

Introduction to the Oath of Office

An oath of office is a pledge or affirmation a person takes before assuming the duties and exercising the powers of an office. Every new Councilmember, commission or committee member, and employee in the City of Paso Robles takes the same oath of office.

The oath is mandated by the Federal and State Constitutions. Although some religious orders and a few other fields employ an oath of office, this mandate applies only to the public sector, for it is only in the public sector that all of our actions are taken on behalf of the public; not to our own benefit, but to benefit the community. In most aspects of our lives, we look out primarily for ourselves or our families. That is also true of those who work in the private sector. The public sector, however, is different.

Oaths of office appear to have started over 2,500 years ago, in classical Greece. Every 17-year old Athenian boy, as a rite of passage, pledged his efforts for the common good, committing to leave the City greater and better than he found it. Oaths have been required in most societies since then. Thus, very time a new Councilmember, commission or committee member, or employee takes the oath of office, they are stepping to the front of an unbroken line that first formed some 25 centuries ago.

Certain groups—such as physicians and the clergy—throughout history have held themselves to a higher standard than is required of the general society. Those groups use their self-expectations and, by sharing their espoused standards, the expectations of others, to help each of their members be better than they would be themselves, so that it becomes second nature to do the right thing, to the highest possible standards.

So too with the oath we take. The oath is our solemn pledge; holding ourselves to a higher standard; it is also a symbol (just like City Hall or a police officer's badge) that we accept the trust that we ask the public to place in us, to serve them well. It is also our commitment to leave our City "greater and better than it was when it was entrusted to us." And although most members of the public don't know the specifics of our oath, they understand intuitively to what we are committing.

Unlike covenants and contracts, nothing is pledged to us in return. However, by giving our pledge freely, and by striving to adhere to it in our daily actions, in one of those wonderful ironies of life, we benefit not only the community but also ourselves, for the oath provides us a compass that guides our actions and leads us to be better people than we otherwise would be.

In the U.S., we have a strong belief in the power and worth of the individual. But it is also true that we are all dependent on each other; we cannot be successful without the support and help of many others.

We take our marriage vows in public; so too, we take our oaths of office in public. By taking this oath publicly, we also ask for others' continued support in helping us live up to the standards we espouse.