

CALL FOR RESEARCH PROPOSALS

Structure, Form, and Ethics: The Future of Professional Local Government

Timeline

- Call for Proposals opens: January 21, 2026
- Proposals due: March 3, 2026
- Researchers selected and notified: April 6, 2026
- Papers due: January 15, 2027
- Practitioner response due: May 1, 2027
- Symposium: August 17 - 19, 2027

Concept and Purpose:

Advancing Professional Local Government in the Modern Era

During the 2025 International City/County Management Association (ICMA) conference in Tampa, Florida, Dr. John Nalbandian, Professor Emeritus at the University of Kansas, reminded the audience that the concept of ethics is linked not just to the principles of ethical leadership embodied in the ICMA Code of Ethics, but to the structure of the form of government itself.

Dr. Nalbandian referenced Samuel Haber's publication *Efficiency and Uplift: Scientific Management in the Progressive Era, 1890 - 1920* that asserted that "in no time in our history has efficiency and morality been connected more than in the early part of the 20th century." The reference to the Progressive Era of American Politics is linked to Frederick Taylor's Scientific Management movement that championed a clear division of responsibility between planning and execution, standardization and rational processes, and the centralization of responsibility. These concepts were integrated into the Lockport Plan, introduced by Richard Childs in New York in 1911, adopted by a vote of the people in Sumter, South Carolina in 1912 and memorialized in the original Model Charter adopted by the National Civic League in 1915.

Reflecting on Dr. Nalbandian's statement, and 115 years of evolution since the Lockport Plan was formulated leads to a question: ***If we conceived of professional local government today, what structural elements would we put in place to support ethical leadership and professionalism in local government?***

To attempt to answer this question, and advance the continued evolution of professional local government, ICMA is issuing this Call for Research Proposals. Researchers will be awarded \$20,000 grants for research-based white papers that identify how we can further institutionalize

professionalism in local governments. The research will be complemented by a practitioner's response and a symposium held to consider and discuss these critical questions.

As local governments face new ethical and structural challenges in the modern era, this initiative seeks to identify actions to guide future reforms. This research offers an opportunity for scholars to influence the structure of local governments nationally and globally.

Call for Research Proposals

ICMA will commission a limited number of research papers that seek to identify structural components essential to professional management and ethical leadership in local government today and into the future. Submitters are encouraged to submit other ideas that align with the central question of this initiative: *If we conceived of professional local government today, what structural elements would we put in place to support ethical leadership and professionalism in local government?* Scholars are invited to share their research and identify critical elements for professional local government that would be adaptable to global contexts.

Illustrative Research Questions

- What has history taught us?
- Where has professionalism in local government thrived, and why?
- What structural components contribute to professional and ethical leadership?
- What structural components contribute to corruption and inefficiency?
- What structural elements can best adapt to contemporary challenges?
- What structural components provide an effective framework for accountability and community engagement?
- What structural elements encourage the collaboration necessary for effective partnerships at the local level?
- How can the evolution of organizational design theory inform us as we look to support professionalism in local government?
- How are evolving technologies impacting the underlying form and structure of local communities?
- Are there contextual distinctions that must be made in different types of local governments, e.g., cities, counties, towns, townships, boroughs, etc.?
- What concepts can be learned from, and are adaptable to, a global context?

August 2027 Symposium

The original research will be shared with a practitioner and discussed at a Symposium on Structure, Form and Ethics – the Future of Professional Local Government, to be held in August of 2027.

Grantees will be expected to attend the symposium and share their research. Grantees should be prepared to pay for their travel expenses from the grant amount awarded by ICMA or from other sources available to them. ICMA does not anticipate awarding additional funding for this expense.

Expected Deliverables

ICMA anticipates that funding will be used to produce original research. The final deliverable should include all text and citations in a single file not exceeding 50 double spaced pages. Additional tables, graphics, charts, images, etc., may be submitted in separate files. The research papers, practitioner responses and symposium proceedings will become the property of ICMA. ICMA will retain the rights to publish the finished work.

Proposal Requirements

This project is intended to further scholarly research from established researchers. ICMA is looking for collaborative efforts that constructively engage graduate students interested in professional local government and organizational design. However, this project is not intended to fund research for capstones or dissertations from current students of public administration.

Full submissions must include a cover page, description of the proposed research, expected innovations, impacts on the field of professional local government, and bios of key researchers. Proposals should be no longer than 8 pages, **not including appendices**, using at minimum an 11pt font and $\frac{1}{2}$ inch margins on each page. Please combine proposals, including the appendix, as a single PDF file.

Cover Page (1 page)

On a **single page** please include the title and brief abstract of your proposed research; and the name, title, organizational affiliation, and contact information for the proposed principal investigator (PI). During the proposal stage ICMA will communicate directly with the proposed PI.

Research Description (4 pages)

In **four pages or less**, provide a clear and concise overview of your proposed research project. Please address the following elements in this section of your proposal

- **Research Premise and Objectives:** Clearly state the central question or hypothesis your research will address and outline the specific objectives you aim to achieve.
- **Significance and Relevance:** Explain how your research relates to the advancement of professional local government, ethical leadership, and organizational structure.

- **Context and Background:** Situate your research within the broader context of existing scholarship and practice. Reference relevant historical developments, current challenges, and any gaps your research seeks to fill.

Innovation and Impact (1 page)

On a **single page**, describe the anticipated results of your research and how these outcomes will contribute to the body of knowledge on professional local government management. Describe how your research will help guide any future reforms that may be necessary for professional local government in the United States and if relevant other parts of the world.

Biographical Sketch(es) (2 pages)

Each proposal must include a biographical sketch for the PI and any key team members. Bios should provide a summary of a person's research background, current institutional affiliation, relevant professional experience, and areas of expertise. Please include information on previous research projects, publications, and any experience related to local government, ethics, or organizational design. Highlight any awards, recognitions, or leadership roles that demonstrate your qualifications to undertake this research. **This entire section should be no longer than two pages.**

Appendices

You may submit additional information as an appendix to your proposal including resumes and CVs. Appendix information is not included the total page count.

Evaluation Criteria

- Research Description - 50%
- Impact and Innovation - 20%
- Qualifications of Researcher(s) - 30%

Submission Instructions

Please submit your full proposal as a single PDF file attachment to workwithus@icma.org while also copying Sarah Berkowitz (sberkowitz@icma.org) and Tad McGalliard (tmcgalliard@icma.org). Proposals must be submitted by 11:59pm ET on March 3, 2026.

Questions

Please contact Tad McGalliard, ICMA's managing director for innovation and research at tmcgalliard@icma.org. ICMA may schedule a webinar in early February to provide additional information about the RFP.

Additional Administrative Terms and Conditions

This solicitation in no way obligates ICMA to award a grant nor does it commit ICMA to pay any cost incurred in the preparation and submission of a proposal. ICMA bears no responsibility for data errors resulting from transmission or conversion processes.

Proposal Submission

Late proposals will not be accepted. Faxed proposals will not be accepted. Proposals will not be accepted at any other ICMA location other than the email address above. ICMA takes no responsibility for effective delivery of the electronic document.

Grants

ICMA anticipates issuing more than one grant under this solicitation. It may award a grant based on initial applications without discussion or following limited discussion or negotiations. ICMA may request additional data or material to support applications.

Limitation

This solicitation does not commit ICMA to award a grant, pay any costs incurred in preparing a proposal, or to procure or contract for services or supplies. ICMA reserves the right to accept or reject any or all proposals received, to negotiate with all qualified sources, or to cancel in part or in its entirety the solicitation when it is in ICMA's best interest.

Disclosure Requirement

The Respondent shall disclose any indictment for any alleged felony, or any conviction for a felony within the past five years, under the laws of the United States or any state or territory of the United States and shall describe circumstances for each. If an indictment or conviction should come to the attention of ICMA after the award of a contract, ICMA may exercise its stop-work right pending further investigation or terminate the grant.

No Gifts

It is ICMA's policy that no gifts of any kind and of any value be exchanged between respondents and ICMA personnel. Discovery will disqualify Respondent from participation in this procurement and may result in disciplinary actions against ICMA personnel.