

*Why Your City Council Makes Dumb Decisions . . .
and What You Can Do About It*

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Thank you!



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Introduction

Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.
- Theodore Roosevelt

Every city council makes dumb decisions.

Someone had to say it. I just did.

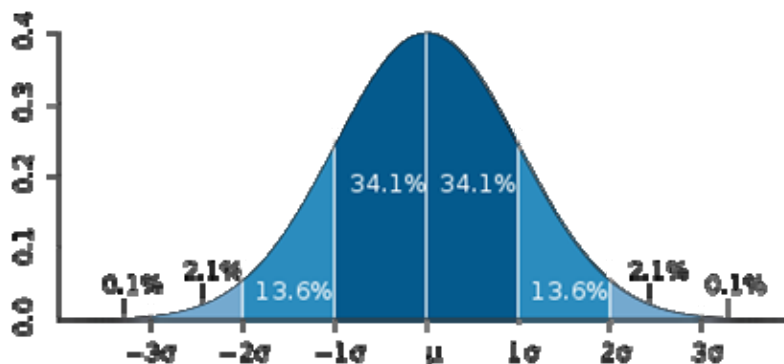
But how do I know? How can I say that EVERY city council makes dumb decisions. It's very simple: everyone makes dumb decisions. Every individual, every organization, every unit of government ... at one time or another, they all make dumb decisions. (And while the title of this ebook refers to city councils, "country board" or "school board" could be used instead.)

For over 30 years, I have been participating in and attending city council and other local government meetings. From my humble beginnings as a sarcastic political cartoonist, to mayor, county board supervisor and local government lobbyist, I have literally sat in every seat in the room at these meetings.

When attending a meeting, I study the participants. Just as a sports coach scouts an upcoming opponent, I scout potential political supporters and opposition. I have made it an art form.

During those hundreds of meetings, I have witnessed many dumb decisions being made. Some dumber than others. Some really dumb.

In order to understand how these dumb decisions can happen, I will use the normal distribution (Bell) curve.



The normal distribution curve above indicates that of every hundred city council representatives (hereafter referred to as aldermen), 2.1% of them will be excellent, and 2.1% will be awful at their job.

There are excellent and awful doctors. There are excellent and awful bankers. There are excellent and awful postal carriers. There are going to be excellent and awful aldermen.

Another 13.6% are equally distributed just below excellent or just above awful. Lumped in the middle is the vast majority of average aldermen at 68.2%.

Did you expect better than this? Did you think that somehow only the best and brightest run for and get elected to city council? Think again.

My experience suggests that about two thirds of all mayoral and city council races are unopposed. The voters only have the opportunity to vote for a single candidate, who may or may not be better than nobody. If the races are contested, the winner is often chosen based on personal popularity rather than views on issues. This means that if you have ten aldermen, plus a mayor who breaks a tie, seven of those members will be average. That leaves just four of them who are well above or below the average members.

There will be times when every city council has below-average participants. Other times they will have overachievers. Most of the time they will limp along from crisis to crisis, just doing an average job. They make a few blunders along the way to counteract their good decisions.

This is not to disparage anyone who serves. These are just the facts.

Take the best auto mechanic, the best insurance representative, add a fantastic stay-at-home mom who also home schools, a retail sales associate, three retired whatever's, and what do you have? You have the makeup of an average city council.

They may be, and probably are, very nice people. But this is a recipe for a dumb decision to be made 2.1% of the time. Another 13.6% of the time a poor decision will be made. The normal distribution curve tells us that.

Can anything be done to improve the odds so a dumb decision isn't reached? Of course. There are things the members can do, and also things the citizens can do, to reduce the risk of making a dumb decision.

But in order to improve the performance of your city council you need to first understand what factors lead to the making of a dumb decision.

Three Reasons Why a City Council Makes a Dumb Decision

Democracy is based on the conviction that there are extraordinary possibilities in ordinary people.
- Harry Emerson Fosdick

Reason 1: Rookie Mistakes

Good judgment comes from experience. Experience comes from bad judgment.
- Jim Horning

Your city council is a collection of novice members who are continuously being replaced. Every one of them starts out as a raw rookie. I don't care what their professional background is; when they first get elected to office, they start out as a raw rookie.

Sometimes these raw rookies have run for office on a single issue. They are going to lower taxes, or have a zoning issue, or some other agenda. They have no other real reason for running for office.

Whatever their reason for running for alderman, decisions must be made on issues with which they have absolutely no experience or background. How many people have life experiences in police, fire, libraries, streets, parks and recreation, waste management, storm water runoff and so forth? Nobody, of course. Yet every month, aldermen are expected to vote, determine policies and spend money in every one of these areas.

What do rookies do that experienced veterans don't? They make more mistakes and dumb decisions.

New aldermen are like deer in headlights. It takes a minimum of one year to go through everything they deal with on an annual basis. We are talking a big learning curve. Then, just when they finally learn what is really going on ... they quit. The average length of service on a city council is about four years. There is a constant turnover of rookies.

One of the worst rookie decisions I ever had to make as a mayor was during a tie-breaking vote on which grader we would purchase for the street department. Me? I was the person in the room who had the least knowledge, experience, or even interest in which grader was best, and I had the final decision? Who wrote these rules?

It happens all the time, on issues of much greater importance than which grader to purchase. Raw rookies making decisions. Dumb decisions, sometimes? Unfortunately, they are unavoidable.

Reason 2: Decisions on the Lesser of Two Evils

"Politics is not the art of the possible. It consists in choosing between the disastrous and the unpalatable." - John Kenneth Galbraith

Your city council has to make decisions to solve problems. Problems are situations that have no good solutions. If there were good solutions, they would not be problems; they would be opportunities.

Therefore, since there are no good solutions to the problem, whatever decision is reached could be interpreted to be dumb. Fair or not, that is how it is.

There is never any good solution to major street/sidewalk repairs. There is never a good solution to wage negotiations. There is never a good solution to crime prevention. Get the picture?

Yet all these issues and more end up on the city council desk each month.

Each month decisions are made by selecting the “lesser of two evils.”

And sometimes the wrong evil is chosen.

Reason 3: Lack of Input from Citizens

*Change from the Top Down happens at the will and whim of those below.”
- Peter Block*

Often a city council is accused of doing things in secret. They are accused of withholding information from citizens. But many times I find just the opposite to be true.

Citizens withhold their questions and views on issues from their alderman. They complain about not being “listened to” when they didn't even let their voices be heard by the appropriate decision makers to begin with.

I don't know how many times a citizen has asked me, after a decision had been made, “Did you consider this? Did you know that?” I would look at them and answer, “No. Why didn't you bring this up this before? You knew we were discussing this issue.” Then they would whine, “Well, I just figured you knew.” They figured wrong ... I didn't know.

What I do know is that aldermen do appreciate thoughtful, courteous, timely input on any issue. The problem is getting it!

Four Steps Aldermen can take to Reduce the Risk of Making A Dumb Decisions

Success seems to be connected with action. Successful people keep moving. They make mistakes, but they don't quit. - Conrad Hilton

If an alderman wishes to be anything better than just average, it takes work. Nobody lucks into being a good or great alderman. There are no shortcuts.

1) Attend Training Sessions

*All men who have turned out worth anything have had the chief hand in their own education.
- Sir Walter Scott*

Politics is one of the few professions where absolutely no experience is required. What do you think when you see a job posting that says: “No experience required”? You think: low-level job.

There is a quick lube place in my town whose ad for help always says, “No experience required.” I don't take my car there. I want someone with a little training under the hood of my car.

I also want my rookie aldermen to get some training. I am constantly amazed at the lack of training aldermen receive. They intentionally do not put money in the budget for training. It is like admitting they don't know everything if they think they need training.

Every city budget should include funds for aldermen to attend training a minimum of two days a year. Training is available to them through municipal leagues and associations.

When they run for re-election they should be asked how many days of training they attended during their term. If they didn't attend training, voters deserve to know why they didn't.

I don't know about you, but I want the person who represents me to get better at their job. I want someone who takes it seriously enough that they recognize their inexperience and want to do something about it. I can't guarantee that attending training will make you a good or excellent alderman, but I do guarantee that you will never become a good or excellent alderman if you don't attend training.

It is not just the training sessions which are valuable; aldermen who attend the training sessions have the opportunity to meet and network with others who have similar problems.

When going to a training session, I have always had a goal of learning one thing I wanted to try. I didn't care if it was a three-hour or three-day session; I just wanted to learn one thing. And if you learn one thing after another, pretty soon you've accumulated quite a bit of knowledge.

I was at a meeting where the topic under discussion was whether the zoning director should attend the state zoning directors' convention. One of the committee members stated, “I don't want her going

somewhere, learning something new and trying to bring it back here.”

Do you think he went to his state convention to possibly “learn something new”?

Should he?

I believe he should.

2) Read Background Material

Make sure you know the issues. Know how to make the most effective case for those issues, and forget about personality. - Anonymous

Aldermen need to read any and all background information that is provided to help them make their decisions.

There is only one thing worse than an alderman trying to make an informed decision on a problem that has no good solution. That is an alderman who does not even attempt to make an informed decision on solving the problem. He or she goes to meetings never having read any background material or done any research on issues coming up for vote.

If you are extremely lucky, you have staff who prepare and explain, without prejudice, all the options for you to consider. The pluses and minuses of each option are explained in an unbiased process.

But sometimes the staff may have their own agenda for the passage or defeat of an item. Unbiased information is not provided, and the decision-making process is tainted.

That said, there will be some issues that are going to be far beyond your ability to comprehend, no matter how much you read or how many questions you ask.

Me? I have to make the final decision on which grader to purchase?

Don't make excuses when this occurs. It happens to everyone. Nobody is an expert on every issue and if they claim to be they are wrong.

Prepare yourself the best you can for every issue. That is all anyone can expect. But it is expected of you by your constituency.

3) Do Your Own Research

*I've got this theory that if you give 100% all the time, somehow things will work out in the end.
- Larry Bird*

The best aldermen I have seen were never afraid to do their own research on an issue. I know of many who have driven on their own dime to visit a distant city that had overcome the same problem they

were now facing. Many others have made phone calls or sent emails.

Some city administrators prefer aldermen not do research on their own. To them I say: tough.

If you have been attending training sessions you have met peers from other locations that you can tap for information. Your municipal league might also be able to help.

Never apologize for doing your own research.

4) Ask Questions Before the Meeting

*It is better to debate a question without settling it than to settle a question without debating it.
- Joseph Joubert*

As you prepare for your upcoming meeting and issues, questions will sometimes arise. Perhaps something doesn't make sense. Your background material should clearly indicate who is available to answer questions. Someone's name should be attached to every proposed action or discussion item.

Questions should not be held until meeting time. Answers to questions often require time and research to answer.

If questions are held until the meeting, the answers may not be available or well-researched. This can lead to the postponement or tabling of items, or, worse, a decision being made without all information being available.

The earlier in the process that you start asking questions, the more fully you will understand the issue. The more you understand the issue, the better the chance that you will make the best decision possible.

Three Steps Voters Can Take to Help Reduce Dumb Decisions

“Think big about what you can achieve: Think small about how to achieve it.”

General Bill Crees

Can one citizen change the course of a city council decision? Absolutely.

But that one citizen needs to know where to start. Then, once you begin, the more time and hard work you put into the project, the more likely you are to succeed. Pretty much like anything else in life: you start with small steps and gradually expand your universe.

1) Cast Knowledgeable Votes

“Bad officials are elected by good citizens who do not vote.” - George Jean Nathan

When my son Jeff graduated from high school his gift from his Aunt Sue was a tablecloth that fit over a card table. It looked like a little patchwork quilt, with small squares and triangles. The idea was to have people at his graduation party write small notes or “words of wisdom” to Jeff.

What does a father write in a small two-by-three inch square for his son’s graduation? Now, I’m realistic: I know that this tablecloth will be put away and not looked at for years. So what do I write that will inspire my son to say, years from now: “Yup, that’s Dad.”

I wrote: *“Vote Always ... Always Vote. Love, Dad.”*

There were no better words of wisdom that I could possibly give my son, because casting knowledgeable votes at each and every election has always been very important to me..

Voting for aldermen is just as important as voting for governor, senator or president. Each candidate needs to be examined prior to the election and your vote should be cast based on solid research of their background.

It impossible to change the fact every new member starts out as a rookie. But every effort should be made to make sure your alderman vote is the best you can possibly make.

2) Watch, Listen and Learn

Planning without a vision is a waste of time. Vision without planning is a daydream.

- Anonymous

Political awareness is not an event: it is an educational process. It is ongoing and never-ending. Political awareness cannot be accomplished by reading your newspaper or through your local TV or radio stations. Those outlets report what has happened. They do not, for the most part, report on what *might* happen. Citizens need to know what issues are slowly simmering in the process.

You need to **Watch** your city council.

Watching your city council starts by keeping an eye on the agendas of all meetings for upcoming issues. The real discussion of issues often comes at the committee level. These agendas must also be watched. The excuse of “I didn't know you were talking about this” gets pretty old to aldermen. You need to take responsibility for knowing what issues are being discussed by your city council.

The computer and the Internet have made the job of following agenda items much simpler than it was in years past. Most cities have a website where upcoming agendas are posted and easily viewed. There is no excuse for any city not to have such a website. Like training for aldermen, funds should be budgeted for a website which is updated regularly with new agendas.

You also need to watch some city council meetings. Not on community access TV: you need to actually go sit in the room and watch these meetings.

Local elected officials do a more thorough job of research and deliberation if they know they are being watched. Everyone does a just a little bit better job if they know they are being watched. That is just human nature. They need to be watched to ensure maximum productivity.

You need to go once a year to keep up with turnover. A year seldom goes by without someone new coming on board.

When you attend a meeting to watch, make sure you arrive at least twenty minutes early. You do this to watch the aldermen as they enter. The first thing you watch for is who hasn't opened their background packet yet. They have done nothing to prepare for this meeting. Some open the packet and try to hide they are just opening the packet. Others joke about it and seem rather proud that they have not prepared for the meeting.

Others have opened their packet before they enter but haven't read anything. They just are just as unprepared as those who just opened their packet, but are not as obvious. You can spot them because they are attempting to speed-read over the material. (These are not the same as those who have prepared and are slowly reviewing the information.)

Hopefully there will not be more than two or three of these unprepared members, depending on the size of your council.

During the meeting, watch the members individually. Do they seem interested in the issues being discussed? Do they participate in the discussion? Watch their body language as others speak.

You need to **Listen** what is being said.

Who are the “leaders” and who are the “followers”? Who doesn't have a clue?

Who asks intelligent questions and has a grasp of the issue being discussed?

Who intelligently explains their votes, and who just votes, while not having a clue about what they are voting on?

Who do you believe is doing a good job and deserves to be re-elected?

Who don't you want to vote for even if they are running unopposed?

It is amazing what you can hear if you really listen.

You need to **Learn** about the rules and players

Your city council meeting is run by rules. Rules change from one city to another, and there are no right or wrong rules, so long as they are legal. There are just different ways to conduct a meeting. Robert's Rules of Order is the generic term used to describe these rules. Very seldom is Robert's enforced to the letter. Local customs can even at times shred Robert's.

The only way to learn the rules of your city council is to see them in action: to see everything going on in the room. Get familiar with the territory, just in case there is ever the need for you to play their game. If you have witnessed meetings and have some idea what to expect, it makes for a much more comfortable situation. You will be more relaxed. And if you are more relaxed you will do a better job

You also learn about your aldermen. You learn that they have personalities. They have faces.

You learn which alderman you would want on your side if you had a problem with the city. It may not be your alderman. It's nice to know who really has influence on the city council and who doesn't.

You can learn all that and more by watching and listening.

Remember, nothing happens in city government without having a meeting about it.

Always be prepared for that meeting. You never know when it might come.

3) Offer Thoughtful, Courteous and Timely Input on Issues of Concern to You

The right to be heard, does not automatically include the right to be taken seriously. - Hubert Humphrey

I believe the best form of communication with any elected official is written. This could be a letter with a stamp on it or an email, but it should be written. Do not use email attachments.

I prefer written over verbal communication, so they have a written copy of my thoughts that they can refer to, instead of wondering, "What did he say?"

Your input should be knowledgeable. Know what you are talking about.

If you are citing statistics, state the source.

Do not just oppose solutions to issues. Present what you believe is the best solution and why.

Be courteous. Don't call names.

Be professional: sign your name.

Don't make threats like, "I won't vote for you."

Never, never say, "I pay your salary."

Also, when an alderman makes a vote you agree with, thank them. Via letter or email, send a note of thanks.

Make your views on an issue known to the elected official as soon as possible after you learn of the issue. Do not wait. The longer you wait to express your views, the less influence you will have.

Conclusion

*Do not let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do.
- John Wooden*

All this watching, listening and learning has benefits.

Valuable contact with local officials and knowledge of how local government operates is obtained. You not only see your local officials in action; your local officials see you in the audience and start to know who you are. Yes, this can be accomplished over time, one meeting a year! So few people attend local government meetings that, believe me, if you start attending, you will be noticed.

You will become more respected by your local elected officials. You came to a meeting to “watch, listen to and learn” how your local government works. What is there not to respect about that?

Attending one meeting a year won’t make you an expert instantly. One meeting a year will never make you an expert. However, one meeting a year, over time, will make you much more politically aware of your local government than you would be if you don’t attend any meetings. It also should come as no surprise to you that the more meetings you attend, the more you will learn.

If at some point you decide to run for city council, then attending meetings becomes a necessity. As soon as you start to think about running for council, start attending every council meeting and at least two committee meetings a month. There is no better way to learn all the issues that must be debated than to attend the meetings where the debate occurs. If you can't discipline yourself to attend these meetings as a candidate, you won't be able to discipline yourself to attend the meetings after the election. Use the meetings as practice. If you don't like the practices, you won't like the game.

Do you remember the General Bill Creech quote, “**Think big about what you can achieve: Think small about how to achieve it.**”?

Taken one by one, the steps I have outlined for you to become a more involved citizen are small steps.

It is not a big task to cast knowledgeable votes.

It is not a big task to attend one government meeting a year.

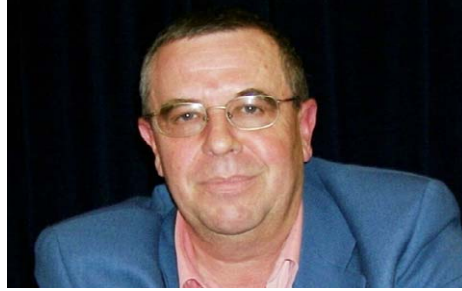
It is not a big task to give knowledgeable, courteous, timely input on issues that concern you.

But think about the influence you can have on your elected officials if you do these small tasks.

The time to start is now.

*“Follow the path of the unsafe, independent thinker.
Expose your ideas to the dangers of controversy.
Speak your mind and fear less the label of “crackpot” than the stigma of conformity.
And, on issues that seem important to you, stand up and be counted at any cost.”
- Thomas Watson, former president of IBM*

About the Author



I'm a junkie. A political junkie. A local political junkie.

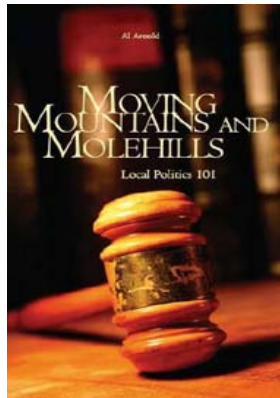
I need a daily fix of politics.

It all started as a young lad, when I would deliver newspapers to the home of my mayor. As I delivered those newspapers I would think to myself, "Someday, I'll have your job." I didn't even know what a mayor did, but I felt destined to be one. And I was. Again and again and again.

For over thirty years I have been involved in local government. I have chaired hundreds of meetings and attended many more than that. I have sat in every seat of the room at those meetings.

My observations over the years what happens at those meetings led me to publish *Moving Mountains and Molehills: Local Politics 101*, a self-help book on how to fight city hall.

I am the Local Government Pontificator!



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or for media interviews, please contact him at**

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