



National Strategy Council

Visionary Leadership Playbook

National Strategy Council for Local
Government Public Utilities

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The NSC & Strategy Playbooks

The overarching goal of the National Strategy Council is to convene councils, focused teams of civic leaders, to discuss some of the most pressing challenges of our times: the infrastructure crisis, financial sustainability, affordability and intergenerational equity. Each council convenes to discuss these challenges and to innovate actionable strategies to address them. The work of each council is captured in these Playbooks to provide guidance and strategy in the form of practical best practices that can be shared with all local governments for adaptation to their own local realities. With this goal, we aim to guide our society towards a vibrant and sustainable future that benefits all.

Who This Playbook Is For

The first Strategy Playbook was created by a council of local government CFOs for CFOs. This Playbook has been created by a council of City Managers for all CEOs, including City and County Managers, Utility Executive Directors, General Managers of Districts and Authorities, and other local government Chief Executive Officers who want to address the most pressing challenges in modern local government management.

The best practices developed by this council are organized into four topics: engaging with the public, managing political expectations, team collaboration, and institutionalizing continuous revenue management. The call to action from the council is for City Managers across the nation to adopt and institutionalize the set of these practices that make sense and are practical.



This CEO playbook should be to challenge city managers to think about the bigger picture.

Bret Prebula

The Infrastructure Crisis

Infrastructure deficit threatens to undermine most communities' vision of a vibrant future. The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) estimates the current infrastructure deficit at over \$2 trillion, with a significant portion of that in public works and utilities.

Much of America's infrastructure is over 50 years old and has exceeded its intended lifespan. Intergenerational equity is at risk if we continue to wear down infrastructure in the present without contributing to its renewal, effectively robbing future generations of comfort, convenience, and reliability by saddling them with excessive infrastructure liabilities.

There are many forces conspiring together at the heart of this matter: underfunding, limited resources, ongoing wear and tear of infrastructure, rapid population growth, urbanization, staff turnover, rising sea levels, more frequent and severe storms, prolonged droughts, new regulations, compliance, and the need for increased security. Adapting to these many conditions is costly and challenging as there are many moving parts requiring constant and vigilant attention to navigating into the future.



Our city has utility infrastructure that are as old as the late 1800's to the early 1900's.

Molly McGovern

The infrastructure deficit crisis directly impacts the economy, public health, and quality of life for millions of Americans. Wide-ranging consequences include reduced access to safe drinking water, increased traffic congestion, higher cost of goods and services, and decreased competitiveness in the global market—factors we are already experiencing.

These issues not only affect the present but also impact our future economy. Failure to address it will lead to unafford-ability, lost productivity, and missed opportunities, resulting in an estimated \$4 trillion GDP shortfall in the next two decades. Managing the infrastructure problem is crucial and immediate, lest we find ourselves in an impossible situation.



The city is 70 years old and has never had any infrastructure changes since it first went in 70 years ago.

Cesar Garcia

The Grand Challenges

Factors precipitating the infrastructure crisis manifest as three distinct challenges every community must contend with:

01

Financial Sustainability

Pertains to the local government's ability to manage financial resources to ensure long-term viability, stability, and resilience.

02

Affordability

Refers to the ability of citizens to comfortably manage the costs of the services without undue financial burden or hardship.

03

Intergenerational Equity

Addresses the principle of fairness that considers the rights, needs, and interests of both present and future generations.



Need a long View.
What you don't know can hurt you.

Molly McGovern



Managing a city is often like
keeping the plane flying in the air
while we make repairs

Bret Prebula

Framing The Role Of Executive Leadership

The local government's CEO plays a critical role in addressing the infrastructure deficit crisis in America. Their leadership is essential in ensuring that communities have safe, reliable infrastructure while maintaining financial sustainability and operational integrity.

Visionary Leadership

Executive leaders must develop and communicate a clear, strategic vision for the future. This involves proactive and creative planning, driving the vision of the Community Strategic Plan, and ensuring that all initiatives align with long-term community goals.

Community Engagement

Building trust and fostering collaboration with the public and stakeholders is crucial. Leaders must engage transparently with the community, ensuring that public trust is regained and maintained through consistent engagement and open communication.

Authenticity & Common Sense

Leaders should bring authenticity and common sense to their roles, even if it means being brutally honest. This approach helps build credibility and ensures that decisions are grounded in practical, real-world considerations.

Managing Political Expectations

Balancing infrastructure needs with political pressures is a key challenge. Leaders must navigate these dynamics by aligning infrastructure projects with political realities, fostering respectful collaboration, and ensuring that all parties understand and respect the boundaries of authority.

Policy Implementation

Ensuring that policies are executed effectively requires a collaborative process within the organization. Leaders must balance affordability, sustainability, and intergenerational equity, making sure that policies not only meet current needs but also secure the future well-being of the community.

Operational Excellence

Leading teams to achieve high performance through innovation and efficiency is essential. This involves fostering a culture of respect and inclusivity, promoting continuous professional development, and empowering staff to propose and implement new ideas for improved service delivery.

The Executive Leadership Solution

To address the infrastructure deficit and achieve sustainable community development, executive leaders must focus on three primary areas: engaging with the public, managing political expectations, and effective team execution.

01

Engaging with the Public

Effective public engagement involves meeting the community in familiar settings, providing clear financial transparency, and building trust through consistent values and responsive communication.

02

Managing Political Expectations

Clear roles and ethical standards, continuous strategic planning, and regular communication with elected officials are essential for managing political expectations and fostering collaboration.

03

Team and Execution

Strong execution relies on breaking down departmental silos, fostering inclusivity and innovation, and maintaining transparency through regular updates and aligned strategies.

04

Continuous Rate Management

In many cases, utility rates are only periodically and often infrequently reviewed. When it's time to review rates, the process proceeds with an intensive RFP process for a rate study with a report as a deliverable. Reports are static.

01. Engaging with the Public

Why It's Important

Engaging with the public is critical for building trust, fostering collaboration, and ensuring that community members feel heard and valued. Effective engagement leads to better decision-making, as it incorporates diverse perspectives and promotes transparency, ultimately strengthening the relationship between the government and its citizens.

The Anticipated Benefits

1. Enhanced Community Trust

Transparency and proactive engagement build trust between the government and its citizens, leading to stronger community support for initiatives.

2. Informed Decision Making

Educating the public about financial realities and involving them in discussions helps ensure decisions are well-informed and reflect the community's priorities.

3. Stronger Civic Participation

By making the public feel heard and valued, civic participation increases, fostering a more active and involved community.

4. Improved Conflict Resolution

Efficiently addressing public complaints and concerns helps transform dissatisfaction into appreciation, reducing conflict and improving public relations.

5. Unified Community Vision

Collaborating with local organizations and finding common ground helps bridge differences, creating a unified vision and collective effort towards common goals.



Progress, not Perfection!

Ryan Snow



This needs to be an us conversation, not an 'us and them' conversation.

Molly McGovern

Best Practices - Engaging with the Public

Best Practices	What This Is And What It Does For You
Meet 'em where they're comfortable	Conducting town hall-like focus groups and meetings in familiar settings like churches, community centers, and HOA meetings rather than at City Hall. This approach increases participation and makes the public more comfortable and open to discussion.
Be Upfront about Economics	Providing a single source of truth for overall finances and taking time to educate the public on real costs and cost-benefit thinking. This transparency helps the community understand the need for prioritizing resources and supports informed decision-making.
Stand up for your Values	Emphasizing and communicating the manager's and local government's values. Sharing these values can make a strong impression on the community, fostering trust and alignment with government goals.
Avoid the Comparison Trap	Recognizing that neighboring communities are not always comparable and focusing on local context. This avoids unrealistic expectations and promotes a more accurate understanding of local issues and solutions.
Find the Common Ground	Partnering, collaborating, and innovating with local organizations by actively listening and discovering shared interests and beliefs. This helps bridge differences and unites the community towards common goals.
Be a Silent Digital Guardian	Being visible online by actively listening and caring about the community's conversations without overstepping. Engaging respectfully and using multiple channels like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube to stay connected.
Build Trust with Transparency	Using data transparency and effective communication to manage public expectations and gain trust. Encouraging community feedback in developing progress reports ensures that the community feels involved and informed.
Transform Gripes into Gratitude	Developing a system for efficiently tracking and addressing public complaints and concerns. Ensuring timely, respectful responses that provide actionable solutions helps transform dissatisfaction into appreciation.

02. Managing Political Expectations

The Importance of Political Navigation

Managing political expectations is crucial for local government executives to maintain smooth operations and achieve strategic goals. Political dynamics can significantly influence decision-making processes, resource allocation, and the overall direction of municipal projects. Clear communication, ethical standards, and continuous engagement with elected officials help build a cooperative environment, fostering mutual respect and understanding. Effective management of political expectations ensures that all parties involved—executives, elected officials, and the public—are aligned, reducing conflicts and enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of government operations.



The biggest deficit in government is the deficit in public trust.

Charlie Francis

Challenges Managing Political Expectations



I have a high degree of trust with the City Council, and I appreciate and value that. And so, when necessary, I pretty much just share the consequences if we don't invest in our infrastructure. That's tough, but it has to be done.

Scott Getchell

One of the primary challenges in managing political expectations is navigating the diverse and sometimes conflicting interests of different stakeholders. Elected officials often face pressure from their constituents, leading to short-term decision-making that may not align with long-term strategic goals.

Additionally, the rapid pace of political changes and the need for frequent updates can strain communication channels. Building and maintaining trust, ensuring transparency, and fostering a culture of collaboration are essential yet challenging tasks that require consistent effort and strategic thinking.

Best Practices Managing Political Expectations

Best Practices	What This Is And What It Does For You
Craft a Clarifying Contract	Establishing clear contractual guidelines that delineate your functional role fosters respectful collaboration and ensures that all parties honor the boundaries of authority.
Elevate Integrity	Actively participating with ICMA and adopting a personal ICMA code of ethics elevates integrity. If not already in your charter, adopting an Ethic Standards Ordinance based on the form of government reinforces ethical standards.
Plan Perform Perfect	Establishing a strategic plan early and regularly reviewing, aligning, and adjusting goals to meet community needs. This plan should include quantifiable, accountable, and reportable metrics that align the council's objectives with public expectations.
Link with Finance	Providing linkages in the strategic plan to long-term financial forecasts, annual budgets, and capital improvement plans ensures coherent financial management and supports strategic objectives.
Dare to Excel	Being bold, creative, innovative, and aggressive pushes the boundaries with daring ideas and vigorous action, achieving exceptional results.
Navigate Continuously	Meeting early and often and keeping local elected officials informed with brief, data-driven reports help navigate the many moving parts and prepares officials for tough decisions later.
Be on the Cutting Edge	Adopting modern tools that enable visualization of complex issues and interactive engagement facilitates buy-in and efficient decision-making.

03. Getting the Job Done: Team & Execution

The Importance of Team Collaboration

Effective team collaboration is essential for local government executives to achieve strategic goals and deliver high-quality services to the community.

Breaking down departmental silos, fostering inclusivity, and promoting clear communication are crucial for building a cohesive and motivated team.

By investing in professional development, encouraging innovation, and maintaining transparency, executives can ensure that their teams are well-equipped to handle challenges and drive continuous improvement.



Nobody likes to have a huge rate increase at once. That really creates a problem. But if we could have incremental increases and explain the reason why our rates are what they should be, then people can see and understand what will be accomplished.

Ryan Snow

Challenges with Collaboration & Execution



Surround yourself with people that can execute.

Scott Getchell

Managing a diverse team with varying functions and expertise can be challenging. Silos often exist within local government, hindering communication and collaboration.

Additionally, aligning individual roles with organizational goals, fostering a culture of respect and openness, and maintaining consistent performance management require ongoing effort and strategic planning.

Executives must also balance the need for innovation with the practicalities of day-to-day operations, ensuring that all team members are engaged and motivated.

Best Practices - Getting the Job Done

Continuous rate management requires deviation from the traditional approach. We've identified six best practices below

Best Practices	What This Is And What It Does For You
Tear down those Silos!	Encourage finance, planning, engineering, and public works functions to meet and collaborate regularly. This improves communication and coordination, leading to more effective problem-solving and project execution.
Every Voice Propels	Promote a culture of respect, inclusivity, openness, honesty, and candor so every voice is heard. This fosters a supportive work environment where team members feel valued and motivated to contribute.
Mission Clarity	Communicate policy objectives and organizational goals clearly to all staff members. Ensuring each team member understands their role in achieving these goals enhances focus and alignment within the organization.
Invest in Excellence	Empower staff to propose and implement new ideas and solutions for improved service delivery. Promoting the use of technology and best practices streamlines processes and enhances efficiency.
Make Metrics Meaningful	Gather data and use meaningful metrics to track issues and report to the public on needs and progress. For example: "# water main breaks per year", "# street light outages", "miles of road repair per year". This provides transparency and accountability.
Foster Continuous Management	Encourage staff to keep track of key metrics and report these frequently to elected officials and the public. This promotes transparency, builds trust, and creates opportunities for interactive stakeholder collaboration.
Unite for Impact	Maintain close relations with Finance and Public Information Directors to ensure financial and communication strategies are aligned and effective. This enhances overall organizational cohesion and effectiveness.
Ward off Rate Shock	Regularly review rates and taxes through a continuous planning process. Implementing regular small incremental adjustments to rates and taxes prevents sudden financial shocks and ensures stability.

04. Continuous Rate Management

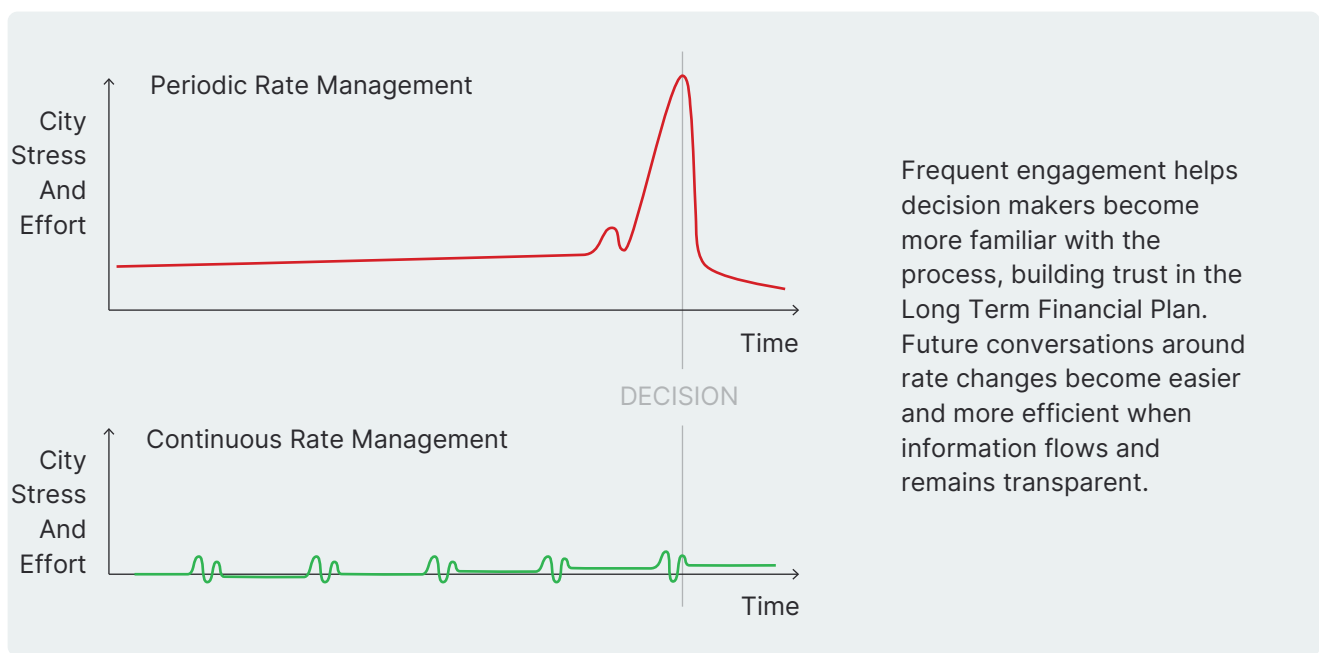
What is Continuous Rate Management?

In many cases, utility rates are only periodically and often infrequently reviewed. When it's time to review rates, the process proceeds with an intensive RFP process for a rate study with a report as a deliverable.

Reports are static. They may consider the next five years, but their recommendations are often out-of-date within weeks or months of completion due to rapid external and often unexpected changes. Recent examples include the pandemic, new regulations, and increased inflationary periods requiring planned projects to be re-priced.

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An important outcome of the Strategy Playbook is to have a set of tangible best practices for continuous utility rate management
Bret Prebula

Other factors include growth, changes in demand patterns (perhaps due to climate or economic shifts), and unplanned capital projects. Today's world is changing rapidly. Using static tools like infrequent rate study reports does not represent success in managing such changes. Agility is essential. To address these issues, municipal utilities are increasingly adopting and institutionalizing the practice of continuous rate management. This involves ongoing analysis of costs and revenues, analysis of trends and other factors that may impact the utility's financial position, and importantly keeping a long-term financial model up to date. By continuously adjusting long-term financial plans according to these ever-changing factors and trends, managers can stay on top as well as keep all stakeholders informed of these changes. This is accomplished by regularly informing stakeholders of changes, and how those changes are likely to impact rate payers.



Best Practices Continuous Rate Management

Continuous rate management requires deviation from the traditional approach. We've identified six best practices below

Best Practices	What This Is And What It Does For You
<p>Stay On Top</p>	<p>Commit to being disciplined about adjusting the Long-Term Financial Plan whenever something substantial changes. This likely is an organizational discipline rather than on just one individual. Finance, public works, and city management need to work together to stay on top.</p>
<p>Analyze Early And Often</p>	<p>Analyze past trends in customer usage and other factors, such as population growth, economic trends, and weather patterns. Compare actuals to budget throughout the year and determine early on if some variations to the approved budget will persist beyond the current year thereby impacting the Long-Term Financial Plan.</p>
<p>Review With Stakeholders Regularly</p>	<p>We know advertising works through repetition. The more often an ad is seen, the more likely the audience will respond. The same principle works with managing rates: many, brief engagements with policy-makers prepare them by softening the tough issues, giving them a chance for early input and time to reflect on the matter.</p>
<p>Engage And Explore With Visuals</p>	<p>Policy-makers need to be engaged if they are to be efficient and productive. Static reports are hard to read and don't lend well to engagement. It's much more effective to have the ability to explore scenarios together interactively, in a way that involves visuals and an ability to explore options easily.</p>
<p>Keep Affordability And Equity In Mind</p>	<p>Any changes to a plan will always be met with the question: "How does this impact ratepayers, particularly vulnerable households?" By maintaining a live, up-to-date model that links revenue requirements to rates, this question can be answered easily at any time.</p>
<p>Modernize With Technology</p>	<p>Practicing continuous rates management requires integration of existing systems, such as budget and accounting along with the Long-Term Financial Plan. It also requires close and frequent collaboration. All this can be challenging. Seek to modernize by adopting technology that can insulate from these challenges and make the practice of continue rates management more seamless and therefore achievable.</p>

The Final Thoughts

The National Strategy Council's Strategy Playbooks aim is to provide actionable insights and best practices that drive effective governance. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this Playbook, local government executives can lead their communities toward a vibrant, sustainable future, ensuring that all citizens benefit from safe, reliable infrastructure and sound financial management.

Let's all work together to address the infrastructure deficit crisis and achieve the shared vision of sustainable, thriving communities.



You know the Golden Rule. We should operate according to the Platinum Rule: treat people not as YOU would like to be treated, but as THEY would like to be treated.

Like grandma used to say: we have two ears and one mouth for a reason: you should listen twice as much as you speak.

Cesar Garcia

01

Engage the public in familiar, comfortable settings, and you'll Boost participation and openness. Be transparent about financial while sharing government values and you'll foster and win back trust. Focusing on local context instead of comparing with neighboring communities to ensure more relevant decision-making.

02

Managing political expectations is about establishing clear contracts and ethical guidelines to foster collaboration and integrity in governance. Regularly reviewing strategic plans and linking them to financial forecasts ensures alignment with community goals and efficient management. Be bold, innovative, and use modern tools.

03

Getting the Job Done involves encouraging departmental collaboration, improving communication and project execution. Clear communication of goals, fostering a respectful and inclusive culture, and promoting professional development helps align staff and maintain high standards.

04

Continuous Rate Management requires frequent stakeholder engagement. It is a low-effort approach to adjusting rates in a way that reassures elected officials, protects affordability, and averts sudden rate shocks while safeguarding the community's long-term interests.



National Strategy Council

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