

WHY DO YOU WANT TO RUN FOR LOCAL OFFICE?

If you can't respond to this simple question quickly and clearly, please put this book down and forget about any political ambitions. The reason you're running is the foundation on which the rest of your campaign is built, so if you get this wrong the house of cards will eventually topple.

A. THE RIGHT AND THE WRONG ANSWERS

The correct answers are:

- This community has given so much to my family that I want to give back.
- I love this city/school district/county, and I want to make it even better.
- Though I certainly give the school/village/county board credit for all the time they put in, they've forgotten they were elected to serve the people.
- I've served on board(s)/foundation(s)/civic group(s) and that experience would serve the city/school/county board well.
- This city/school district/county is facing some serious challenges that require serious solutions. I possess the experience, energy, and leadership to guide us through this tough time.
- This city/school district/county is facing some serious challenges that require serious solutions. Considering my opponent's long tenure, it's time for a fresh perspective.

Did you notice that running for office is never about you?

While there aren't that many good reasons for running, the number of bad reasons borders on infinite. Here are some of the worst I've heard:

- I'm retired and have the time to run for office. (There has to be a better reason than you have nothing better to do!)
- "My wife, friends, and family think I'd make a great village/school/county board member, so I thought I'd give it a shot!" (They're just trying to get you out of the house.)
- "I can't stand the mayor/board president (or my opponent) and I'm gonna run him or her out of town." (Local voters don't like vendettas and negative campaigns.)
- "I've faithfully served my community and I deserve this office—it's my turn!" (Entitlement mentalities don't go over very well with voters.)
- "Because I know I can win this one!" (And what will you do then?)
- "I've been asked to run for statewide and national office, but I want to serve my community instead." (So, you're settling for little old us?)
- "The local party leaders asked me to run and I thought, 'What the heck!'" (Unless you've worked your way up through the party ranks, the only reason they want you to run is because no one else is dumb enough to take your opponent on.)
- "I need the money and the perks." (No explanation necessary.)
- "I am going to single-handedly change the village/school district/county." (No, you're not! Political change always requires consensus.)
- "I'm running for school board because they serve broccoli in the school cafeteria. I hate broccoli!" (Single-issue candidates rarely win.)
- "My father/brother/sister/mother held this office, and I'd like to carry on that legacy." (American democracy isn't hereditary.)

I'm sure there are more, but I'm sure you catch my drift.

Running for local office isn't about you! It's about your potential constituents and how well you'll serve them. Offer a ridiculous reason for running and you'll be dead before you really start. Neither the press, the party, your potential peers nor the public will take you seriously if you can't correctly answer this basic question.

So, let's delve a little deeper into some of the bad ones.

1. Single-issue/hot-button candidates

Our anti-broccoli activist is a perfect example. Even though his particular "I'm against it!" vegetable contention may seem "out there," some folks have run on the strangest of pretexts.

In 2012, a gentleman ran for governor of Tennessee so he could keep his pet raccoon. Then there was the 101-year-old Florida man who ran for Congress on a platform of a built-in term limit. Another Tennessean (there must be something in the water) ran for state rep to remove all gold-fringed flags from the state because it "prevented them from flying properly."

Depending on the temperature of your particular issue, and especially if you present yourself well, single-issue candidates can win an election. But it doesn't happen very often.

In those rare instances when a single-issue candidate does prevail, they're never effective. Their peers quickly tire of that lack of perspective and dismiss them outright.

To wit, there is currently a Geneva, Illinois, City Councilman (2016) whose singular concern is historical preservation. That may be a laudable goal, but as a result of relentlessly pushing this one issue, he's long since lost the other council members' respect and frequently finds himself casting the lone dissenting vote.

It's a miserable political existence.

No single board member makes anything happen on their own. Political progress always demands a consensus. That's especially true of a mayor or chairman who

can only cast a vote in the case of a tie.

So please, please, please! If the reason you're running comes down to one narrow issue, save yourself a lot of heartache. Find a candidate who espouses your cause and support them instead.

Real-world example

Sometimes you realize you don't have a new perspective!

Mark Allen was a 2015 Batavia, Illinois, Park District candidate who did his due diligence by attending the meetings and reading the minutes. Through that process, he discovered that his core campaign concern, Fox River water purity, was an issue an opponent had always embraced.

Mark realized the scope of the park district big picture, called himself a "one-issue candidate" and withdrew from the race.

When we got Mark on the radio show, I proposed to him on the basis of his sound judgment and encouraged him to run for another office sometime down the road.

2. Ideologues

Folks who fervently espouse either end of the political spectrum almost always start ten paces behind the other candidates, because local elections tend to be non-partisan ventures. And any effort to turn them into an ideological battlefield won't play well with the voters.

Unless the incumbents have gone too far in either direction—raising taxes too much or cutting too many services—ideologues are far less likely to win than hot-button candidates.

What these zealots always fail to understand is, conservative voters want lower taxes until the cuts affect them directly, and liberal voters love to add services and schools until they get the bill.

The candidate who claims he's going to "change everything" won't get very far

for all the reasons we just discussed. If they do manage to get elected, they find themselves caught between Scylla—the impossible promises they’ve made to their constituency—and Charybdis—the reality of being unable to build any kind of board consensus.

With nowhere to turn, they spend the rest of their political lives railing against everyone and everything in an effort to placate the voters who put them there. And they’re utterly ineffective as a result.

Why go through the trouble of winning a local election only to become a running joke?

B. DO YOUR DUE DILIGENCE!

Considering the hours required, the propensity for negative feedback and having to work with some difficult peers, you really need to have a passion for the position to make it work. If you don’t have that fire, it’s going to be the longest four years of your life.

I’ve seen local office holders become so frustrated with the process that they simply give up. They stop attending meetings, refuse to read the agenda packets and generally ignore their constituents. While that kind of surrender may be understandable, it’s patently unfair to the people they represent.

So please, please, please! Be sure running for local office is something you REALLY want to do.

Real-world example

A sheriff’s lieutenant asked me whether he should run for mayor of a local municipality. I didn’t even have to think about it.

I told him the only thing he’d have any power over was the city council agenda, and he might get to break a tie every now and then. He started laughing and said, “That won’t work for me. I’m used to being a cop!”

He thanked me for talking him out of it.

Real-world example

Unhappy with the current county chairman, a local Republican faction tried to get a high-profile Republican to primary her. To this potential candidate's credit, he started regularly attending meetings.

But people noticed that he'd regularly nod off during the proceedings, which is a sign you're not interested in the office. That candidate eventually ran for state senate and won.

The best way to determine whether you have the grit, determination and fortitude to run for a local office is by attending the meetings and reviewing past minutes. Yes! You can watch meetings on cable or the Net, but you won't pick up all the nuance.

The best thing about going to those board meetings is, you'll quickly learn that, according to a quote misattributed to Otto Von Bismarck, "The process by which any local taxing body manages to accomplish anything is not unlike the methods a butcher applies to making sausage."

It's messy, it's time-consuming, you really don't wanna know what went into it and someone is always gonna be unhappy with the result.

If you're used to getting your way, if you don't play well with others, or if you harbor any "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" fantasies, local politics will frustrate you to the point of fits of rage or uncontrollable bouts of weeping.

Even the lowliest water reclamation district trustee has to understand a variety of complex budgetary, statutory and parliamentary requirements before they become effective. The smartest small-town alderman takes at least a year to get up to speed on the budget.

So, if you couldn't stand studying in high school or college...

C. IF YOUR SPOUSE DOESN'T WANT YOU TO RUN, DON'T!

I'm not trying to be sexist, but men still dominate the local political scene and wives wield far more influence over their husbands than the converse.

So please keep in mind that you aren't the only one running—your entire family is

campaigning along with you! And I've seen simple water reclamation district races descend to the point where long-term neighborhood friendships were destroyed.

Whether it's fundraisers, forums, debates or any of the plethora of powwows that permeate the political process, your spouse will be expected to attend some of them. You can do your best to shield a reluctant partner from the rigors of the process, but that doesn't mean they won't suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous electoral fortune as much or more deeply than you will.

Trust me! After suffering those slings and arrows as a columnist, it's much nicer to come home to a supportive spouse than one who likes to say they told you so.

The bottom line? Unless you have a hankerin' for divorce, if your spouse doesn't want you to run, don't do it! As I said in the Introduction, that lack of support will make an already difficult proposition much worse.

D. CONCLUSION

Serving as a local elected official can be trying in the best of times. But if you run for the wrong reasons, it will be a miserable experience. So! Why are you running for office?

CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY

- **Be sure you're running for the right reason.**
- **Single-issue/hot-button candidates rarely win, and they rarely accomplish anything if they do.**
- **Ideologues rarely win, and they're often dismissed by their peers if they do.**
- **Be sure you have a real desire to run. The best way to determine that is by attending the board meetings and reviewing past meeting minutes.**