

JIM KNIPPEN

Helping Local Governments Operate Amid Greater ‘Culture Wars’

by Chris Bailey

WHEATON—Any student of U.S. history knows the country’s political life has always been rife with name-calling, nasty campaigns, deception and enduring personal animus. In 1804, for example, Aaron Burr, the sitting vice president, killed Alexander Hamilton, a former secretary of the U.S. Treasury, in a duel.

James H. Knippen II majored in U.S. history at St. Norbert College, and he knows that political chaos isn’t unique to the current moment. But he also thinks what he calls the “culture wars” have led to failures of governance on both the state and federal levels.

Knippen, a Wheaton-based principal in Walsh, Knippen & Cetina Chartered, praises the focus of local government bodies in staying out of those culture wars and providing their residents quality governance and consistent services. He says he has found that to be generally true across DuPage, Will and Kane counties.

He says local governments also are succeeding in this endeavor despite actions at the state level that make it more difficult for local governments to provide good governance based on solid policy considerations.

“I have a terrific opportunity to see and participate in effective government,” says Knippen, who has provided legal counsel to any number of local and county government bodies over decades.

“Local governments are still doing the work of the people, while the state and federal governments are so wrapped up in the culture wars that they seem to have forgotten their duties. Political opponents no longer engage in constructive governance dialogue. They don’t listen to each other. They seem more comfortable castigating one another than working together.

“The commentary-driven media and the public’s appetite for that commentary encourages the gridlock of government at the state and local levels. I’m heartened local governments continue to govern based on good policy and practical considerations.”

Knippen is nothing if not a professional who has spent his entire career advising public servants in the legal exercise of their duties and helping them lawfully achieve their policy goals.

His clients have included the Village of Roselle, City of Wheaton, Forest Preserve District of DuPage County, Village of Woodridge, City of West Chicago and various fire and police chiefs in employment and disciplinary matters.



He also has represented corporations that include Amoco Oil, Bluff City Materials, Waste Management, E/M, Concord Homes and Pasquinelli Development. Complex litigation has also been part of his career, which followed his graduation from the University of Illinois College of Law.

Knippen began as a criminal prosecutor in DuPage County, where he served as an assistant state’s attorney for 3 ½ years. He says the experience helped teach him terrific trial skills and how to think on his feet. Knippen has since practiced with Ed Walsh, who is a former corporation counsel for the City of

Wheaton, an award-winning trial lawyer and the person who introduced him to municipal law.

“Ed mentored me well to do municipal law,” says Knippen. The firm has since expanded to do all sorts of work involving local and regional governance.

“I found I really enjoy municipal government work because of the quality of the people I work with, both elected and administrative.”

Knippen understands, though, that the continued effectiveness of local public bodies isn't necessarily because they have more talented and motivated people than state or federal governments do. He knows local entities have some built-in advantages.

WHY THEY STILL FUNCTION

“There are some structural dynamics that help,” Knippen says. “In most local governments, there are no party affiliations, and they are paid little or nothing. Administrative management is provided by educated and degreed professionals who have been trained and mentored in good public policy and sound governing structures. Local governments also govern over people's immediate needs—streets, safety services, garbage. These are fundamental services upon which nearly everyone can agree and must make work.”

“Local boards are doing well at governing and delivering services,” says John Prindiville, a lawyer by profession and a Wheaton councilman. “The state should take lessons from local municipalities on how to govern. We have a wide range of political thought on our board, but we don't let it alter our ability to get things done. Most of what we do is pretty prosaic—roads, sewers, sidewalks, police and fire protection. Jim provides advice that covers all issues and all the bases without a particular point of view. A lot of the credit for our success goes to Jim and his partners.”

“Local governments are in your community, right down the block,” says Michael Dzugan, Wheaton's city manager. “We are more accessible, and that proximity helps.”

Even so, Dzugan says Knippen's ability to research and conceptualize an issue and then put it in writing in a way that makes it “understandable in application” has been a great boon to his city.

“He can explain what will work, what might work, and how a particular rule or decision might be interpreted differently,” says Dzugan. “And if Jim is involved, we all walk away thinking and understanding the same thing. He's well-respected by staff, who believe his research and advice is always complete.”

Dzugan says Knippen is helpful when new board members arrive, too.

“We are really a \$100 million corporation,”

says Dzugan, of his city government. “You don't walk in on the first day and understand it. He doesn't talk lawyer gibberish, and he explains things so the average Joe can understand them.”

“He's right on in his ability to deal with the public, and he manages the personalities on both the council and within staff very well,” says Jeffrey O'Dell, the village administrator of Roselle. “But the breadth of his knowledge and experience in municipal law is essential to us, too.”

He points to telecommunications as an example of a difficult issue for many municipalities because it costs a lot to stay current and often requires regional coordination as well.

“Jim often lends his expertise to regional councils as well,” says O'Dell. “And he is skilled at navigating through difficult issues to get a result that feels satisfactory to everyone. He helps us strategize, too, getting everyone to think more broadly. He's just a consummate professional. There's no shortage of ‘happy with Jim’ around here.”

“He has absolute integrity,” adds Prindiville. “He's one of the best lawyers I know, and he's dedicated to providing us the best unbiased advice he can. People feel comfortable asking him anything. He shows a great deal of respect to everyone and provides details to make decisions easier. We are very fortunate to have him.”

UNDERSTANDING, SINCERITY

“I've known Jim for many, many, many years,” says Roselle Mayor Andrew Maglio. “He is conservative, straightforward and has been on the money with the right advice for our

community for many years. He's at our beck and call, and he has a unique way of explaining issues so that people can understand. He will talk to elected officials, staff members and residents in a kind-hearted way. He talks with them, not down to them. His understanding and sincerity are his two biggest strengths.”

Knippen also has an affinity for police officers and firefighters and their leaders, especially in times like these, when they are under immense public pressure due to issues or behaviors by others that are out of their control.

“I enjoy representing police and fire chiefs because they are generally high-caliber people,” says Knippen. And they appreciate his support and expertise as well.

“I've known him through the city for probably 35 years,” says James Volpe, the police chief for the City of Wheaton. “And he might have been here before I ever joined as a police officer. But it was when I became a supervisor in 1993 that I really started using his expertise.”

Volpe also says he got a great deal of mentoring from Knippen when he began thinking about going to law school.

“About law school, he was encouraging,” says Volpe, who passed the bar several years ago.

Volpe says going to law school was nothing more than a desire to learn more about his profession. “I always intended to stay in police work,” he adds.

Volpe and Knippen developed a professional relationship as attorneys, too.

“I would bounce things off him,” says Volpe. “And we talked a lot about police conduct cases.”



Knippen and wife Tallya hiking the Morton Arboretum in February snow

Good training for the current world, one might say.

“Jim would always pick up his phone,” says Volpe. “He’s been on my speed dial for 25 years. He taught me to look at a situation and see all sides before I took any action. On his advice, I learned to always look at the best interest of citizens and officers, and they aren’t always the same. He always has been supportive. He works well with the department and has always tried to understand the direction we want to go.

“He’s been a mentor and a legal guide,” says Volpe, who became police chief in 2015. “He’s been a guiding force in disciplinary issues or intricate legal issues involving employees. He’s always there to help, and he provides legal counsel I can rely on.

“I always want to be sure that what we’re doing is ethically correct and legally correct. He helps with insights and potential pitfalls, which really helps decision-making on tough issues. He’s been both a mentor and a blessing.”

After more than three decades of practice, Knippen is being more selective in accepting outside litigation and is focusing on his relationships with local government bodies.

“Local government is so diverse and so illuminating, both in its needs and in how it can solve problems,” says Knippen. “For example, I get to see the evolution of technology and telecommunications in ways that are both necessary and fascinating. Data mining can help in the delivery of services and if communities are managed properly, it can substantially enhance their ability to deliver services.”

THREE GREAT PASSIONS

Yet as passions go, his for local government is but one of three. He came to the two others—his wife, Tallya, and the Wind River Mountains of Wyoming—earlier.

“I’ve known Tallya since high school, but our relationship really began after law school,” says Knippen. They married in 1984, and he calls her “the love of my life.” They have two sons, a daughter and a grandson, Asher James Sullivan. “Obviously, my daughter’s child,” he says, adding that he Face Times with his grandson about three times a week.

His wilderness passion and his love of the Wind Rivers, which are still very much wild, began when he took a year off between his St. Norbert graduation and starting law school at the University of Illinois. A gap year, so to speak.

“I just got in a car and drove west,” says Knippen. “I loved Wyoming.”

He returned over and over, and that love of the mountain West remains apparent in the alpine mountaineering skills he developed and the backpacking, fishing and cross-country skiing trips he made almost religiously over the years.

“I’ve climbed technical routes on most of the major Teton peaks,” he says.



Knippen roller skiing at McKee Marsh Forest Preserve in April 2018

That Western experience has led Knippen to several other pursuits—landscape and wildlife art, roller skiing, kayaking and music, which included his becoming a five-string banjo and guitar player in a group called the Wind River Band.

He also has won awards for his oil painting, an interest triggered by western artist friends and made real by Tallya’s gift of oil painting gear.

“I mostly paint wildlife and landscapes,” he says. Knippen pulls an original painting of a red-tailed hawk from an office wall. “I’ve been in a couple of shows and won some awards.”

But his first outdoor love remains the Wind Rivers.

“He has been coming out here to fish since, I think, 1978,” says George Hunker, an outfitter and guide for Sweetwater Fishing Expeditions in Lander, Wyoming. “He came for fishing, backpacking and climbing and he got hooked on the Wind Rivers.

“He certainly holds the record for the client most enamored with them and a guy who needed to come here regularly. Early on, he was a power fisherman, a guy who had to fish, fish, fish. Now he comes to relax and then maybe do a little fishing.

“It has been really interesting,” says Hunker. “He’s a great friend, but we’re not bosom buddies. Still, when we get back together, it feels like we were never separated. He’s very erudite and verbal back home, I think, but in the Wind Rivers, he doesn’t have to do any of that.”

Hunker says that over the years, Knippen has brought various people with him—“partners, police and fire chiefs, prosecutors and family

members. When he got interested in art, he brought several artists, paid for their trip, and said he only wanted a painting in return. It was shortly after that trip that Tallya gave him the painting materials as a gift because he had decided he wanted to try it.”

An article Knippen wrote about the trip with Hunker and his artist friends was published in *Southwest Art* magazine.

Hunker says not all those trips went flawlessly out in the wild, either.

“He usually came in September,” says Hunker. “I don’t think he really liked bugs, so he came later. We had taken some llamas into a base camp and were planning to spend a week out. He hurt his ankle walking near a creek that day, and we weren’t sure if it would get better or not.

“It got worse the next day. The only way to get a chopper in was to climb up somewhere where I might get a signal. It was pretty tricky, but I was able to get a good signal and reached the sheriff’s office. I heard the whop, whop, whop of a chopper near the lake outlet just about the time I got back. His ankle was broken, and he flew home. And I had to take the llamas home by myself.”

Hunker has skied with Knippen, but doesn’t quite understand his fascination with roller-skiing, something Knippen still does regularly. But Hunker truly understands the appeal the Wind River range has held for Knippen over the years.

“Some people go see a shrink,” says Hunker. “But he came here for the same reasons others go to a shrink. He came here because it cleansed him and made him feel new again.” ■