



Is Incivility an issue locally? Managers weigh in



The Manager Insights Series: As you know if you've been watching this space, I interviewed each NWCCOG municipal and county manager during the first quarter of 2023 and asked each a series of questions on housing, sustainability, marketing, policing among other topics. This week's issue focuses on the serious topic of incivility and it's direct impact on our staffs.

Previous issues can be found [here](#).

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During the 1-hour interviews NWCCOG performed in early 2023 of 31 managers across the region, I was curious if they had noticed an increase of incivility in their day-to-day operations. They were asked 1) if Incivility is an issue in the public realm, meaning meetings and events, 2) if their staff has had an increase in threats or harassment and 3) if their organization had taken steps to address building safety or staff training to deal with these issues; first as yes/no and then with expanded answers. Herewith, a sample of their answers:

"Every November we have to remind the community that it will snow, so don't yell at your Public Works team for leaving a windrow at the end of your driveway." --Michelle Metteer, Town of Minturn Manager.

"We are much more aware of our surroundings, staff. We get yelled at a lot more than we ever have. We have people climbing on our equipment to yell at our operators, it is dangerous; its about plowing mostly. We had someone pull in front of an operator to stop them." --Sherry Cure, Town of Walden Clerk.

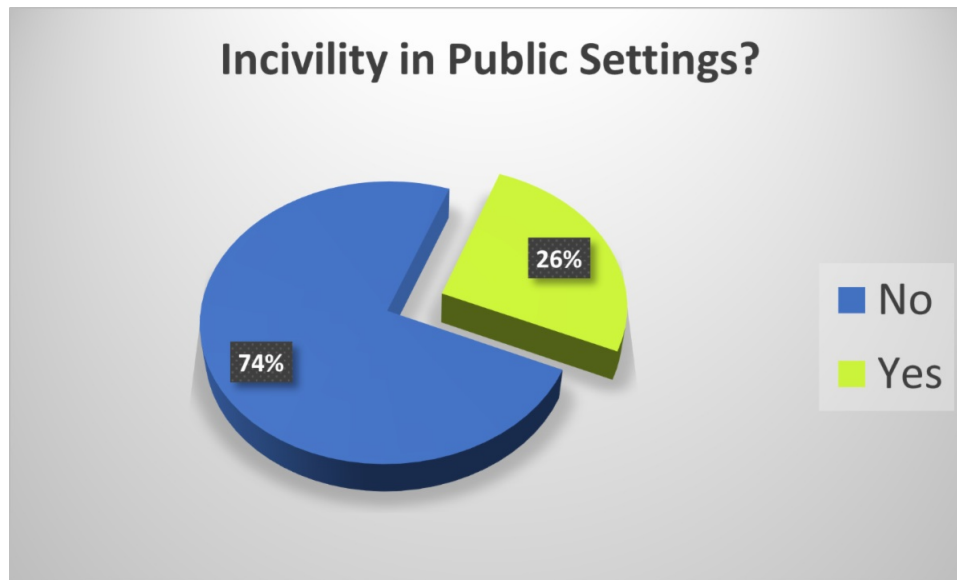
"...residents who feel emboldened. There is no longer a conversation, it is passive-aggressive and bullying. Constant complaints over anything... constant nitpick, constant badgering; there is no longer a filter. Just being there in Blue River we don't know when someone is going to flip (installed cameras and key card access)." --Michelle Eddy, Town of Blue River Manager.

"We did have an experience, one new person in town engaged to someone who has been here longer (testified and didn't like a board decision)—she went out and screamed 'I'm going to kick your dogs,' we suspect that she let air out of the tire of a board member's vehicle – put a pebble in the stem. It was kind of emotional." --Leslie Davis, Town of Montezuma Mayor.

Managers across the region generally answered in brief that no, neither incivility nor staff harassment were issues, though just about everyone had a few stories or incidents that qualified as evidenced from the quotes. At least 4 managers answered the incivility question in inter-council interactions which had

improved or declined. In expanded comments, questions arose such as what constituted an 'increase' since there has always been challenging situations confronted by police and a few other departments. What level of harassment/incivility was just baseline for public work? No matter the other answers, many shared that staff across their organizations were increasingly concerned about personal safety. They shared anecdotes about situations. The incidents had a magnified impact on staff. Many reported that once-common interactions with citizens had a sharper edge. Nearly all jurisdictions had taken steps or had budgeted to tighten security for their buildings and for their staff. Five or more who will not be mentioned said they had recently installed bullet-proof glass in key locations to protect staff. Nearly all were installing live-monitored camera systems inside and outside if they didn't have them already.

Is incivility an issue in public settings?



"We have some people who feel very strongly about Council decisions, and they are not polite. When they show up and do the stuff they do, it's not every meeting. They criticize but not in a productive way. They are passionate. They tell Council what they think of them." --Steve Boyd, City of Glenwood Springs, COO

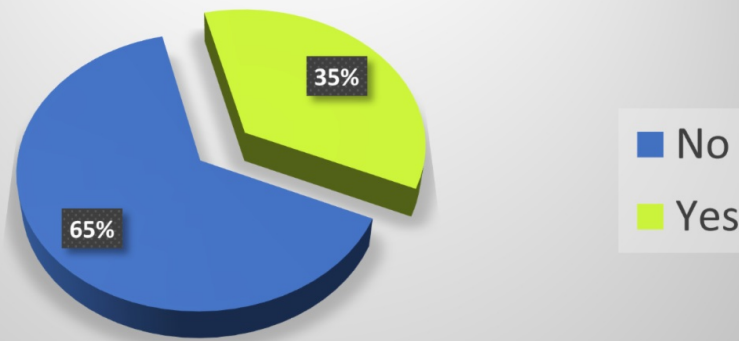
"With STRs we saw more of a lack of civility than ever. Outright hostility. We were going where everyone else was going and you would think it was the end of the world up here. We sent it to the electorate. Council did a good job; took bold actions." --Gary Suiter, City of Steamboat Springs Manager

"It is almost expected today that people come in with mal intent instead of assuming good intent that staff is doing their very best as public employees. Land use hearings are just about a complete disaster, no matter the project or where it is...and now it has become personal attacks against staff based on how they define the parameters. Not all, but a high percentage that we hear from are wealthy, entitled people with a lot of time on their hands. Most land use across the country is based only on their input and not a majority who cannot take the time to attend hearings. It is so short sighted. It is based on anger, and I got mine and it is my job to make sure you don't get yours." --Jeff Shroll, Eagle County Manager (excerpts)

"There is a real ethic in Frisco about being civil amongst staff and the Council. Council members talk about it openly. To be prepared, our police chief attends all meetings and is ready to step in to de-escalate tense, uncivil activity at public meetings. This is the first place I've had that level of awareness." --Tom Fisher, Town of Frisco Manager

Have threats to or harassment of staff increased?

Harrassments of staff by public



"I get feedback from staff regarding hostile encounters with people during their routine service delivery. The memorable ones are with people who come out with guns blazing, and an attempt to convey why something is being done a certain way can quickly become hostile. The staff does a great job of listening and that can help to calm the situation." --Ryan Mahoney, Town of Basalt Manager

"People are spicy. I am so much better equipped than when I started. Often people came in and I wasn't prepared. I know I am more physically at risk than I would be in another job. I think I minimize that in how I communicate and treat people. But I have no illusions that someone is stewing now." --Jeremy Reitman, Town of Gypsum Manager

"...we've had quite a few (threats). Nothing has been followed through on. Threats based on decisions and outcomes." --A Grand County Area Manager

"We ring people into the building. When I started here I didn't like that. I love it now." --John Crone, Town of Grand Lake Manager

On First Amendment Auditors and social media:



"...that's difficult to answer for Granby given some of the history here. We get a number of phone calls or emails each month. These are sometimes turned over to the police or they are just ignored." --Ted Cherry, Granby Town Manager

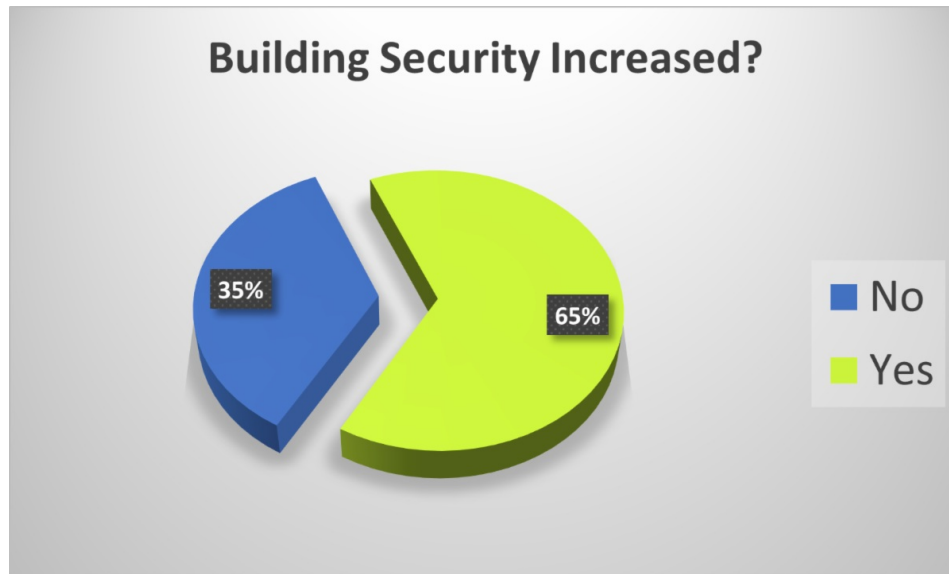
"We had an experience a few years ago where local Post Office employees didn't follow their USPS policy of allowing filming, and they called our PD to trespass an individual from the Post Office. We didn't trespass the individual, but the interaction with PD ended up on YouTube, and to this day we still have trolls on social media, or calling us, about the video." --Ryan Hyland, Town of Silverthorne Manager

To put it another way, 30% of top administrators in each community believe that civility has declined in public interactions, with harassment and threats to staff also increasing by the same percentage. As a

result, 68% of administrators have increased building security and trained staff on handling conflicts. However, there is a shortage of resources to train staff to keep up with the rapidly increasing danger to public officials and staff. Conflict reduction experts need to focus more on advising public entities on this issue. Colorado's primary insurer of municipalities, CIRSA, has published information on "[Handling Interactions with Angry Citizens](#)."

While it is not new that citizens have 'feedback' about how their town is managed—the public realm exists to engage with citizens and translate feedback to policy. There are realms where this is standardized. Then there is feedback about operations-- down to how the roads are plowed, and choice of flowers. Where is the boundary between engagement and harassment? Managers' report that citizens have become more brazen in what they say, like the Clerk from Walden who reported that people will block a plow driver, and climb up on their equipment to yell. Other Managers reported citizens speaking heatedly about how their driveway was plowed in, what street was plowed first or wasn't plowed soon enough. Snow management is personal in Colorado, evidently. Coaching for front facing administrative staff, public health or public works employees may have been common after an incident in the past. Now it is reluctantly becoming a priority.

On Increased Building Security and Staff Training...



"We are limited to a historic building (town hall). There are not many options for safety improvements. When staff was surveyed they don't like being in town hall by themselves. We lock up more." --Michael Brack, Fraser Town Manager

"We have a risk assessment team. When we built a building recently, it was interesting...we had a team that included the Sheriff and different department heads, at the time our IT director had come from Aurora and the recent shootings, the Sheriff was on the side of 'Aspen is Aspen- we don't need to fortify," so we compromised, our building was put together with thoughtfulness to incidents." --Rich Englehart, Pitkin County Deputy Manager

"If I listened to half the staff (about building security) we wouldn't let anybody in at all. The other half don't care. We were SWATTEd with a possible school shooting nearby like a lot of districts across the state. It really hit people." --A Roaring Fork Area Manager

"We are approaching building safety differently not because of our incidents, but because of what we see. We've given front desk access to the feed (entrance camera) so they can see people coming in, and we have a locked back entrance for staff only." --Shannon Haynes, Town of Breckenridge, Assistant Manager

Several managers recommend to staff that they do not try to defend town policy in the field. Managers have reported utilizing police staff for de-escalation training. Some make police available to train others in the resort community. Resort towns have always bridged this community policing to enforcement challenge with visitors, though it wasn't until recently something that was required to deal with supposedly sober citizens in expected situations. **Beyond just coaching, many jurisdictions have begun formal trainings.** Silverthorne has officers who do community training for de-escalation, a two-hour version of the kind of training that has become standard for most law enforcement.

Many of those interviewed lamented the hardening of public spaces and the need to train public employees across the organization with preparation, tactics and education that once were reserved for law enforcement. Such is the world we live in today, where working for the benefit of the community increasingly puts a person doing that civic duty in harms way.

Note about the Manager Insights series: The data collected for this series demonstrates the depth of knowledge among area managers and I felt honored to be entrusted with their candid reflections. Raw data will be shared directly back to managers and packaged data and quotes will be published only after review and with permission from each manager. I take responsibility for any inaccuracies or cumulative insights not directly attributed to one of my fine colleagues.

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