

Handbook Highlight from the Montana Municipal Officials Handbook

Citizen Participation and Interaction

7.1 Citizen Participation and Interaction

As a municipal elected official, your responsibility is to represent and act on behalf of not only a constituency but also the community as a whole. With this responsibility comes the task of knowing how to interact with the public effectively and how to actively promote citizen participation. This chapter provides an overview of techniques and theories for dealing with the public including background on representing the community, political parties and interest groups, neighborhood politics, and use of community surveys and related sampling techniques. Providing for effective citizen participation and interaction is not only in your interest as a municipal official, but it's a fundamental principal of good democratic governance.

7.101 Representing the Community: Trustees vs. Instructed Delegates

An interesting issue that any elected official will face is how to represent various citizens and their interests within a community. Often, the choice that an official is faced with involves acting as a trustee or as an instructed delegate. The concept was originally defined by the 18th century British statesman Edmund Burke who explained that legislators should act as trustees according to their “enlightened conscience” and should not sacrifice their “mature judgment” to the wishes of their constituents.

The trustee makes decisions based on their sense of right and wrong and what they believe will be in the best interest of the public as a whole. Generally, the decision takes into consideration both the present and the future with a focus on the long-term implications of an action. Because of personal experience or professional background, the elected official may have knowledge of certain facts that define a policy question and thus may better understand the costs and consequences of a decision than a majority of his or her constituents.

Consequently, an official may be obliged to a higher standard of accountability in advancing the public interest in the face of competing private interests and irrespective of re-election consequences.

Alternatively, an instructed delegate votes and makes his/her decisions based on the majority of one's constituents, or the people that voted for him/her. The instructed delegate acts as an agent of the voters and thus will reflect the will of the majority of the representative's constituents. Under these circumstances, the official will base decisions on what the voters want even if the official does not agree and irrespective of what is in the public's interest. This decision-making strategy will not satisfy the interests of all the citizens nor necessarily meet the fundamental needs of the community but it will probably facilitate reelection of the municipal official.

The arguments for and against the "instructed delegate" and "trustee" decision making strategies have been pondered by political philosophers for centuries with little improvement since Burke first formulated the options. Today, however, experienced representatives seem to understand that, on a great many minor issues and on some not-so-minor issues, they may be able to respond as an "instructed delegate" to the demands of their constituents. At other times and on other issues, the well-being of the community requires that the representative transcend the wishes of even a large majority of constituents and vote, instead, for his or her understanding of the public's interest and, in doing so, risk losing the esteem as well as the votes of his or her own constituency. The reality is that no elected official serving his or her community as a member of the governing body wants to vote against the will of a majority of the community. He or she will do so and vote as a "trustee" of their community's well-being only under the most clear cut and urgent circumstances and not always even then.