

AN INTERVIEW WITH

# Antonio Brown

Detroit Public Library CFO

BY ELIZABETH FU



Antonio Brown, the chief finance officer of the Detroit Public Library, didn't initially plan to go into public finance. He started out with an accounting firm, doing governmental auditing and school district auditing. "One of the most interesting audits I probably worked on was with the State of Michigan lottery," Brown said. After getting his government auditing experience, he became a tax analyst—which is when a friend who was with the City of Flint, Michigan, called to let him know that the city was looking for a deputy finance director. Because Brown is from Flint, he decided to interview for the job.

When asked if that job was something of a homecoming, Brown said, "I was working in Ann Arbor, so I was traveling back and forth, still living in Flint but commuting back and forth." But while he now had a shorter commute, Brown was facing some major issues. "At that time, the City of Flint was under

emergency management, so I was thrown into everything—union negotiations, emergency management, less than two months of cash on hand. It was really bad, and the financial struggles that Flint was under are well-documented. So, I took a huge chance. I left my career and a cushy job, making decent money, to come to Flint and try to help turn things around using my expertise."

Emergency management is a huge task to take on, but Brown was compelled to help his hometown recover. "Like I said, my goal wasn't to get into public finance, but I had some experience with fund accounting. One of my first tasks was to complete the CAFR for the City of Flint. So, that was my first job—'Oh, by the way, this is your introduction into public accounting, public finance. Your first task is to complete a CAFR.' I had never completed a CAFR and didn't know what it was. So, my boss actually sent me to Washington, D.C., because the GFOA was doing a training on CAFRs."

After that training session, Brown immediately started to work on the city's CAFR. "When I came back, I was into full audit mode and trying to get the CAFR completed. And because I was the deputy finance director, everybody was looking to me to know what I was doing—so I had to really pull the team together and utilize their expertise to help me identify the different areas. Auditors were instrumental as well. They helped guide me into what I needed to consider putting in and helped me with my management discussion analysis and so on." To make what was, at the time, a long story short, Brown aced the CAFR and Flint received GFOA's Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting.

Brown left the City of Flint in 2015, moving to his current role as chief finance officer with the Detroit Public Library. "I wasn't looking to leave Flint. I was actually planning on staying." After the emergency management was nearing its end, he got a call from a recruiter who asked if he was interested in looking at the opportunity in

Detroit. Brown was intrigued by the idea of taking on a different role in a somewhat slower-paced environment. “It’s probably been the best career change I could have made. The library has a different focus and it speaks to my personal beliefs, as far as helping those who have seemingly been neglected. So my five years here have been tremendous. We’ve been able to grow our fund balance, and we’ve been able to renovate some branches. It’s been exciting to grow as a professional and then build the kinds of relationships that I’ve been able to build in government. Coming from a small town like Flint to a large municipality, right after the bankruptcy... I went from an emergency management situation in Flint to Detroit as it emerged from bankruptcy. And the library was heavily involved in the bankruptcy. My career has been one thing to another, but I’ve gotten so much experience the last seven, eight years. I wouldn’t trade it.”

When asked what GFOA members might find interesting about either his experience with Flint and emergency management or the Detroit Public Library going through this renaissance, Brown pointed out just how complex each government entity really is. “I learned that the library is so much more than books. It is an institution. Detroit Public Library has 24 locations, including the main branch, in the city of Detroit. And we also serve the City of Highland Park.” This is a complex government entity.

“There’s always something wrong. And you have to plan for renovation, you have to plan for system failures, you have to plan for all that. And sometimes things come up that are unexpected, and what do you do? The Library has been fortunate to be able to have managed its resources very frugally. We’ve done the most critical thing from a financial management standpoint. So, when these emergencies happen, we don’t have to panic. We just have to respond.” That makes it very different from Brown’s previous job. “At the City of Flint, you have a negative \$19 million fund balance and you’re in a state of emergency, so any emergency is going to put you in panic mode.”

Brown also points out that the library is so much more than books. “We spend more money on programming and

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providing services and meeting spaces, Wi-Fi, and printing. And we can’t reach everybody.” He provides an example.

“We had to purchase a new mobile library because our last bookmobile died on us. It’s full of technology and different things that we can take on the road so we can reach those areas where we don’t have a physical location.”

Brown’s overall point is that no two governments are the same, and each one has its own complexities. “Even at the GFOA conferences, when you’re engaging in, say, the Urban Forum and talking about capital planning—each municipality, each governmental unit, has its own challenges and its own areas of focus. And as a government finance officer in charge of responding with professionalism and analytics and providing the most sound recommendations possible, understanding those complex issues from our standpoint is important to furthering the governmental mission.”

One example of a major project Brown is working on for the Detroit Public Library is a roof replacement for the main library. “It was the original roof from 1963, I believe. Last summer, our chiller went down—it had aged out—so we’re also replacing that with something like a 500-ton chiller. That’s a massive undertaking. There are also some things going on in the cultural district, and that’s a lot of moving parts. And one thing I have learned is that

when you’re coordinating with so many different entities, and so many problems come up, communication is so important to being able to coordinate those events. We talk about communication like it’s a cliché, but this is how we identify who the stakeholders are in a particular project, get their buy-in, and then ultimately work to find out how the financing for these projects will go.”

Detroit is definitely growing, and it’s exciting to know that the library can meet the new levels of services that residents are demanding. What are some of the other projects Brown is working on? “We are reopening a branch that has been closed for about 15 months for renovation. It’s got state of the art technology, a new HVAC system, new flooring, new lighting—we’re trying to bring our library branches up to 21st century standards. That’s something that we’re proud of.”

Switching gears, we asked Brown to tell us more about his involvement with GFOA. “After the crash course in financial reporting and CAFR, my then-boss thought that it would be beneficial for me to attend the annual GFOA conference. I think my first conference was in 2013, in San Francisco. I have been going every year, and every year I have learned something new. I get updated. I’ve also met some quality colleagues from around the nation, discussed our complex issues, and learned from their resources. Because that’s what really matters in a conference setting like that. I’ll be in sessions with some of the leading government finance officers in the nation; we’re all together in one place, and shame on me if I don’t reach out and make a connection. I have been a part of the Black Caucus as well, and I’ve gone to the Black Caucus meeting every year. GFOA has things for everybody in government finance. I’m amazed every year.”

Of course, GFOA’s 2020 annual conference won’t be held in New Orleans because of the coronavirus pandemic, but we will be hosting our first-ever online conference, with many sessions to choose from. Brown’s advice? “Attend all the sessions that you can, because you are going to learn something.” ■

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