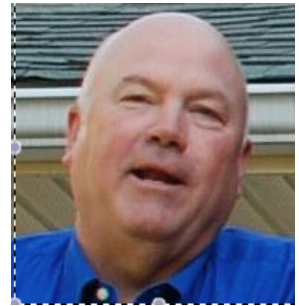


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HOW DO YOU COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR ENGINEER?

By: Dave Connell, President, CKS Engineers

Communication between an elected official and his Township Engineer is always interesting. The Township Engineer is typically a licensed professional, well educated and highly experienced in the technical matters that are of concern to a municipality. Quite often, he has served a municipality for longer than the elected official. That elected official may have no particular background in engineering or technical matters, BUT ALWAYS; the elected official is unequivocally in charge. Some engineers have a hard time remembering that. Some elected officials are hesitant to act on that. The balancing act between the engineer and the elected official often creates interesting dilemmas for those reasons. There are often some very difficult decisions to be made. These decisions almost always involve the expenditure of funds. For various public works projects, the engineer will often recommend doing things a certain way which should be based on his knowledge, expertise and opinion as to how best to provide some particular amenity for the use of the public. However, the elected official is the one responsible to the public for the expenditure of the public's money. The engineer should fully understand that. The engineer should be able to explain his reasoning and rationale; to explain the pros and cons of doing things a certain way; should be able to fully outline various options; should be ready, willing and able to make a strong recommendation; and then should be able to get out of the way while the elected officials make the decision. The engineer simply wants to be heard. The engineer should understand that the elected official has a greater responsibility and that he usually has a broader perspective. The elected official has to consider not only the technical issues, but also the financial matters and other peripheral issues such as historical perspective, public opinion and many other things that do not go into the engineering equation. However, after having heard his engineer's opinions and recommendations, the elected official has the responsibility to make a decision and the engineer needs to respect that.



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That engineer often has a very broad perspective to bring to the table. The vast majority of the member Townships of BCATO have consulting engineers as opposed to in-house engineers. These consultants usually work for multiple municipalities. The elected official, by definition, works for only one municipality. The Township Engineer is usually able to bring a broad range of experience to bear in a particular municipality after having seen how things are done by other municipalities, by other staff level people, by other elected officials, etc. This perspective should be very helpful to an elected official. The Engineer usually wants to bring that experience to bear, but both he and the elected official should never lose sight of the fact that the elected official is the one who will decide what is right for his municipality, regardless of what experience the Engineer brings to bear from other municipalities.

Once during a Supervisors meeting, I saw a Board make a decision on an engineering matter that was just plain wrong. The decision was made, and the vote taken, before I had much of an opportunity to fully explain myself. I worried about this, but how do you contradict a public official, during a vote, at a public meeting? At the break, after gathering up my courage, I went to one of the Board members, who I greatly respected, and told him "that might be the dumbest thing I've seen you do." After getting over his shock, he questioned me, and we spent the entire break exploring the issue thoroughly. After the break, with the Board back in session, he reopened the issue, asked me to explain to the full Board, in public, what I was talking about, and then made a motion, approved by all the others, to reverse their decision. That is obviously a dramatic example. I do not think the Engineer should be doing that too often, but I think it does point out that the Engineer has a responsibility to explain matters thoroughly, and then get out of the way. I probably had failed to anticipate that the issue was going to go the way it did, and failed in my responsibility to thoroughly explain things to my Board. It was a good lesson for me. I came to understand that Board members often have an entirely different and broader perspective on many matters affecting the municipality. *So, if you are not listening to your Engineer, please do so. However, if he does not understand that it is his responsibility to educate you on engineering matters, make sure he does so, but also make sure that he understands that you have a larger perspective than he does.*