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Preparing the First Post-Election Budget

The first budget after an election can be difficult for new municipal administrations. For a newly elected council, especially one where there has been a lot of turnover, preparing it often becomes a test of governance and a learning experience that puts the council's first collective decisions in the spotlight.

An administrative and political exercise

The municipal budget is a concrete expression of the council's political orientations. However, deadlines are tight in the year after an election: the law requires the first post-election budget to be adopted by January 31 and subsequent budgets to be adopted by December 31, even though many officials are still learning the ropes.

What's more, with the first budget, the council needs to balance its desire for change with the municipality's financial and administrative obligations. Factors like existing contractual commitments, the administration's basic needs, and ongoing projects may not leave much room for manoeuvre. Ultimately, before the council can shape the future, it needs to take stock of the present and understand the constraints that municipal action has to contend with.

A learning experience

In the weeks after an election, new elected officials receive something of a crash course in municipal governance. Training, committees, technical documents... the learning curve is steep. Yet the budget cannot wait. Elected officials want to play an active part in establishing priorities, but they sometimes lack the instincts they need to gauge the financial repercussions of their choices.

That can limit their participation to general discussions, leaving the actual decisions mostly up to administrative staff. In fact, many elected officials refer to the first budget of their term as an "administration budget." To prevent this imbalance, some administrations opt for a mentorship approach: they offer preparatory meetings shortly after officials are sworn in, simplify budget principles, and explain matters like the structure of expenditures, the difference between operations and capital assets, and the different forms of taxation. This allows elected officials to learn to navigate the budget and better understand the tangible effects of their political orientations.

Promoting participation and understanding

Municipal budgeting should not be seen as a number-crunching exercise best left to accountants, but rather as a shared tool for decision-making. When elected officials are actively involved in the process, it better reflects the council's shared vision, which in turn means the council will better support the outcomes.

There are several ways a municipality can ensure budget preparation goes well. First, it's essential to start the process early, as soon as the council is back in session, so that newly elected officials can familiarize themselves with the portfolios. Next, discussions should be well-organized; workshops on specific themes (infrastructure, environmental protection, public safety, economic development, etc.) will help officials associate the numbers with real-life issues.

Committees can be useful for shaping and organizing these workshops. Finally, presenting the budget in an accessible way—for instance, by breaking it down into programs or projects—helps officials visualize the actual effects of expenditures and prevents discussions from devolving into nitpicking over numbers.

It is also crucial that the council and the administration remain clear, flexible, and transparent when communicating with each other. When elected officials are conscious of administrative constraints and municipal administrators understand political expectations, discussions are much more constructive. This regular dialogue helps build trust and prevent the tensions that can arise when roles are misunderstood.

Reconciling ambitions with reality

The post-election period is often full of enthusiasm and potential. Citizens expect immediate change and officials want to make good on their promises. But budgetary realities mean there are limits. The new priorities need to fit into an established financial framework, and many campaign promises need studies or regulatory adjustments before expenditures can begin.

This means that the first budget shouldn't be seen as a political obstacle, but rather as a stepping stone. It can lay the foundations for a vision, illustrate the major orientations, and set the wheels in motion for the campaign promises to come to life. The goal is not to achieve everything in the first year, but to establish a clear, realistic trajectory that will guide subsequent budgets.

Preparing the first post-election budget can also be an opportunity for officials to strategically plan the rest of their term and the projects they will carry out. This way, they can see that their plans are still taking shape even if the projects did not make it into the budget.

A pivotal moment for the term

Preparing the first budget after an election is much more than a financial exercise: it's a pivotal moment for municipal governance. It's a process that shapes the council's working culture, establishes the priorities for the rest of the term, and forges the relationships between elected officials and the municipal administration.

The success of a budget is measured not only by the ability to balance figures, but by the quality of the dialogue that made it possible. When it reflects a genuine balance between political aspirations and administrative constraints, it becomes the starting point for solid, transparent, and sustainable governance where grounded vision is possible right from the start.