Project Champions: Helping Municipal Projects Move Forward

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Good municipal projects need more than a good idea. They need people who believe in the work, help others understand why it matters, and keep it moving when challenges arise.

That is where a **project champion** can make a difference.

A project champion is a person who strongly supports a project and helps build the support needed for it to succeed. In a municipality, the champion might be a selectboard or city council member, municipal manager or administrator, department head, staff member, or another respected community leader.

The champion does not have to do all the work. Instead, the champion helps create the conditions that allow others to do the work well.

Champion, Sponsor, or Manager?

The terms *project champion*, *project sponsor*, and *project manager* are sometimes used in similar ways. But each role has a different focus.

A **project sponsor** has formal authority over a project. The sponsor may approve major decisions, commit resources, or bring decisions to the municipal legislative body. The sponsor helps make sure the project supports the municipality's goals.

A **project manager** manages the day-to-day work. This person tracks tasks, schedules, budgets, contracts, and deadlines. The project manager coordinates the many details needed to move from an idea to a completed project.

A **project champion** is the project's advocate. The champion keeps attention on why the project matters. They build support, bring people together, help solve problems, and keep the project visible.

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One person may fill more than one of these roles, especially in a small municipality. What matters is that everyone understands who is responsible for what.

What Does a Project Champion Do?

A strong project champion stays involved from the early planning stages through major project decisions. Their responsibilities may include:

- **Explaining the vision.** The champion helps people understand what the project is meant to accomplish and how it could benefit the community.
- **Building support.** The champion talks with municipal officials, staff, community members, partners, and others whose support may be important.
- **Bringing people together.** Municipal projects often involve many people and organizations. The champion can help create connections and encourage cooperation.
- **Removing roadblocks.** When a project runs into a problem, the champion can help identify who needs to be involved and what decisions need to be made.
- **Keeping momentum.** Projects can take years to develop. Staff may change, costs may rise, grants may be delayed, and unexpected issues may appear. A champion helps keep the project's goals in view.
- **Listening.** A good champion does not simply promote a project. They listen to concerns, questions, and new ideas and help the project team respond.

A champion should also be careful not to promise an outcome that has not been decided. Municipal projects may require public votes, permits, funding decisions, contracts, or other approvals. Championing a project does not replace those public processes.

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Leadership Matters Throughout Project Development

Project champions are important, but successful projects also need strong municipal leadership.

Early in a project, municipal leaders can help answer basic questions: What problem are we trying to solve? Does this project fit our community's goals? Who needs to be involved? What resources might the municipality be asked to provide?

As a project develops, the questions become more detailed. Municipal leaders may need to understand the project's team, budget, financing, schedule, site, permits, and risks before committing significant public resources. These questions should be revisited as conditions change.

Leadership also means knowing when to ask for help. A complicated project may require advice from attorneys, engineers, financial advisers, accountants, housing professionals, or other experts. The amount of review should fit the size of the project and the level of municipal resources at risk.

Leadership Includes Community Engagement

Community engagement should not wait until a project is almost finished.

Municipal leaders can help residents understand the need or opportunity behind a project before major decisions are made. They can explain what is known, what is still being studied, and when the public will have opportunities to participate.

Good engagement also goes both ways. Leaders should create ways for people to ask questions, raise concerns, and share ideas. They should listen carefully and explain how public input affected the project—even when the final decision does not match every person's preference.

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Project champions can play an important part in this work. Because they understand the project's purpose, they can help tell its story in clear language. But they should also make room for different views. A champion who listens and responds openly can help build trust, even when a project is complex or controversial.

Creating the Conditions for Success

No project champion can guarantee that a project will succeed. Projects change. Costs increase. Funding may fall through. Permits can take longer than expected. New information may require a different approach. Municipalities should continue to review important risks as a project moves forward and decide whether the public commitment still makes sense.

Strong leadership does not mean pushing a project forward at all costs. It means asking good questions, listening to the community, making thoughtful decisions, and keeping people focused on the public purpose behind the work.

A good project champion helps make that possible. By connecting the project's vision with the people needed to carry it out, the champion can turn a promising idea into a shared community effort.

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