

So you want to be a councillor?

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Local Government 101 columnist **Elizabeth Hughes** says that every three years from December to April she gets asked by potential local government candidates for advice on how to get elected to council. Here's her take.

In my experience, potential candidates come at the idea from one of two perspectives: externally driven and internally motivated. These are not mutually exclusive.

1) It's late summer 2016 and the potential candidate has found themselves at a BBQ, golf club, church or work, and "a number of people" are saying to them:

"You should stand for the council. You'd be so good at it – not like the self-serving / idiotic / stupid / useless / wasteful / ill-disciplined [insert the appropriate offending human characteristic here] people currently running the place."

Or

"You know all about trees / roads / running a business / events / marketing / planning / the RMA / building / community groups / parking / development [insert your own specialty topic here]. You should stand for the council. Lots of us support your thinking. We'd vote for you."

Or

"The council never listens to us but, if you got elected, you'd represent the retired / youth / migrant / artists / developers / greenies / accountants / ratepayers / new mums / anti-fluoride / dog lovers [insert own specialty interest group here] and make things happen for us."

2) The potential candidate has been involved for a number of years in a progressive community or business activity (usually one that intersects with the council in some way) and they are wondering how much more could be achieved by being inside the tent rather than being on the outside.

This is usually how the advice-giving goes...

Here are some questions to honestly answer, some things to think about and then some homework. Once you've answered, thought about and completed these, come back and we'll have another chat.

- What would you be standing for? (As opposed to standing against.)
- Who are you standing for? (While you probably already know a group of people who would love for you to represent them, will you also be able to represent people whose views are different?)
- What specifically do you want to achieve for the city / district / region? (Your vision.)
- What are your bottom lines / non-negotiables? (Not just the things that make your blood boil but also the things that might limit your ability to maintain an open mind.)

And this is the homework I give them

Read (not skim) council / committee agendas from the previous 12 months in the library. This serves two purposes: it gives you an actual visual of the amount of reading required, and it gets you to hang out in a council facility (many potential candidates have never even set foot in a library or a public toilet for that matter). Meet with at least two of the sitting elected councillors – ones you wouldn't normally talk to – and ask them: "What have you achieved since you were elected?"

Read the purpose of local government and parts 1-4 of the Local Government Act 2002 (as well as the relevant clauses and sub-clauses).

Google all the Acts of Parliament that control local government delivery, services and activities (there are 21 of them).

Watch six back-to-back episodes of *Neighbours at War* in one sitting.

And sometimes, they come back for that chat...

Things to think about

Your personality type

There is no one perfect personality for an elected representative but having awareness of your own type is helpful. Some questions that will give you some insight into your personality fit for the job are:

- Do you think it more important to be 'likeable' or 'effective' as a community leader?
- Are you someone who values 'evidence-based' decision-making or 'weight of public opinion' decision-making?
- Where do you think you sit on a 'tedium to excitement' continuum?
- Are you a lone wolf or a collaborator?
- What is your usual response when faced with stupidity, bullying, arrogance and / or extreme earnestness?
- How will you react on learning that something you expected to do is "just not possible" and, on the face of it, looks like "bureaucracy gone mad"? (Honest answers please.)
- What will you do with being constantly reminded that you promised to deliver 'X' when you decided to stand and, as yet, you have been unable to deliver it?

A day in the life of ...

You're in a meeting around the table with 14 people who are nothing like you.

A half-hour Powerpoint presentation has been delivered about installing new public toilets at the park. You'll have already received and read a report about 20 pages long. The report and presentation cover the following context: global tourism trends, regional economic development, the Public Facilities Strategy, sustainability, investment comparisons, land ownership, debt management, future water supply, size of sewage pipes, waste management, depreciation, parking, health and safety installations, colour schemes, signage and (conflicting) views from the community.

You have formed your view. A debate ensues giving everyone five minutes (that's five times 14) to speak.

An alternative perspective on 'availability of parking' is introduced (one of your colleagues was elected because of parking issues). You have your own view on this, and so will everyone else (none are informed views – just views) and another five minutes each is allocated.

A vote is eventually taken on the parking availability issue (probably asking for more information) and you get back to debating the public toilet project.

A decision (vote) may now need to be delayed awaiting the additional information.

Then, a few weeks later, you'll have another report and Powerpoint presentation with some new information added and then debate the public toilets again. You'll need to remember what you said in all previous debates so you don't contradict yourself. (There'll be video or audio footage in case you forget.)

This can go on for several months until the majority are happy one way or the other.

This is democracy and is now your job.

Top ten personal qualities that make an outstanding elected representative

1. A superhuman ability to listen and absorb.
2. The ability to stand back and see all sides of an issue.
3. The ability to compromise and negotiate.
4. The ability to take a long-term view.
5. A vision that is clear and the ability to articulate it in many ways.
6. The willingness to be public property.
7. Good health and resources.
8. Stamina.
9. Integrity.
10. Strong and honest friendships that are separate to your political ambition.

Note: a sense of humour seems to be optional.

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