



Serving on a Board or Council – It's More Than a Popularity Contest

Board and council members are public servants who represent the utility customers. Important decisions are made by board and council members during every meeting. Many board and council members often do not clearly understand their role, nor do they have a sense of core principles for effective governance. Generally speaking, most board and council members do not have the same level of expertise as staff. As representatives of the public, however, it's the board or council members who bear the burden for sound decision-making on behalf of the public they represent.

The preceding paragraph describes the all-day pre-conference session on Tuesday for the board and council members at KRWA's 54th Annual Conference. The program is entitled "Becoming an Effective and Efficient Board or Council Member".

This program will be presented by Betty Johnson, Betty Johnson & Associates, Lawrence, Kansas, and Betsy Wearing, Dane G. Hanson Foundation, Logan, Kansas.

After you read the excerpt in the next paragraph, I will provide a few examples why I believe board and council members should be required to have some training or at least a briefing on how water and wastewater systems operate.

Serving on a board or council is a great honor and an even greater responsibility. This training session will provide many tools and resources to help board and council members gain confidence and governance skills. The agenda includes group exercises that will encourage discussion and participation. Attend this session to help yourself and your RWD or city.

A more to-the-point way to state the previous sentence might be as follow. Attend this session to help yourself and your RWD or city, or continue to perform in the same uninformed manner, thereby possibly failing to serve the people you represent.

In nearly five years of working for KRWA and providing technical assistance in water and wastewater through different programs, only once has a board member, council person, mayor, or chairperson come on-site to the technical assistance (TA) being provided to the utility. In defense of the previously mentioned folks, most probably didn't know when the KRWA staff member would be onsite (but should they?). In most wastewater systems, if KRWA is on-site providing TA, the wastewater system is beginning to decline in its effectiveness: keeping pollutants within the collection system or preventing pollutants from entering the receiving stream. To me, the issue being addressed seems like an issue that the board/council would want to be aware of.

I have been asked to attend numerous council and board meetings for various reasons including relaying information that the operator failed to provide in previous board or council meetings. Often, the board wants to hear from someone other than the operator. I am okay being that person. However, the disconnect between the board/council and the operator could have been alleviated with better communication. This would also require the board/council to be open



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for a field trip to the water or wastewater treatment facilities. For smaller communities, the wastewater facility generally means a trip to the lagoon ponds, also known as waste stabilization ponds.

Many board/council members are not eager to go to the wastewater treatment facilities, so maybe they can at least go to the facility's gate, and we can explain how the system operates. This is also a good time for the board/council to be informed on how much time the operator needs to spend at the water or wastewater facility each day. The amount of time depends on the type and condition of the treatment facility. I have never heard from an operator how much extra time they have to spend at either treatment facility.

Recently I was contacted by a system that had a loss of water pressure below the minimum required 20 psi in the water distribution system. The cause was suspected to be a significant water line break. The system's water treatment facility was having issues maintaining enough water in the distribution system to maintain the minimum 20 psi in the distribution system. The common way to look for a leak in this town of approximately 2,000 people is to drive around and look for water surfacing or running down the street. For this tactic to be effective, it requires the distribution lines in the system to have water in them that could leak out at the line break location or in that general vicinity.

The newly elected mayor hears the city workers discussing their efforts to locate the suspected water leak and the potential supply issue at the city's water treatment plant. So then, the mayor jumps into action. Not totally understanding the issue, his first action was to post on social media. This wouldn't seem like such a bad move as long as the mayor consults with the water department before telling the town that there will be a water shortage, so fill up your bathtubs and any container that can hold water. Trying to locate the line break became even more difficult due to further draining of the distribution system because people were filling storage containers. The post by the mayor only compounded the problem by causing a decrease in pressure within the distribution system allowing the pressure to drop below the required 20 psi and placing an increasing strain on the water treatment facility. To be clear, I did not read the post, but more than one city employee told me what was included in the post.

Most boards and council members consist of a variety of individuals that include a mixture of longtime residents of the community and people



An update on Brian, the cyclist . . .

While writing this article, I received a call from someone who stated their name clearly and perfectly enunciated his words. From my neck of the woods, myself included, pronunciation of words in some social circles is not the most crucial subject matter openly discussed. This call seemed very official, followed by, "You don't know who I am!" At this point, the caller certainly had my attention. The caller explained that he had recently read my previous article in the November issue of *The Kansas Lifeline* magazine (see pages 68 – 72) about Brian and his journey to see his ailing mother. The caller said the article moved him, and he shared it with this family. The caller said that he has had opportunities in his life to do random acts of kindness but thus far had not seized the moment. Because of reading the article, he plans to in the future. The caller also asked if I had talked to Brian, and I told him I had spoken with him during the holidays. Brian said he is ready to move south away from the North Dakota cold.

Thank all those who reached out to me about the article. I sincerely appreciate all the kind words.

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who have moved into the area. They will consist of many different personalities, some with good old common sense who have the utility and its customers in mind when making critical decisions, and others may not. No matter the makeup of the board and council, it is essential that they become educated on how the utility works so that intelligent decisions can be made during critical times.

Generally, this is when the council/board goes into panic mode. An example of such a situation would include the following scenario: The utility receives a letter from the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (my former employer for ten years). This letter describes violations or out-of-compliance status of the water or wastewater treatment facilities. This letter will contain strong language that suggests potential penalties and fines. These letters are serious and should be acknowledged, and corrective actions should be taken.

Usually, the next step is to have an engineering firm meet with the governing body to offer alternatives to return the system to compliance. In fact, it is probably a good idea to request more than one engineering proposal to help avoid potential problems such as an over-designed alternative or unexplained cost escalation. There may be times when engineer's estimates might be considerably lower than the

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final cost of a project. This is often seen as a lowball effort by an engineering firm to get the contract but can also be caused by the time that's needed to get a project through the planning and approval stages. Also, the time it takes to obtain financing can increase project costs.

Generally, a governing body will find it difficult to disagree with an engineer's proposal. That is the person that is the expert and should be recommending the best possible alternative. Boards and councils must become educated enough to ask pertinent questions about the utilities. And that is why I recommend boards and council members attend the pre-conference session mentioned previous in this article – "Becoming an Effective and Efficient Board or Council Member" on Tuesday, March 28, 2023 at KRWA's 54th Annual Conference. There are many other sessions that will also be helpful for board and council members for their oversight of their utility operations.

Jason Solomon works primarily as a wastewater tech at KRWA and trainer. He previously was District Environmental Administrator at the Kansas Department of Health and Environment southeast Kansas office in Chanute, Kansas.



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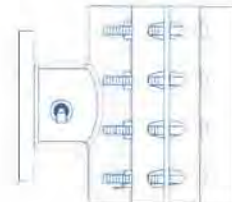
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