal authority** as a governing board member only when the board is in legal session.

17. **Don't spring surprises** on fellow Board Members or your District staff, especially at public meetings. If a matter is worth bringing up for discussion, it's worth being on the agenda. Surprises may get you some publicity, at the embarrassment of others, but they tend to erode any "team" approach to governance.

18. Participate in official meetings with the dignity and decorum fitting those who hold a position of **public trust**. Personal dress and courteous behavior at meetings help create an environment for making sound public decisions.

19. Conduct your official public meetings with some formality, and **follow rules of procedure.** Have an agenda and follow it. Most governing body members agree that formal meetings expedite the process and promote better decision making.

20. **Don't be afraid to ask questions.** It is one of the ways we learn. But do your homework by studying the agenda material before meetings.

21. **Vote yes or no** on motions. Don't cop out by abstaining except when you have a legitimate conflict of interest. A pass does not relieve you of responsibility when some decision must be made.

22. Once a majority decision of the governing body has been made, **respect the official position** and defend it if needed, even if you personally disagreed.

23. Respect the letter and intent of the **open meetings law**, but also keep private and confidential matters to yourself—don't gossip.

24. **Retain competent, key employees**, pay them well, trust their professional judgment, and recognize their authority and responsibilities.

25. **Don't bypass the system**, if you have an administrator responsible for day to day

operations.

26. **Don't let others bypass the system.** Insist that people such as equipment or service suppliers work with your purchasing staff. If direct contact with governing body members is necessary, it should be with the board as a whole.

27. **Don't pass the buck** or responsibility for a hot issue to the staff or employees when they are only following your policies or decisions.

28. **Don't always take no for an answer.** The right question may be "How can we do this?" instead of "Is it possible to do this?".

29. **Encourage imaginative solutions.** Learn to evaluate recommendations and alternative courses of action. Ask staff to provide options and ask yourself: Why Not?

30. **Be concerned about the long-term future of the District.** Avoid taking short-term gains at the expense of long-term losses.

31. **When determining the public interest,** balance personal rights and property interests, the possible harm to a few versus the good of the many. Recognize in many situations, everyone can't be a winner.

32. **Provide leadership** in the intergovernmental system. Keep in contact with and cooperate with your federal, state, city and special district officials. Relationships build efficiencies.

33. **Learn to listen**—really listen—to your fellow Board Members, other District officials and the public. Hear what they are trying to say, not just the words spoken. And *certainly* don't interrupt people at public meetings.

34. **Learn to be effective with the media.** Cultivate good media relationships and communicate successes. Consider funding a public information officer's position. The Board is supposed to speak with one "voice." You don't want "too many cooks in the kitchen."

35. **Maintain your sense of humor.** Don't take yourself or the business of government so seriously that you don't enjoy it. It should be fun as well as a rewarding experience.

36. **Don't be afraid to fail.** You learn just as much or more from failure as you do from success. If you don't fail, you are not learning.

37. **Follow the ethics rules.** Don't secure special privileges and gifts because of your position of power. Don't share confidential information. Avoid conflicts of interest. *See* RCW 42.23.070

Adapted from "53 Ideas on How to Govern Better, by E. A. Mosher, Connecticut Town and City, May-June 1990; Copyright © 1998 by the Municipal Research & Services Center of Washington. New Board Member Handbook, September 1998.