

A Plea for Public Civility: *An Example from One Florida Community*

by Ron Barnette

Local communities, as well as state and federal officials, have been discussing with some urgency the topics of civility and ethics in the political marketplace, as elected officials are requested increasingly by the voters to conduct themselves in a civil and ethical manner. But what does this mean, and how might our elected officials address these voter concerns responsibly?

With this issue and question in mind, I would like to share the Code of Core Values for Civility and Ethics that my city, Dunedin (population 37,000), has adopted, and to explain why our approach to this important matter has been welcomed by, and successful for, the community at large.

As a given, reflect on the following generic argument:

- Elected leaders pledge to address their constituents' concerns;
- Constituents' concerns are often divided and diverse, and reflected among their elected leaders; thus
- Elected leaders face the issue of resolving conflicts among conflicting concerns.

This is a simple argument that is all too familiar, and should be understood as normal and acceptable among representatives of diverse constituencies. However, it seems to be the case that the conclusion is often one that invites a significant clash of personalities and resulting questions of civility in approach to resolving conflicts. It is at this juncture that I will address this topic directly, and make the case that personality clashes and their often-resulting incivility only work to deter a fair and wholesome democratic process, so vital for all.

Elected leaders, especially at the local level, are watched closely by their residents, who look to them for sound leadership, and with good reason: Local legislation affects a community most directly and immediately. As such, community leaders have a keen ethical responsibility to work on behalf of their community and, at the very least, to reflect this in their commitment to working together with some common principles of conduct that further community interests, independent of the differences they might have over specific issues. Therefore, I want to point out the importance of drafting and approving a code of

core values for civility and ethics, such as we have done in Dunedin, in light of one's own particular community aspirations and vision.

For Dunedin, the goals of such a code were to include the following:

- To define acceptable, responsible behaviors for the public's interests;
- To define what it means to be a responsible public servant;
- To promote healthy debate without ad hominem attacks;
- To foster mutual respect among community leaders;
- To encourage and promote thoughtful dialogue and respect among diverse parties; and
- To be self-enforcing as helpful reminders of our individual responsibilities.

The final document reads as follows:

The Dunedin City Commission has adopted a Code of Core Values for Civility and Ethics for members of the City Commission, Boards and Committees to assure public confidence in the integrity of local government and its effective and fair operation.

It is the policy of the City of Dunedin to uphold, promote and demand the highest standards of civility and ethics from all of its officials, whether elected or appointed. Accordingly, members of the City Commission, Boards and Committees should maintain the utmost standards of personal integrity, truthfulness, honesty, civility and fairness in carrying out their public duties, avoid any improprieties in their roles as public servants, and never use their City position or powers for improper personal gain. (FS. 112.311/City Code Sec. 2-93)

Implementation

The Code of Core Values for Civility and Ethics is intended to be self-enforcing. It therefore becomes most effective when members are thoroughly familiar with it and embrace its provisions.

For this reason, the Core Values of Civility and Ethical standards shall be included in the regular orientations for the City Commission, Boards and Committees.

Code of Core Values for Civility and Ethics

Integrity – I shall make no promises or commitments I cannot reasonably expect to fulfill, and I shall maintain appropriate social, ethical, and organizational norms in City related activities.

Ethics – I pledge to maintain the highest standards of professional behavior and to comply with the laws, regulations, and policies under which we operate.

Civility – I pledge to help create an atmosphere of respect and civility where individual Commissioners, City Manager, department heads, staff, committee and board members, and the public are free to express their ideas and work to their full potential.

Respect for the Individual – I respect the diversity of Commissioners, staff, committee members, and citizens, to provide fair and equitable treatment in all areas, and to encourage personal and professional growth.

Communication – I pledge to be open, consistent, truthful, and respectful in all communications, written and verbal, as this is vital for reflective and sound decision making for the Dunedin community.

Teamwork – I shall work together with others, with mutual respect, to achieve organizational goals, recognizing that unity of purpose and effort leads to increased productivity and greater accomplishments.

Leadership – I shall lead by example, using appropriate interpersonal skills, and shall strive to maximize citizen and staff involvement to further the vision of Dunedin's quality community.

Creativity and Innovation – I shall strive to stimulate and appreciate new concepts and solutions suggested by all, as Dunedin's creative community is enriched.

Quality – I shall strive for excellence in every phase of our work.

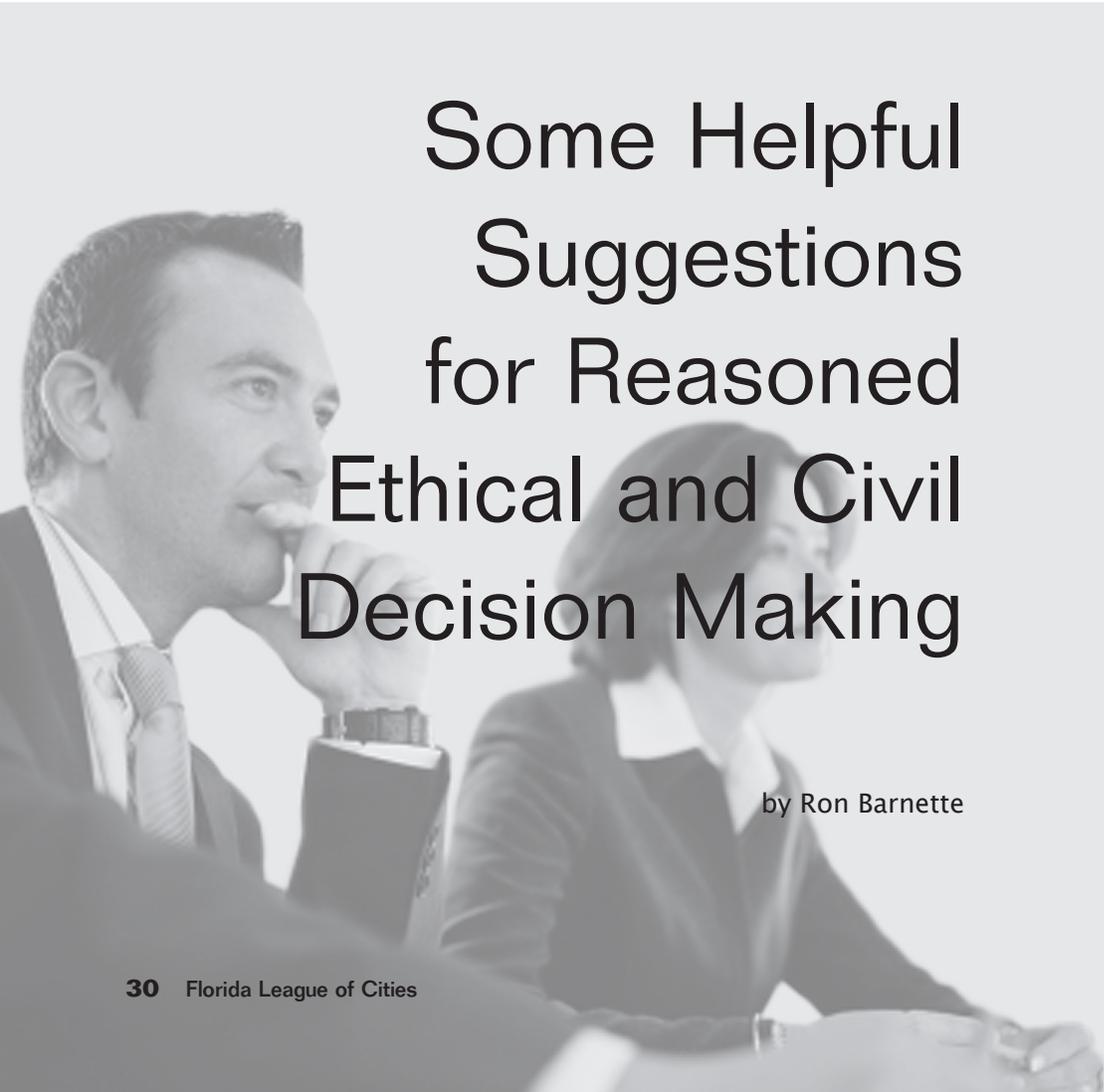
Stewardship – I shall strive to make a positive contribution to our City and to enhance the quality of services throughout the Dunedin community.

Efficiency – I shall work to attain our goals by optimizing the use of our energy, time and resources.

Organizational Sensitivity – I shall consider the impact of all decisions on resources and to recognize the limitations imposed by our environment.

Adaptability – I shall respond efficiently and effectively to the needs of our citizens as well as to changes in our environment.

Recognition – I shall recognize and value individual contributions to the Dunedin community, as the City's mission and vision are pursued.



Some Helpful Suggestions for Reasoned Ethical and Civil Decision Making

by Ron Barnette

In response to requests that I received several years ago concerning suggestions for making clear ethical and civil decisions, I drafted the following as some tools for individual reflections.

I submit that the most effective ethical and civility judgments and decisions are made with a keen blending of the mind's reason, with emotional involvement, and with a check on one's reactive instincts. To this end, the following thoughts serve as an aid for clear, thoughtful, ethical and civil decision making:

To further the goals listed above, all current and new members of the Dunedin City Commission, city boards and committees undergo an orientation that includes an understanding and commitment to the code for the betterment of the community. By fostering a partnership among city leaders, grounded in basic principles of ethics and civility, we have undertaken a significant step forward for our residents and for ourselves, and have helped educate all to the values of personal conduct which define our city's special character.

Questions and Answers

Q: How has the code been received?

A: Given a clearly explained philosophy of its importance and its self-enforcing nature, all parties have welcomed the code, which was initially approved in 2004. The Dunedin City Commission agreed unanimously to reaffirm its commitment to the code in a public meeting in 2010, and to remind all residents of such in the future.

Q: Has the code made a difference?

A: All parties to the code realize that mutual respect, professional and congenial relationships, and opportunities for positive dialogue only enhance the creative ideas before the city. There has never been a disagreement about the code's effectiveness for enhancing the public's interests.

Q: Does the code diminish or curtail debate and disagreement over issues?

A: Quite the contrary. The code only stipulates the manner in which one conducts oneself in the context of interpersonal actions, which, as a matter of fact, enhances wholesome debate over legitimate differences of opinion, freed from personal, irrelevant attacks and the like. Logic and critical thinking are thus front and center, as they should be in the context of salient, wholesome debates over the public's best interests.

In conclusion, cities in particular can become the leaders in furthering their voters' calls for civility in the political arena, and I hope that Dunedin's "case study" might well further this effort.

Ron Barnette is a Dunedin city commissioner, a conflict mediator and the author of Dunedin's Code of Core Values for Civility and Ethics (2004). He is a professor emeritus of philosophy at Valdosta State University in Georgia, and was co-founder of Valdosta State's Center for Professional and Applied Ethics. While at Valdosta State, Barnette also served as head of the philosophy department and dean of the College of Arts and Sciences before relocating in 2002 to Dunedin. He received his Ph.D. from the University of California, Irvine.

Use Reflective Reasoning

- Utilize ample time to reflect on ideas before making your decision.
- Use a more systematic process for arriving at judgments.
- Reflect on your personal responsibility for making sound judgments.
- Always be collaborative by including diverse ideas and divergent perspectives from others and from your own imagination.
- Balance your own emotions with your reasoned judgment.
- Listen well to the views of others and suspend personal judgment.
- Ask critical questions to clarify the issues.
- Avoid quick "either/or" thinking — the "black or white fallacy" — and avoid ad hominem criticisms of opposing viewpoints.
- Always seek alternative possibilities as you reflect on your own views.

- Consider the consequences and implications of various viewpoints, including your own.
- Justify your position by clear principles of ethics, civility, and logic.

Beware of "Blind Rule" Obedience

- Avoid the tendency to cease or abruptly cut off discussion.
- Evaluate critically a claim that "this is the way we have done this in the past."
- Do not blindly rely on the chair to say, "Do it this way because . . ."
- Never underestimate nor neglect personal moral responsibility, in spite of what others say or imply.
- Challenge rules, thoughtfully, if you judge that they compete with ethical principles or when they are not logical. This makes for cogent, reflective dialogue, in light of changing times. But always be prepared to alter your views in light of what you hear, and evaluate gently.

- Always realize that past practices are subject to current realities.

Avoid Visceral Reactions

- Bite your tongue and steer clear of strong visceral responses.
- Do not let emotions rule your reflective judgments; always endeavor to separate issues from personalities.
- Avoid staking out positions and locking on to them blindly.
- Do not talk when it impairs your listening ability.
- Do not see others as "for me or against me."
- Do not allow a personal feeling to prevent thoughtful collaboration and potential agreement . . . a "win-win" is always an ideal for which to strive.