



PM MAGAZINE

APRIL 2007 · VOLUME 89 · NUMBER 3



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Local Government Professionals Team Up on Disaster Recovery

by Christine Shenot

For many Americans, the horrors of Hurricane Katrina have been forever distilled in the frightening media images that came out of New Orleans. The chaos that consumed the Big Easy played out in countless scenes of desperate evacuees packed into the Louisiana Superdome and the city's convention center. We saw people waving for help from rooftops where they waited to be rescued and residents traveling flooded neighborhoods in small boats, picking up stranded people including seniors, children, and the disabled.

Some also remember a sense of frustration about why—in a nation with arguably the highest standard of living on the planet—it took so long to deliver adequate food, water, and other vital resources and assistance to the victims. So many people wanted to help with more than just a check for disaster relief, but they couldn't figure out how or were unsuccessful when they tried.

For local government leaders, the latter feelings, in particular, remained poignant long after the storm. Many had resources and wanted to help, but they could find no way to quickly tie into a disaster assistance network. They knew as they watched media coverage that a disaster of this magnitude would bring huge long-term challenges. They knew that once the search and rescue missions had been completed and people were safe from immediate danger, their colleagues on the Gulf Coast would spend months just trying to begin cleanup and redevelopment.

And they knew that the task of restoring even the most mundane functions of local government would be extremely difficult.

For William Whitson, who at that time was assistant city manager in Port Orange, Florida, and now is city manager of Cairo, Georgia, the feelings stirred by news coverage of Katrina also were personal. He remembers seeing a picture in the *Pensacola News Journal* of a woman standing in what used to be downtown Long Beach, Mississippi, the city where he'd lived about a decade earlier. "I recognized, oddly enough, where she was," he said. "She was crying and there was just debris everywhere around her, and I said, 'This can't be.' It looked like something you'd see in Bangladesh."

"It really hit home," he added. "I said, 'I'm a professional. We've got to get in this fight. We can't just sit back and let this happen.'"

MANAGERS TO THE RESCUE

Whitson had a powerful ally in Port Orange City Manager Ken Parker, who'd spent years developing an informal network for disaster recovery assistance within Florida. After Whitson showed Parker the newspaper photo, the two immediately got to work building support from their mayor and city council for plans to help Long Beach. But they also looked beyond Port Orange.

They knew the job would require far more than one city's assistance, so they started talking to Lee Feldman, city manager of Palm Bay; Frank Roberts, the former city manager of New Smyrna Beach; and other Florida managers they'd worked with on disaster aid. And by September 10, less than two weeks after Katrina made landfall on the Gulf Coast, the first Florida team was on the ground in Long Beach, assessing the city's needs. With strong support from their governing bodies, this same coalition of Florida cities ended up sending dozens of staff members and some elected officials to help their counterparts in Long Beach and two other Mississippi cities.

Soon after they started working in Long Beach, they heard about Pass Christian, a nearby Mississippi town that had been completely wiped out by Katrina, and they launched a parallel effort there. Then, in the fall of 2006, the group

responded to a call for help from ICMA (International City/County Management Association) and the city of Pascagoula, Mississippi, which was struggling with longer-term recovery challenges related to everything from inspections and code enforcement to public relations.

Fannie Mae officials had been working with Pascagoula and, after discussions with city officials, realized the need for additional staff, so they contacted ICMA to consider solutions. The two organizations quickly made plans, with Fannie Mae offering to cover the cost of sending teams of Florida professionals to Pascagoula in the fall and ICMA agreeing to organize the effort by working with the Florida Municipal League and the Florida City and County Management Association.

The Florida teams ended up spending a combined total of four weeks helping their peers in Pascagoula catch up on a huge backlog of work. The list included building permits and insurance paperwork, a survey of residents about their needs, grant writing, and many other critical tasks.

The Florida response in Mississippi marked the beginning of what is fast evolving into a concerted effort to formalize the concept of coordinated disaster recovery assistance by local governments, a concept the Florida managers call recovery strike teams.

Parker, Feldman, and Roberts, who has since retired, had developed their own networks of support in the years since Hurricane Andrew devastated South Florida. They had forged strong relationships with peers in cities and counties across the state, and had done the planning to be sure that each would be prepared to respond with assistance if any of them was devastated by a hurricane or other disaster.

Whitson describes it as similar to the way things have worked for years with police and fire rescue services: local governments lend personnel and equipment to help an affected community during an emergency. Typically, they send people in rotations to help with various aspects of disaster response, and they adjust plans and assignments as needed. "We're using the same template, the same organizational approach and just applying it to the long-term recovery," he said. The help of other municipal and county staff can be vital, he added, once a community gets to long-term recovery tasks.

"You're talking about a massive, massive effort. The recovery strike teams are meant to customize or mirror the delivery of [local government] services in any community," Whitson said. "They pick up garbage and send out water bills in Iowa. Whether you do it in Mississippi or do it in Iowa doesn't make much difference. That's the beauty of the model."

Last summer, Whitson and Parker took steps toward formalizing a local government role in recovery assistance when they briefed former governor Jeb Bush on their work in Long Beach and Pass Christian. Bush was impressed enough with the idea that he encouraged them to move forward in establishing teams across the state and finding a way to incorporate them in Florida's emergency management system. Last fall, Whitson, who became city manager of Cairo, Georgia, in January, worked with Parker, Feldman, and others to set up the first teams in some of Florida's emergency response districts. In addition to designating team leaders and coordinators for each of four district strike teams, they have identified a state coordinator who would work out of the state's emergency operations center.

Parker said they hope to have the strike team system ready to be tested when Florida carries out its annual exercise of emergency planning in the spring. Along with ensuring that the teams are trained and ready to deploy, their goal is to establish teams in the remaining emergency districts as soon as possible and ensure that all of the necessary information is available.

"We want the system to be so transparent that people at the state level will know that these resources are there," Parker said of the strike team concept and any effort to build a national model. "They could be moving within hours, instead of days."

The Florida group got the chance to put their concept to a real test in 2004, when the state was hit by four hurricanes. But it wasn't until Katrina that they were able to see how well it might work across state lines. Building on what they've learned, these local government managers now are working with the state to formally establish a network of recovery strike teams in different regions of Florida. And they're exploring the prospects for starting something similar on a national level.

"This is where we should be going," Parker said of the strike team concept, adding that it could be expanded into a national model. The most important thing the Florida teams learned from Katrina, he noted, was the urgency of creating such networks. "It has moved us from just talk to action," he said. "We were doing it in an informal manner here in Florida, but it was largely based on personal relationships. What we've found is that it's time to go beyond that."

THE CHALLENGES OF LONG-TERM RECOVERY

In August 2006, Pascagoula City Manager Kay Kell was working with Fannie Mae and other groups to try to jump-start the redevelopment of housing a full year after Katrina, and she kept coming back to one inescapable truth. "The more we talked, it came out that what we needed were people," she said.

Lessons Learned in Mississippi

Most local government professionals in Florida know the disaster drill. They have tracked hurricanes headed toward the Sunshine State, and many have had to prepare their communities for a potential landfall. Some have had to lead hurricane cleanup and recovery as well.

But whatever their level of experience at home, those who traveled to Mississippi to help their peers after Hurricane Katrina talked about how much they learned. In addition to practical lessons on how to better prepare for disaster and recovery, many brought back personal

Staff members were exhausted after spending months working 12- and 15-hour days trying to get Pascagoula's cleanup and recovery under way; in addition, many were bouncing between the trailers that served as their offices and those that provided temporary housing. After Katrina, 95 percent of the city had been under water, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had brought in 6,300 mobile homes.

"At that point we were just so incredibly stressed," Kell said. They kept hearing that there was money to pay for the work that had to be done, and her staff felt the need to move quickly. "We had this guilt that if we didn't do it all right now, while the money was available, the city would suffer."

Fannie Mae had been working with ICMA on various efforts to support local governments in neighborhood revitalization, and responding to Pascagoula's recovery needs emerged as an excellent opportunity for a partnership. The two organizations launched a pilot peer professional/loaned-executive program in Pascagoula that, like the strike team concept, was designed to recruit and direct local government professionals to assist their peers in cities recovering from a disaster. The idea was to supplement staff resources with professionals from unaffected areas who could help address many of the needs that follow the initial response to a disaster during the long-term recovery process.

The program was built on the network concept promoted in an ICMA policy paper titled "A Networked Approach to Improvements in Emergency Management," which is available online at <http://icma.org/main/ld.asp?ldid=20120>. The white paper was developed in 2006 after ICMA's Executive Board called for the organization to play a leadership role on local emergency management.

For Fannie Mae, which promotes home ownership nationwide and has been active in advancing rebuilding efforts along the Gulf Coast, the idea of bringing the Florida strike teams in to help their peers in Pascagoula made sense.

Fannie Mae had worked with Pascagoula and two nonprofit organizations—NeighborWorks America and Dependable Affordable Sustainable Homes (DASH)-La Grange—on plans to build more than 300 new homes elevated above street level to replace homes that had been destroyed in the Chipley neighborhood in south Pascagoula. But the city was struggling to catch up with demolitions, cleanup, and inspections in the aftermath of Katrina. At one point, Pascagoula was issuing more than 10 times as many building permits as it had prior to the storm. All told, the city issued more than 7,500 permits after Katrina.

By bringing in teams of local government professionals who were fresh and knew what had to be done in the hurricane recovery process, Kell hoped to help Pascagoula's city staff get caught up so that they could assemble a realistic to-do list. "I kept saying we needed brains, people who can help us think," Kell said. "That's where this concept came from—people who understood what we had to do and could think clearly."

Fannie Mae officials immediately jumped on the idea, working with ICMA to support the concept with a financial grant to ICMA to cover the Florida teams' travel expenses. "This project demonstrates how local governments and the private sector can work together in support of community recovery and redevelopment, including housing and business development," said Bill Brown, regional director of the Gulf Coast initiatives for Fannie Mae.

Nine cities and Bay County ultimately sent local government professionals from Florida to Pascagoula. The key to their effectiveness was their spirit of teamwork, said Carol Westmoreland, of the Florida League of Cities. "It was a real people-to-people, very practical effort. They didn't build a lot into the system that wasn't essential."

In addition to helping the city with building inspections, Kell said the Florida staff identified \$400,000 to \$600,000 in additional federal and state reimbursements due to the city. They also helped develop and publicize a citizens' needs survey and helped Pascagoula put the finishing touches on a presentation about redevelopment opportunities for an Urban Land Institute conference last fall that attracted developers from across the country.

The most significant contribution came in the realm of inspections, permitting, and code enforcement. Steve Mitchell,

insights and a different way of thinking about it.

Mary Schultz, the emergency preparedness coordinator in Palm Bay, gained a sense of urgency to spread the word about Florida's strike team concept, in which teams of city and county staff rotate through a disaster-stricken community to help restore the functions of local government. Schultz, who went to Mississippi shortly after Katrina hit and again a year later, points to the unique needs that local government professionals can help fill. She'd like to see funding to develop training for regional teams to provide long-term recovery assistance. "I see it as an incredible tool," she said. "If we can develop this, it should be expanded on a national level."

RECURRING THEMES

For building a code enforcement officials, the time spent in Mississippi confirmed the importance of moving fast on damage assessment and inspections. With any disaster, people will quickly try to restore their homes, despite any risks with electrical wiring, mold, or other potential problems. "Folks will start to do repairs and some of the necessary work, whether the city is there to permit it or not," observed Nestor Abreu, the building and code administration director in Palm Coast, Florida, who spent time in Pass Christian, Mississippi, after that town was leveled by Katrina.

Information technology professionals found they had to think about their work quite differently. "You really can't rely on computers," noted James Majcen, who went to Pass Christian from Palm Coast immediately after Katrina and helped develop a GIS tracking system. "When you get to that level of devastation, you need the traditional pen and paper, and a strategy that does not rely on electricity."

Majcen and his colleagues built an application that allowed field inspectors to record damage in specific locations on paper and then map the damage by linking the inspection sheets with a GIS system. They came to see the value of having pre-printed forms that can be used to make some progress while computers are down.

Joan Dunn, who works in the finance department in Palm Coast, saw a worst-case scenario in Pass Christian. She remembers municipal staff members trying to fill out Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) paperwork. Most of them had lost everything and city hall had been destroyed. "I don't know how they were functioning," she said.

Dunn recalls one staff member going through a paper bag full of mostly hand-written forms, trying to pull together payroll information. "It took my breath away to see her sitting there struggling and trying to get her coworkers paid," she said. When Dunn returned to Palm Coast, she met with her boss to talk about the records for which they needed to have backup copies, and how and where to store everything.

The importance of good recordkeeping was a recurring theme. Matt Efid, the risk manager in Deland, Florida, traveled to Pascagoula, Mississippi, to perform insurance audits. He combed through pictures, estimates, purchase orders, and other records to determine if the city was eligible for additional reimbursement. Fortunately, he found everything he needed. "Paperwork is everything. If it's not written down, it didn't happen," he said. "They were very meticulous about their paperwork. That made everything a lot easier."

Keith DeWise, of Pensacola, went twice to Mississippi. First, he went as a police officer immediately after Katrina hit. And last fall, having changed jobs to work in code enforcement, he went to Pascagoula to help with later-stage recovery needs. While the two trips were different—the first time, he had to sleep in his police cruiser—he learned the same lesson in both cases. "The value of teamwork," he said. "That's the biggest thing. No matter how big or small a project, if everybody pitches in, it goes so much easier."

William Whitson, the former assistant city manager in Port Orange, Florida, who is now the city manager in Cairo, Georgia, echoes that message. He wasn't surprised to hear about local government professionals in Mississippi saying they'll gladly volunteer to provide disaster recovery assistance elsewhere when it's needed. "Come crunch time, we're there for each other," he said. "If there's anything I've learned, that's what it is—we have to be there for each other."

who is Pascagoula's building official and last year was named director of planning and zoning, said his crew showed up within two days of the storm, and they immediately fanned out to start assessing damage. Once they'd finished the preliminary inspections, they had to do more in-depth assessments in heavily flooded areas to determine which structures would have to be raised, moved, or demolished. The more detailed damage assessments were required by the national flood insurance program.

In the end, there were about 1,200 structures that needed more careful damage assessments before any permits could be issued for repairs. At that point, the city was issuing some 130 to 140 permits a day, Mitchell said, compared with a pre-Katrina norm of about eight to 10 a day. In the code enforcement area, his team also had to inspect about 460 swimming pools that, because they had been left untended for months, had become breeding grounds for mosquitoes.

"We knew that if we could make it over the hump, we would be in relatively good shape and could even things out. But we just could not get over the hump," he said.

Everything changed when code enforcement staff and building inspectors started arriving from Florida. "They knew what they were looking for. All I had to do was point them in the right direction," Mitchell said. "When you can bring somebody in here who knows what they're doing and you don't have to hold their hand, it makes all the difference in the world."

Although Pascagoula had the extra help in the building department for only a couple of weeks, it enabled Mitchell and his team to get back to a manageable level of activity. By the end of 2006, they were down to about 35 to 50 permits a day, mostly for new construction. "We're busy, no doubt about it, but it's a routine that we can live with," he said.

PART OF THE FAMILY

Harrietta Eaton, Pascagoula's director of administration, describes other ways in which Florida strike team members helped the city address long-term recovery needs. Debbie Majors, from Boynton Beach, Florida, helped the community development department with grant applications, and Yvonne Martinez, the public information officer in Palm Bay, Florida, shot video to create a short documentary after hearing that many in Pascagoula felt that their city had been overshadowed by New Orleans.

"They fit right in. I felt like they were part of the Pascagoula family," Eaton said of the Florida team members. "They kind of pushed their sleeves up, looked around, and said 'What do you need our help with?' They were so enthusiastic."

Some ended up working on tasks well outside their job description. Mary Schultz is the emergency preparedness coordinator in Palm Bay. She'd worked in Long Beach a few weeks after Katrina hit, and then went to Pascagoula to help that city a year later. In Pascagoula, she served as a public information officer, helping the city develop a survey to determine residents' needs and recommending that it be sent out with utility bills to be sure people got it. In the end, Eaton said, the city got about 2,000 responses, some of which included detailed feedback on Pascagoula's rebuilding and economic development plans.

Today, some of those plans are coming to fruition. In early January, the city held a press conference at a 26-acre site that is being demolished for future development. The city has entered into an agreement to purchase the property, with plans for a community center and a senior activity center. Pascagoula officials hope the site will attract commercial development as well, and revitalize what had been a blighted area.

"We feel like we've gotten beyond recovery, and we're starting to rebuild," said Laura McCool, Pascagoula's human resources director. McCool was one of those who found nothing but a slab and some steps when she checked on her beachfront home a day after Katrina tore up the city, but she was at work the next day arranging office space in four trailers for about 55 municipal employees, including herself, who needed a place to work. "Without the help that we received after the storm, we would still be in recovery mode. It would just take that much longer," she said. "The network is vital. I think it's just a vital thing that all cities should have."

While Pascagoula officials credit the Florida teams for getting them to the turning point, the Florida professionals all insist that the time they spent in Mississippi provided an invaluable learning experience. "I'll tell you, the folks who went out there, I think it was some of the best training they have ever had," said Oel Wingo, assistant city manager in Palm Coast, Florida, who spent a few weeks in Pass Christian and had a number of staff members travel there and to Long Beach and Pascagoula to help with computers, financial and FEMA paperwork, utilities, and building inspections. The lessons spanned everything from the importance of how and where to keep copies of financial records to the value—and limitations—of GIS and other computer-based tools.

"I brought back a lot," Schultz agreed. "I cannot thank those cities enough for allowing me to come in and do this. I've learned a tremendous amount. As much assistance as we may have provided them, it came back 10-fold."

One of the more important lessons for the Florida professionals was that local governments have to be prepared to fend for themselves for several days or more after a disaster. "Every area of the country is susceptible to something," added Feldman, the city manager in Palm Bay. He listed earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, wildfires, and terrorist attacks as events that have devastated U.S. communities in recent years. Two months ago, central Florida was hit by deadly tornadoes. "We all have the chance of having to respond in an emergency mode sometime during our

careers," he said. "We have to build that into our organizations, or we're not doing our jobs."

The Pascagoula-ICMA-Fannie Mae collaborative was designed to advance that goal. The pilot initiative began to explore the organization of local government, nonprofit sector, and private sector networks for emergency preparedness, response, and recovery. ICMA and Fannie Mae are now assessing the results and considering ways to expand the pilot to include additional Gulf Coast communities as well as local government and private sector partners.

"This is an excellent example of how people from different organizations can come together for a common purpose and make a significant impact in a short amount of time," said Mosi Kitwana, director of ICMA Results Networks, which provides technical assistance and other services to local governments.

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FEATURE

Ethics

THE MANAGER'S NAME APPEARS IN CAMPAIGN MATERIALS

Q. A candidate for the board of selectmen campaigned on a platform to strengthen the role of the town administrator. In doing so, the candidate named the town administrator, which made the town administrator uncomfortable. There had been no discussions at town meetings about charter changes, a fact that led the town administrator to speculate that the candidate used her name and reputation as a ploy to try to garner more votes in the most recent election.

The town administrator has worked for the community for more than 20 years, and she has established a reputation for integrity and political neutrality. The candidate lost his bid for election, and the town administrator wanted advice on what to do to set the record straight and restore her reputation.

A. The town administrator can use this experience as a way to educate the town council and the public in general on the ICMA Code of Ethics. By explaining the reasons why she objected to the campaign reference, the town administrator can reinforce the value of political neutrality and the importance that the profession places on serving members of the governing body equally and impartially.

She also may want to write to the candidate to advise him not to use her picture or name in future campaign materials because that could create the appearance of an endorsement, which is prohibited by the ICMA Code of Ethics.

THE FREE TRUCK

Q. The county's fire chief recently returned from a convention, excited that he had won a pickup truck in an exhibit-hall drawing. The county paid for his trip to the convention but has no policy that addresses what employees should do if they win a prize like this. The fire chief points out that other employees have won prizes at conferences, although he admits that the truck is the biggest prize anyone has brought home.

County employees are not allowed to solicit or accept any gift that might influence them in their official duties. No one asked the chief for a favor; this was a random drawing. The county administrator concluded that the fire chief may keep the truck but is uneasy about it and asked for advice.

A. Although it was a government-paid trip, the drawing was random and does not come with any strings attached. Absent a policy that addresses the issue or a state law that governs the receipt of such gifts, the employee has to make the decision about keeping the truck or donating it to the county. The random drawing cannot be viewed as a reward for any action by the fire chief beyond dropping his business card into the container for the drawing.

Ethics advice is a popular service provided to ICMA members. The ICMA Executive Board members who serve on the Committee on Professional Conduct review the inquiries and advice published in PM magazine. ICMA members who have questions about their obligations under the ICMA Code of Ethics are encouraged to call Martha Perego at 202/962-3668 or Elizabeth Kellar at 202/962-3611.

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DEPARTMENTS

On Retirement

Tax-Time Savings

It is tax season again. And if you're like me, you probably prepare for April 15 with some trepidation. In the days ahead, I will gather up all my records, sit down with a calculator, and settle accounts with the Internal Revenue Service.

It's also a time when I check to see if I am up to date on all the ways that the government offers to reduce my tax obligation. After all, many tax incentives are intended to encourage positive behavior. I want to take full advantage of any tax-saving opportunities the government considers not only good for me, but also good social policy.

At the top of my list is the opportunity to save for retirement on a tax-advantaged basis, which not only saves taxpayers money on their tax bills, but also has the positive reward of reducing the public's reliance on government support for a secure, and hopefully comfortable, retirement.

Individual retirement accounts (IRA) offer tax deferrals and in some cases, deductions. And IRAs are one of the few savings tools that give you until April 15, 2007, to take advantage of these plans for your 2006 tax return. The limit for your IRA contribution is \$4,000 this year and \$5,000 if you are over the age of 50.

There are two types of IRA plans, and the decision of which plan is best for you depends on a number of circumstances that you and your tax counselor should consider. Contributions to a traditional IRA may or may not be tax deductible, depending on your income and pension plan situation. Account earnings accumulate tax deferred, and withdrawals of deductible contributions and account earnings are taxable. Until you reach age 59½, withdrawals from a traditional IRA are generally subject to a 10 percent penalty in addition to income tax, although there are several penalty exceptions.

A Roth IRA is different in that contributions are not tax deductible, but the account offers the potential for tax-free investment growth. To receive tax-free distributions of investment earnings from a Roth IRA, at least five years must have passed since the year of your first Roth contribution and you must be at least 59½, disabled, or paying first-time home-buying expenses (\$10,000 lifetime cap).

Another difference: Higher income taxpayers may not contribute to a Roth IRA. The estimated 2007 adjusted gross income phase-out ranges for Roth contributions are: \$99,000–\$114,000, for unmarried taxpayers; and \$156,000–\$166,000, married taxpayers filing jointly.

As long as we're talking taxes, you should consider the possibilities of converting your traditional IRA to a Roth IRA, if you are eligible. The real advantages of paying taxes up front on your IRA is that you don't have to take Roth distributions until after you reach 70½, so you can benefit from years of tax-free investment growth.

To be eligible for a Roth IRA conversion, your modified adjusted gross income, not including the amount reported as a result of the conversion and any required minimum distributions, has to be \$100,000 or less, and you must file a joint return if you are married. Starting in 2010, however, these restrictions no longer apply.

In the public sector, state and local employees also have the opportunity to save in their employer-sponsored 457 deferred compensation programs. Some employers have even incorporated IRAs right into—or alongside—their 457 plans to make it convenient for employees.

With the recently passed Pension Protection Act, these 457 plans now have permanent provisions that allow up to \$15,000 in pre-tax contributions and up to another \$5,000 for those over age 50. In addition, there are special catch-up provisions for those within three years of their normal retirement age.

In 457 plans and defined contribution plans (if offered by your employer), contributions are taken from your paycheck pre-tax, so you won't owe taxes on these contributions or related plan earnings, until you take a distribution. While it is too late to take advantage of these provisions for the 2006 tax year, make sure you contribute the largest amount possible for 2007.

You should also consider your tax consequences if you are in a position to leave your employer and decide to receive a distribution from the plan. It's important to keep your nest egg intact and continue to defer income taxes by maintaining your account with your current employer, if that's available; rolling the payout over to an IRA; or carrying it to your new employer's plan, if that option is available. This is an important matter, because handling the distribution incorrectly could create severe tax consequences in the years ahead.

It's also important from a retirement security point of view to resist the temptation of taking distributions upon leaving an employer. You have planned wisely by building an account and preparing for retirement, and you should continue that good practice right up until the time you need the funds for retirement.

So, as April 15, 2007, approaches, I remain cognizant of what I can still do to reduce my 2006 taxes, and mindful of how I can start reducing my 2007 taxes as well. It's something you may want to keep in mind too.

—Joan McCallen
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PM MAGAZINE

APRIL 2007 · VOLUME 89 · NUMBER 3

DEPARTMENTS

Profile

Lakewood's Legendary Manager



Howard Chambers is the city manager of Lakewood, California.

Howard L. Chambers is a phenomenon in his profession. Enduring in a job in which the average longevity in a city is seven years, Chambers has lasted three decades, through political upheaval, hard fiscal times, and several rounds of new city councilmembers.

For Chambers, loyalty to city hall and the community is what has kept him at the helm of Lakewood, California, for so long. "It's not anything else than serving the people," he said at his office. "There are disagreements at how you do that and what the priorities are, but they (the councilmembers) care about the community. They support the staff. We're not whipping posts."

In some cities, there is a constant turnover of key staffers, Chambers said. "They (councilmembers) can hardly wait to fire somebody," he said. "They can hardly wait to hire somebody so they can fire somebody. Or the staff could do no good at all, or they're berated. It doesn't work that way here. It is as close to a team situation as you can get."

Area officials honored Chambers, who currently is believed to be the longest serving city manager for a single city in California. "Thirty years is unheard of in this profession," said Pat West, Long Beach's director of community development and a former Paramount city manager for 11 years. "He's a rock in this region to be able to guide (Lakewood) for 30 years and position it to be one of the key communities in Los Angeles County."

Sometimes, a city manager's departure is for personal growth, an entry into taking charge of a larger city. Oftentimes, the exodus is political, a fate sealed with a majority vote by an unhappy council. "Politicians," said retired Lakewood City Attorney John Sanford Todd, "When things don't go right, they have to blame someone and the first guy they go after is the city manager."

By comparison, Long Beach has seen four city managers in the 30 years Chambers has led Lakewood. In cities such as Lakewood, city councils can hire and fire their city managers. Similar to a company's chief executive officer, a city manager is responsible for the conduct of the city's functions and directs the work of city staff members.

"His employees are extremely loyal to him and his leadership," said Mayor Larry Van Nostran. "I've talked to him at 6 in

the morning and he's at his office. He's there at night. He's got a real handle on the pulse of this city."

A LAKEWOOD LIFE

Chambers' ties to Lakewood are lifelong. He grew up not far from Mayfair Park and worked at the YMCA. A park director encouraged him to become a recreation leader, a path that led him to become a park director and a fixture at city hall.

After befriending the city administrator at the time, Chambers showed an interest in public administration and began taking classes at Cal State Long Beach. After earning his degree, Chambers interned at Lakewood for two years, handling youth services. He then went to work for the city of Rosemead as an assistant city manager.

In 1972, Chambers returned to Lakewood, securing the post of executive assistant to then-City Manager Milton Farrell. The political climate at the time was contentious. Councilmembers were at odds with staff members, who were overwhelmed with demands for reports on various items—some aimed at other councilmembers.

Chambers was installed as acting city administrator in 1976 after a council majority fired Farrell. "It was a very chaotic time," Chambers said. "The key was trying to keep the organization together, keep these services provided."

Many—including Chambers—were shocked when the council voted unanimously to permanently hire Chambers, one of the few 5-0 votes at the time. "I was surprised, particularly because I was pretty much led to believe that they were seeking somebody outside of the city, an experienced city manager at the time," Chambers said. "It was kind of sprung on me."

As city manager, Chambers continued to ride through the political storm. Budget cuts were imminent. Three newly selected councilmembers demanded change and city workers threatened to strike. "Everything happened," Chambers said. "Yeah, I knew I was in trouble when I looked out my window and saw the mayor in the picket line with the employees. I knew that was not going to be an easy thing to overcome."

The confidence to prevail was what got Chambers through the difficult time. "The city of Lakewood had a great reputation until that point in time," he said. "At the time, we were the laughing stock of the cities around us. You would attend functions and people would say, 'Glad you're in the *Press-Telegram* and not us.' And some of the stuff was just crazy stuff. "I felt we had a great community and staff. Things would click if we could just hold it together."

The political tide eventually turned and Chambers was allowed to focus on community improvement. Under his leadership, the city developed the civic center, the Weingart Senior Center, the renovations of the John Sanford Todd Community Center and Mayfair Park, The Centre at Sycamore Plaza, Rynerson Park, and the expansion and modernization of the Lakewood sheriff's station.

Chambers said he takes pride in presenting balanced budgets, managing to keep park programs going, and maintaining streets and other infrastructure in times of recession.

BUILDING TIES

Among his peers, Chambers is considered a legend in the profession and is known for his ability to form working relationships with city staffers, civic leaders, and state legislators.

"When I first became a city manager, I tried and tried to arrange meetings with our state legislators, only to be told that they were unavailable because they were meeting with Howard Chambers of Lakewood," said Bellflower City Manager Michael Egan, who has served nine years as city manager.

"So when then-Assemblywoman Sally Havice rented space right here at Bellflower city hall, I thought I had a sure thing," Egan said. "First day early in the morning, I walked into her office and guess who's sitting in there with her? Howard!"

Also known for his "teachable moments," Chambers has become a mentor and teacher to new city managers. "He's one of the really nice people of the profession," West said. "I can say this coming up as a director at 26 years old. Howard was already city manager when I was the director of parks and recreation (in Paramount), and Howard reached out at meetings. He mentored you, talked to you. . . . Not every city manager reaches out to the young folk like that, and Howard would do that."

In presentations, Chambers entertains, oftentimes using a prop to convey his point. Among the books on his office shelf was the curious tome "written" by Chambers: "How to Be a City Manager for Dummies."

"They (visitors) just hoot," Chambers said, laughing as he grasped the mock cover wrapped around a children's book.

THE FUTURE

"It doesn't seem like 30 years," Chambers said. "I really enjoy what I do. I'll probably be carried out with my boots on. I don't know what I would do in retirement."

Chambers, whose contract runs through December 2010, hopes to celebrate 40 years as a city manager in 2016. "It's a great city," he said. "It is probably the greatest city manager job in the state of California, and a good part of it is the community itself. This community, they demand good city services. They let us know when we don't do that.

"But the other thing about this community is that they respect the job you do and thank you for the job you do."

—Karen Robes
Staff Writer
Press-Telegram
Lakewood, California

Reprinted with permission from the October 7, 2006, issue of the *Press-Telegram*, Lakewood, California.

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Director's Desk

CONSISTENT MESSAGES DRIVE POWERFUL IMAGE FOR ICMA AND THE PROFESSION

When we launched our brand revitalization process last year [see June 2006 issue of *Public Management (PM)* magazine], we discussed how ICMA's outreach could become significantly more effective by developing and promoting a set of consistent messages about the organization and the profession.

In last month's *PM*, the article "How Professionals Can Add Value to Their Communities and Organizations" featured the unique value proposition that professional local government management delivers to communities throughout the world. This value—and the practices that support it—now make up five key messages, including an overarching message about the organization, that ICMA will "push out" to such important stakeholders as the media, elected officials, and funding organizations during the coming months.

To strengthen the organization's overall communication effort, we invite you to incorporate these messages into your presentations at public forums and other meetings and to add personal examples whenever possible to bring each key message to life. The high-level messages are summarized below. Supporting points for each message are available at <http://icma.org/keymessages>. Feel free to share your thoughts about these messages and supporting points with me at roneill@icma.org.

OVERARCHING MESSAGE

ICMA creates excellence in local governance by developing and fostering professional local government management worldwide. ICMA is the premier local government leadership and management organization. We reach thousands of local, county, and state government managers and other employees; academics; consultants; citizens and other individuals through our data and information, peer and technical assistance, and training and professional development.

KEY MESSAGE #1

Under the "Value Proposition of Professional Management," highly trained, appropriately educated, and experienced local government managers share a set of values, skills, and practices which (combined with strong political leadership and policy development; a relentless focus on execution and results; a commitment to transparent, accountable, and ethical government; and a strategy for representing, including, and engaging every segment of the community) lead to the success and high quality of life of the communities they serve. To ensure the continued growth of professional management, local governments must identify, recruit, develop, and inspire the next generation of professional managers.

KEY MESSAGE #2

Local governments must innovate to effectively address emerging and persistent issues facing their communities. Worldwide, innovative local governments are setting standards in service delivery, providing examples for other communities and creating momentum for economic development.

KEY MESSAGE #3

Performance measurement is the only way to *know* that a local government is high performing. It helps local governments make decisions, set targets, identify best practices, and communicate verified improvements to citizens.

KEY MESSAGE #4

Local governments are the stewards of local and global sustainability, that is, creating communities that reduce and balance the negative impact on the environment and the use of natural resources while also improving human livability. The core elements of sustainability are environmental stewardship, economic development, social equity, and

financial viability.

—Robert O’Neill
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