

What's in Your Code of Conduct?

Does your city need a code of ethics or code of conduct for the mayor, city council members and city employees? Regardless of how you might answer this question, perhaps it is a question that deserves further discussion and consideration in “good times” or “bad times.”

Written City Policy

A code of conduct is a written policy designed to describe the manner in which the mayor, council members, and city employees should treat one another, city staff, citizens, constituents and others when representing the city. The constant and consistent theme in the guidelines of any code of conduct is “respect.”

Elected officials and city employees experience significant workloads and tremendous stress in making decisions and providing services. Despite these pressures, elected officials and city employees are called upon to exhibit appropriate behavior at all times. The demonstration of respect and civility for each individual through words and actions is the cornerstone that will help guide the mayor, council members and city employees to “do the right thing” in even the most difficult situations.

Advantages of the Code of Conduct

The reasons or advantages of a code of conduct can vary from one city to the next, but here are a few:

- Preserve and enhance the positive image of the city.
- Ensure city council meetings are productive, civil and orderly.
- Improve the overall morale and productivity of city employees.
- Increase the level of confidence and trust that citizens have in their city government.
- Enhance the city's ability to recruit and retain qualified city employees.
- Improve the city's ability to attract businesses, industries and residents to the community.

The Content

The content of a code of conduct policy is something that will require much discussion and review. After reviewing examples from cities in Iowa that have adopted a code of conduct or code of ethics, the following can be used to start the discussion. There is no need for your city to start from scratch on this process. The content of a code

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of conduct could include:

- Clarification of all roles and duties.
- Compliance with state laws on such things as the open meetings law.
- Professional conduct at public meetings.
- Conflicts of interest.
- Gifts and favors.
- Handling of confidential information.
- Proper use of public resources.
- Positive work environment.
- Civility and mutual respect.
- Adhering to the chain of command.

Compliance and Enforcement

The actual preparation of a code of conduct could be the easy part, but the more challenging task may be the enforcement of it. The enforcement of the provisions of a code of conduct could be included in the city's employee handbook or personnel policies. City employees will be motivated to comply with the code of conduct in order to remain in good standing with their supervisors.

ADMINISTRATION FOCUS

The more difficult task may be how to motivate the mayor and city council members to comply with the code of conduct. The code of conduct will need a section on compliance and enforcement, which could refer to an orientation process for newly elected officials. It could also include a signed statement acknowledging receipt of the code of conduct and a willingness to adhere to it.

The code may also need a process for enforcement and a review of the consequences for noncompliance. While it would hopefully never be required, flagrant violations of the code of conduct by elected officials could be addressed through a process of public censure and notice to their supervisors (the voters) that the offender be “called to task” and possibly not reelected to another term.

Best Time to Adopt

Some people may reason that their city has no issues at this time and that there is no need for a code of conduct. However, the best time to adopt a code of conduct is during those times when there are no major controversies or conflicts. The adoption of a code of conduct can then be completed in a calm, civil and orderly environment. When the need or urgency to adopt such a code is during turbulent times, it could be a more controversial and emotionally charged task. Hopefully, all the players in your city will conclude that there is no time like the present to adopt a code of conduct or code of ethics for your city. ●

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