

## November-December 2007 Questions and Answers

### ***Aiming for the Top Prize***

I am a career-minded local government professional who enjoys the work associated with larger and more established communities. Is it more beneficial for my career in hopes of one day managing a larger community to wait and serve in a steady role in a current large community and seek promotion from within or to take "higher" positions in smaller communities first? Which would help me better reach my goal? *Aiming for the Top Prize*

*Dear Aiming for the Top Prize:*

If you truly enjoy the work associated with "larger and more established communities," then I would suggest that should be where you focus your effort. Doing work that you enjoy will usually lead you to other opportunities, sometimes even to opportunities you haven't yet considered.

When you refer to "wait and serve in a steady role" it sounds like you might be thinking you are stuck in a rut. I don't believe that you necessarily need to job shop to expand your professional horizons. Perhaps you can take on some new projects or ask the boss to give you more or different responsibilities. In local government work, there are infinite projects that need to be done. Take on some of those projects, even if they are not strictly within your job description. You can also build your skills resume outside of work by doing volunteer work for service organizations in your community.

Make sure you think through your goal. Is it financial, geographic, demographic? You can't take steps to achieve your goal if you haven't defined your goal. Start with envisioning where you want to be in 2, 5 or 10 years? Be as specific as you can. Once you map out the destination, you can better choose the routes to get there! ***Sue Hann***

The hardest thing in the City Manager profession is to get the title of City Manager. My advice would be to start in a small community early in your career as the manager and then work your way up in terms of working for larger communities. At that point, you can afford to take a lower salary to get the title.

If you start in a larger organization at a lower level, you have to climb the ladder and that is not easy. Perhaps someone is comfortable in the position that is the next logical step in your career path. You either have to leave and start afresh in a new organization or somehow leapfrog them. Alternatively, let's say you are successful and work your way up to the Assistant City Manager's position in the larger city. Then, after a few years, you are ready for the City Manager job. At that point, you either have to wait for the manager to leave or go out and

compete for other City Manager jobs. Let's assume you decide to go after other CM jobs. You will not want to (or be able to) go after jobs in smaller cities because you will probably be making a salary that is higher than what they can afford to pay. If you want to compete for the CM position in a larger city, you will be interviewing against people who have already been City Managers. Guess who is more likely to get the job.

Of course, there are exceptions to the rule, but on average, if you want to be a CM, get the title as quickly as possible and build your career from there. **Colin Baenziger**

Local government is not about the size of the community but effectiveness manifested in a community. When first entering municipal management, I was offered the opportunity to work in a large county government but declined to do so on the advice of a senior assistant county manager who assessed my goal of also wanting to attain a "responsible" position and work my way to the top. This proved valuable advice as I became an assistant city manager in a small community within five years of receiving the MPA. Likewise, and what I learned in taking this path is that it matters not the size of the community as the problems are the same regardless as to whether it is a small, medium or large municipality. Most important, however, is the ability to be effective wherever there is commitment to public service. One must truly enjoy serving people, changing lives, and influencing policy to even consider a career in local government. Therefore, and where one's commitment to task(s) is manifested, therein will favor elevate you in stature and respect; these two alone will direct your path in achieving the highest position in a community. **Anna Lightfoot-Ward**

I think that you will find that there is value to serving in higher positions in smaller communities then moving on to larger organizations and I also believe the reverse is true. You will gain a better understanding of their perspective with regard to issues they may face. This is particularly beneficial if you're referring to moving from a county to a city. Having worked in a large organization and now a small one, I have a good understanding of the county's perspective on issues and that helps me be more effective as a small city official. It has opened the door for a number of very successful partnerships with our county government. **Michael Pleus**

### ***Planning Ahead***

Should students aspiring to be managers be trained in a certain subject matter expertise while in school or be generalists? The trend lately in many young professionals' eyes is that while they have a Masters Degree (in Pub. Admin) they are being overlooked for advancement or opportunities because they were a Poli Sci Major or a Pub Admin Major in undergrad due to the nature of the Masters Degree. Would it be beneficial to begin suggesting to students to get an

Engineering or Accounting Degree or something along those lines prior to their work on their Masters? *Planning Ahead*

*Dear Planning Ahead:*

The path to city/county management is often circuitous. There is not one “optimum” route that everyone should take. My advice is to do what you enjoy. If that’s engineering or accounting, start there. If you prefer the more generalist approach, start there. Personally, I preferred the specialist first, generalist second approach simply because it gave me more options. I truly believe that doing what you enjoy will open up more opportunities for you than if you follow a route that is “beneficial” but not enjoyable. If you are happy in your work, you are more likely to be the type of employee who is sought out for promotion, not overlooked.

I have met city managers who are former fire chiefs, finance directors, city planners, city engineers, police chiefs, parks and recreation directors, etc. I have also met city managers who have no experience managing an operating department. Neither approach produces better managers or more promotable managers. Whatever path you take, give it your best effort and enjoy your work. Find the holes in your knowledge and skill sets and take steps towards continuous improvement.

When I’m looking for a new manager, I look for someone who has initiative, enthusiasm, strong people skills, positive outlook, problem solving skills, customer-service focus, etc. The letters behind your name rarely matter as much as your ability to show me you will be the right fit for the job in our community and organizational culture. **Sue Hann**

The first thing you have to do is be able to get a job and to do that, you need a skill to sell. A local government HR department looking at an MPA says, “Wow, great degree and we see you graduated with honors but what can you really do?” On the other hand, if you have a degree in accounting, engineering, or planning, then the HR department can immediately see a place to put you to work.

Therefore, I would advocate first focusing on a specific discipline such as engineering, accounting, or planning. Then you have something to sell. From there, then get your MPA. In terms of disciplines, planning is particularly good now because governments always have openings for planners. A budget or management analyst position is great but only large governments have those sorts of jobs and the applicant pool for those positions tends to be very competitive. **Colin Baenziger**

In the greater scheme of career planning, notice that both doctors and lawyers study the full breadth before being a doctor or before being a lawyer. Similarly, those who aspire to management in municipal government need to study the full breadth of public administration. Notwithstanding and before advancement

becomes the object, everyone in any profession must first “pay dues” to gain the knowledge base necessary to begin considering an area or areas of expertise. By understanding the rudimentary aspects of policies, procedures, regulations, etc., one develops an understanding of the separate parts that make a whole, those separate parts being applied regardless of the area of expertise. The expertise gained, however, often commenced because of a void in understanding and application, and/or fortune allowed an engagement in an area that proved interesting and opportunity, ultimately, availed. A great place to begin a career in municipal government is as a budget analyst for several departments. This placement allows one to learn process, procedure, etc. and, to the extent you prove an effective analyst, opportunity for advancement will manifest. **Anna Lightfoot-Ward**

There is tremendous value to a political science degree that I think is often times overlooked. Granted there are many of us out there, but it seems to be the path of the “undecideds” and we often times are faced with a glut of those with a political science degree trying to get jobs. But, here is what they don’t tell you. There isn’t a major out there, in my opinion, which better prepares you for the analytical and oral and written communications aspects of being a manager. These are very important skills. Further, there is an argument to make for technical degrees such as engineering, planning, or finance. However, the same argument can be made for political scientists who are stronger in theory and analysis. In the end, it boils down to the skills and experience that are needed by an individual city or county. There is one last piece of advice I have to offer and that is the power of the internship. Cities and counties need a combination of skills and experience. Make sure that you target good management internships to gain the experience you need to be a serious applicant. **Michael Pleus**

### ***Leading on Growth Management Issues***

As an aspiring Local Government Manager in Florida, I see that experience in Growth and Community Management is increasing in importance to elected officials. What suggestions can you give for an individual to acquire the experience and knowledge necessary to effectively direct that function in Local Government? What skill sets and management styles are beneficial? *Leading on Growth Management Issues*

*Dear Leading on Growth Management Issues:*

The growth management field is constantly changing. I would suggest you get connected to the professional organizations that deal with these issues in Florida such as the Florida Planning and Zoning Association and the Florida Redevelopment Association. You may also want to talk to your city/county attorney about getting connected to the legal aspects of these issues. The

Florida Department of Community Affairs web site also has a wealth of information.

Growth management and community issues are very important to citizens and to elected officials. You will need skills that will help you effectively solicit and manage public involvement. You will need to be able to facilitate dialogue among diverse interest groups. You will need excellent public speaking and written communication skills. If you don't have these types of skills, find a mentor to help you. Attend public workshops/meetings on controversial issues. Watch the meeting and take notes on what goes well, what goes badly and why. Then, find some opportunities to practice your skills on less controversial issues at first.

***Sue Hann***

Make an appointment with several Growth Management Directors near where you live and ask them. They will be able to give you both the technical requirements and the benefit of their experience. Alternatively, the American Planning Association has a branch called the American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP). Once you have a certification from them, you are ready to go, at least from the point of the theory. ***Colin Baenziger***

A great place to start might be attaining a working knowledge of F.S. 186, becoming a part of a Smart Growth Network, maintaining membership in the American Planning Association, and finally, acquiring a mentor with expertise, interest, and zeal in this area. ***Anna Lightfoot-Ward***

Gain an appreciation for the growth management function. Spend some time with your planning director or community development director. Ask them to give you the 101. Attend the technical review committee and planning board meetings and follow the decisions through to the Commission or Council. Most importantly, have conversations with those who are knowledgeable in the field. It is like learning a foreign language. So, my best advice is that you have to learn the language before you can begin to have meaningful policy discussions on the subject of growth management. As with anything in government, experience often trumps education. ***Michael Pleus***

### ***Finding It Tough to Cut***

Many entry-level aspiring managers are somehow connected to the budget process, and in so being, they are going to have to personally deal with the fall out of budget cuts caused by the Florida Legislature's Property Tax Reductions. As such, these new employees will have a challenging time making tough decisions like cutting a position or asking a person to leave, or cutting a program that a group of citizens really appreciate. What are some of the ways you have dealt with these challenges and what advice would you give as a coach to a

subordinate in your organization faced with this challenge for the first time?  
*Finding It Tough to Cut*

*Dear Finding It Tough to Cut*

The decision to make significant cuts in government programs should not be made by entry-level managers. Typically, these decisions are made after much analysis of options (are there other revenue sources, can we cut expenses elsewhere, etc.?) The decisions almost always include the elected officials and the citizens. As an entry-level manager, your approach could be to try to get as much information as possible as to the priorities of the community so that the elected officials can make an informed decision. Check in with other communities across the country. For example, I recently found a community with an interactive budget spreadsheet on their web site where citizens could make value/service/revenue choices and ultimately determine the tax rate that would achieve their desired level of service. I thought this was a great way for citizens to become aware of choices in their community.

If your responsibility is to inform those affected by budget cuts enacted by the manager and/or governing body, then you need to muster your best people skills. Losing a job is one of the most stressful situations, so make sure you are prepared both to deliver the news with empathy and to receive the various emotional responses that may come back at you. Similarly, if you are cutting community programs, be prepared for the backlash from those affected by the cuts. Make sure all of the agency staff is on the same page. You, your boss, the senior management, and the elected officials all need to be saying the same thing. Have a clear understanding of any flexibility you may have and be firm in whatever decision ultimately gets made. ***Sue Hann***

A budget analyst does not make those kinds of decisions but rather is responsible for making recommendations. The Budget Director, Finance Director, City Manager and ultimately the City Council will make the final call. Do the best job you can in terms of compiling the data and let the chips fall where they may. Remember your real job is to use the taxpayers' money efficiently and effectively, not to run a full employment program. That may sound harsh but the worst thing a local government can do is to keep people employed who are not essential to its programs. If it does, then taxpayers really can find waste. An alternative way to look at is that sometimes governments have to cut essential functions because of legislative mandates. When that happens, citizens scream because they are not getting the service they want, the legislature responds and finds a way to fix the problem. That is what happened in Colorado with the Taxpayers Bill of Rights (TABOR). Passed in 1992, it caused all kinds of problems and eventually, in 2005, the voters passed a ballot measure to loosen its restrictions. ***Colin Baenziger***

In reality the entry-level position and experience of a budget analyst requires consultation with department directors prior to any financial cuts. What you have described in your question is generally academic rather than practice.

Department directors are aware and budget instructions are provided outlining the necessity to “reduce” budgets and where a department refuses to “play” the budget director recommends specific or across the board cuts in department budgets, with the entry-level budget analyst physically removing budget items as instructed. Therefore, it is not the budget analyst per se who makes the ultimate decision to cut a budget. It is the collective effort of many and much consultation that results in departmental budget reductions. Anything short of collaboration will stunt a budget analyst’s initial steps or career in municipal government.

***Anna Lightfoot-Ward***