

Building Civility from the Ground Up

Last summer at Badger Boys State, I watched a delegate stand up to propose a bill on county road funding. He got three sentences in before someone across the room cut him off. Then another voice piled on. The chair called for order, but the damage was done. The delegate sat down and did not speak again for the rest of the session. This was a room full of high school juniors who had been selected for leadership. If civility breaks down that fast among students in a simulated government, the problem runs deeper than any single meeting. A 2024 National League of Cities survey confirms it at the real level of governance: 87 percent of local officials reported a decline in civil discourse during their time in office (National League of Cities). Civility is the foundation of self-governance, and the cracks are showing. Local government sits closest to the people. That makes it the best place to start fixing things. Three strategies stand out: establishing clear codes of conduct at public meetings, creating shared civic spaces that build relationships across divides, and engaging young people in governance before cynicism takes root.

The simplest step is also the most immediate. Town boards can adopt formal civility codes that apply equally to officials and citizens. The University of Nevada Cooperative Extension recommends that local bodies vote on a Pledge of Civility and review it before each public meeting (Haynes and Burkhardt). A civility code sets one shared expectation: personal attacks, interruptions, and intimidation have no place in democratic deliberation. Officials must lead by example. When board members treat each other with respect during contentious votes, the audience mirrors that behavior. When they don't, the audience mirrors that too. A written code makes the standard visible. It gives the chair a tool to enforce order without appearing arbitrary. Several California municipalities have adopted sample civility policies that lay out specific behavioral expectations for both officials and the public (MRSC).

Wisconsin towns can adapt these models to their own cultures. Productive disagreement needs ground rules. A civility code provides them.

Codes of conduct address the structure of meetings. Civility itself is relational, though, and relationships are built outside the boardroom. Town officials can collaborate with citizens to create shared civic spaces where people interact as neighbors first and political actors second. Farmers' markets, community clean-up days, block parties, and town picnics do something a policy memo never will. They let people see each other as whole human beings. The National League of Cities emphasizes that the structure of civic engagement itself can contribute to greater civility and trust in government (National League of Cities, "Innovative Approaches"). When a resident who disagrees with you on zoning has helped you stack chairs at the town fish fry, the disagreement stays within bounds. Town boards can sponsor and promote these gatherings, dedicating modest budget lines to events that prioritize inclusion across age, background, and political leaning. In small Wisconsin towns, where the population often numbers in the hundreds, a single well-organized community event can shift the tone of an entire year of governance.

The most durable strategy is generational. Young people who participate in local government early are more likely to engage in civic life as adults. Town boards can create youth advisory councils, invite high school students to shadow officials, or partner with schools on civic education projects. At Badger Boys State, I served as a County Executive Supervisor and helped pass twelve county bills. That week taught me that disagreement does not have to be hostile. The delegates who listened more than they argued were the ones who actually moved legislation forward. Programs like these give young people a framework for civil participation before the habits of outrage and disengagement settle in. The Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service has noted that civic engagement among youth increases when local governments create meaningful ways for them to contribute (Wisconsin Institute

for Public Policy and Service). Town boards that invest in youth engagement are investing in the kind of citizens who show up, speak up, and let other people finish their sentences.

Civility will never mean the absence of conflict. Wisconsin towns will always have disagreements about budgets, land use, and roads. The question is whether those disagreements happen in a room where people listen or a room where people shout. A civility code sets the expectation. Shared spaces build trust. Youth programs plant the habit early. None of these strategies requires large budgets or state legislation. They require local officials and citizens who decide, together, that how they treat each other matters as much as the decisions they reach. That delegate at Boys State deserved to finish his sentence. So does every citizen at every town board meeting in Wisconsin.

Works Cited

- Haynes, Marlene, and Fred Burkhart. "Promoting Civility in Our Public Spaces: A Primer for Local Officials." University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, extension.unr.edu/publication.aspx?PubID=5268. Accessed 20 May 2026.
- MRSC. "Community Engagement Resources." MRSC, mrsc.org/explore-topics/engagement/resources/community-engagement-resources. Accessed 20 May 2026.
- National League of Cities. "Innovative Approaches to Civic Engagement." NLC, 18 April 2025, www.nlc.org/article/2025/04/18/innovative-approaches-to-civic-engagement/. Accessed 20 May 2026.
- National League of Cities. "We the Cities: Bridging Our Divides." NLC, www.nlc.org/initiative/we-the-cities-bridging-our-divides/. Accessed 20 May 2026.
- Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service. "Rural Youth Civic Engagement Strategies." WIPPS, wipps.org/publications. Accessed 20 May 2026.