



Key Takeaways:

- City Council members have two primary roles - legislation and constituent services. To be successful, they must be committed to both public policy and the quality of life issues that affect residents.
- It is important for council members to have community relationships and regular interactions with community-based organizations. It's a chance to hear from residents about their concerns and issues, and give them an opportunity to be heard by their government.
- Legislating is about the long-haul. It takes stamina, commitment, and relentless drive to get legislation passed.
- Relationships are key to getting things done. Having trusted relationships with other council members is critical to advancing a legislative agenda. Maintaining a strong relationship with the Mayor can help ensure the success of legislation, and that the issues receive funding and support from the administration.
- Compromise is key to being a successful legislator; it's a combination of art, science and soul. A legislator must always remember that it takes 12 votes to ensure veto-proof passage of a bill. Compromise is not a bad word. But Council members should remember to compromise on concepts, never on principles.

Council – Learning to Legislate

Members of Philadelphia City Council were sworn in January 2nd, at a time of sweeping change in city government. There's a new mayor, Chelle Parker, and a new Council President, Kenyatta Johnson, and the 17 City Council members will have less experience in the body than any Council in recent memory. Four members are brand new, four more were chosen during the last term in special elections, and four more have served only one term.

The Committee of Seventy, in partnership with the Chamber of Commerce for Greater Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Council AFL-CIO, Bellevue Communications and the Urban Affairs Coalition held an information session to help new and returning members learn Council's rules and traditions and adjust to the job.

Michael Nutter, who served four terms in City Council and two terms as mayor, authored plenty of consequential legislation, including a civilian police oversight bill, major ethics legislation, and the bill that prohibits smoking in most public places in the city. He said meaningful bills take time and patience. "You've got to have stamina, that's for sure. Stay committed to the cause and just be relentless," he said. "I mean, the smoking ban took six years."

The theme was echoed by former Councilmember Bill Greenlee, who spent years getting his bill requiring large employers in the city to offer paid sick leave enacted. "This bill was lobbied against by the Chamber of Commerce. The Inquirer came out against it. It was a long haul," he said. "One thing you learn is that compromise is not a dirty word," Greenlee said. "You have to make compromises, and you also have to garner as much support as you can from citizen groups, people who can influence Council."

Former Councilmember Derek Green, who moderated the information session, said maintaining good relationships with fellow Councilmembers is critical. If you promise to support another member's bill or a procedural move in committee and then don't, you can pay a price. "This is a small legislative body," Green said. "It's not like the [state] legislature or Congress. When your body is 17 members, things come back around very quickly."

The Councilmembers also heard presentations on the nuts and bolts of drafting and enacting legislation. Former city attorney Richard Feder explained the powers and limitations the City Charter and state law provide for Council, and he said attorneys in the Law Department will work with members to draft legislation that meets their goals. Some Councilmembers pushed back on that, suggesting the Law Department isn't always cooperative if the mayor opposes the member's legislative goals.

Frank Iannuzzi, an attorney and veteran Council staff member, explained the body's procedures and practices in some detail, including the intricacies of a Councilmember introducing a bill that ends up in a committee of which they are not a member. This scenario highlights the importance of Councilmembers working together and keeping each other informed and educated on the issues important to them.

Apart from crafting and passing legislation, there was discussion of how to set up a Council office and manage the workflow. When hiring staff, "chemistry is key," Green said. "So someone that worked on your campaign may not be the best person to come into your office, because it's a different skill set."

Nutter agreed, and noted that it's typical for district Councilmembers to accept job recommendations from ward leaders in their district. Nutter said he often did that, with the understanding that if the recommended person didn't work out, he'd make a change. "And you never want to hire somebody you can't fire," Nutter added. "So you can't hire all your friends and family. If you decide to let your cousin go, there's going to be an awkward conversation with your aunt."

Green said he also wanted staff willing to push back on a bad idea. “I said, `listen, if you think I’m doing something crazy, that doesn’t make sense, I need you to tell me,” he said. “I always wanted to have honest feedback.” Finally, Green said, as a Councilmember you’ll be asked to go to endless meetings and events, and you have to pace yourself. “You have to find that work life balance that works for you,” he said. “Are you a morning person or evening person? When is it easier for you to do meetings with staff or constituents or groups? Because you’ll want to go everywhere, but you can’t be everywhere.”

Dave Davies is a journalist who spent decades covering Philadelphia politics and government. He is currently a contributor to NPR’s Fresh Air with Terry Gross.

Additional Resources:

- [City Council Rules of Procedure](#)
- [Standing Committee List](#)
- [Council Contact List - phone numbers, office numbers, social media contacts](#)