

# Report

**Event:** Fire Hall Chat

**Date:** February 19, 2026

**Topic:** Local Governance Matters: Civil Communication in the Current Climate

## Participants

- **Dennis Cooley**, Professor of Philosophy and Ethics, North Dakota State University
  - **Amy Zundel**, West Fargo City Commissioner
  - **Austin Schauer**, North Dakota Legislator
  - **Jim Jonas**, North Dakota Legislator
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## Purpose of the Program

The program focused on the importance of civil communication and ethical governance in the current political and social climate. It explored how democratic processes function, the challenges facing civic engagement, and the role of local leadership in maintaining public trust.

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## Opening Presentation

Mr. Cooley opened the session with an overview of democratic governance and the processes through which societies seek outcomes that provide the greatest benefit to the most people.

He identified several challenges shaping today's governance environment, including:

- Political polarization
- Spread of misinformation
- Increasingly complex bureaucracy
- Declining civic participation

He emphasized core principles of ethical governance, including:

- Integrity
- Fairness in decision-making
- Accountability to the public
- Respect for the rule of law

Mr. Cooley also noted that North Dakota benefits from a level of personal access between residents and elected officials that is less common in other states, contributing to stronger public accountability.

Content from the accompanying presentation further highlighted the importance of civil dialogue grounded in charity, humility, and careful understanding of differing viewpoints, as well as the role of transparency and accessibility in strengthening trust in governance systems.

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## **Panel Discussion**

Panelists Amy Zundel, Austin Schauer, and Jim Jonas discussed their experiences serving in elected office. They reflected on the responsibilities of representing diverse constituencies and the challenges involved in reconciling differing perspectives.

A recurring theme was the importance of collaboration and trust among decision-makers, given that no individual can be an expert in every policy area.

Panel members also noted that current federal-level developments generally have limited impact on their day-to-day work, aside from considerations related to funding.

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## **Audience Engagement**

The program concluded with a brief question-and-answer session, allowing attendees to engage directly with the speakers and discuss topics raised during the presentation and panel.

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## **Summary**

The Fire Hall Chat provided a forum for examining the role of ethical leadership, civil discourse, and public participation in local governance. The discussion underscored both the challenges facing democratic institutions and the opportunities for strengthening community engagement through transparency, accessibility, and respectful dialogue.