

## **Eleven tips for enlivening local government coverage**

- 1. Don't rely on just top officials for story ideas, tips or even comment. Some of the best stories and information come from the coffee stand, from secretaries and clerks, and other sources less in the limelight.**
- 2. Don't give up on meeting coverage. Cover them as often as possible. No matter which town, county or state meeting we decide to cover, there is liable to be an issue that people get excited about and, in the meantime, we're doing public interest journalism.**
- 3. Many local government stories would benefit from coverage of the prospective or actual impact of official proposals or actions. Talk with those affected. Instead of just reporting on a rezoning vote, do a story on how those affected regard the move, for instance.**
- 4. Profile politicians beyond their official credentials and experience. What are they like as "just folks"? What do they read? Do they mow their own lawns, shovel their own snow, do the household shopping? Where do their kids go to school? Where do they shop? What are their avocations?**
- 5. Allegiances and alliances are often important to how officials govern. Which candidates for office favor or disfavor the current municipal executive(s), for instance? If a voter likes the mayor, for example, can you tell him or her which city council candidates he or she should consider voting for, based on those candidates' attitude toward the mayor?**
- 6. Follow the money. In all campaign coverage, say who's collecting how much in campaign money and, in general terms, from whom – those with business with the local government, out-of-towners, big-money interests? Who's spending the most, and on what? How much of a candidate's campaign money is his or her own?**
- 7. How deeply are you able to look into a candidate's or an elected or appointed local government official's background? Criminal record, if any? Bankruptcy records, if any? Real estate holdings? Liens or foreclosures?**
- 8. Even at the smallest of news outlets, there ought to be a place for a column or news analyses on local government, clearly labeled as such and separate both from straight news coverage and editorials. That kind of license can provide insight helpful to informing readers, voters and taxpayers.**
- 9. Context is important to all news stories, and no less so those about local government. Never report a tax rate, for instance, without giving an example of what it will mean in dollar terms for the average residential or commercial property.**
- 10. Even in local government, there are good human interest stories. Don't overlook them amid the crush of issue and policy stories.**
- 11. As important as issues and votes are, people are still the most important and interesting element in the news. In any story, focus on the people shaping those issues and making those votes. What makes them tick, and what motivates them to take the stands they do and to vote the way they do on those issues?**

