

“CHARACTERISTICS” FOR MUNICIPAL COUNCILLORS

Preamble: I propose two types of “characteristics” for councilors: “qualities”, which are human characteristics (such as “integrity”) not normally developed from education, training, or experience, and “qualifications” which are generally so developed (such as “knowledge of budgeting practices”). The former are perhaps more important because they are normally an unchangeable part of the person; the latter can be learned IF the person is astute enough to recognize their deficient areas.

Since a council will have a mix of skills, abilities, and knowledge, I view most qualifications” as “wants”, but I believe these qualities are a “must” for all councilors.

I do not regard positions on any particular issue (e.g. “I support community based planning”, or “I do not support direct democracy” as prerequisites for a good councilor. The characteristics below would, hopefully, allow a councilor to examine any particular issue and develop an appropriate conclusion that is logical, supportable, and explainable.

For brevity, I use the pronoun “he” to mean “he or she”.

QUALITIES

Integrity: “Walks the talk”. Integrity is not perfection; mistakes are human. However, he does not lie, mislead, or misrepresent knowingly. Does not allow himself to get into conflicted positions or create perceptions of same. Works for the electorate, not his own interests or special interest groups. In two words, honest and trustworthy. If he says “X”, I can trust 100% that he believes it and means it, and that he has no devious purposes.

Keeps promises unless a clear and convincing requirement to reverse.

Never allows private or personal interests to determine his conduct as a councilor.

Is fully familiar with, subscribes to, and commits to live by the DNV code of conduct.

Personal Courage: Possesses the courage to hold the line against special interest groups or others, even under intense pressure and threat of loss of office, when his analysis indicates those special interests are not aligned with the best interests of DNV.

Willing to take unpopular stands and differ with the majority if convinced he has the proper position for the best interests of the general electorate. Willing to be personally unpopular to do the right thing. Examples: stopping unsustainable policies such as the Heritage and Reserve Fund raids. Willing to educate voters on such issues.

Recognizes the need for and is willing to make painful decisions such as disciplining municipal personnel, including dismissal. Willing to make unpopular facts public instead of hiding them: e.g.: grants, subsidies, etc.

Votes his beliefs and conclusions, as developed with public input. Does not argue one position and then vote the other position.

Not Naive: Businesslike sophistication: not shocked or unduly upset by the idea of firing personnel, using audits or other investigators, discipline of staff, litigation, or taking harsh but justifiable business measures.

Focus and Vision: Recognizes time is finite, and that the electorate is paying council for that time and suffering from improper use of it.

Spends very significant time on vision and strategic planning, recognizing that these are the precursors of plans, programs, and budgets – and indeed of success.

Chases and runs to ground the elephant issues, not the mice. Avoids minutiae and issues not of consequence or not within the jurisdiction or purview of council, regardless of political popularity or political correctness of the issue. Prioritizes ruthlessly. Avoids micro-management of operations and staff. Practices delegation (and the corresponding need for stewardship and effective corrective action where required).

Avoids the natural human tendency to chase issues he is close to or understands, instead of the “grey” ones that have the greatest potential impact on the electorate or are hardest to run to ground.

Decisive. Works a given issue until it is resolved; doesn’t keep deferring it to another meeting, group, or study to avoid making a decision. Works under the “Pareto theory”: excepting atomic bomb issues, an imperfect 90% solution **now** usually beats a 99% solution months later. Recognizes delays and studies have a real cost, both monetary and otherwise.

Willing to say “I have nothing to add on this issue” rather than rambling on and speaking for his allotted time. The natural human tendency to talk on all issues must be avoided by a “professional” councilor. Well prepared for meetings and hence does not waste time on items that he should have known before the occasion.

Clear Thinker: Able to move quickly to the heart of the matter and not get lost in details or abstractions. Develops a quick and thorough (but not over-detailed) understanding of even complex issues. Good assimilator of input from others and seeks it out. Objective in making decisions – lists the pros, cons and risks of each option, seeks other and better options. His decisions and conclusions have a clear logic and evidence trail that he can and will explain. Highly rationale and objective – decisions not based on emotion or thin analysis. Maturity. Sound judgment. Able and willing to ask good and tough questions of Staff.

Respect for Others: Recognizes that different people with different backgrounds have different views. Respects those views and tries to learn from them. Does not demean others. Attacks issues, not people, unless circumstances force otherwise.

A reasonable degree of humility, and a sense of humor, especially under pressure, are essential to achieve respect for others and teamwork.

Seeks and Values Public Input: Recognizes that the electorate contains a mix of highly skilled, educated, and qualified individuals who are a valuable source of information and advice and that harvesting such advice is the hallmark of a strong and intelligent councilor. Encourages, promotes, and harvests such input, even where it may oppose his own views or values. Encourages dissent as a valuable tool to avoid errors and disasters. Is passionately dedicated to doing DNV business in public. Supports transparency and freedom of information.

Leader, Team Player: not a loner; enjoys and can effectively work with people, taking satisfaction from group accomplishments as well as personal ones. Works to build teamwork and alliances, and motivate others to excellence in furtherance of DNV vision and goals. Understands and exercises the basic and well-known principles of leadership. Effective committee worker.

Accountability, Stewardship: Accepts responsibility; does not try to blame others for his or council failures. Willing to submit to scrutiny of his actions and decisions, and the process involved. Recognizes the

need to be a good steward of all DNV assets. Commitment to the job and the time and energy/drive to do it.

QUALIFICATIONS

Recognition of Limitations: Given the inability to attract enough candidates for council with all the desired abilities, skills and knowledge, *this one characteristic is, in my view, a “must”*.

“A man has to recognize his limitations” (with apologies to Clint Eastwood as “Dirty Harry”). Recognizes that he lacks skills, abilities, knowledge, and experience in many areas, and that advancing positions or voting in such cases is dangerous, and demonstrates lack of integrity and professionalism. Recognizes these areas, declares lack of knowledge, and seeks input. In many cases council in general, and often staff, also lack knowledge and expertise and require outside assistance. He must push for this external input.

In my view, a number of current DNV councilors completely lack this key qualification, giving strong views on everything from NAFTA to PPP, about which many have conclusively demonstrated they know little.

Respect for the Democratic Process: Recognizes that he was elected by and is to represent the electorate.

Will vote the general electorate’s wishes even when contrary to his own, barring exceptional and clearly justifiable circumstances. Refuses to bow to pressure of special interest groups if their position will negatively affect the general electorate without net offsetting benefits for all. Does not vote based on “packed” council chambers, but rather on the issue and on the interests of the entire electorate.

Awareness of Community: Knows the community represented in term of geography, culture, history, vision of the future. In touch with what people want and don’t want.

Good Communicator: Can communicate precisely and clearly without long harangues. *At least as good a listener as a talker. Concise and clear in speech.* Really does listen and actively seeks understanding of information from the electorate. Can “think on his feet”, and thinks before speaking.

Doesn’t Need the Council Job: Traditionally, those who actually need the job for personal, financial, or other reasons are unwilling to make the tough

decisions required of them for fear of annoying special interest groups and losing the next election.

Governance: Supports and demands clear, open, transparent corporate governance and processes at all levels including properly structured internal reporting relationships. Promotes governance initiatives such as: full disclosure to ratepayers of even unpopular facts, including benchmarking; “real” performance indicators for DNV and each department with clear accountability and performance management; development of a corporate culture to provide effective and efficient government; code of conduct for staff, effective use of strong citizen advisory committees, audit committee, operational audits.

Absolute minimum use of in-camera proceedings; full explanation as to reasons when used.

Aware of the recent failings in corporate governance in the private sector and acts to eliminate same in DNV (examples: auditors also doing special studies for DNV, DNV internal auditor reporting to mid-level staff).

Knowledge of Effective Management Processes and Business Basics:

Ideally, given that DNV is a corporation with an operating budget of \$100 MM/year, councilors would have experience in corporate life. This is particularly important because the drivers (risks and rewards) influencing civil service staff’s performance are much different than in the private sector, and hence the council cannot act entirely as an arm’s length high level board of directors, particularly since they are elected, not appointed.

Corporate processes that are key to effectiveness (getting the right things done) and efficiency (getting things done right) are items **such as** objective setting, benchmarking, stewardship, performance reviews, salary and incentive systems, all of which are usually poorly done in government organizations. Failure in these “soft” processes almost guarantees bad government. If councilors do not have this background, then training at the overview level should be employed. (Parenthetically, if the District Manager cannot do these processes well, there is little hope – picking the **right** District Manager is Council’s first and key task!)

In terms of business basics, experience in budgeting, understanding basic economics such as rate of return, asset valuation, cost allocation, and time value of money is essential in some council members. Knowledge of the basics of contracting and PPP is important. We can’t expect to make councilors

experts in these fields, but they need basic knowledge to recognize “snow”, and to ask the right questions, (instead of the frequent trivia level questions seen at council), and most importantly, to know what they don’t know.

Councilors and staff traditionally have a habit of “practicing law without a license”. A lawyer as a councilor would perhaps be appropriate.

Most importantly, councilors must recognize develop a vision and proper strategic plan before the budget cycle (DNV’s “strategic plan” is pure motherhood). Councilors with experience in strategic planning are crucial to success; absent which effective outside assistance is required.

Allegiance to Community: Recognizes that he is elected to serve the residents of DNV. Abides by the principle that the individual interests of councilors, staff, and of persons or bodies not residents and taxpayers of DNV must be held secondary to the welfare of DNV electorate, within the limits of law and common sense.

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