



Best Practices

## Overpromising—The Achilles' Heel of Local Government Leaders

*Can you care about everything, do everything, and pay for it?  
You can't! Here's how to manage that tendency.*

*By: Michael Scanlon, Principal at Our City Planning LLC, recently retired City Manager from Kansas and Colorado communities*

**H**ow many of us have overcommitted so we could make a citizen happy? How many of us occasionally get sucked in by a social media thread that's an endless list of city or county government inadequacies and citizen wants—wants there is no possible way to fund? But then you try. How many of us have created unreasonable expectations?

As city and county managers, many of us have personally experienced the feeling that we have to fix everything in our community—and fix it all by the end of the week. What happens when we aren't successful? We are disappointed, and our constituents begin to believe we can't deliver on our promises. Overpromising can stifle real progress in your community—and leave your citizens doubting your real motives and abilities.

What is the root cause of the "Great Overpromise?" From my experience, here are the two most common paths that get local leaders into trouble and cause us to overpromise:

- Taxpayers are overburdened, so do more with less.
- There must be somebody to blame (even if the situation is beyond our control).

### **Path #1: Taxpayers Are Overburdened, So Do More with Less.**

Local leaders fall into the trap that we should approach every issue from the view of the overburdened taxpayer. When someone in a meeting asks, "What are you doing for the overburdened taxpayer?" here's a response you should have in your back pocket:

"I view the people that live in our city as citizens. And they are proud to call themselves our citizens. Yes, they have a responsibility to pay taxes, but they also have a

responsibility to maintain their property, obey our laws, and help others when they can. All of these are ways our citizens make our city the great place that it is. Yes, citizens deserve a better city, and most of them strive to make our city better every day (Athenian Oath). To call them simply taxpayers is to diminish their contribution."

The overburdened taxpayer argument often results in cutting taxes without fully understanding the impact. But, we can declare we've met our obligation to citizens! But, in short order, we walk into the greatest overpromise of all: Do more with less.

As we all know, it is mathematically impossible to do more with less. Math tells us that  $2 + 3 = 5$ , not 6. The math doesn't work.

Doing less is OK. It's our inability to accept less as an alternative that gets us into trouble. When confronted with the "do-more-with-less" argument from a citizen, ask the citizen what they would like you to do less of and how they want you to achieve the more? Invite them to present their plan to the community and city council. Don't be afraid to challenge their math.

### **Path #2: There Must Be Somebody to Blame (even if the situation is beyond our control).**

When you face issues that are beyond your control, they are usually accompanied by claims there must be somebody to blame! Yes, on occasion there is someone to blame. But most failures, problems, and work at the local government level have their genesis in situations you have little control over. But rather than acknowledge our lack of control, what do we do? You guessed it—we overpromise. We pledge to fix it now!

Here are three common “beyond-our-control” situations that lead to overpromising:

**1. Sins of the past.** These are decisions and choices made over decades that have created a problem today. One of the most common is not funding infrastructure replacement (e.g., streets, pipes, wires, and structures). At some point, there aren’t enough fingers for the dike. This is where most communities that are older than 100 years are today. They have huge capital project backlogs. Newly elected officials get caught in the promise that they will get to it all shortly—as if you can undo 100 years in a year or two. It’s not possible.

It’s best to temper expectations and do the best you can and explain that the 100-year-old pipe isn’t simply the fault of the people working for the city today. Rather, it’s a decades-old problem that’s been passed from generation to generation. And now it’s our responsibility to take care of it. Resist the fix-it-now promises. It took generations to get to this point, and it will likely take generations to improve the situation.

**2. Act of God.** There are things that befall our communities that are beyond our control (e.g., tornadoes, floods, Arctic vortexes, etc.). With these situations come an early rush of adrenaline and enthusiasm to solve the most immediate problems.

Most of us can get past the acute emergency, but recovery from any of these things isn’t a week or month in the making. It’s usually measured in years. We want to promise quick relief, but rebuilding and reconnecting utilities, homeowners, and schools and reestablishing social connections isn’t a next-day matter. It takes time and patience. It’s better to communicate reasonable and conservative deadlines; otherwise, your citizens end up living the emergency twice.

**3. The changing world.** Economic, social, and technological evolutions continue to change our country, state, and communities (e.g., on-line retail, social media, pandemics, cost of health care—or lack of health care if you’re in rural Kansas, and others).

The march of emerging technologies can swamp even the best-run communities. Who would have ever thought a city would need to contemplate paying a ransom to get their data back? State and local government ransomware attacks have increased 58% to 69% over the last year alone. That trend isn’t going to change.

Just keeping up with the technology needs of your community and understanding their implications isn’t a one-week, one-month, one-year journey. It can take years to bring new technology into the regulatory frameworks in which cities operate. But our temptation is to promise innovative technology solutions within the year—that’s not reasonable.



Don’t waste a lot of time looking for somebody to blame when you’re dealing with sins of the past, an “Act of God” or the changing world. These situations are ripe for leading local leaders to overpromise.

If you can manage expectations and keep the community engaged, together you can navigate your community to its best future version. Remember always the Athenian Oath: “... *We will transmit this city not only not less, but greater and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us.*”

 **Michael Scanlon** is the Principal at Our City Planning LLC. Michael is a recently retired City Manager from Kansas and Colorado communities. He can be reached at [mscanlon@ourcityplan.com](mailto:mscanlon@ourcityplan.com).

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