

The Virginia NEWS LETTER

Local Elected Leadership: A Sword in the Stone

By Robert E. Matson, A. Tyler St.Clair, and Charles F. Church

In the legend of King Arthur of Camelot, Arthur was successful in removing the sword from the stone where all others had failed because he knew the heart of the people and was committed to a vision which met their needs. This article is about building a local elected body that can deliver these same leadership qualities. Today's world requires a collectively committed elected body to bring forth the magic of democracy.

We'd like to offer several thoughts about how the King Arthur fable contains powerful parallels to a model for local elected leadership today.

1. Arthur faced unique challenges as he assumed leadership within a feudal system that gave power to those who oppressed and subjugated others.



Robert Matson



A. Tyler St.Clair



Charles F. Church

2. Arthur reigned at a time when life was arduous; only enlightened leadership and a new leadership model could bring about fundamental change in the citizens' quality of life.
3. Arthur established a powerful vision that would bring a new picture of the future amid troubled times; the vision created new resolve among the citizenry.
4. The establishment of Arthur's Round Table and the force of principles agreed upon by all created a synergy in decision-making and actions that fundamentally improved the quality of life for everyone.

Of course, Virginia in the 21st century is not England in the 9th century. But, communities all over America struggle with



WELDON COOPER
CENTER FOR PUBLIC SERVICE
University of Virginia

economic and social demands that require new ways of thinking and a new way to govern. The Industrial Age has given way to the Information Age, bringing radical new values, cultures, and power issues. Communities have different problems: explosive growth, sprawl, deterioration, diverse residents, declining revenue, and lackluster citizen participation. Each locality needs a new way for elected officials to make the important decisions that will guide the community's destiny—its own “sword in the stone.”

Just like Arthur, today's leaders face unique challenges that must be overcome to restore the confidence of the electorate and vitality in our communities. Finding a process by which these challenges can be met is critical to the success of any governing board or council.

Arthur used a compelling vision and the collaborative leadership of his knights to create a better future in a community that had many social problems. We believe that a system developed at the University of Virginia's Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, the Local Elected Leadership Model, can provide the same refreshing approach to governing that Arthur's vision and the Round Table provided in feudal times. Using a series of five concrete steps, a local elected body can use this model to strengthen its leadership effectiveness as a body.

Using the parallels of King Arthur's story, let us build the case for the use of the Local Elected Leadership Model for a council or board that is seeking greater effectiveness.

Parallel 1: The Challenge of Elected Leadership

Does local politics resemble power and decision-making in feudal times? We hope not! We do believe, however, that the role of elected officials is challenging in a way that is different from all other leadership positions. Local government leaders are encumbered by several factors that must be ameliorated in order for the elected body to achieve its greatest potential.

Moving from politics to policy is difficult.

The process of getting elected is often counterproductive to producing the kind of leadership that is needed if a community is to realize its greatest potential. The electoral process is by its very nature adversarial. People are schooled in political roles when they come to the governing body, not in policy-making. Political candidates learn how to develop an individual political agenda and to organize constituencies against others. A candidate must articulate his or her

position so that the opposing candidate looks as if he or she has less than the best intent for the community. These contradictions in democracy's machinery often keep elected bodies from having their greatest positive impact on the community.

Electing leadership is perceived as a business transaction.

Today's flashy marketing and consumerism has caused us to expect no less from the political process than we do from any other consumer exchange. Citizens perceive that promises made by candidates must be both visible and engaging. We expect to have the candidate's views shaped by a strong marketing campaign, we “pay” with our votes, and we expect the results for which we “paid.” Once elected, council members find that they can have limited effectiveness with their individual agendas and it becomes difficult to deliver on “business expectations” without the support of other council members.

The decision-making environment is challenging.

We have worked with elected leaders for more than twenty years and have found that most serve because of a compelling desire to make their communities better—in short, to fulfill a higher moral purpose. Despite good intentions, they quickly find that the environment in which they serve is a complex and demanding one. Council members must make decisions on sophisticated issues with speed and high visibility.

In the midst of this, it is easy to forget that elected officials are, in fact, part-time officials who serve long hours for little compensation. Most approach their jobs with energy and commitment and strive to become expert in the volatile environment in which their decision-making must occur. When expertise fails, information is inadequate, the desires of the constituency are ambiguous, or the issues so complex that policy direction is unclear, they must resort to compromise and trade-off. An environment dominated by compromise seems to take the elected body in different directions and causes members to feel dissatisfied with their individual leadership impact.

There are no right answers.

Elected bodies work in a world of “no right answers,” rarely experiencing the satisfaction of a “problem solved.” John Nalbandian, a professor of public administration at the University of Kansas who has served eight years on his local city council, has described this dynamic in countless articles and presentations. Dr. Nalbandian is

POLITICAL VALUES

Representation. This is the deep-seated belief that government answers to the will of the people through elected representatives. The wishes of citizens should be represented in governing bodies. If a public policy is going to have impact on a group of citizens, that group should have the opportunity to be heard.

Efficiency. Citizens expect government to be run with concern for resource management. This is achieved through cost-consciousness and rational, analytical, decision making and through an emphasis on expertise and professionalism.

Individual Rights. Citizens are granted legal rights that protect them from arbitrary decision making by government. These rights may be expressed in the Constitution and in state and local laws and regulations.

Social Equity. Frequently, citizens are treated as members of groups rather than as individuals. As group members they expect treatment equal to members of other groups. For example, people living in one neighborhood expect to receive a level of government service similar to that received in other neighborhoods.

Used with permission, John Nalbandian, PH.D.

a popular presenter at the Weldon Cooper Center's Senior Executive Institute, where he uses four values to describe the context in which political decision making takes place. He suggests that citizens' perception of responsiveness includes the council's ability to balance individual rights, social equity, efficiency, and representation. The interplay of these equally important but often competing values characterizes political decision-making, forcing the council to choose a solution that is not always "the" right answer. Indeed, governance is often about finding the most possible, not the best possible.

The council-manager form of government is vulnerable.

The powerful challenges faced by elected officials make the council-manager form of government vulnerable. The manager can best serve the council's agenda when it is clearly stated. When the council allows choices to be driven by near-term events and fails to provide this compass, a steady pattern of "win-lose" decision-making may be created. Fragmented decision-making often leads "losers" to turn to the manager for support and this is when the council-manager form of government is in its weakest, most vulnerable condition.

Parallel 2: A New Local Elected Leadership Model is Needed

We believe that the Local Elected Leadership Model can potentially be the "sword in the stone" that gives elected bodies an ability to cope with

these unique factors. It must be a macro-strategy that yields enough force to affect the politics-to-policy transition, to deliver on "business expectations," and to manage complex decisions in an environment of "no right answers." A strategy this comprehensive can only be achieved through the leadership of the whole, symbolized by Arthur's famous round table.

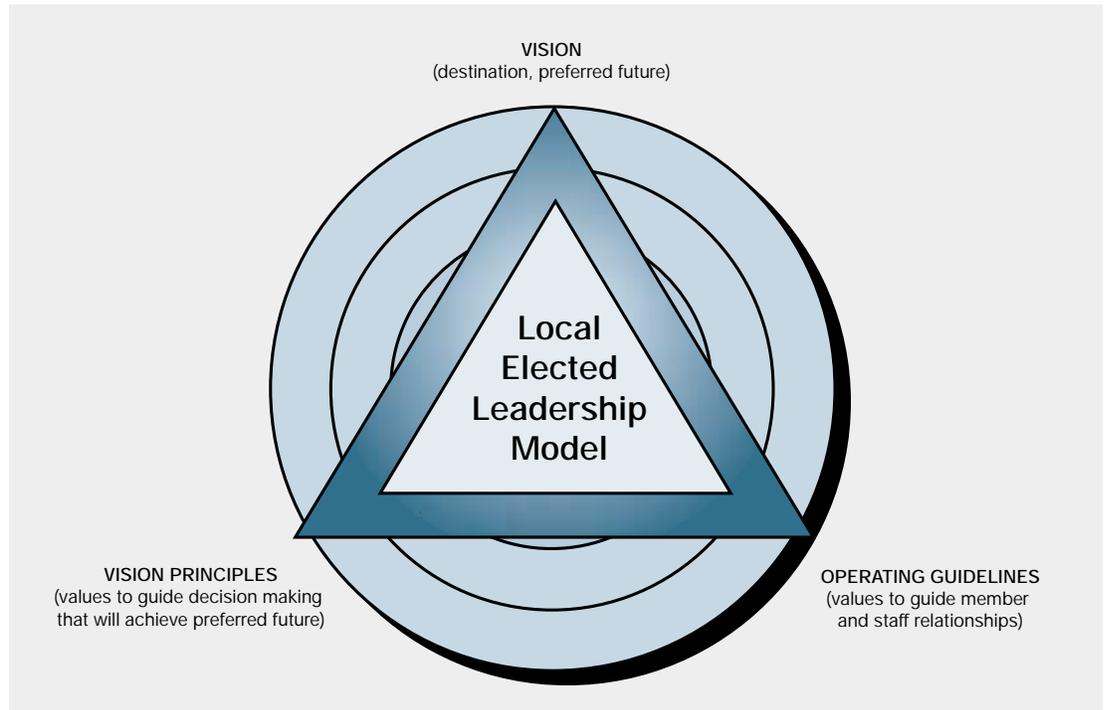
The Local Elected Leadership Model focuses on five concrete steps to bring the council into a strong leadership position. These steps are usually initiated through a series of retreats that help the council focus on its working relationship and what it would like to accomplish for the community. The council's consensus regarding these issues is documented and used as a guidance system. These five steps include:

1. Forming Strong Working Relationships:

The first step is to help council members understand and appreciate each other as unique resources in serving the community. The political process often creates misperceptions; working relationships must now be built at a more personal level. By learning more about their differences, they learn how to use each member's strengths for more creative and effective decision making.

2. Building the Collective Picture of the Community's Future:

The council then crafts the critical elements of a 10-to-20-year vision for the community, clarifying the specific outcomes that must be



shaped to achieve it. Without an inspiring, compelling picture of a preferred future, the key to good leadership is missing.

3. Developing Principles to Drive each Project Toward the Vision:

A third step in the process is to assist council in putting more “teeth” in the vision by developing principles that will drive decisions and projects related to the vision. These principles guide both the council and the local government staff by providing firm, but empowering boundaries for action.

4. Choosing Effective Operating Guidelines:

The council also develops operating guidelines to maximize council-council and council-staff working relationships. These guidelines clarify roles, expectations, and procedures to expedite council and staff effectiveness. Reconstituting these operating guidelines when a new member joins the council is an empowering alternative to “that’s the way we’ve always done it.”

5. Engaging Others:

The last step involves the development of a clear plan for engaging others in achieving the preferred future of the community. Council, staff, and citizens can have the greatest leadership impact if each group is aligned in service to a shared vision and other components of the council’s leadership agenda.

Parallel 3: A Powerful Vision is Critical to Success

Most council members promise change when they campaign for office, only to become a part of an elected body that lacks direction and focuses almost exclusively on immediate issues. We have worked with too many councils that are representative of the old adage, “if you don’t know where you’re going, any road will get you there.” An elected body that limits its actions to near-term problem-solving is not a leadership body. A strong vision that reflects the hopes and dreams of each council member is the foundation for each locality’s use of the Model.

The idea of developing a vision sometimes meets with skepticism. Some individuals avoid it because they think that they will be forced into “pie in the sky” thinking when they would prefer to deal with practical matters. More often, we find individuals who have experienced constructing a vision that led to a framed document on the wall with little change in policy, strategy, and systems. These concerns must be dealt with constructively by a facilitator skilled in managing the visioning process in order for the elected body to produce a vision with significant pay off.

The visioning process can be an exciting opportunity for members to articulate their desires for the community in a free-flowing and unencumbered way. We avoid “word-smithing,” preferring that the group members agree on

strategic outcomes and words that excite or inspire them. Coming to consensus on a long written document can sap the group's energy. Instead, we recommend that a subcommittee provide follow-up to refine the group's work. A good facilitator can help the subgroup develop its thinking into a collective leadership document that can be returned to the entire council for consensus.

The council's vision must be creative, inspiring, and comprehensive. Slogans may supplement the intent of the vision, but fall short of providing the detail that is needed in order for a vision to speak to everyone that must be reached. The use of an image that captures the spirit of the vision is also helpful. An excellent example is found in Lynchburg, where a picture of a diverse group of citizens "holding up" a community has been widely used to help people identify with the vision.

Once the council develops the vision, it will only be effective when it is used consistently and constructively in every aspect of the council's leadership. Noted futurist Joel Barker says, "Vision without action is only a dream." Staff members must continuously bring decision-making alternatives to the council in the context of its vision. We recommend that the council consider changes in its management systems to bring the vision close to both staff and citizens. In one Virginia locality, each department created a vision aligned with that of the council. Strategic planning, council's reporting process, and council orientation are processes that may be re-aligned to make the vision a powerful, living document.

The vision becomes even more powerful if the elected body finds a way to include citizens in

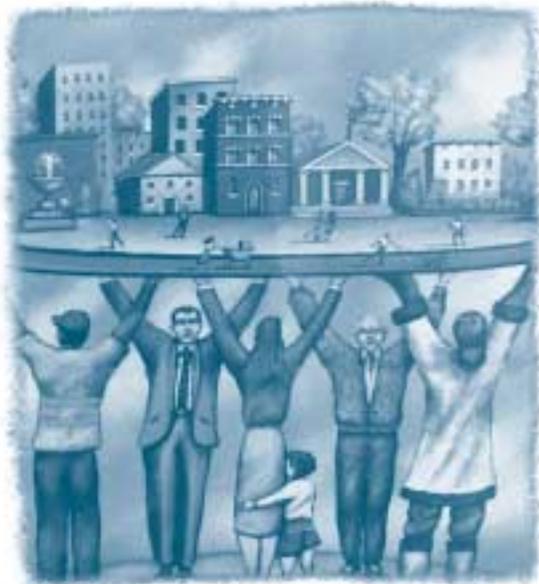
it. King Arthur's vision and leadership style created a newfound resolve in the citizens who then became an active part of the search for a better quality of life. Likewise, elected officials can create a more powerful agenda by engaging the community in broad-based visioning activities that reinforce, expand, or bring into the action the vision that they have outlined to direct their own efforts. When the citizens feel represented in the process of developing the vision, the road to re-election is well-paved.

Parallel 4: Principles Guide Collective Decisions and Action

Vision alone is not enough. Arthur himself possessed a powerful personal vision but recognized that he could not redirect events single-handedly. The Round Table and the principles to which each member aspired set the stage for collaboration and good decision-making in troubled times. Likewise, it is critical for the elected body to develop a set of meaningful values to support the vision. Without a set of values to guide decisions and working relationships, the council will be less effective.

The Local Elected Leadership Model helps an elected body define two sets of values to support the vision: vision principles and operating guidelines. Vision principles are developed by the council to provide specific direction about how decisions are to be made. They provide a valuable guidance tool for the local government staff, who can act creatively within the boundaries provided by the principles. The staff is not forced into constantly checking with the elected body and can spend more time on developing alternatives for the council's consideration. When council members recognize their vision and driving principles in staff recommendations, they have no doubt who is leading.

Further, vision principles promote effective communication with citizens and partners and enable better planning and time management. This is illustrated by the story of one small town that had undertaken a major street-scaping project. The project was seriously delayed, causing its costs to extend far beyond the original budget. Public criticism of the project mounted, compounded by information that no plan or allocation had been made for ongoing maintenance of the new streets. The street-scaping project may have been guided by the council's vision for the town's appearance. A vision principle which stated "we will fund only those projects that we can afford to maintain" might have led to a



Used with permission, City of Lynchburg

dialogue about how to maintain the significant street-scaping investment. Principles serve as a pre-determined guidance system that allow the elected body to focus on decisions that have the greatest significance for the community.

In another locality, the council was able to work more effectively with the local Habitat for Humanity by using a vision principle which stated that investments in partnerships to improve existing neighborhoods took preference over new development.

The Local Elected Leadership Model also includes the development of a set of operating guidelines to facilitate the working relationships between council and council/staff members. This step outlines rules that may guide such areas as communication, media relations, performance accountability, the appointment of boards and commissions, staff reporting, and conflict resolution. Our work with councils has proven that most members are willing to undertake this process in order to develop trust-based relationships. These guidelines are even more helpful when council members agree to regularly evaluate their effectiveness.

Practical Suggestions for Implementing the Local Elected Leadership Model

What will it take for councils or boards to use the Local Elected Leadership Model? Our experience has shown that there are some pathways and pitfalls to consider.

Use opportune circumstances to initiate the process.

There are several conditions that cause localities to be interested in the use of the Local Elected Leadership Model. An election that brings new members is frequently the impetus. In some localities, the council may be experiencing conflict that causes members to feel or be perceived as less than effective. Managers who attend the Cooper Center's Senior Executive Institute are exposed to case studies of localities that are using the Model, often giving rise to a desire to boost the performance of the council or staff with a new approach.

We suggest that the process begin with a retreat that enables the council to focus exclusively on building the foundation elements of the Model. An off-site location that is comfortable provides the best setting for members to work on relationships, achieve a long-term focus, and to sequence the activities appropriately. A locality that embraces the Local Elected Leadership Model might expect to realize cumulative benefits over the course of its implementation.

Let the dust settle after the election.

Because elections are often divisive, we find that rushing into a visioning process may be unfruitful. Experience has shown that new council members need an opportunity to try on their agendas and to learn the lay of the land before a retreat is scheduled. We suggest that a Local Elected Leadership Retreat is most appropriately scheduled two to three months after an election.

SAMPLE OPERATING GUIDELINES*

1. The Council will formulate policy by determining the broadest policies before progressing to more narrow ones.
2. The Council recognizes that the expression of differences and the debate of public policy will ensure that we have good public policy. In support of this, members' opinions will be heard and respected.
3. The City Manager will ensure that Council is informed about issues that have impact on a major policy area, may attract media or public attention, or affect major stakeholders.
4. Staff should provide Council with all relevant information on matters of policy, including pros and cons, alternatives, and professional recommendations, in order that Council may make an informed final decision.
5. The City Manager will be evaluated on the accomplishment of City Council's stated goals.
6. Evaluation of the City Manager and City Attorney will be a collective act of the City Council.
7. Priorities of the City Manager will be defined by the City Council's vision and goals or by those issues collectively supported by the City Council.

* From Lynchburg City Council Operating Guidelines (June 16, 1999)

Focus on the future versus the immediate.

It is common for a manager to request that we provide a visioning and goal-setting session. We suggest that these processes be separated. The foundation for collective leadership is most effectively established when the group focuses on a time that is far beyond current management issues. We recommend an annual goal-setting session be used to develop short-term goals that will achieve the vision.

Prepare members.

The facilitator should prepare council members for active participation in the retreat through interviews held about one week before the retreat. It is important to explore the issues or concerns that are important to each member and to discuss potential outcomes from the retreat that may help meet individual needs. This is a time to help each member see how sharing values and the role that they wish to play on the council can benefit the entire group.

Seek full participation.

It is critical that every council member attend the retreat; full participation insures the highest success. The council will develop the highest level of consensus regarding the vision if every member contributes to it.

Establish working relationships before substantive visioning.

The council can benefit from having the opportunity to do some team building before the future activity begins. We construct opportunities for members to share their values and to look at their similarities and differences. Self and group awareness and a healthy appreciation of members are a prerequisite to success with a shared vision that will have true leadership impact. It is also critical as a means to moving from the “me” of the election to the “we” of collective leadership.

Engage the community.

Citizens are quick to respond to the elected body’s vision. It provides a way for them to discuss issues and to bring recommendations to the council. The most powerful visions have the input and support of the community. Localities using the Local Elected Leadership Model have used a variety of approaches to get community input. The energy that comes from having a strong collective leadership agenda can be quickly intensified by processes that ask citizens to identify their desired future, to identify actions that will achieve a desired goal, or to find new ways to come together to solve problems.

Benefits of Using the Local Elected Leadership Model

The initial development of the Local Elected Leadership Model for a council takes time and commitment. Many localities add components to the process over a period of time, learning to use each new component in a way that invigorates the locality’s governing style. The Local Elected Leadership Model enables the council to develop habits of leadership—habits that are not just individual but collective. These collective habits come from the commitment to a series of processes that provide the greatest possible synergy and ownership for the elected body and those who work with them.

The council’s collective leadership agenda must be created anew each time there are new council members. The openness to changing the vision ensures that democracy’s revitalizing processes are operative. The engagement of people around ideas keeps the document a source of energy and direction and makes it a viable guidance system. The new vision may have many similar elements, but the new words must seize the spirits of new members as well as those who created the original version.

Localities who are using the Local Elected Leadership Model report that they experience many benefits, which may include:

- Members of the council or board are able to overcome some of the challenges unique to elected officials and can focus more time and energy on issues of the greatest priority for the community.
- The model helps the elected body make more effective decisions about the long-term future of the community and reduces the focus on short-term management issues.
- Managers who work for elected bodies who use the model are better able to focus the work of the staff on achieving council’s agenda.
- The elected body which operates with a collective leadership agenda can form a strong nucleus of citizen and partner engagement to achieve its desired ends.

What is the “sword in the stone” for elected bodies? Arthur’s last act with Excalibur, the sword that had marked him for power, was to cast it into the lake to ensure that the legacy of his leadership model would remain intact. Most elected leaders are equally concerned with leaving a positive legacy within their communities. An individual agenda is not enough—effective councils must work together to be successful in

*Past issues of
The Virginia
News Letter are
available in the
publications section
of the Cooper
Center's Web site:
www.virginia.edu
/coopercenter/*

making decisions that will bring about a positive future for a community. The Local Elected Leadership Model provides a way for councils and boards to make extraordinary the power of their office and to create better communities

Credits:

*John Nalbandian, Ph.D
Department of Public Administration,
University of Kansas,
www.goodlocalgovernment.org*

CONTACT:

If you would like to find out more about the Local Elected Leadership Model or use it in your locality, please contact Bob Matson (434-982-5516) or A. Tyler St.Clair (540-261-5241).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Robert E. Matson is Director of Leadership Development at the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service at the University of Virginia, and also directs the Center's Senior Executive Institute. His contributions to the development of local government leaders won him the ICMA's (International City/County Management Association) Sweeney Award in 1998. He has worked with boards and councils for over 15 years to develop the Local Elected Leadership Model.

A. Tyler St. Clair is on the staff at the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service at the University of Virginia. She works with local elected bodies using the Local Elected Leadership Model and with local government staff on a variety of high performance initiatives.

Charles F. Church is a retired city manager from Lynchburg who also served as city manager in Danville and used the Local Elected Leadership Model in working with both elected bodies. He received the ICMA Distinguished Service Award and the 2001 Virginia Municipal League President's Award for Entrepreneurial Government.

ENTERED AS
PERIODICAL
Charlottesville, Virginia

The Virginia NEWS LETTER
WELDON COOPER
CENTER FOR PUBLIC SERVICE
University of Virginia



VOL. 77 NO. 7 OCTOBER 2001
Editor: William H. Wood
Graphic Design: Susan Wormington
The Virginia News Letter (ISSN 0042-0271) is published ten times a year by the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, University of Virginia, P.O. Box 400206, Charlottesville, Virginia 22904-4206; (434) 982-5704, TDD: (434) 982-HEAR. Copyright ©2001 by the Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia. The views expressed are those of the author and not the official position of the Cooper Center or the University.
To get on *The Virginia News Letter* mailing list or to request reprints or reproduction permission, write or call the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service.
Periodical postage paid at Charlottesville, Virginia.
Postmaster: Send address changes to the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, P.O. Box 400206, Charlottesville, Virginia 22904-4206.

8.041 10.01