

## **The Manager as Political Leader: A Challenge to Professionalism?**

*John Nalbandian*

It has been acknowledged for a long time that city and county managers play a prominent role in policy making. It can be no other way. Managers set the council's agenda, for example, by calling to the governing body's attention infrastructure issues of which it would not otherwise be aware. They develop alternatives for the council, and they make policy recommendations. This is expected of them, and they do it well.

These administrative activities support the council's policy-making responsibility and its problem-solving capacity. Over time, local government professionals have effectively integrated this influential policy role with the sober, analytical, politically neutral foundation of their profession. But what happens when the manager is expected simultaneously to lead staff in an objective analysis of a complex project and to build political support for it?

A case-study format is ideally suited to describing both the context and some ways of thinking about the role confusion produced when a local government manager is thrust into a political role. To address the question "What happens to a politically neutral chief administrative officer when expected to act politically?" I analyzed scholarly research, examined documents, read newspaper accounts, and interviewed several public servants, including Dennis Hays, chief administrative officer of the Unified Government of Wyandotte County/Kansas City, Kansas (KCK). Hays had just found himself in the middle of a highly visible policy debate on economic development involving the possible location of a NASCAR racing facility in Wyandotte County, Kansas. This is his story.

### **NASCAR Comes to KCK**

In the spring of 1997, the International Speedway Corporation (ISC), headquartered in Daytona Beach, Florida, was searching for a site in the Kansas City area where it could construct a National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) track. ISC is the major player in NASCAR racing; its interests include the ownership of several tracks that host this kind of racing.

Plans called for a \$250 million facility in the metropolitan Kansas City area that eventually could accommodate 150,000 people. The project would develop some 1,000 acres, more than the combined area encompassed by Arrowhead Stadium (Kansas City Chiefs football) and Royals Stadium (Kansas City Royals baseball), and would require easy access from interstate highways. ISC would partially fund the project and would expect the chosen city and state to finance the rest.

## **NASCAR Becomes Hays's Highest Priority**

The mayor and chief administrative officer were dismayed at the news that ISC might consider Kansas City, Kansas, as a site for its newly planned racetrack. "Surely, we don't want a racetrack!" Dennis Hays told Mayor Carol Marinovich when she asked him to attend a meeting with ISC and some staff members from the Kansas City Area Development Council.

If the ISC representatives were expecting a warm welcome, they were sorely disappointed. "It was almost a fiasco," said Hays. Apparently, they were expecting to be greeted as bearers of an economic jewel. Instead, "they must have thought we were really something after that first discussion. We didn't show much interest; we were not well prepared; I went through a quick dog-and-pony show about possible sites and the topography of the community and some concerns we would have about siting such a noisy, nasty facility." The economic development people reported that ISC was disappointed by the reception it received.

At the time, Hays was preoccupied with a ballot measure to consider the consolidation of city and county government. He saw the NASCAR initiative as a distraction that would force Mayor Marinovich—a champion of consolidation—into the lead publicly on what Hays thought would be an unpopular project, just before the consolidation vote.

Consolidation was approved that spring, and Hays anticipated that the next six months would be occupied with developing and implementing transition plans leading to a September vote to elect the consolidated government's new leadership. Mayor Marinovich would run for the new office of mayor and chief executive officer of the unified government of Wyandotte County/Kansas City, Kansas. Consolidation was officially to occur on October 1, 1997.

In June, ISC officials publicly and officially announced their interest in the Kansas City area as a possible site. ISC officials met in separate sessions with officials from Kansas City, Missouri, and from KCK.

In the meantime, city officials had undertaken research on the impact of a major racing facility and had found the outlook favorable. In addition, citizens of Wyandotte County began calling the mayor and other public officials, who began to realize that they should take the initiative seriously and that the "noisy, nasty project" might not be so bad after all. "There goes the possibility for a smooth, orderly transition," Hays remembered thinking. "After the election, I thought I knew how I was going to be spending my time from April to September."

Subsequent meetings led the mayor, Hays, a councilmember, and a member of Wyandotte County's state legislative delegation to visit Fontana, California, to attend a NASCAR race at Fontana's newly built track. "I had no interest in going to a NASCAR race. My life was hell; I was working on the transition. The mayor looked at me and said, 'Hays, I'm going to Fontana, and I want you to join me.'" She left little room for discussion, Hays recalled.

But the experience was unexpected. The facility was first-rate, and the event was family-oriented. The imagined pot-bellied, cigarette-smoking beer drinkers in black leather did not materialize. The mayor talked with nearby residents about noise,

traffic, and other possible disturbances, and, aside from the traffic on race days, Marinovich and Hays couldn't find a down side to the facility. Also, they learned at first hand why access from only one interstate highway was not acceptable to ISC.

On the return trip, Hays and the mayor tried to figure out how to lead others in the same direction as they were moving. "Mayor, they're not going to believe us," Hays remembered commenting, then adding in the sober voice of a local government manager, "What if we make an all-out effort, and we don't get it?" He recalled thinking that, like it or not, if they pursued ISC, this effort would be seen as the first test of the new unified government.

The mayor decided to appoint a fact-finding committee made up of respected citizens who were neither for nor against the track. Some owned homes in the proposed track location. The idea of the committee was risky; if its members failed to endorse the project, their disapproval would sink negotiations with ISC before they had even begun. When the fact-finding committee took a trip to Daytona and Darlington to see these cities' NASCAR tracks, their visits confirmed Marinovich's hopes, and additional allies began lining up.

Soon after it had made another visit to the Kansas City area, ISC informed the mayor that it was requesting proposals from KCK and Kansas City, Missouri. ISC expected presentations in three weeks in its hometown of Daytona Beach!

Hays recalled: "It wasn't until that point that I realized how serious this was and how much time and energy would have to be devoted to it. I got to the mayor, and I remember saying, 'Mayor, do we want this? Do we throw everything we have at it?' She was facing a September election, and she couldn't know how this would affect her chances to become mayor of the consolidated government. But she looked at me, and she said resolutely, 'Yes, we are going for it!'"

### **Hays's Priorities**

The city administrator got the political direction he needed. The mayor would work with the council, and Hays now knew where his priorities lay: NASCAR first, transition second. But knowing one's priorities and knowing one's role are different matters. Soon after hearing from Marinovich, Hays realized he would be cast in a role he never thought a manager would perform.

My interviews with Hays, Mayor Marinovich, and Robert Roddy, who was director of the water pollution control department and chair of a staff task force to coordinate engineering planning on the project, confirmed a cooperative relationship between the mayor and CAO.

This relationship had begun to develop years before, when Marinovich was elected to the council of KCK and Hays was deputy city administrator. She noted, "From the beginning, I had great respect for Dennis's ability from what I saw at first hand as a member of the governing body. Typically, when there was something tough to accomplish, it was given to Dennis—the deputy administrator." When she became mayor, she recommended that Hays become CAO. At the mayor's request, the contract with Hays was negotiated by one of the councilmembers, to distance Marinovich from the close working relationship she knew would develop.

As for Hays, his respect for Marinovich was seen in his confidence that, when she said they would go all-out for the project, he could count on her to bring the council on board and to handle other political relationships. Roddy's remarks described the relationship well. He observed, "From what I have seen of Dennis and the mayor in meetings, they seem to have a common direction; they discuss what needs to be done to reach a common goal. They might have different opinions, but they are not combative. They review their opinions and try to come to a common course of action. I believe that they have the trust of the community."

What might seem like a politicized relationship, with Hays owing his job to the mayor, is anything but. In a telling statement, Marinovich said, "Respect for one another and what each other can bring to the table builds respect between me and Dennis. Our styles are different. I am more emotional. He is our Mr. Rogers [emphasis added]"—a characterization that Hays did not take issue with during our interviews. In fact, he joked that he has been known to wear a cardigan sweater around the office.

What more flattering characterization could be made of a midwestern local government manager? Mr. Rogers. Someone you can trust with your children (your constituents). Someone whose motives are transparent. Someone who understands that personal ambition must play second fiddle to the greater good. In short, a politically neutral figure!

It was her confidence in Hays's selfless character, his integrity, and his professionalism that permitted the mayor to push him out front when she felt it was appropriate, even when he had misgivings. His self-effacing personality and his embodiment of community values, which he had demonstrated during his years as deputy administrator, lent credibility to the project in the eyes of others, and she knew it.

### **The CAO Calls a Sunday Meeting and Invites the Mayor**

Once the mayor had identified NASCAR as the number-one priority, Hays invested his efforts fully in the project. He recalled the weekend after KCK was notified that the Daytona presentation was only three weeks away: "Saturday, I am wrestling with this. There is no way I can do this in the amount of time we have. The council has not endorsed this, but we can't go to them in public because there are too many unanswered questions and too many fears that could arise among the homeowners who might be displaced. But we have had no public hearings!"

Then, Hays took the first step on an uncharted path, one that might endanger his political neutrality: "I've never done this in my career, but I called a meeting at my house for Sunday. I called the mayor [and said], 'I need you at my house tomorrow!' We're still working on our relationship at this time, so I'm not comfortable about this, but I feel like I need to do it. It's my responsibility, now that [the project] is the city's number-one priority. I call people I can depend upon, whom I have worked with before, and we brainstorm."

For another manager in another context, calling a meeting like this might not have seemed out of character, but clearly it was for Hays. He did what he felt was necessary, inviting his misgivings about the role he was embarking upon.

## **Hays Takes the Lead at Daytona**

The Daytona presentation forced Hays further into the forefront. Transition business came to a halt. The pressure leading up to the presentation was enormous, with newspaper accounts characterizing the affair as a Super Bowl showdown between Kansas City, Kansas (David), and Kansas City, Missouri (Goliath).

Hays recalled, “Somehow, we had to present an image that we could get this done when we hadn’t really had any formal discussion of it [in a public meeting]. We need the council’s help; we are going to need the governor’s help with special legislation; we need the state legislature’s help; we have to deal with the residents who will be displaced.

“But we have to make a presentation and convey the impression that we can pull this off and that we can come up with \$150 million and that all their questions would be affirmatively answered.” Hays was taking the lead—a highly visible and uncomfortable one.

After the lieutenant governor and the mayor had made introductory remarks, the responsibility for presenting the proposal and responding to questions fell upon Hays, who remembered: “We arrived in Daytona and worked all night on the presentation. . . . I got one hour of sleep that night. I said to the mayor, ‘You are the mayor, the lieutenant governor is here, there are a lot of decisions that are going to have to be made on the spot.’ She said, ‘You call it. You make the decisions, and if we see it differently, I will let you know; but otherwise, get it done.’

“We were making finance decisions down there on the fly that the city council didn’t know about. Subsequently, I would try to include the mayor in the tough meetings with me, but it was understood that I would take the lead.”

When Missouri Governor Carnahan vetoed special legislation supporting Kansas City, Missouri’s bid, KCK held the upper hand. And the city took advantage of this position with a persuasive presentation that Hays and Marinovich later learned had made the impact they were seeking on ISC ownership.

## **Time Pressure Keeps Hays In Front**

The leading role that had emerged for Hays in the Sunday meeting at his home and later at Daytona was reinforced when he and the mayor returned home. When ISC announced it was giving an exclusive right for 60 days to Kansas City, Kansas, to develop a final proposal, there were doubts in KCK about the timetable.

Negotiations, which ISC limited to a two-month time, required the resolution of conflicting preferences about the site, the working-out of a financial package, and an agreement on legal issues, transportation (traffic access) requirements, and a public information program. All issues involved technical questions, and consultants were hired to complement staff. The technical blended into the political, and with such a short time frame, Hays remained in charge.

These time pressures were an important part of the context. The financial package alone was incredibly complex and required meetings with consultants, the mayor and councilmembers, state legislators, ISC consultants and managers, and lobbyists. Hays

had no time to slip into the background and direct the show silently. If not the producer, he was a combination of director and leading man, staging a play that was set to go on in less time than he would ever have committed himself to, had he devised the production schedule.

### **Hays Embodies the Story**

During media announcements and public meetings, “Mr. Rogers’ neighborhood” suddenly became a popular place. Hays took the lead in the next stages: announcing the successful package in October and then presiding over meetings with 600 citizens, many of whom would be affected by the project and were anxious at best. Hays said, “I am not a high-profile person. I thought we could use our public information officer or someone from the state, but the mayor said, ‘No, Hays, you are going to do this.’ And no one objected.

“In fact, I was the natural one to take the lead, even if my own sense of professionalism cautioned me not to. With so much uncertainty, it would have been political suicide for the mayor to take the lead.”

Both the mayor and Hays realized that, while Hays might not have the political legitimacy to cheer for the project in public, he had the credibility of a respected chief administrative officer and could talk publicly about the project’s benefits and costs and how the government would work to treat affected homeowners fairly. He could tell the NASCAR story credibly because he embodied trustworthiness, anchored in his past accomplishments and in his image as “Mr. Rogers.”

### **Mr. Rogers Goes to Topeka**

State legislation was required to finance the \$200 million needed to match ISC’s investment. The state had agreed to fund some \$43 million in road improvements and economic development incentives as part of the development agreement. Special tax abatement and sales tax measures were needed, and with the Wyandotte County delegation split on the project, legislative authorization was uncertain.

As in other aspects of the project, Hays found himself at center stage. In this case, the mayor, who was persona non grata with some members of the state legislative delegation, was advised to stay at home. She didn’t, of course, and she bristled at the advice, but, knowing what had to be done, she turned to her “silent” partner, Mr. Rogers.

Hays said it turned out that “I was the one who made the contacts and who went to [legislators’] offices to try and convince them. I was fielding questions left and right on issues that were going to come to the floor on the day our legislation was to be considered. Some questions were really hostile, and others asked for a position: ‘Would you accept . . .?’ Against my instincts, I would answer.”

As of this writing, the legislation has passed and been signed, the litigation has been managed, the property acquired, the bonds sold, and construction of the track has begun.

### **Conclusions to Be Drawn From the Case Study**

Dennis Hays’s role in this case was not of his choosing. When he thinks about the

meaning of professionalism in local government, he still questions his role in locating the NASCAR track in Wyandotte County. After all, local government managers do not see themselves as politicians because they think of themselves as problem solvers, the balance in the wheel; they bring a long-term, sober, analytical perspective to governance. Also, they realize that political neutrality is a scarce, valued, and vulnerable administrative resource. Once exhausted, it is as hard to replenish as trust.

Effective politicians speak to our minds as they reach for our hearts. Managers will never do this. Managers do not reach for the emotions of citizens, even if they sometimes touch them. And because they will not, they do not think of themselves as politicians. But for Hays to be seen as part of the unified government's team, it seemed he had to invest emotionally in this project.

As a CAO, he could convey credibly the message that the project could pay for itself. But more was required in this case. He had to show his loyalty to the project in order to win full buy-in from his political superiors.

Hays was thrust into a political role, in a context not of his own making. Standing in front of so many people, with the mayor and lieutenant governor in the front row and answering questions on a project he had worked on at their direction, Hays had little to distinguish himself from a politician. In our interviews, he referred to this incident several times; it symbolized the dilemma he faced. Failing to step onstage would have jeopardized the project and his standing with the elected leadership, he said.

But as he walked onstage, he saw himself risking his credibility as a political neutral. He could ingratiate himself with his political leaders by telling a story that an audience of Wyandotte County residents, desperate for a vision of economic hope, wanted to hear (even if the affected landowners didn't). But he could not escape self-doubts about his professionalism. He said, "How do you stand in front of 600 people, 300 who are losing their homes, and not sound like you are marketing NASCAR, telling them that this is a great deal? How do you cheerlead for a project and yet maintain the necessity of fairness and equity in dealing with the displaced landowners? How do you retain credibility with your staff?"

A governing body deserves to hear from its manager what it needs to know, not what it wants to hear. How far can the manager go in endorsing a project when at some point he or she may be called upon to reexamine some part of it critically?

Hays further described his self-doubts this way: "I think an elected official can say, 'This is my vision; this is what I believe.' My job as administrator is to figure out policy for the governing body. The governing body has a right to know what I think, where that thinking is the product of staff's expertise, judgment, and experience.

"Being in a high-profile role, I want to say, 'This is a great idea; I want to cheerlead.' But I have to resist the temptation to join the bandwagon and march in the parade. My sense of professionalism tells me to stay in the operations center and manage the parade."

It was Hays's commitment to the public interest that helped him decide what to do,

and this was the first of two lessons in this case. As Hays recalled, after the groundbreaking, “I really did personally believe, after we had researched it, after we had looked at the economic impact, after visiting one of the facilities, after knowing who our partner was going to be, after understanding the governor and lieutenant governor and the level of support in Topeka, that this was a good project for our community from an economic standpoint, as an economic engine.”

While Hays appears to have resolved his dilemma by grounding it in the public’s interest, it is not clear whether the public interest serves him as a rationale or a rationalization. In large measure, I suspect that the answer to this question is not how he regards the choices that he made but how others see them. Legitimizing a role is not something the role incumbent can do alone.

How did Hays minimize the likelihood that his actions would jeopardize his political neutrality? He grounded those actions in what I assert to be a set of four fundamental values that together compose the foundations, the anchors, of political legitimacy: representation, efficiency, social equity, and individual rights. Together, these enduring values provide the broadest base of legitimacy for a governing role, whether administrative or political. In other words, to the extent that Hays’s behavior was seen as respecting these values, his claim of acting in the public’s interest was more likely to be accepted.

Let’s examine these values more closely:

**Representation.** Hays indicated that from early in the process he and the mayor were struck by the overwhelming public support for locating a NASCAR racetrack in Wyandotte County. Furthermore, he always had the mayor’s support and agreement from the council that this project was a top priority and should be pursued without fail.

**Efficiency.** Not only was Hays able to work out a deal so that the project would pay for itself, but he also demonstrated to the governing body and to himself that he had negotiated the deal in the public’s interest. In one of our interviews, he said in response to a question about whether he ever felt that he had abandoned his stance of professional neutrality: “No. I honestly don’t. I think that if we had blindly pursued the NASCAR facility at all costs, I would have [felt that way].”

“Knowing how hard we were battling in the negotiating room, knowing in my heart, in my gut, that we were there protecting the public’s interest and we weren’t giving away the farm, I can say I never felt a loss of professional credibility to the public good.”

Part of embodying the value of efficiency through professionalism is conducting oneself with dignity and respect for others, maintaining and conveying a sense of integrity—not becoming emotionally caught up in the tide of events. Hays said, “I can think of several examples of individuals who did not want to move, but they called and said, ‘We don’t agree with it, but we want you to know that the way the meeting was handled, we thought it was fair. You listened to us, and there was a forum, and it was done professionally. We weren’t talked down to; we weren’t stampeded; it was respectful.’”

“Some people are going to associate me personally with the project, but as an honored

enemy, not necessarily as the mayor's hatchet boy or the person carrying the water for the politicians."

**Social equity and individual rights.** From the start of this project, there was deep concern for the landowners who were going to be displaced. Ultimately, they received 125 percent of the value of their property and a break on utilities, if they relocated within the county. Some of their stories were heart-wrenching. Hays's reaction to these stories reflects his compassion and understanding of the passion that drives issues of rights and equity: "On Christmas Eve, I went to mass with my family. The lecturer at our parish is one of the guys whose family is being relocated. He and his family are in the front aisle, and throughout the mass, all I can do is think about this poor family. And I know who they are, and I know they are having a difficult time. My heart is going out to this family as I see him read the scripture."

One can see that Hays's actions, and the way he thought about them, reflect his deep respect for the fundamental political values that create trust in the eyes of citizens. Resolving a role conflict by claiming to have acted in the public's interest is one thing, but anchoring the claim and the resolution in enduring public values is a more convincing approach, and this may have been the second lesson in this case.

Despite their success, and with some foresight, Hays and the mayor have agreed that he should show a lower profile on issues that they are currently working on: "We've generally agreed that I would be best working on these issues from behind the scenes, keeping the elected officials in the forefront. That decision has evolved, and I think there is general agreement that we should not perpetuate my high profile. It is not in anyone's best interest." This agreement testifies to the precarious position in which Hays found himself in the NASCAR case.

Political leaders often tell others what they want to hear. But the politicians we respect the most convey stories that touch our noblest selves, our moral character as citizens. And then they ask us to reach beyond, to dignify ourselves as citizens. The manager cannot do this and remain Mr. Rogers. When Dennis Hays was invited to join in a photo opportunity celebrating the legislative victory at the statehouse, he declined.

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