

The following is an excerpt from *Nelson, K. (2025). County and municipal boards. In C. B. McLaughlin (Ed.), County and municipal government in North Carolina: 2025 edition (pp. 51–52). UNC School of Government / Longleaf Services.*

Expectations of County and Municipal Governing Boards

County and municipal governing boards must operate transparently, in a public setting, and are entrusted to carry out their work legally and ethically. Local governing boards have a direct influence on the culture, effectiveness, and efficiency of county and municipal governments and function best when they adopt common expectations for their work, examples of which are provided below.

1. The governing board sets direction by
 - clarifying the local government's mission and purposes and setting goals for the short and long term,
 - adopting policies to accomplish the e purposes,
 - employing professional public managers and administrators as needed for administrative functions and service operations,
 - engaging regularly in strategy development (e.g., during an annual retreat), and
 - routinely monitoring and evaluating local government's ability to administer and provide efficient and effective public services.
2. Members of the governing board act as a body by
 - focusing their discussion with clear and consistent rules of procedure, following a planned agenda, and spending time on important topics;
 - understanding their own legal and ethical responsibilities, as well as those of the local government;
 - making sure they all have the same information with which to make decisions;
 - working to master small-group decision-making techniques;
 - respecting one another;
 - abiding by the decisions of the board's majority; and
 - making clear to the public that decision-making power rests with the majority, not with individual board members.
3. The governing board serves the public well by
 - enhancing the local government's public image,
 - providing members of the public opportunities to respectfully comment on public issues,
 - ensuring the success and viability of the community by convening and facilitating public engagement, and
 - making sure that resources are adequate to serve the public and are used for their intended purposes
4. The board takes responsibility for its members' behaviors by
 - abstaining from seeking political support from staff,
 - submitting questions about board agenda items ahead of the meeting,
 - providing each member an opportunity to influence and respectfully dissent in board meetings,
 - focusing on issues instead of personalities,
 - having members themselves address inappropriate behavior in their ranks rather than delegating this responsibility to the staff, and
 - working as a team to jointly develop and hold itself accountable to a common code of conduct.

5. The board freely gives and seeks feedback by
 - supporting the manager or administrator by providing clear direction and annually reviewing the manager's performance,
 - annually setting expectations for itself and assessing its own performance,
 - inviting constructive feedback to improve its own performance, and
 - regularly reviewing and monitoring the local government's finances, programs, and services.
6. The board works with the manager or administrator to function as a high-performing governing body by
 - looking to the manager or administrator for assistance in
 - clearly defining roles and relationships,
 - thinking to the future and acting strategically on key issues,
 - operating in a culture of values and ethics,
 - regularly evaluating policy implementation,
 - developing and following protocols for board behavior and board-staff relations,
 - allocating time and energy appropriately,
 - setting clear rules and procedures for meetings,
 - getting regular assessments of public concerns and its own performance,
 - recognizing its position in intergovernmental systems and in building productive partnerships, and
 - focusing on personal learning and developing as leaders;
 - having the board chair and manager or administrator orient new members to the governing board, providing expectations about how to be successful; and
 - working with the manager or administrator to promote behavior that encourages public confidence in local government.

Boards with a manager can benefit from establishing two additional expectations:

7. The governing board respects the role of the manager by
 - channeling communications appropriately to the manager or other responsible person;
 - depending upon employees to respond to public concerns and complaints as fully and as expeditiously as practical;
 - expecting staff to make independent and objective recommendations;
 - expecting the manager, administrator, and staff to support and advocate for adopted board policies;
 - respecting the professionals who work in local government and following appropriate protocols for interacting with staff; and
 - refraining from publicly criticizing an individual employee (where criticism is differentiated from questioning the facts or opinions of staff).
 8. Board members give the manager a chance to earn their trust by
 - recruiting, selecting, and hiring the manager or administrator;
 - promoting and encouraging a positive relationship between its members and the manager or administrator;
 - treating and respecting the manager or administrator as a professional; and
 - recognizing that the role of a professional manager or administrator is to serve the governing board as a whole.
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