

Civility Matters: How Officials and Citizens Can Work Together for Better Local Government

In recent years, incivility has become a growing concern in local government as hostile interactions can disrupt operations and erode trust between elected officials and the communities they serve. Because local government functions best when citizens and officials work collaboratively, it is important to implement approaches that promote civility, transparency, and mutual understanding. These strategies include maintaining emotional discipline, increasing transparency, encouraging structured communication, and supporting civic education.

To learn more about how local government and citizens interact, I spoke with my grandfather, the town board chairman of Spring Grove, Wisconsin. His experiences helped me understand why incivility happens in local government and how it might be addressed.

My grandfather believes that citizens often start incidents of incivility. Many frustrations stem from concerns about taxes, with residents believing the local government should “get by with less” and operate with fewer resources. Residents also tend to put their own needs ahead of the community’s. In Spring Grove, for example, citizens often demand that their personal roads be plowed or repaired first, regardless of whether those roads serve fewer people than major routes or other routes more in need of immediate services. These demands sometimes lead to angry calls or harsh comments aimed at local officials.

One of the most important ways to keep things civil is to practice emotional discipline. Officials need to listen carefully, think before they respond, and control their reactions. Instead of reacting defensively or matching someone’s anger, they should focus on building good relationships in the community and not making conflict worse. For instance, when my grandfather gets a call from someone demanding that a road be repaved, he listens, shows understanding, and calmly explains

when the repairs will be done. Solving these problems often means he has to mediate between residents, talk with landowners, and work with the whole town board.

An additional key strategy is learning not to take public criticism personally. Harsh comments can easily trigger defensive or negative reactions but doing so risks damaging the credibility of the official and the government they represent. Instead, officials should ask clarifying questions, set boundaries, and pause conversations when constituents become uncivil. Resetting the tone, rather than matching a citizen's negative energy, leads to more productive conversations and results.

To encourage productive discussions, local governments should invite citizens to participate in structured public meetings and use social media carefully. Social media is helpful for sharing news and getting people involved, but it can also spread negativity. For example, when my village government posted about a new subdivision and golf course on Facebook, the comments quickly turned negative and unhelpful. To handle this, governments can continue using social media for announcements while limiting or turning off comments. This approach maintains transparency while directing citizens to appropriate channels for their feedback, including public meetings or direct communication with officials, where discussions can be moderated and respectful.

Citizens also play a crucial role in maintaining civility. According to my grandfather, many people do not understand how a town government operates or how decisions are made. One of the most important things citizens can do is to educate themselves about how town government functions. As the Wisconsin Towns Association notes, “no other form of government is as connected to the people as town government, where the people govern themselves and unleash the potential of democracy.” Understanding this structure empowers citizens to participate effectively and respectfully in their government. In Wisconsin, a town government consists of an elected board, including a chairperson and supervisors, and a clerk and a treasurer who can be elected or appointed, depending on the official township ordinance. These officials manage elections, property taxes, road maintenance,

and other essential services. When citizens are informed about local laws, budgets and decision-making processes, they are better equipped to engage constructively, uphold civil discourse, and build strong partnerships with their elected officials. Citizens engaged with their local government may also choose to run for elected office and serve their communities in the future.

Maintaining civility is crucial to a functioning government, especially in smaller communities where relationships are personal and interactions are frequent. Both citizens and officials must hold each other accountable and remember that even when conversations become tense or discouraging, it is still possible to return to a respectful foundation. Civility is not something that disappears permanently; communities can rebuild it through steady effort and mutual respect. By increasing transparency, promoting open communication, and practicing emotional discipline, town board officials can create an environment where citizens feel heard rather than dismissed. At the same time, informed and engaged citizens help strengthen the connection between themselves and their local government. When both sides follow these practices, they create a community where productive discussions are not only possible but expected—and where civic participation is something everyone can be proud of.

Work Cited

“Wisconsin Towns Association.” *Wisconsin Towns Association About Town Government*,
<https://www.wisctowns.com/about-us/town-government/>.