

The Millennials in the Mayor's Seat

**Young leaders are
injecting cities with
a new energy.**

By Dylan Scott

**Pittsburgh Mayor
Luke Ravenstahl**

RICHARD KELLY





Duluth Mayor Don Ness: “Oftentimes, we look at optimism as a source of weakness. I think optimism is the fuel for a willingness to take on the big problems and to feel like we have a chance to actually solve those problems.”

Just in front of City Hall in Ithaca, N.Y., the mayor has a reserved parking spot. Or at least he did. When then-24-year-old Svante Myrick took office in January 2012, he decided he didn’t need it. During his four years as a student at Cornell University, Myrick had gotten used to traversing the city of 30,000 on his feet and via public transit. As an environmentally conscious member of Generation Y, he wanted to set an example. So Myrick authorized city workers to construct Ithaca’s smallest public park where his parking space once stood. They laid down turf and erected a small bench. Some evenings, he will sit out there and conduct a sort of open forum, letting residents come up and share their thoughts or concerns. A few feet away stands a “Mayor’s Mailbox” that Myrick has installed, a comment box for citizens to leave their praise and scorn for the city government.

These small touches are reminders that Ithaca’s youngest and first African-American mayor (he’s actually biracial) does things a little differently. When Myrick wants public input on a road project, he doesn’t wait for the 6 p.m. Tuesday City Council meetings, where folks have to fill out a comment card and get their allotted three minutes to speak. He posts a status on the city’s Facebook page—a page he started—and lets residents share their thoughts. His new style “still freaks people out a little bit,” Myrick says. “They’re used to getting feedback in a certain way and through a certain structure.”

“People aren’t used to having unfettered access to public officials,” he says. “But unfettered access is kind of what my generation is all about.”

Just like his approach to governance, little about Myrick’s journey to the Ithaca mayor’s office is traditional. He grew up in Earlville, about 70 miles to the east, the son of a single mom and the third of four children. His mom worked two jobs, cooking at a hospital and nursing home, while caring for her kids between double shifts. Perpetually short on money, the family moved in and out of rundown apartments and homeless shelters. When Myrick was 11 years old, he started his first business. He and a friend would walk around Earlville with a bucket of water, offering to wash strangers’ windows, mow their lawns or trim their hedges.

He grows noticeably quieter when talking about his childhood and how it might have impacted how he approaches his job, but he acknowledges the influence is there. Some months as a kid, he would have to choose between going on a school field trip and buying a new pair of shoes. “When the money didn’t match up, and it never matched up, it was like, ‘OK, what are we going to do?’” Myrick says. “It does make you grow up a little faster, and it does prepare you for the hard decisions that you have to make in this job.”

That level of maturity is part of what it takes to be a young, new mayor. And Myrick is one of several young mayors around

the country who represent a changing of the guard in city hall, bringing a fresh perspective and new energy to public office.

You can see it in Pittsburgh, where residents might catch 32-year-old Mayor Luke Ravenstahl at a City Council meeting one night and then out with friends at a local watering hole the next. In Manitowoc, Wis., where 25-year-old Mayor Justin Nickels can't go out on a date without his server asking about a pothole on her street. In Holyoke, Mass., where 23-year-old Mayor Alex Morse commuted from class at Brown University during his campaign. Or in Duluth, Minn., where 38-year-old Mayor Don Ness keeps a drawer full of toys in his desk for his young children when they make a surprise visit to the office.

Being a young mayor comes with its own set of challenges. There's skepticism from friends and family—not to mention voters—about whether you're prepared to move from the college dorm to city hall. Once in office, younger mayors are eager to shake things up with fresh ideas and new ways of doing business, only to be confronted with the same old challenges of overburdened budgets, drowning pension systems and struggling schools. And these mayors are still learning to strike a balance between public service and the private life of someone in their mid-20s or 30s.

"With this new generation of elected officials, I think you have people who see the potential in public service to establish a new framework to how we approach these things, to be solution-minded and to bring a sense of optimism," says Duluth's Ness.

"Oftentimes, we look at optimism as a source of weakness, but I actually see it completely differently. I think optimism is the fuel for a willingness to take on the big problems and to feel like we have a chance to actually solve those problems."

The first step in running for office as a young person is convincing somebody—anybody—that you can do it. That usually starts with family. In 2011, when Holyoke's Morse sat down with his extended family (his parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles—everyone) and told them he wanted to challenge Elaine Pluta, the 67-year-old incumbent mayor, they voiced their support. But Morse says he sensed a little skepticism. "I'm sure they thought, 'We'll support him, but I doubt he can unseat an incumbent mayor.' Even if they thought I was crazy, though, they weren't going to tell me that."

Then comes convincing everyone else that you're ready for the responsibilities of public office. "People would laugh," says Pitts-

burgh's Ravenstahl, who ran for City Council at age 23 in 2003 and even had the advantage of having a father who had been a local judge and a grandfather who had been a state legislator. "At least one person told me, 'Look, I have kids your age. The last thing I would ever do is put them in that seat.' There were days that were very discouraging."

But the mayors overcame others' skepticism by conveying long-term visions for their cities. "Experience is important for mayors, but it's really not as important as inspiration and leadership," says Stephen Goldsmith, professor of government at the Harvard Kennedy School and former mayor of Indianapolis

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Ithaca Mayor Svante Myrick: "People aren't used to having unfettered access to public officials. But unfettered access is kind of what my generation is all about."

(and a contributor to *Governing.com*). "A person will be successful as mayor if they're able to galvanize enthusiasm and support for public goals. So in that sense, a young mayor is as capable as somebody older in filling that role."

Many of these executives have already achieved significant successes. In Duluth, Ness was facing a structurally unbalanced budget and \$290 million in unfunded retiree health-care benefits. So he offered his plan to resolve those legacy issues. "There were a lot of derogatory statements—that I just didn't get it, that these were promises written in granite," he says. "But I explained that we either had to have the courage to face this today or be faced with bankruptcy in the future." In his first few years as mayor, Ness cut the city's annual budget by more than 9 percent and implemented reforms, including increasing copays and deductibles, to retiree health benefits, changes he says will save Duluth \$4 million annually. He won a court case in 2011 to go through with his plan.

Pittsburgh's Ravenstahl campaigned in part on a promise to improve public schools. For years, he had watched friends with young children move away or send their kids to private schools because of public education's poor reputation. Now he's organized Pittsburgh Promise, a public-private partnership that awards college scholarships of up to \$40,000 to public students who finish high school. So far the project has given out some \$25 million to more than 3,000 students, and graduation rates are on the rise.

Alex Morse viewed Holyoke, a former paper mill town now facing 11 percent unemployment, as a dying city. He pledged to remake its economy around art, innovation and technology. Last year, he oversaw the ribbon-cutting at the Massachusetts Green High Performance Computing Center, a state-of-the-art energy-efficient computing facility, as a start down that path.

In Ithaca, Myrick has said he wants to create a more affordable, livable and sustainable city. That's already resulted

In addition to these kinds of successes in somewhat traditional areas—education, fiscal reform, downtown redevelopment—there's a definite shift in style among this cadre of young leaders. They're injecting their cities with a hipper, cooler vibe that many residents say is bringing new energy and new attitudes about public service. Before Don Ness became mayor, he ran the Homegrown Music Festival (billed as "Duluth's annual showcase of rawk and/or roll devil music"), and when the alt-rock band Wilco performed in Duluth last summer, Ness, a fan, gave the members keys to the city. Each of these mayors regularly speaks at local schools or colleges about their experiences and why a life of public service is worthwhile. Ravenstahl created the ServePBH initiative in Pittsburgh, aimed at getting youth to volunteer and improve their city. Morse was recently approached by a 19-year-old Holyoke resident who wants to run for City Council after seeing what Morse has done as mayor.



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in plans for a 60-unit mixed-income housing project, an \$800,000 commercial street rebuild with sidewalks and bike lanes, reforms to the zoning code to encourage denser development and a \$10 million downtown redevelopment program. "Mayor Myrick is wise beyond his years," says Stephen Philip Johnson, vice president of government and community relations at Cornell, an important constituency in a town-and-gown place like Ithaca. "He has been able to make the tough decisions that the reality of our economic times have required."

Youth can be a double-edged sword. Ness, who was first elected to the Duluth City Council in 1999 at age 25, remembers the strange looks he got when he walked into a local chamber of commerce meeting dressed in shorts and a T-shirt. But as soon as he started speaking, displaying intimate knowledge of the local economy and the state politics that would factor into their ability to get it going, the mood changed, he says. "I could feel the room turn. Folks had been playing wait-and-see, wondering, 'Is this kid going to bring any real value or is it just a sideshow?'"



Holyoke Mayor Alex Morse: “My age is an asset. I haven’t been around long enough to be cynical.”

Manitowoc’s Nickels noticed similar doubts as he sat in on some of his first department meetings after taking office in 2009. Longtime city workers seemed to talk around him as if he weren’t even there. “I could tell sometimes that I wasn’t a part of their conversation,” he says. “But I think people finally get it now. They accept that a 25-year-old can do a pretty darn good job.”

And then there’s trying to have a social life. Balancing the role of running a city and living the life of a single 20- or 30-something can be tricky. Morse (who is gay) says that the biggest drain on his social life is fellow bar patrons asking if they can take a picture with him and post it on Facebook. In Manitowoc, Nickels recalls being on a date with another young professional, with roses set at the table’s center and candles lit, while half a dozen residents kept walking up and sharing their complaints about the city government. It can all be a little jarring, says Ithaca’s Myrick. “I’ve tried to adapt—I’m usually more comfortable with it than the people who are unlucky enough to go out with me.”

Sometimes the tug of war between political and personal life can have very real consequences. That’s true for any public official, of course, but especially for those unaccustomed to the limelight. Less than a year after he became mayor, Ravenstahl was criticized for appearing at a celebrity golf invitational sponsored by some groups, including a university medical center, that have frequent dealings with the city. The same year, he caught flak for driving a publicly funded homeland security SUV to a country music concert. Some of that scrutiny was probably connected to his age, Ravenstahl says, but he also admits that he didn’t fully understand the attention that comes with being mayor in those days. “I underestimated the lens that I was under,” he says. “I’ve learned a lot, and I do approach things a lot differently than I did in the beginning.”

Ravenstahl assumed office in 2006 when Mayor Bob O’Connor died and Ravenstahl was sitting council president—a promotion he was granted only because he was viewed, in his youth, as the least threatening candidate by other council members. Some dubbed him “The Accidental Mayor.” The stress of the position took a toll on Ravenstahl’s personal life. He and his wife, with whom he shares a 4-year-old son, separated in 2009, when Ravenstahl was 29. While Ravenstahl says he wouldn’t go back and change his mind about seeking public office, he acknowledges that the divorce has been one of the toughest unintended consequences of his decision to become a public figure at such a young age. “The hardest thing for me is how this job impacts my family and those that didn’t choose to have their name in the paper and be a public servant,” he says. “It’s something that I didn’t foresee or expect.”

In the years since he took office, Ravenstahl has grown into the position and become a stronger leader, says Pat Altdorfer, a political science professor at the University of Pittsburgh. “You play the hand you’re dealt. From that perspective, he did step up,” Altdorfer says. “Everyone’s got a learning curve, and I would certainly say he’s a better mayor today than he was when he first started.”

The bottom line, these mayors say, is that they don’t see their youth as the defining aspect of their leadership. Sure, they may be more connected on Facebook and Twitter than their predecessors were. And they may be more open to unconventional solutions and ideas, like Myrick’s pocket park in his parking space. But being an effective city leader is the same regardless of age. “I ran not because I wanted to represent the youth,” says Myrick, “but because I cared about this place.” **G**

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