



5 traits of effective elected volunteer decision-makers

by Rich Rosenthal Ashland City Councilor, Monday, October 7th 2019

We live in a representative democracy, and I'm honored to serve as an elected volunteer in service to Ashland.

As a councilor, my primary goals are to:

Balance competing community goals and priorities in a way that creates productive working relationships

Instill confidence in the professionalism of local governance

Be a good listener

Have plenty of patience

As I reflected on the purpose of the Ashland Global Peace Conference, the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission and the core values of peace, care and compassion, collaboration, kindness, generosity, wellness, and mutual respect, I've developed the following advice for those interested in serving as an elected volunteer, or conversely, the type of traits you should insist upon in your elected officials.

The five key traits are:

1. Be prepared to collaborate

Regardless of what he or she may want to accomplish, councilors only have one vote in a seven-person, small-group dynamic, and it requires at least four votes to effect an outcome. Which people have the best ability to solve problems collaboratively rather than to polarize?

2. Be tactful

Councilors won't always be in the majority, and tensions may run high. Councilors won't always agree with the outcomes of votes, but is he or she capable of objectively explaining all sides of the issue to the community, regardless of the outcome?

How one reacts in moments of adversity and success is a sign of true character. We shouldn't elect folks who throw colleagues under the bus in the op-ed pages or in social media chat rooms when things don't go their way.

3. Be judicious

Not every agenda item will be interesting, but a councilor's role is to be the community's umpire on all issues facing the city. This type of objectivity requires doing the homework that comes with the job — lots of reading and discovery of the facts. Every vote cast should be justified by fact-based pragmatism.

4. Be forward Thinking.

Councilors represent 21,000 residents, as well as those who will be living here for generations to come. Elect individuals who can see over the horizon and ask, "What is best for my child or my grandchildren when they lead our community?" Sometimes forward-thinking decisions may run counter to the demands of citizens in a packed room, and this requires courage.

5. Be responsive

Councilors are volunteers, but it's an elected part-time job. Expect your elected officials to respond to personally addressed correspondence. Your local representatives should make time, whenever possible. Ultimately, I believe the best councilors listen more and preach less.

Ask yourself which candidates are most likely to be prepared to compromise, be tactful, be judicious, be forward-thinking and be responsive in a way that best addresses issues facing the community. You may not be able to influence the outcome of national discourse, but you sure can have a major impact at the local level.

Rich Rosenthal has served on the Ashland City Council since January 2013 after 10 years on the Parks and Recreation Commission.