



## Virginia Local Government Law

# Do Yourself a Good Turn: Boy Scout Principles for Dealing with Local Government

By: Andrew McRoberts. *Friday, June 3rd, 2011*

Businesses seeking a local government approval (or a denial for someone else's proposal) may need some guidance. Local governments behave in a way that is different than businesses behave, for legal and political and many other reasons. As an attorney who has practiced local government law most of my career, I have seen approaches to local government that work, and many that have not.

From time to time, I have been asked how best to work with local governments. Perhaps because I also double as a local scoutmaster, these guidelines parallel the principles of the Boy Scouts of America, which have stood the test of time for more than 100 years.

For guidance in government, business and in life, one can do a lot worse than following the Boy Scouts!

As a long-time local government attorney, I appreciate how many scouting principles can help businesses in dealing with local governments. I'll focus on a handful:

### *The Patrol Method*

Boy Scouts do most activities in a patrol, a group of scouts headed by a patrol leader. A team, if you will.

The team approach works best for dealing with local government. You may need experts to conduct studies or answer fair questions from local government officials and employees. You may need team members experienced in local government to be prepared as discussed below. Some may have stronger ties to decision-makers than others, or a better way to approach an issue. Experience counts. By assembling a team, your team can be stronger and more successful.

### *Be Prepared*

This is the Boy Scout motto.

Every piece of real estate is unique. Similarly, every governmental situation is different in some ways, and

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every local government varies in how it approaches approvals. Businesses dealing with local governments should learn how the government works and how decisions are made. Understand the policies and ordinances of the local government. Learn who the decision-makers and influencers are, and who your likely allies and opponents are. Meet with elected officials, staff, allies, opponents, and of course, your team. Make it easier to win. Know what approaches work best in that locality. Find ways your plan or position can also serve the plans and needs of the locality.

Do your homework. Diligently prepare a case for your project (or against a project you oppose). Never assume that approval or denial is in the bag. The political winds shift quickly in the local government world. Be prepared for last-minute shifts and changes. Keep working until the end.

### *Be Trustworthy*

This is the first point of the Scout Law.

Your credibility is critical. This goes beyond telling the truth, which is essential. Gaining a reputation for half-truths can be deadly. Explain accurately the upsides to your plan or position, certainly. But also explain how you address the opposition's plan or position. Explain accurately what you can and cannot do. Explain why you do or do not support a certain plan or position. Accurately describe your opponents' plan or position.

Never promise something you cannot deliver. Remember that if local government approves your project, the local government is endorsing you to its citizens. Do not betray that endorsement.

### *Be Helpful/Do a Good Turn Daily*

Helpfulness is both a point in the Scout Law ("helpful") and an explicit promise in the Scout Oath ("to help other people at all times"). "Do a good turn daily" is the scout slogan.

Be ready to answer all questions and do so. Share information and address all issues. Share studies, pictures, reasoning behind your plan or position. Help allies with arguments to aid you. Help opponents understand why you believe you have addressed their issues as well as you can. Craft your plan or position to conform to local government plans or policies so you are helping to serve public goals. Help local government officials and staff help you. Making their jobs and decisions easier not only does them a "good turn," it will also help you.

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Getting local government approvals (or seeking a denial) can be a difficult task, but it can be made easier by following some of the basic principles from the Boy Scouts of America.

Just ask any scoutmaster.

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