

# City Council pays for lessons in civility

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By Drew E. Fleming for USA TODAY

Councilman David Chapman says the fracas at last week's Ashland City Council meeting wasn't unusual for the group. "I just lost my temper," he says.

By **John Ritter**, USA TODAY

Owning up to its bad manners, the City Council in Ashland, Ore., has decided to throw itself on the civic version of a therapist's couch.

The six-member council, plagued by bickering, sniping and profanity at its public meetings, agreed to spend \$37,000 of taxpayer money for professional help to learn how to get along.

Just don't use the "T" word, which alarmed some constituents. "It's by no means therapy," says Rick Kirschner, an author, speaker and trainer who on Saturday will lead the first of a number of group sessions with council members. "I'm not a therapist and this is not therapy. This is coaching and training."

The council's move drew criticism from residents at its meeting Tuesday. "If it's personal behavioral counseling, they should pay for it themselves," says Bill Skillman, who owns a typewriter repair service. He says that when council members ran for office "they presented themselves as mature thinking adults who could lead the city effectively. It's embarrassing to the city. It's embarrassing to me as a citizen of the city."

Perhaps the low point in Ashland's council chambers occurred last week when Councilman David Chapman told Councilman Eric Navickas to "shut your (expletive) mouth."

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"I just lost my temper," Chapman told Medford's *Mail Tribune*. "He's lost his temper with me. We kind of take turns."

The council in this affluent, picturesque city of 21,000 in southern Oregon's Rogue Valley took a step other public bodies have taken in recent years as demands on local officials intensified.

Whether because of personal agendas, old feuds, misunderstandings, constituent and interest group pressure or poor listening, councils and boards sometimes can't function effectively because of a lack of courtesy, says Charles Mahtesian, editor of the *Almanac of American Politics*. "The public arena is a much louder and nastier place, and civility has really disappeared," he says.

Rancor among public officials "reflects a general decline in civility in society," says Mahtesian, who chronicled the trend in a 1997 *Governing* magazine article. "We can't expect our elected officials or our civic bodies to be any different than the people they represent."

Mahtesian wrote about dysfunctional conduct in Atlanta; Dallas; Austin; Cincinnati; Reno; Jackson, Miss.; Wilmington, Del.; and Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

More recently, public fireworks have been reported on city and county panels in Detroit; San Francisco; Chesapeake City, Md.; Mount Dora, Fla.; Milton and Alpharetta, Ga.; and the Missouri towns of St. Peters, O'Fallon and St. Charles.

Some councils and boards work out their issues and learn to co-exist. Others hire communications consultants and conflict resolution specialists. The National League of Cities offers conflict management training sessions every six months and "are fully booked," says spokeswoman Sherry Conway Appel.

"Councils are under so much public scrutiny, so much pressure to make difficult decisions, often under financial and environmental constraints," says Tim Hicks, director of the University of Oregon law school's conflict and dispute resolution program. "It's not untypical."

Ashland Councilman Navickas says, "Strong political divisions make it difficult to get along, and there have been a couple of blowups." He says the council is bitterly split over a proposed ski-area expansion outside of the city, which he fears will harm a watershed that supplies drinking water.

Ashland collects about \$3 million a year in tourist revenue, much of it derived from its well-known Shakespeare theater, one of the USA's oldest.

Kirschner, author of seven books, including *Dealing with People You Can't Stand*, likens Mayor John Morrison's job leading the council to "herding cats."

Morrison says he urged the council to seek help last month after e-mails from residents "who wanted to see us work better together." Council members earn \$350 a year, plus health benefits.

"We're amateurs. There are no professional politicians here," Morrison says. "These are people who are intelligent, articulate and come from different backgrounds and viewpoints. Sometimes when issues are quite heated, tempers flare."

Contributing: *Wire reports*

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