

Change and Transparency Are Slogans. Here's the How.

A Service-First Operational Strategy for Fort Smith Municipal Governance

Everyone is talking about change. Everyone is talking about transparency. Those words matter. But words alone do not repair a road, improve a city service, strengthen a neighborhood, or protect a taxpayer's dollar.

The question residents keep asking: *What would you change? And how would you change it?* This article answers that question through a Service-First framework combining the discipline of a Soldier, the expertise of a Manager, and the heart of a Leader.

THE SOLDIER

Provides military discipline, thorough tactical reconnaissance, clear planning, and decisive execution.

THE MANAGER

Provides operational expertise, structured workflow systems, public scorecards, and administrative accountability.

THE LEADER

Provides heart, vision, integrity, and continuous dedication to serving every single resident.

The mayor's office should not be a throne. It should be a tool. That tool belongs to the people of Fort Smith: not to the person behind the desk. It must be used with integrity, transparency, discipline, and humility.

FIRST: RECON BEFORE WE ACT

The Soldier does not begin a mission by guessing. The Soldier gathers facts, understands the terrain, identifies the obstacles, and establishes a clear objective. That is how I would begin my first 30 days as mayor.

I would meet one-on-one with every member of the Board of Directors, the city administrator, and the deputy administrators. These meetings would not be ceremonial. They would focus on the condition of city government, the challenges facing our departments, and the decisions that require immediate attention.

I would also meet with frontline employees: the people who answer resident calls, inspect properties, maintain streets, respond to emergencies, process permits, manage public facilities, and keep the city operating every day. Good leadership does not only listen upward. It listens to the people closest to the work.

FIRST 30-DAY DIAGNOSTIC FRAMEWORK

Human Resources Department Report:

- Employee turnover & current department vacancies
- Time-to-fill for open positions & training completion needs
- Workers' compensation trends & retirement risks in critical roles
- Specific positions that are difficult to recruit and retain

Top 5 High-Friction Citizen Processes: Identify permitting, complaint routing, code enforcement, inspections, or delay-prone services to eliminate systemic citizen frustration quickly.

"We cannot manage what we refuse to measure. The first 30 days are about finding the truth quickly and establishing a mission plan."

SECOND: FIX THE SYSTEM, NOT JUST THE PEOPLE

The Manager understands something important: cities do not improve simply because leaders tell employees to work harder. Most employees want to serve well. But even dedicated people struggle when systems are unclear, approvals are duplicated, information is scattered, and departments do not coordinate. We must fix the operating system of city government.

1. Hiring & Onboarding Academies: Each department should have clear hiring targets and reasonable time-to-fill expectations. Vacant positions affect response times, public safety, infrastructure, and employee morale. New employees should enter a structured Onboarding Academy to understand Fort Smith's mission, ethics, and standards from Day 1. Supervisors will complete a mandatory Supervisor Academy to build real leadership, conflict resolution, and performance management skills.

2. Public Scorecards & Regular Reviews: Every department should have a public scorecard with 5 to 10 meaningful metrics, tracking trend lines through quarterly reviews. City leadership will hold weekly executive alignment meetings and monthly department performance reviews to answer:

- Are services actively improving?
- Are residents receiving timely responses?
- Are key municipal projects staying on schedule?
- Are costs being controlled effectively?
- Are we meeting the standards we set?

3. Service-Level Agreements (SLAs): Inter-departmental dependencies must be governed by formal SLAs. Clear ownership, explicit timelines, and operational accountability replace excuses. *"No one told me" is not an operating system.*

4. Retention Strategy & Stay Interviews: We must invest in our workforce through clear career ladders, succession plans, and stay interviews—understanding what keeps good employees here before they leave.

THIRD: CHANGE WHAT RESIDENTS ACTUALLY FEEL

Residents do not experience city government as an organizational chart. They experience it through a permit that takes too long, a complaint routed between offices, or a code enforcement issue disappearing into a system without visible progress.

I would begin by reviewing the 10 highest-friction processes residents face, mapping each from start to finish to remove redundant steps and bottlenecks. We will publish target turnaround times for common municipal services.

WARD-BY-WARD PUBLIC DASHBOARDS

We will launch public progress dashboards allowing residents to see open requests, processing timelines, responsible departments, and resolution statuses across all wards—from the Northside to the Southside, from downtown to Chaffee Crossing.

The Frontier Spirit of Fort Smith was built on people who solved problems directly. Our local government should reflect that same determination.

FOURTH: MAKE TRANSPARENCY A RHYTHM

Transparency is not a campaign phrase. It is a regular practice. It should not appear only when an election is approaching or when a controversial decision is receiving public attention.

As mayor, I would establish a **Quarterly Public Progress Report** built on four clear pillars:

1. **What we said** — Original commitments and published benchmarks.
2. **What we did** — Concrete operational steps taken during the quarter.
3. **What improved** — Verified data and measurable results.
4. **What still needs work** — Transparent reporting of remaining challenges.

Before controversial Board votes, the public will have access to detailed study sessions outlining costs, alternatives, and likely community impact. Leadership will hold open-door listening sessions throughout the year with residents, business owners, non-profits, first responders, faith leaders, and neighborhood advocates.

FIFTH: DRAW A FISCAL LINE IN THE SAND

Transparency must include the money. Your tax dollars deserve a clear explanation. Every major expenditure should answer three non-negotiable questions:

- **What public benefit are we buying?**
- **What measurable result should residents expect?**
- **How will we know whether the investment worked?**

Fort Smith cannot afford to give away its tax base without carefully measuring long-term costs. When public land, infrastructure, or subsidies support projects yielding little to no future tax revenue—such as arrangements connected to Housing Authority models—we must be fully transparent about taxpayer trade-offs. This is an argument for fiscal discipline.

We need **Priority-Based Budgeting** connected to measurable outcomes. Growth across the River Valley, downtown, and Chaffee Crossing must support our core infrastructure backbone: roads, transit, housing, public safety, schools, and essential municipal services.

SIXTH: APPLY THE LEADER'S QUESTION

The Leader brings the heart. Every policy change and budget decision must answer one essential question:

"Who does this serve?"

If a new process is easier for City Hall but harder for a grandmother on the Northside, it is not a fix. If a budget decision looks efficient on paper but leaves vulnerable residents without a path forward, we must reconsider it.

Leadership must care about unseen citizens: individuals struggling with homelessness, families facing mental health crises, youth needing safe environments, and senior residents wanting to be heard. Restoring Fort Smith means restoring trust, responsibility, and neighborly respect at the center of public life.

CHANGE IS A SYSTEM. TRANSPARENCY IS A RHYTHM.

Service-First leadership combines the **discipline of the Soldier**, the **expertise of the Manager**, and the **heart of the Leader**.

The first 90 days will prove the difference: not through promises, but through data, public reports, visible progress, and honest conversations. Fort Smith needs operational excellence and mission-ready leadership willing to roll up its sleeves and get to work.