

I've worked closely with city councils for four cities. Evansville has good people on its council. From all that I see, they act with good intentions and with the public interest in mind.

We recently had elections of city council members, and last evening the council held its annual reorganization meeting. During the reorganization meeting, committee appointments are decided. A few committees – such as Police Commission and Board of Appeals – are mandatory under state law. Others – such as Plan Commission and Library Board – are technically not mandatory but have statutory requirements if the city wants to conduct certain activities.

However, most of our committees have been created at the discretion of the city council. For example, these include the Water and Light Committee, Finance and Labor Relations Committee, Public Safety Committee, and Economic Development Committee. Cities often create such committees in order to more effectively address and oversee certain topics or city activities.

The League of Wisconsin Municipalities annually, after the spring elections, conducts a New Municipal Officials Workshop. This year, newly elected alderpersons Cheryl Fuchs and Floyd Hayes will be attending. The workshop provides an overview of fundamental topics such as Framework of Wisconsin Local Government, Powers of City Councils, and Procedures for Local Government Meetings. It also includes a few more specialized topics such as Recognizing and Avoiding Conflicts of Interest, Budgeting and Financial Oversight, and Managing Public Works Activities.

I have also seen new officials learn on the job. Typically only one or two appointments are new; most committee members remain and can coach newer appointees. And an outgoing committee chair will often meet with the new chair to bring them up to speed with ongoing and emerging issues.

A couple weeks ago, I attended a meeting of the Park Board. Before the meeting, there was some uncertainty regarding the meeting date. Then during the meeting, there was some confusion when only a copy of the capital budget (but not the operating budget) was available.

After the meeting, I talked with Park Board Chair Todd Culbertson briefly about the possibility of some training or reference material that might help committee chairs in the future. My initial thought was for the chairs, but yes it could easily be available for all committee members. Todd agreed some type of checklist might be beneficial for future committees and future meetings.

So now I'm thinking that we will be developing a reference to help our officials. In some cases it may contain rudimentary information – such as open meetings and fiscal management – relevant to all committees. And in other cases it may be focused to specific committees with information such as the Economic Development Strategy, Park and Outdoor Recreation Plan, or state liquor licenses regulations.

At this point, I can guess at a few topics such as walking quorums (which one or another committee seems to need reminding every year). But for the most part, I do not know what information it will contain or how it will be organized. I need input from the city council and each individual committee about what information would be most helpful and the amount of detail to provide.

But over the next couple months, I think some “Welcome to Your Committee” information could be compiled to assist the various city committees. They have enough work to do as it is, having relevant reference material handy could make their jobs a bit easier.