Dear Mayor,

Founded in 1934, the American Bar Association’s Young Lawyers Division (ABA YLD) serves as the voice of young lawyers across the country. I recently had a meeting with one of my mentees, Tommy Preston, who also happens to be the recently-appointed National Chair of the ABA YLD. Tommy and I discussed a quite pressing matter - the importance of getting more young attorneys civically involved in their communities.

As a person who got my start in this organization, I write to encourage you to engage young attorneys in your communities for local service. In every community, there is a need for those who are capable, energized and eager to put their abilities to work. In considering that need, there is no better example of who can be called to public service than a young attorney.

Our nation’s young attorneys have a unique set of skills. They are thinkers, trained to parse through the details of complex matters. They are problem solvers, tasked with finding creative solutions to issues that affect a wide array of people and interests. They are ethical, dedicating through oath an obligation to fairly represent those from all walks of society and the interest of others above their own. Simply put, they have the training and ability, which uniquely situates them to be great contributors to our communities.

As a mayor, you have the ability to shape local boards, where citizens have a seat at the table in addressing the complex matters faced by communities. You play a vital role in developing policy, using input from residents to help resolve issues through collaboration and problem solving. You set the tone and agenda for the community, prioritizing matters and fostering a civil discussion on how they are best handled.

Despite the confluence of skill sets and community needs, engagement on local levels by attorneys is waning. The percentage of lawyers serving in statehouses has dropped significantly over the last forty years – from 22.3% in 1976, to 14.4% in 2015. Likewise, the number of lawyers in Congress has decreased significantly over the same time period. In the middle of the nineteenth century, attorneys compromised almost 80% of Congress, a number that is now slightly less than 40%. While cynics might hail this as progress, the importance of the ability to understand the law and provide thoughtful analysis on its impact on our local communities and nation at large is vital. Evidence shows that only 5 percent of Americans consider running for office, whereas 58% of lawyers have the idea. It would be a wonderful thing to help turn those ideas into action by engaging those young attorneys in your community – whether they have had the thought or not.

I ask you to consider young attorneys for positions in your administrations, hearing boards, zoning committees and any other manner in which they can be useful. Engaging a young attorney at the outset of their career with a role serving their community will not only provide your municipality with quality representation but will also create a loyal local citizen who will devote their best to the city you both serve.

Sincerely,

Stephen K. Benjamin
Mayor, Columbia, South Carolina
President, United States Conference of Mayors