

Dad Tried to Warn Me

Opinion: The views expressed in this article are my own.

My father tried to warn me about local government. He told me it would be demanding, that the workload would be relentless and that I'd need more patience than I thought I possessed. I listened, nodded, and then largely ignored him.

The truth is that I never expected to be elected.

I'd spent far more time preparing myself for defeat than I had for victory. Then, almost overnight, I found myself sitting around a council table with people who appeared to know exactly what they were doing while I was still trying to work out how everything functioned.

The biggest shock was the reading.

Before becoming a councillor, I imagined attending a meeting every few weeks, discussing a few issues and then getting on with my day. Instead, I discovered an endless stream of reports covering everything from transport and housing to infrastructure, planning, finance and water.

Reading them wasn't the difficult part. Understanding them was.

Local government has its own language. Reports are full of legislation, technical terminology, financial modelling and references to decisions made months or even years earlier. I distinctly remember sitting in front of some of those early reports thinking, "I have absolutely no idea what I'm reading."

That's not a comfortable feeling when you know you'll eventually be asked to vote.

One of the things I underestimated was the weight of responsibility. Every decision affects real people. A vote on infrastructure affects rates. A vote on transport affects how people move around the city. A vote on housing affects communities and neighbourhoods. I worried constantly about making the wrong decision because, in those first few months, I wasn't convinced I fully understood what I was voting on.

I suspect many people assume councillors arrive fully formed, armed with decades of governance experience and an encyclopaedic knowledge of local government. I certainly didn't.

I spent a good part of those first few months convinced that everyone else around the table had received an instruction manual that I'd somehow missed.

Then, around Christmas, I had a chance to slow down and reflect, and I realised I'd been approaching the role entirely the wrong way.

I thought I had to understand every issue, every report and every technical detail. I thought every decision rested on my shoulders. I thought I needed to become an expert in absolutely everything.

I was wrong.

One of the most important lessons I've

learned is that local government is a team effort. Every councillor brings different experiences, different knowledge and different strengths. Some understand finance. Others have expertise in planning, infrastructure, business or community development.

The realisation that I didn't need to know everything was probably the single biggest turning point in my first year as a councillor. My job wasn't to become an expert in every subject. My job was to prepare, ask questions, contribute where I could add value and trust that my colleagues would do the same.

Another surprise was council staff.

Like many people, I'd never really thought about what happened before a report landed on a council agenda. I certainly hadn't appreciated the amount of work that goes into producing the information we rely on to make decisions.

The public sees the meetings. Councillors see everything that happens beforehand.

Engineers, planners, project managers, finance teams, lawyers and many others spend weeks, and sometimes months, researching issues, consulting with communities, preparing options and presenting information. Seeing that process from the inside has given me an enormous amount of respect for the people who keep the organisation moving.

And then there's the public speaking.

I suspect some people assume councillors enjoy standing up in front of a room and speaking confidently about complex topics.

I can assure you that isn't universally true.

I'm perfectly comfortable speaking when I've prepared my notes, but ask me to speak off the cuff and there's a very real possibility that every useful thought will immediately abandon me. It's still one of the most challenging parts of the job.

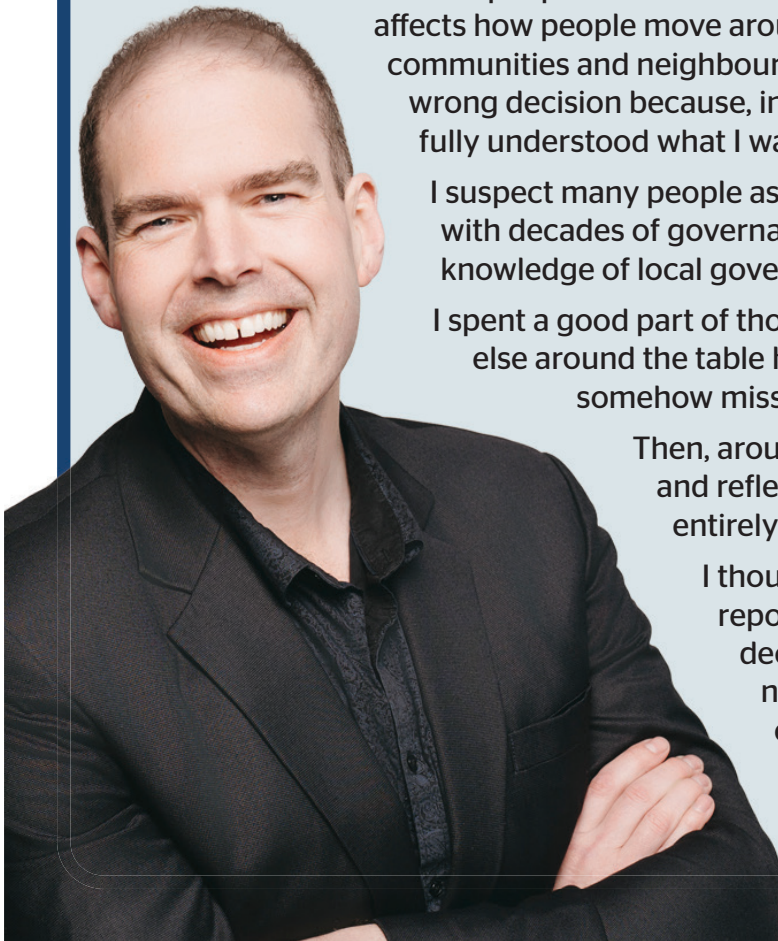
Nearly a year into this role, I'm still learning.

I still have moments where I feel out of my depth. I still read reports twice. Sometimes three times. But I've stopped believing that I need to have all the answers.

I've learned that asking questions isn't a weakness. I've learned that every person around the table has something valuable to contribute. And I've learned that good local government isn't built by one person. It's built by people working together, relying on one another and doing their best to serve their community.

My father was right. He warned me that the job would be difficult.

He just forgot to tell me how rewarding it would be.



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