

League of Women Voters examines how City Council functions, offers suggestions

The group recently released a summary of interviews it conducted with all nine council members



by **Bob Seidenberg**
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Members of the current Evanston City Council were faced with particularly challenging tasks upon taking office, including overseeing the city’s COVID-19 response and the pandemic’s impact on the community.

They saw major issues dumped on their plate early in their tenure, including the lifeguard sexual harassment scandal and the continuing search for a permanent city manager.

Along with that, they “didn’t know each other well, most being new to the City Council and as a result of having to meet virtually for months, had little opportunity to become better acquainted and develop solid working relationship,” observed members of the League of Women Voters of Evanston (LWVE) Local Government Committee in [a recently issued report](#).

Among its regular activities, the league sends observers to meetings of the City Council and many city boards and commissions, where they report on elected officials’ actions.

The league started the process of writing the report in mid-2023, taking note of the Council’s large number of new members.

In the April 2021 election, four new members of the council were elected. Not long after that, two incumbent members, Ninth Ward Council Member Cicely Fleming and Second Ward Council Member Peter Braithwaite, resigned.

“So there were six new members out of the nine,” said Betty Hayford, longtime Council watcher for the league and a member of the Local Government Committee. “And so I think the ability to have these meetings twice a month, addressing important issues that have to be addressed – that’s a skill that has to be developed – and with so many new members I think the process of learning to work effectively was challenging.”



League of Women Voters of Evanston leaders, from left to right, Joan Linsenmeier, Cate Whitcomb and Betty Hayford, the primary authors of the League's "This is Evanston" guidebook, pose in front of the Civic Center with the guide's new edition last June. Credit: Bob Seidenberg

The league has nearly a front row seat to judge the answer to that question. One of the group's regular activities is watching city meetings, particularly taking note of how officials follow rules and procedures.

Members then write reports of the meetings and post them on the League of Women Voters website, lwve.org, for the public to read. The Local Government Committee meets regularly to discuss "what our elected representatives are doing and how they are doing it," the group said in its introduction to the report.

"The League is committed to principles of good government, including accountability and transparency. When appropriate, we contact our elected representatives with comments, suggestions, or questions about their actions."

In this case, the statement said, "we wondered how well the large group of new members understood their role and how their newness might affect their relations with their colleagues."

League members decided to meet with each council member to ask about their perceptions of their role and what they viewed as the major issues facing City Council. Council members are referred to as CM or CMs in the report, with the league having promised council members not to use their names individually, Hayford said.

The report draws on these interviews, as well as observations of Council meetings.

With the report, Local Government Committee members said, "we were interested in their views about the challenges they faced, the possible tensions between their commitment to their wards and their commitment to

the whole city, their evaluation of the main accomplishments of Council in the past two years and the major challenges to address in the rest of their term.“

A portion of the report is devoted to specific issues that council members set as goals in October 2023 – economic development, the Climate Action and Resilience Plan (CARP), public safety, finances, affordable housing and public health – and how council members see those goals as being met.

The great bulk of the report, though, is devoted to evaluating the attributes that make “an effective body even more effective.”

Below are the comments that council members made in their interviews with, suggestions from LWVE members about possible responses:

Council training

- *CMs' comments (LWVE summary):* “There is consensus that newly elected CMs received training that was useful, but not sufficient. There were meetings with department heads, which not all CMs attended, at which managers discussed the work of their department. CMs were not adequately trained on the financial aspects of their position such as budgeting, pension funding, and issuing bonds.”
- *LWVE's suggestions:* “An enhanced and well-organized training program for new Council members and any appointed in the middle of a term would be constructive. Media guidance, a tour of city properties and operations (including parks) meetings with staff and additional discussion of municipal law could be added to the process.”

Council and committee meeting attendance

- *CMs' comments (LWVE summary):* “CM committee service varies widely, with CMs serving on from one to 12 committees. Reports of time spent to prepare for and attend committee or Council meetings also varies, from 20 to 50 hours per week. Seven CMs characterized their service on committees as equivalent to a full-time job. Several said they served on or joined a large number of committees so that they could learn more about the city and issues.”
- *LWVE's suggestions:* “Clarification of guidelines for in-person and online attendance would be helpful for CMs, staff, and the public. This would include how virtual attendance is regulated, reported, and recorded, and how votes are recorded. We hope that all Council and committee members are encouraged to attend in person if possible. We encourage reconsideration of how committee appointments are made and how chairs are selected to make committee obligations more consistent among CMs.”





City Council Member Krissie Harris (2nd) is sworn into office by Mayor Daniel Biss in May 2023. Harris is one of six council members serving their first term. Credit: Richard Cahan

Collaboration

- *CMs' comments (LWVE summary):* “CMs generally agreed that they were not very collaborative when first elected because most of them were new and did not know each other before joining Council. They were also unfamiliar with Council procedures. Big issues early on, such as the lifeguard scandal and the challenge of hiring a new city manager, required immediate action and did not provide them with an opportunity to become better acquainted and more collaborative before diving into these issues. One said that Zoom meetings during the pandemic made it more difficult to communicate effectively. This was unavoidable, but one commented that it led some CMs to make in-person attendance ‘optional.’”
- *LWVE's suggestions:* “We believe that the Illinois Open Meetings Act does not prohibit informal social gatherings of CMs as long as city business is not discussed. We encourage getting clarification of the OMA regulations. Getting together occasionally outside of formal meetings could be beneficial.”

Public comment

- *CMs' comments (LWVE summary):* “When questioned about civil discourse, most CMs interpreted it as a concern about public comment. They said that rudeness and abusive language are wrongly directed by the public at CMs. A few place responsibility on CMs saying that they should listen with respect and not show any emotion. Several were troubled by public incivility, touting their long hours and service to the



community. Others complained about the ‘attitude’ or rudeness that some members of the public bring to Council.”

- “One stated that some residents have a mindset that the local government neither respects nor hears them. Another dates the problem to the 2016 election and the frustration that has since been mounting across the country.”
- *LWVE’s suggestions*: “Several CMs offered ideas for ways to engage with members of the public, and we encourage the city to identify and implement strategies to allow more effective interactions. Possibilities could be to create a focus group including community members to help design a plan, or for staff to develop a model. Ward meetings, an occasional town hall or other mechanisms could provide a regular exchange of ideas and information, to the benefit of all.”

To read the report in its entirety, visit the league site at lwve.org, and click on the “Local Government” tab. The full report, as well as observer reports of the City Council and other meetings of city boards and committees, can be found there.

This report was prepared by members of the League of Women Voters of Evanston (LWVE) Local Government Committee: Sue Brenner, Sue Calder, Mary Gavin, Betty Hayford, Carol Mullins, Jennifer O’Neil, Lisa Seegers, Sarah Vanderwicken, Georgia Vlahos and Cheryl Wollin.

