

What strategies can be implemented by local government officials in collaboration with citizens to encourage and maintain civility?”

In an era often defined by polarization, local town government remains the most critical frontier for maintaining civility. When governance becomes an abstract concept, friction grows; conversely, when citizens and local officials ground their interactions in a shared responsibility for their immediate environment, collaboration replaces conflict. Growing up in the Driftless Region of La Crosse, Wisconsin, nestled between the bluffs and the Mississippi River, I learned early on that my surroundings are not a passive backdrop. Watching the river change levels and tending the farm and woodlands my family has cared for since 1965 instilled in me a deep sense of stewardship. My connection to local civic duty is personal: my grandparents served as town officers, working directly on the frontlines of municipal management. Watching them navigate the daily, practical needs of their neighbors taught me that town government is where policy meets the pavement. To encourage and maintain civility, local officials and citizens must implement strategies that shift the public mindset from passive to active, collaborative creation through project-based civic engagement, structured leadership training, and transparent education.

The first strategy for cultivating long-term civility is building a culture of collaborative creation rather than a standstill. For many citizens, the default reaction to a community issue is searching for the person whose job it is to fix it, which often leads to finger-pointing and frustration. As I learned from my grandparents' tenure as town officers, the most effective local leaders do not simply manage complaints; they invite citizens to be part of the solution. When I noticed that local youth lacked a connection to where their food came from, I chose to act rather than complain. I wrote a grant to design a curriculum and partnered with local farms and food cooperatives to launch "Learn to Live Local," a three-day camp that connected thirty youth and six counselors to the importance of Wisconsin agricultural lands. By creating a replicable model of environmental education, I saw

firsthand that when people are invited to build solutions together, divisive rhetoric melts away. Local town boards can mirror this by actively supporting grassroots citizen initiatives, providing micro-grants or logistical backing for resident-led community projects, and transforming public comment periods into constructive, solution-oriented workshops.

Second, local governments can foster civility by engaging citizens, particularly the youth, in tangible, celebratory community projects. Protecting a community or debating local ordinances does not always have to feel like a fight; it can look like an empowering, shared achievement. When a section of the Mississippi River shoreline near La Crosse suffered from severe erosion, past repair approaches relied strictly on stone riprap. I researched biological restoration methods, secured a youth climate grant, sourced native plants, and mobilized thirty youth volunteers to execute the city's first bio-engineered shoreline restoration. The joy of laboring together to restore wildlife habitats energized the volunteers and prompted the city to request ongoing native planting projects. When town officials invite citizens to better their communities, whether through conservation days, park builds, or infrastructure work, they break down the "us versus them" barrier. When neighbors see one another working toward a shared, visible good, mutual respect and civility are naturally restored.

Third, while hands-on local environmental work provides the physical foundation for community connection, maintaining civil discourse over complex legislative issues requires structural practice. This is where real-life leadership programs become invaluable strategies for both towns and school districts. My experience as a participant in the American Legion Auxiliary Badger Girls State program taught me how civility is fundamentally tied to an understanding of democratic mechanisms. By participating in a fast-paced, immersive simulation of city, county, and state government, my peers and I had to draft, debate, and pass legislation while navigating deeply contrasting viewpoints. Badger Girls State taught me that real civility is not merely about polite agreement; it is about learning the rules of structured debate, practicing active listening, and honoring a process that balances individual

liberty with the public good. Town officials can adapt this framework by collaborating with public high schools to sponsor youth government days or youth councils. By giving young citizens a structured way to practice municipal debate, we strip away the toxic polarization often modeled in national media and replace it with a pragmatic focus on local compromise.

Finally, civility is maintained through transparent, educational bridge-building between grassroots advocates and town policy-makers. Tension often arises from a gap between what citizens feel is urgently needed and what local policy currently allows. To close this gap civilly, we must demystify governance. As the lead plaintiff in *Dunn v. PSC Wisconsin*, a lawsuit advocating for the consideration of greenhouse gas emissions in power plant permitting, I learned how crucial it is to put science directly in front of decision-makers. I later applied this by organizing a two-day trip for twelve youth to Madison to meet with legislators, attorneys, and researchers. Watching a twelve-year-old calmly and confidently present their award-winning renewable energy project to a state legislator proved that education creates civilized, impactful advocacy. Town officials can foster this brand of civility by hosting regular, informal educational forums, inviting high school student representatives to town boards- much like my rewarding experience serving as Onalaska's Board of Education's Student Representative- and mentoring the next generation of civic leaders through organizations like 4-H and Rotary.

In review, civility is not the absence of disagreement; it is the presence of a shared commitment to the common good. My leadership journey, from winning the state and world KidWind Renewable Energy competition and sharing this accomplishment with my state legislators to representing Wisconsin on the National 4-H Conference leadership team at the USDA in Washington, D.C., has always been driven by the belief that individuals can close the gap between science and policy through constructive action. By prioritizing youth mentorship, shared community labor, and open educational

dialogue, Wisconsin's local town officials and citizens can ensure that our local governance remains as resilient, grounded, and enduring as the land we share.

Bibliography

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