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Brenda's Bytes

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Brenda Garton

I quote my maternal grandmother, aka Nanny, a lot. It is possible that I will bore you to death quoting my Nanny. There's a reasonable explanation for this. Nanny lived with us while we were growing up. My parents were divorced when I was six or so, my mother was a working, single mother during a time when that was way less common than it is now, and my grandparents lived with us. So, it was like we got a bonus - all that Grandmotherly and Grandfatherly love. There's nothing like it on this earth.

Granddaddy was the silent but playful type. He didn't say much, and most of the time what he did say was rich with meaning. For instance, when asked by my Nanny if he wanted more fried fish, which he didn't like, he'd just say, "Well, if that's all you've got, I'll take some." Or, when suggesting a family picnic on Skyline Drive after church, he'd just say, "Do ya'll want to go up on The Drive?", which, translated, means, "Helen [aka Nanny], get in the kitchen and make some fried chicken, potato salad, and deviled eggs! After church, I'll take us on a long, wonderful ride on Skyline Drive, and we'll have a picnic, even if it's in the car because it's pouring down rain!" Or, if he wanted to go fishing, he'd say, "Let's go dig up some nightcrawlers.", meaning that we were going to one of Granddaddy's secret worm spots, dig around under rotting leaves to fill a container of worms, and go fishing -- somewhere. What an adventure!

Nanny, on the other hand, was a fount of information and wisdom. "Sit still

while it's thundering and lightning. This is God's work. God is quiet while we work, so we need to be quiet while He does His work." And we did. Sit in a chair that is. And try to be quiet.

"Don't stand on your head. Your liver will turn upside down." Now, any good parent knows that if you want your children (or grandchildren, as the case may be) to stop doing some obnoxious behavior -- like, say, standing on your head on the living room sofa and making shoe marks on the wall -- you get to make up anything that will make them stop. I daresay we didn't know what a liver was, or even if we had one, and weren't sure it could turn upside down if we DID have one. But, better not take any chances.

"Don't cross your eyes. They'll get stuck that way." Same reason. Don't tell me you've never used THAT one!

"He's/she's so ugly he'd/she'd scare the buzzards off a gut wagon!" This is my personal favorite Nanny-ism. You have to know what a gut wagon is - the horse drawn wagon taking entrails and such from the slaughter house to wherever they threw that stuff in the old days. I'm afraid to ask, but I don't expect that it was an actual Landfill. And, I am pretty sure that in those non-euphemistic days, if it WAS to a specific site, it was likely called "The Dump", and not "The Landfill" or "The Convenience Center". So, you know he/she is ugly if he/she is scaring buzzards off a gut wagon!

So, what's the point, you're asking? Well, if I have a point other than story-telling, it is that there is a lot of wisdom and humor in grandparent-aged folks. We don't sit around on the porch talking and listening like we used to. When I was little, we didn't have air conditioning. So, in the summertime, we all gathered on front porches, waiting for the night to fully settle and the temperatures to drop so you could sleep comfortably. We told ghost stories and listened to stories of when they were young. And, yes, learned about such esoteric topics as gut wagons and God's work. And, we told ghost stories and horror stories. I had many sleepless, nightmare-filled nights over those stories.

Do we really hear the wisdom that others have to offer? Do we really listen?

Most of the time when a really, REALLY irate citizen calls my office, demanding to speak to the County Administrator or "whoever is in charge", what they really need is someone to listen -- someone to understand that the issue they are dealing with, right now, is THE most important thing in the world to them. They want a listener who will sympathize with the sheer frustration and anger they are feeling. I find that by truly listening and truly caring about their issue, and then trying to find out if we can change something about the situation to improve the outcome from their perspective, it goes a long way toward conveying that we really are here to help and that local government really is comprised of good folks! Can't good customer service really be boiled down to three simple steps: (1) listen until you understand the issue, (2) seek to understand the other person's point of view, and (3) see if you can help? I know that smacks of Stephen Covey, but truth is truth.

Listening is really hard to do. Most of us (me included) are not really very good at it. I work on it. Daily. Because, after all, isn't that what we ALL need and want? Someone to listen and really HEAR what we have to say?

Or put another way, as Nanny would say, "God gave you two ears and one mouth for a reason."

I would like to take a moment to recognize our new VLGMA member: Richard W. Peters, Jr., Botetourt Director, Parks, Rec & Tourism.

-Brenda

[Contact Brenda Garton](#)

Tedd's Take



Tedd Povar

When "Google-ing" the web, you stumble on things that grab your eye. In this case, it was a Pew study conducted in 1998 titled "Deconstructing Distrust" (of the federal government).

Let's set the scene in 1998: Bill Clinton was starting his second term as president, and the economy, particularly the technology sector, was strong. The major national distraction was the Monica Lewinski scandal, and talk of impeachment was rampant.

The Pew study found the following - "For the most part, Americans remain open-minded about government. Most think it can do better. Increased positive public evaluations of the Post Office and the military during a period in which trust in government is at a very low ebb give testimony to the public's "show me" willingness to change its mind. Indeed, most Americans agree that the federal government is basically sound and needs only some reform. What's more, nearly all Americans express confidence that the government can work better."

More importantly, they concluded - "In many ways, the Pew surveys underscore the importance of government performance to improved public attitudes about government. While acknowledging the difficulty of many of the problems with which government deals, perceptions about poor performance are still seen as a primary reason for government failures. Despite some concern about misguided government objectives, most people say

A DAO in the Life

"If it isn't written down, it didn't happen"; advice given to me by the first city manager I worked for when I got into this local government business more than 20 years ago. That wasn't anything new



Stephen King

to me. I had heard that advice many times in the past. This was the first time however that the suggestion was made to avoid written documentation. If it's not written down, they can't prove you did it. They can't prove you played a role when something goes wrong. That manager served in the position for only a year.

Shortly after his start, the new city manager advised me that "if it isn't written down, it didn't happen." I had to laugh to myself when I heard this advice, again. In this instance, he was recommending the more traditional application. He wanted me to document approaches, decisions, actions, etc., so that those who came after us would be able to follow the logic, be able to understand the circumstances that lead to decisions, be able to point to past practices and policies. Likely because I was in agreement, this has been my practice over the years.

There is however a balance between leaving a proper historic record and saturating the record with information of limited value. Overloading inboxes (paper or electronic) and files (paper or electronic) with useless information can sometimes be more problematic than having no information at all.

it is performance that determines their opinions."

While the rating of and trust in the federal government is now at all time lows, and dramatically lower than 1998 levels, one thing that is consistent then and today is that "performance" is the fundamental measure that determines governmental satisfaction, not taxes. If one equates performance with "value" defined as bang for your buck, it remains THE KEY to citizen satisfaction with government, at all levels.

[Contact Tedd Povar](#)

Certificate News

The summer Certificate classes are finally over and our students (and professors) will get to enjoy a brief respite before the fall. Our students continue to do a great job in both their courses and their professional careers, and they will be welcoming another large class of new students this fall. This continues to show that the need for professional local government graduate education is vitally important to Virginia.

One of the great boons of being involved with the Certificate program is getting to see the Next Generation of local government leaders begin or further their careers. Brandon Gann, a recent MPA and Certificate graduate, has just accepted his first full time local government job as a buyer for Roanoke County. While to most people, this may not seem like much, Brandon is a special case. He has proven himself surely to be one of the future stars of local government, and he has made his first step. He has interned twice with the Town Manager of Vinton and has made himself known throughout the professional world. Now that Roanoke County has given him his first chance, he will have every opportunity to learn



In an effort to avoid creating a document that in itself contradicts the message, here's the summary. What information will I need in the future when I'm trying to understand why decisions were made and why actions were taken as they were? What information will help County staff and the Boards of Supervisors that follow 10, 15, 20 years from now? And conversely, what information is not needed, isn't relevant, is too editorial in nature, or unnecessarily clouds the story? If it's important, write it down. If it isn't written down, it didn't happen.

[Contact Stephen King](#)

Innovation Edge



Recently I met with Frank Bossio, county administrator of Culpeper County.

He told me of a program called Entrepreneurial Energy (E Squared) that has shown a great deal of innovation and success in the county. High school students interact with local business leaders in a daunting assignment to create a business, on paper, that makes and markets a real product or provides a real service. The students are given the opportunity to learn about the business world and in turn are rewarded with scholarships for their hard work and collaboration. [Read more](#) in the July Alliance Newsletter.

Questions? Comments? Please reach out to me saburnett@transformgov.org, or 800-777-2509 with any questions.

Visit the [Alliance for Innovation](#) for more information.

Mel's Poetry Corner

Summer Relief

This summer day of heat and humidity and lethargic, dormant inactivity.

the ropes and shine. Keep an eye on Brandon and other Certificate students as they begin changing the world little by little.

Preparing to change the world is the essence of the Certificate program. Seasoned managers pass along their hard earned information to the Next Generation so that we all can benefit. Even though the deadline has passed for fall enrollment, now is the perfect time to start thinking about the spring courses. While Bob Stripling will be torturing...I mean...teaching students this semester, he is always willing to wax poetic about the Certificate. He can be reached at chars08@vt.edu or 540-448-1102.

Find the Certificate online:



Cindy Mester Receives Outstanding Assistant Award

Assistant City Manager Cindy Mester was recently awarded the Marcia Mashaw Outstanding Assistant Award by the Virginia Local Government Management Association. Each year VLGMA



Stephen King presenting Cindy Mester with Outstanding Assistant Award

presents this award to an assistant manager who has demonstrated outstanding performance, particularly with a special project or during a period of unique conditions and circumstances. Mester was nominated by City Manager Wyatt Shields for a number of accomplishments, including her



Mel Gillies

No residue of inspiration for creativity is drowned in perspiration.

An oppressive stagnancy settles in and even the birds do not sing.

Every moment put on hold. Inertia of body, mind, and soul.

What will it take to animate this paralyzed state?
The willingness to be vulnerable and entertain the incomprehensible?

Out of no where ness, a premonition, a spark in this oppressive condition. From the infinite Source within, this impulse begins.

Distant rumblings herald relief, hope arousing apathetic belief. Spiritual energy begins to flow into slumbering soul.

Watching, waiting patiently, for the grace of a rain fulfilled prophesy. Soul aroused, grumbles and peeks at a vision beyond belief.

In a grand thunderous in-lightning display, Mother Nature saves the day. Soul awakens and welcomes in the rainbow Light where once all was dim.

[Contact Mel Gillies](#)

Save the Date

Save the date for the VRA Infrastructure



leadership role in establishing the Tinner Hill Historic Site. [Read more...](#)
[Contact Cindy Mester](#)

ICMA and Partners Esri and MindMixer Host Second Local Government Hackathon

Event to be held in conjunction with ICMA's 100th Annual Conference in Charlotte. WASHINGTON, D.C. -ICMA, the International City/County Management Association, together with its long-time strategic partner, Esri, and MindMixer, will join together to sponsor Hackstock for #LocalGov, a two-day event during which computer programmers will develop new technology applications for addressing community problems and engaging citizens in community dialogue. The event will take place Saturday, September 13 (9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.) and Sunday, September 14 (9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.) at the Charlotte Convention Center.

For more information, visit the [Hackstock for #LocalGov page](#) on the ICMA Annual Conference site. Then [register here](#) for Hackstock for #LocalGov today!



Financing Conference December 10-12, 2014 in Roanoke.

[Contact Jean Bass](#)
[Calendar](#)

Upcoming Events

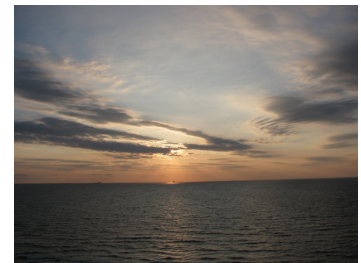
PDC Meeting - August 29 at the Stonewall Jackson Hotel

VLGMA Executive Committee - Oct. 6 in Roanoke as part of VML Conference

[More Dates](#)

Future Newsletter Articles

A goal of this e-newsletter is to keep you informed on activities relative to our profession. As with any membership-based organization, contributions by members are welcome and encouraged. Topics can range from a recent achievement in your locality to an upcoming event with networking potential to human interest stories about current or retired members. To contribute simply send your brief e-newsletter content (~5 sentences or less) via email to [Molly Harlow](#).



Quick Links

[VLGMA Website](#)

[ICMA Website](#)

[Alliance for Innovation](#)

[Virginia Municipal League](#)

[VA Association of Counties](#)

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VLGMA | P.O. Box 400206 | Charlottesville | VA | 22904