City officials find value in face-to-face contact with constituents

By Debra O'Connor
doconnor@pioneerpress.com
Posted: 11/16/2014 12:01:00 AM CST | Updated: about 10 hours ago

North St. Paul Mayor Mike Kuehn meets with a group of home-schooled children and their parents and talks about what a city is. (Pioneer Press: Scott Takushi)

On the first Monday of the month, Mayor Mike Kuehn never knows who will be coming by his office at the North St. Paul City Hall to complain, compliment, question or simply shoot the breeze.

People can make appointments, but Kuehn welcomes drop-ins, too: a resident who wonders how many public safety staff drive city vehicles home; a neighborhood block captain asking about home burglaries; a resident irritated with a noisy neighbor; a Finnish librarian in town to visit relatives. Kuehn said these face-to-face meetings can be calmer and more informative than an email exchange or a phone call.

"The advantage is you can have much more of a dialogue," Kuehn said. He also welcomes groups, like young home-schooled children who have been studying the concept of a city with their parents, said Tiffany Sinn, mother of four children in the group. After sitting in the mayor's chair and pounding his gavel, the kids moved on to the police and fire departments.

Several other officials in the east metro regularly throw open their doors or make out-of-the-office contact with constituents.

St. Paul City Council member Amy Brandmoen has set community office hours at the Rice Street Library, but she also by appointment has walked around a lake in her district with constituents more than 100 times.
"It takes about 40 minutes to get around Como Lake, and that's a good amount of time to have a conversation," she said.

Advertisement
"Lake laps tend to be idea exchanges. People contact me when they have something they want to noodle with me. People's perspectives help form my decisions on important questions."

One walker was Susan Janda, who wanted to know more about the city's plans to narrow some streets from four lanes to three. She liked the experience because "it becomes much more of a two-way street, much less of asking for an audience in the throne room. After meeting with Amy, I had a completely renewed vision of what the city was trying to achieve ... how to tame traffic to make more of our urban setting."

In Apple Valley, about every six months Mayor Mary Hamann-Roland holds a "What if?" session -- as in, "What if we wanted to do this?" -- where residents can give her ideas and bring up issues they're concerned about.

Lakeville Mayor Matt Little has his office hours at city hall so staff can be summoned: "If I can't solve your problem, I can get you to the person who can. The mayor is better than any LinkedIn account in the nation."

If Little's schedule doesn't fit the time constituents have available, he will arrange to meet for coffee when it's convenient for the other person.

"I think it's important for people to have direct, face-to-face, in-person contact," he said.

"There are multiple occasions where I've been made aware of things I had no idea about." Plus, he said, "Arguments that (may) turn heated online never turn heated" in person.

He also is open to talking to people while he's just out running errands: "I went to the bank and one of the tellers said, 'I need to talk to you before you go.' I can't go to the grocery store without (having) three conversations."
Blaine Mayor Tom Ryan has weekly office hours because "it's a whole different story when you talk to them live than in the email."

He also has open meetings monthly at the city's senior center. He's been unopposed for the past two elections, and this keeps him from getting out of touch with his constituents, he said.

In some cities, such as Eagan, residents can go to city hall before council meetings and talk to the council about items that aren't on the agenda.

Some city officials prefer a much more casual approach. In South St. Paul, said Mayor Beth Baumann, "people feel free to stop by my house. And I am at a couple of events every week where citizens also feel free to talk to me about issues. It's not as important to have a specific time for people to come and talk to you."

White Bear Lake City Manager Mark Sather said his city has switched from a monthly opportunity, which was attracting few attendees, to an overall attitude of welcoming residents to drop by.

"The current mayor (Jo Emerson) and I encourage residents to stop in or call at any time, no appointment needed. ... Less gimmicky, but much more effective," Sather said.

Non-elected officials also are sometimes available to meet with residents. In Roseville, police officers recently had a session at a coffee shop to answer questions and listen to opinions.

Gov. Mark Dayton has his own way of letting constituents tell him a thing or two: They can pick up the phone and call him, said press secretary Matt Swenson.

"He gives out his home phone number at any gathering. He's given it out to tens of thousands of people over the years," said Swenson, who declined to provide that phone number for this story. "He gets all sorts of calls from regular Minnesotans at the residence."

Lake Elmo Mayor Mike Pearson makes time for drop-in visitors all over town, most recently one morning at the Twin Point Tavern.

"The value I see ... is the free-flowing conversation," he said. "For me as an elected (official), you get in this bubble, almost, you're so focused on a couple of matters."

The city also holds open forums about issues such as downtown development and parks, he said.

"At the end of it, there's typically good that comes out of it and everybody benefits," Pearson said. "And that's what you're supposed to be there for, accessible to the public. It's local government -- it's a no-brainer."

Debra O'Connor can be reached at 651-228-5453. Follow her at twitter.com/DebOConnorPP.