

- Steve Harding



No Single Path (Either To or From the Profession)

When Frank Benest asked me if I was interested in writing an “Encore” vignette for CAL-ICMA, I said “I would be happy to”. Hum—easier said than done. You see it is the word “Encore” that is difficult to interpret; at least for me. Certainly I understand the definition. In my case, it is the frequency that is hard to explain.

Like some of us, my path to the City Manager’s office had been somewhat unconventional. With my B.A. in Political Science in hand, I went right out and became a regional sales rep for Colgate Palmolive. You can clearly see the connection between the degree and the profession of selling toothpaste, razor blades and shaving cream. For some reason driving the company’s 1972 Chevy Impala and visiting every town in southern Arizona got real old, real fast. Undaunted, I went from selling personal care products to real estate. That was in 1974, when we were experiencing a global recession, the energy crisis, gas lines and an annual inflation rate of 11.3%. Let’s just say that selling Rapid Shave was a whole lot easier than selling resale homes in south

Orange County. So, I did what any brave 20 something would do, I went back to school to get an MPA. It turned out to be one of my better decisions.

Looking back I, like others in my generation, am a Jack Kennedy guy when it comes to the “Ask Not” speech. Yet my interest in the public sector revolved around housing, redevelopment and planning, not city management. It was this interest developed in my MPA studies, and 11 years experience in mid- and small-size cities, that led to my appointment as President of the City of San Diego’s Southeast Economic Development Corporation (SEDC), reporting directly to the SEDC Board and the San Diego City Council. SEDC was a big city public development corporation immersed in big city politics. Wanting more bricks and mortar and less politics it was back to the private sector serving as Vice President of the then largest homebuilder in California the Larwin Company.

Yet as luck would have it, the 1989-1995 recession hit. Development dried up and Larwin was selling off assets: people as well as property. It meant, yes, back to the public sector. So I became the first Planning Director of the newly incorporated City of Murrieta in 1991. Being a part of setting up a new city has been my best public sector experience. It also led me, at the ripe old age of 43, to become the City’s second City Manager. However, four years later, and since I seem to be metaphorically bipolar, it was back again, to the private sector this time as a real estate and redevelopment consultant, and an occasional interim manager, to multiple municipal clients. I left Murrieta at age 48, certainly too young to collect a PERS retirement check. But this departure was for different reasons. I left because of the freedom afforded by the private sector. It gave me a higher level of control over my own time. I certainly didn’t work less but I sure had more control as to what I did and when I did it. I enjoyed taking my children to school and never missed either of their music or sporting events. I had more time for my own choir practice and actually was riding my bike on fairly regular basis. Yet leaving the PERS retirement system early certainly had its financial consequences. So looking to balance my public and private sector assets, I again returned to the public sector as the Director of Planning and Building for the City of Santa Ana. Five years later, and as Deputy City Manager, I re-retired and returned to municipal consulting.

As a consultant I have provided advisory services to more than 40 local government agencies throughout California. I have also provided interim management services to 8 municipalities of which 3 were CM positions. This lifestyle has allowed me to still contribute to the public sector without the constraints of being in the public sector. It has provided the freedom to travel, to teach, and above all, to have more time with friends and family. Municipal consulting has afforded me the opportunity to experience many of the personal aspects of life “before” retirement.

So here I am at age 63. I have 22 years of direct employment in the public sector and 19 years in private industry. I have a breadth and depth of knowledge and experience I would not have garnered by staying on one side or the other. So what’s next? Well, it is actually on going. Since 1992 I have been a university instructor. From teaching real estate

development at Chapman University and the University of California Riverside, regular guest lecturing at USC and becoming a permanent member of the Adjunct Faculty at the University of La Verne's MPA program, has led to my appointment as a member of the Adjunct Faculty in the Master of Public Policy & Administration Program at Northwestern University. This combined with my continuing involvement with ICMA's Advisory Board on Graduate Education and with the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA), allows me to give back.

Next year will be my first where my professional demands are limited to teaching, research, writing and an occasional speaking engagement. So, our orders to ourselves are: back to bike riding, back to reading for enjoyment, back to revisiting our spiritual sides, back to travelling and above all, staying engaged. With the blessing of good health, we should be able to do this as long as we wish.