



Navigating Boundaries for Leaders in Municipal Government



PEI Coalition
for Women's
Leadership



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Why Did We Write This Guide?

Municipal leaders are facing increasing demands on their time due to heightened community engagement and communication. This pressure is often even greater for women in leadership roles.

In January 2023, the PEI Coalition for Women's Leadership launched the Fostering Resilience in Women Municipal Leaders program, in partnership with the Federation of PEI Municipalities, and funded by the Alliance for Mental Well-Being. This program strengthened the capacity of women municipal leaders and built lasting networks of support. The Coalition and its partners held skill building workshops, peer networking opportunities, and resilience training across Island municipalities.

Created in consultation with participants from this women's municipal leadership program, this guide provides concrete steps for establishing, maintaining, and communicating boundaries. These strategies support leaders in focusing on strong community-building while protecting their personal and professional well-being.

How to Use the Guide

Keep this guide on your desk or in your bag to reference when situations arise that require reflection on your responsibilities and responses.

This guide serves as a quick reference for understanding municipal leadership roles and offers practical tips for addressing conflict, harassment, and challenging interactions with other leaders, residents, non-residents, and interest groups.

Please note that this guide is not a substitute for practical and transparent safety policies or procedures.

We hope this guide helps you build confidence in your leadership and in your communication style.

Who This Guide Is For

- Mayors ▪ Councillors ▪ Chief Administrative Officers (CAOs)
- Potential Candidates ▪ Residents

We acknowledge that this work was undertaken in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded homeland of the Mi'kmaq People. We recognize and respect the enduring relationship the Mi'kmaq have with this land, and we honour the Mi'kmaq people of this territory, past, present, and future. This work is carried out within the context of the Treaties of Peace and Friendship, which continue to shape relationships and responsibilities today.



WHO'S WHO IN MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT

Mayor

The mayor is the elected leader of the municipality. The mayor remains neutral on all issues before the council and is not aligned with provincial or federal political parties.

Key responsibilities for this role include:

- Providing leadership to the council and representing the municipality publicly and ceremonially
- Chairing council meetings and often serving as the primary spokesperson
- Working with the CAO to ensure council decisions are implemented
- Representing the municipality at official functions and in communications with other governments and interest groups

* Note: at the time of writing this in 2026, mayors only vote in the event of a tie

Elected by:

All eligible residents of the municipality who meet voting requirements

*"Municipal is
the closest government
to the people."*

– Debbie Johnston
Mayor, Town of Three Rivers



Chief Administrative Officer (CAO)

The CAO is the senior staff member appointed by council to manage the municipality's administration.

Key functions for this role include:

- Implementing council decisions and municipal policies
- Managing staff and services, including hiring, supervising, procurement, and infrastructure development and maintenance
- Advising council on operations, finances, bylaws, and compliance with the *Municipal Government Act* (MGA)
- Ensuring municipal programmes and resolutions are carried out effectively and lawfully

Relationship to Council:

The CAO reports to the full council, not solely to the mayor. Council appoints or removes the CAO by resolution under the MGA.

“Know your place. The CAO does not have decision-making power—that’s council”

– Margaret Armsworthy
CAO, Rural Municipality of Crapaud

Councillor

A councillor is an elected member of the municipal council. Councillors may represent a specific ward or be elected at large.

Key responsibilities for this role include:

- Making decisions on policies, services, and fees through council resolutions (determined by votes)
- Developing bylaws and budgets that guide municipal services and priorities
- Representing residents' interests and well-being
- Participating in committees and public engagement

*“Everyone has an equal voice
when you’re on council .”*

– Kim Devine

Former Councillor, City of Charlottetown

Municipal Staff

Municipal staff are employees hired by the CAO to deliver programmes and services, including public works, planning, finance, and recreation.

Key functions for this role include:

- Delivering front-line services (e.g., maintenance, utilities, permits, recreation)
- Supporting the administration of bylaws and council decisions
- Implementing programmes and managing operations

Reporting:

Staff report through the CAO, who ensures council policies and MGA requirements are followed.

Resident

A resident is a person who lives within the municipality and is directly impacted by municipal decisions. If someone has more than one residence, they are represented in the municipality where they live for 6 months of the year or more. This is called their primary residence.

How residents interact with the municipality:

- Voting in municipal elections (subject to eligibility)
- Participating in consultations and public hearings
- Providing feedback on bylaws and plans
- Receiving services
- Participating in programmes





Non-Resident

A non-resident does not live in the municipality but may own or rent property. In some municipalities, such as the Resort Municipality of Stanley Bridge, Hope River, Bayview, Cavendish, and North Rustico, non-residents may be eligible to be electors (voters) or candidates under specific rules.

How non-residents interact with the municipality:

- Participating in consultations related to owned or rented property
- Receiving municipal services tied to that property
- Limited voting or representation rights unless specific eligibility applies

Interest Groups

Interest groups are individuals or organizations with an interest in municipal decisions beyond residents and property owners. These may include business owners, community groups, developers, neighbouring governments, and service partners.

How interest groups interact with the municipality:

- Participating in consultations and public hearings
- Influencing through feedback, advocacy, or partnerships, not through voting

For more information, please refer to the [Municipal Government Act](#), or visit the online resources provided by the Municipal Affairs Division within the Government of PEI.

What Is It Really Like to Lead Municipal Government in PEI

Why Run or Apply for a Municipal Leadership Role?

Many of the women interviewed for this guide began by caring deeply about a single community issue and attending council meetings. Over time, they recognized an opportunity to create broader positive change in their community, either by running for elected office or applying for a CAO position.

Many individuals reported receiving limited encouragement or incomplete information about the role's scope. Community interests remained central to their decision-making process and continued to serve as a guiding force during their mandates.

While many acknowledged they did not initially understand the full extent of the role, most felt their voices were an asset to the community, and each remarked that the role offered an opportunity for continuous learning.

“There’s an expectation of what the CAO should already know.”

– Stephanie Moase
CAO, Town of North Rustico





Advice for New Women Leaders

When asked for advice on running for municipal office or applying for a leadership position, many interviewees recommended taking time to fully understand the role and how it might affect their personal life before entering municipal government.

“If you don’t set the boundaries right from the beginning, it’s hard to go back.”

– Alanna Jankov
Deputy Mayor, City of Charlottetown

When faced with conflict, many reflected on the importance of remembering why they stepped into leadership. Holding onto core motivations helps leaders cope with conflict, debate, and division.

“What can you do to make a difference?”

– Helen Smith-MacPhail
Mayor, Rural Municipality of West River

Common Misunderstandings About Municipal Leadership Roles

Time Commitment

- More than a few meetings per year
- Often outside standard working hours

Compensation

- Often insufficient to reflect time and responsibility
- Misalignment with other public sector roles

Council Unity

- Councillors do not always agree
- Mayors vote only in the event of a tie

Jurisdiction

- Some matters fall under provincial or federal authority
- Conflict may arise from non-residents

Governance versus Operations

- The council and mayor set bylaws and policies
- The CAO manages operations, staffing, and budgets

Impact on personal life

- Loss of anonymity
- After-hours commitments
- Being approached in public about council matters
- Frequent community events and obligations outside of the council
- Increased social media exposure
- Expectations of constant availability





Scenario Simulations

Practice Scenarios Based on Real Experiences of Municipal Leaders

Scenario 1:

There is a knock on your door at 8:00 a.m. on a Sunday. You answer and realize it is a constituent. You take a moment to assess your safety and surroundings. You are at home. You are not prepared. This is not an appropriate setting for municipal business.

The resident would like to discuss a building permit. While they are not aggressive, this is not a situation you want to handle at your home on a weekend morning. You may feel pressured to invite them inside and address the issue immediately, particularly if you know them personally.

However, this is your private residence, and it is the weekend. You ask the resident to meet you at the town office the following day or to follow up by email. You then contact the CAO or building inspector during working hours to arrange a meeting to provide accurate information and appropriate guidance.

***Feeling guilty for setting boundaries is common.
It does not mean the boundary is wrong.***

Tips for Municipal Leaders

10 Tips for Listening to Someone You Disagree With

1. Stay calm. Do not try to “win.”
2. Listen before speaking.
3. Pause and reflect on what you heard.
4. Focus on the process rather than opinions.
5. Recognize that frustration may be driving the conversation.
6. Set clear boundaries about what you can and cannot do.
7. Connect the person with the appropriate level of government, if needed.
8. Ask for clarification and offer to follow up.
9. End the interaction respectfully, thanking them.
10. Keep a record of the interaction.



Scenario 2:

CAO Elizabeth has just finished a phone call with a local resident who is unhappy with a proposed bylaw. The resident demands that she meet with him on Tuesday evening to hear his feedback.

After he finishes speaking, Elizabeth explains that she would be glad to hear his thoughts on the bylaw, but that she does not schedule meetings outside the formal consultation process. She provides the dates and times of upcoming public input sessions and offers her work email address so that he can submit his feedback in writing.

Elizabeth documents the call and advises the mayor that a resident has expressed strong concerns about the proposed bylaw.





Scenario 3:

While en route to a council meeting, Mayor Kate is approached by a councillor who wants to debate a proposal scheduled for discussion that evening. Council has been divided on the issue.

Mayor Kate reminds the councillor that her role is to serve as chair and spokesperson for council, and that she votes only in the event of a tie. She explains that she will not lobby individual councillors or signal her position prior to a vote.

Despite her stated neutrality, the councillor tells her to “get a backbone and fight for the city.” Mayor Kate remains calm. She acknowledges the councillor’s passion on behalf of their community, and reiterates her neutral role. She explains that if a tie occurs, she will vote at that time.

The mayor makes a note of the time and subject of the interaction for her records.

5 Tips for Social Media Messages and Emails

1. Don't respond immediately. Re-read first.
2. Keep records and screenshots.
3. Redirect conversations to your official email if contacted on social media.
4. Draft responses and wait 24 hours before sending.
5. If appropriate, thank the sender for sharing their thoughts.

*People act like you [should] take every bit
of their inappropriate behaviour
because they pay your salary."*

– Alanna Jankov
Deputy Mayor, City of Charlottetown





Municipal leaders cited social media and email as the most common reasons they struggled to enforce personal and professional boundaries. For further guidance on managing digital communications, please visit the PEI Coalition for Women's Leadership's **Digital Self-Defence Toolkit**, which offers practical tips for strengthening digital safety, documentation, and accessing support.

Scenario 4:

Councillor Joan logs onto her personal Facebook page to wish a friend a happy birthday.

She notices that someone she does not know has commented on more than 20 of her posts.

When she reviews the comments, she finds that they are aggressive and accuse her of "wrecking the Island" by allowing a new housing development.

Shortly afterward, Joan receives a message from her daughter, who has seen the comments, and is frightened for her mother's safety.

Joan screenshots the comments, and takes a picture of the individual's profile. She reports the situation to the CAO and the mayor. Given the volume and aggressive tone of the messages, she also contacts authorities to begin a report. Using the reporting log in the **Digital Self-Defence Toolkit**, Joan records all details of the incident.

Media Requests

For many municipal leaders, media interactions can feel high-pressure. While the media plays an important role in a healthy democracy, preparation can help you navigate media requests with confidence.

Before the Interview

- Confirm who the media outlet is requesting to speak with.
- Clarify whether the interview is live or pre-recorded.
- Confirm the format (print, audio, or video).
- Ask where the interview will take place.
- Request the questions in advance, when possible.
- Confirm internally who will speak on behalf of the council.
- Select attire and a backdrop appropriate to the setting.

What's in Your Control

- You are not required to accept every interview.
- You control the timing. Allow yourself preparation time.
- You may request a professional and appropriate location.
- You may decline to speculate or comment outside your role.

Develop Key Messages

- Ensure all information is accurate and up to date.
- Develop two to three clear key messages.
- Have the CAO or a councillor review key messages, if appropriate.

During the Interview

- Keep sentences short and clear.
- You do not have to answer questions you are not confident in.
- If a question is repeated, you may calmly restate your response.

A close-up photograph of a person, likely a municipal leader, speaking into several microphones held by reporters. The microphones are from various media outlets, including one with a red foam cover and another with a purple 'TV' logo. The person is wearing a dark jacket and a necklace. The background is blurred.

“There’s a camera on you — thousands of eyes.”

– Kim Devine

Former Councillor, City of Charlottetown



10 Tips for Protecting Yourself in Public Life

1. Set boundaries early and stick to them.
2. Keep your private life separate from public duties.
3. Avoid sharing home addresses.
4. Keep records of concerning interactions.
5. Use official communication channels.
6. When meeting in person, ensure others are nearby or aware.
7. Focus on process, bylaws, and policies rather than defending decisions.
8. Do not take anger personally.
9. Limit after-hours commitments to protect well-being.
10. Recognize that visibility carries risk and plan accordingly.

Scenario 5:

While on a weekend walk to the library with your partner, you are approached by a developer who is upset about a new bylaw that may affect his building plans.

You acknowledge him and calmly explain that it is not an appropriate time or setting for a municipal discussion. You ask him to contact you to arrange a formal meeting.

The developer follows up and schedules a meeting. You ensure you are not alone in the workspace. He arrives visibly angry and brings documentation to support his concerns. You thank him for attending and accept the materials. You explain the process for the bylaw's development, review, and adoption, as well as your role within that process.

You advise him that his submission will be reviewed in accordance with established procedures. After the meeting, you document the interaction and retain the materials to ensure a clear record in case questions arise about impartiality.





Thank You

This guide is shaped by the candid experiences of municipal leaders who generously shared the realities of this work.

We are deeply grateful to the women who spoke openly about their challenges, motivations, and boundaries in public service. Their insights, advice, and lessons will help support the next generation of municipal leaders.

Mayors

Debbie Johnston, Town of Three Rivers

Heather McKenna, Town of North Rustico

Helen Smith-MacPhail, Rural Municipality of West River

Deputy Mayor

Alanna Jankov, City of Charlottetown

Former Councillor

Kim Devine, City of Charlottetown

Chief Administrative Officers (CAOs)

Margaret Armsworthy, Rural Municipality of Crapaud

Stephanie Moase, Town of North Rustico

Susan Morse, Rural Municipality of West River



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