

Should You Run?

by Otis White

Should you run for public office? The city council, county commission, or state legislature?

Don't scoff. Where do you think politicians come from? Answer: Many come from appointed positions where they learn how government works, acquaint themselves with political leaders, and taste public attention.

But should you run? Is it a natural next step for rising civic leaders? Can you do more as an elected official than an appointed? More to the point, will you like it?

It's not an idle question. Elected officials, academics, and journalists who cover politics agree: If you don't enjoy politics — either campaigning for office or fashioning public policy — you'll be miserable as an elected official. Richard Foglesong, who teaches politics at Rollins College in Florida, says the chief reward of political office "is your taste for politics. That can be compensating. It can justify the large investment of time and money, if you just enjoy the game."

An interest in politics, then, should be your first consideration in deciding whether to run for office. But it's not the only one. Here's what else you should think about:

- *Do you have the time?* A city council or county commission job may look like easy work from the outside — a few hours a week in a meeting. But what you don't see are the committee meetings, public hearings, forums, issue preparations, briefings, and constituent work.

- *Do you have the financial support?* All that time spent campaigning and holding office will come at the expense of something, usually your job. Can your employer — and your family — afford for you to spend so much time away from work?

- *Are you prepared for the scrutiny?* If you've ever written a bad check, been

sued, gone through a messy divorce, smoked marijuana in college, or had a DUI conviction, you should be prepared for it to become public knowledge.

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- *Do you have a thick skin?* You won't please everyone, and when they criticize you, it may appear in the next morning's newspaper. Sometimes it'll be fair criticism, sometimes not. Can you live with public rebukes?

- *Are you inquisitive?* Elected officials rarely control their agendas. You may have been elected to deal with land use issues, but you'll wind up voting on wastewater, public safety, financial management, downtown renewal, parking rates — and dozens of other issues. If you're not interested in a broad range of subjects, you'll be unhappy in office.

The greatest barriers are time and money. Depending on your community, you can end up spending 20 or 30 hours a week on city council work for a few thousand dollars in salary. Doug Booth, who retired as a utility executive in Charlotte, N.C., before running for the county commission, says he was surprised to find how heavy the workload was. He adds, "I have difficulty seeing how an individual can hold down a full-time job and do justice (to the political office)."

For that reason, observers say you should look at your family situation before deciding to run. Alan Ehrenhalt, executive editor of *Governing*, a magazine for state and local leaders, says poli-

tics can be particularly difficult for families with young children. "If you don't have children, or they're grown, that's an advantage," he says. "And if you're not the breadwinner in the family, add another point."

Given all that, why does anybody run for office? Love of politics, certainly. But there are other reasons. For one thing, it's not boring. If you like dealing with a wide variety of important problems, holding elected office can be stimulating work.

For another, you can grow in office. It's a cliché, but true. Running for and holding office are complex undertakings — and every aspect offers the chance to learn new skills, from communicating ideas to asking for money, from learning teamwork to making important decisions with limited information. Even losing candidates say they're transformed by the experience, usually in positive ways.

Finally, you'll learn about your community. If you're interested only in planning, you may never get to know how poor families live in your city, which of your political leaders are reliable, and how the area is positioned for economic development. But a conscientious elected official can't help but learn these subjects — and many more. As a result, you'll know your community in a way few others do. ♦

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Editor's Note: The following are some of the responses we received from participants on our informal article review group. We welcome additional feedback to Otis White's article — and will post all comments on our PlannersWeb site. E-mail, fax, or "snail mail" your thoughts to us.



Responses to "Should You Run?"

"I faced the same questions that Mr. White asked, I developed answers, and ran for office anyway. At the time I had completed 24 years as a Federal employee and with the understanding support of my supervisors I ran and won. [Last year] I took the next step and won an election for Mayor of Annapolis, Maryland.

For those of us who are the proverbial children — curious, naive, and trusting — it is a challenge of searching for answers. You can now walk into the fire station as you've always wanted to, and ask all the questions about the equipment. Love people, trust your basic instincts, and always strive for the best — and you will be successful. (Often only you will know.)

My kids have been included since day one, walking door-to-door, waving signs, and attending fund raisers. They understand, and when I was successful they shared in the joy. The worst moment was when the local newspaper editorialized in support of my opponent, and my son as the newspaper carrier had to deliver to all of his customers.

The total process is worth every moment, and is the net result of a democratic society. If you won't run, support the next best person in the community. You owe it to those who ran earlier and left us the society we have now."

— *Dean Johnson, Annapolis, Maryland*

"I am not an elected official but here is my experience as it relates to Otis White's article. The article is right on target and certainly hit home for me.

A few years ago I was looking for an avenue through which I could become more publicly recognized preparatory to a possible political venture. Establishing recognition in a very rural Appalachian county is not easy. I started my recognition

endeavor by writing 'letters to the editor,' lots of them. These letters established my credentials as a person who cared about the rights and issues of the citizenry. A prevalent theme of my letters was that the public needed to have a greater influence in the government's decision-making processes. I espoused individual rights as expressed through a balanced societal decision process. This is just what the public wanted to hear.

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When approached by the County Commission about accepting an appointment to the Planning Commission I thought that I had hit 'pay dirt.' The Planning Commission had been dormant for about ten years therefore the county's comprehensive plan was hopelessly out of date. By participating in the rebuilding of the Planning Commission and the revamping of the comprehensive plan I would be in the public's eye. Just where I wanted to be! I became a member and was subsequently elected president for two terms. My picture was in the newspaper occasionally. My comments made during meetings were in the newspaper often. My public persona was becoming established.

But, Wow! What an education. Instead of enhancing my image I sullied it. Those who had previously accepted me as being someone who supported 'the little guy' suddenly began to accuse me of having sided with the elitist establishment, I had become one of 'them.'...

Negativism began to creep into my recognition endeavor. Large advertisements were placed in the local newspaper attack-

ing the intrusiveness of the Planning Commission into the lives of people who just wanted things to remain as they had always been. No matter how much effort was expended to involve the community, the commission was attacked. Being the president targeted me....

Obscurity may be a better base for a political campaign than I originally thought. On the other hand, being a planning commissioner, especially serving as president, gave me a 'birds eye view' of what public life is like. To make a long story short, I won't be a candidate for elective office anytime soon."

— *Emil Knutti, Randolph County, West Virginia*

"The dynamics of a political campaign are completely different when you step into the role of being The Candidate. I learned this the hard way. Having already worked in several local elections I didn't feel my own candidacy could hold any surprises. I was well versed in the trials of campaign finances or lack thereof, the tribulations of debate (your opponent always seems to get the best questions), public speaking obligations, newspaper advertising, yard signs, hand shaking, baby kissing, attending every function and meeting in the community, door to door canvassing, the necessity of comfortable walking shoes, phone banks, sign waving, first class postage versus political tagged mail, visiting the polls on election day, keeping your volunteers energized.

There were no aspects of running for office that I wasn't familiar with and ready to handle. Almost simultaneously with submitting my qualifying packet I discovered the error in my thinking. Indeed there was one area exclusive to the candidate: constant, unremitting agonizing.

Agonizing about money — who gave and who didn't and who supported your opponent instead. Agonizing over rumors churned out of an ever grinding rumor mill, so and so is going to enter the race, your opponent is getting a coveted endorsement. Agonizing over the text in your brochures, signs, newspaper ads, and how it all compares to that of your opponent. You name it, I worried about it. This

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tendency to obsessive worrying was not part of my normal personality. As the person responsible for handling the financial affairs of a \$5 million insurance agency, overseeing a staff of ten, as well as successfully fielding many of life's hardballs, I had considered myself pragmatic and phlegmatic.

Well I survived, emerged a winner and then did it a second and third time. Why? The level of energy and enthusiasm created by an election: the strategy sessions, getting positive feedback on your position on issues, meeting new people, and making new friends, all combine to make seeking elected office an unique and enriching experience. The energy and enthusiasm generated by a campaign fades but is quickly replaced by something more important — the sense of being able to make a positive difference in your community.

If I was asked to give one piece of advice to newly elected officials it would have to be 'Don't personalize differences.' The sole purpose of any elected body is to provide good, representative government for its constituents. The legislative process frequently is one of opposing views seeking a common ground. You'll win some and you'll lose some but you will always come out on top if you conduct yourself professionally and treat your colleagues with courtesy and respect."

— *Jeanette Carr, North Miami, Florida*

"The points taken and questions asked by Otis White are most appropriate. Perhaps small communities, such as Carroll Valley, Pennsylvania, population somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000, lend themselves to an easier answer to "Should You Run?"

Politics does not seem to play its customary role here, although not all communities, of whatever size, find this to be so. The amount of time spent on community work is related to how deeply one delves into the issues. Some of us have more time to do so, being retired from full-time occupations. Being on both the Planning Commission and the Borough Council gives me a liaison type of role which is often helpful during discussions in either group.

So far I have experienced no conflict of interest problems. Perhaps it is the nature of the community as well as the fine work done by a small, effective, professional, full-time staff in the Borough Hall."

— *Carl Kohn, Carroll Valley, Pennsylvania*

"I have run for office several times. Three times for City Council, once for a water and sanitation district and once for school board — all in different locations. Each campaign was distinct and depended on the issues and my motivation to serve.

One thing I have found is that the more ethical you are, the more dilemmas you have. For instance — taking money to finance the campaign. The amounts needed varies considerably. A shot-gun approach is the most difficult. Sooner or later, you will have an offer of funds from someone who you don't want to 'be in bed with.'

Endorsements can cause the same kinds of concerns. Also, someone will ask how you stand on a certain issue. If the race is close, you are 'tempted' to slant your response depending on how you believe the person wants you to answer — just to get their vote. I found that happening in the last race I ran. This can be very disconcerting when it occurs."

— *Ivan Widom, Sun Lakes, Arizona*