

# In Practice

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## FINANCE

### Collaboration and Workload Management at the City of Brooklyn, Ohio

BY KATIE LUDWIG

**F**or the City of Brooklyn, Ohio, collaboration isn't just an aspiration, it's a necessity. As is often the case for smaller local governments, staff members have multiple areas of responsibility and must balance competing priorities. To effectively manage their workloads, the members of Brooklyn's finance team work together closely.

As just about any member of GFOA's Small Government Forum can attest, close collaboration among staff members is a requirement in maintaining operations and achieving an organization's goals. Small governments have most of the

same types of responsibilities as larger local governments, despite having far fewer staff members. To ensure that all day-to-day tasks—including developing and monitoring the budget, processing customer payments, paying bills, and ordering supplies—are completed, staff members need to work together closely and be available to assist one another. One example of a local government that has fully embraced the concept of collaboration, and is experiencing its benefits, is the City of Brooklyn, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland with a population of approximately 11,000 people and 105 full-time employees.

Brooklyn's three-person Finance Department is made up of Deputy City Administrator/Finance Director Tom Raguz, Cindy Simko in Accounts Payable, and Celeste Westfall in Payroll. Finance isn't the only thing these three do, though.

The trio also manages the city's reception desk, the mayor's court, and the Civil Service Commission. While Tom serves as the official secretary for the Civil Service Commission, Celeste handles most of the day-to-day responsibilities while also being responsible for the city's human resources functions, including processing workers'

compensation claims and reviewing Family Medical Leave Act requests.

In addition to her primary role in Accounts Payable, Cindy also maintains the city's capital asset list and manages inventory. She is the city's point person on insurance claims, as well, and serves as the secretary for the Service, Police, and Fire departments.

"I've worked in larger organizations, and I think the misconception is that it's easier working for a smaller government. It can be in some ways, but it's also harder in other ways," Tom said.

"As challenging as it is, I think the advantage of working for a small city is that we're able to get in touch with people without there being a big delay, and everyone's pretty receptive to working with each other," Celeste added.

Tom explained that one of the most important benefits of collaboration for the Brooklyn finance team is that it has encouraged them to create backup plans for when people are out of the office.

"We want Celeste to be able to take time off, so we all need to understand Payroll. It's an essential function of the department. It's the same with Accounts Payable. We all need to understand that because Cindy needs to be able to take time off," he explained.

The team's close collaboration has helped it navigate many of the challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. "We did staggered weeks for six weeks, and that was challenging because if I had an issue with a department and I wasn't here I couldn't follow up right away. But I did work from home, checking my emails, and then unfortunately, I did get COVID, so I was out for two weeks," Cindy said.



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TOM RAGUZ

CITY OF BROOKLYN, OHIO  
DEPUTY CITY ADMINISTRATOR/  
FINANCE DIRECTOR

"Having a backup plan in place really helped during this time, as this was the first time we had to fully use it for accounts payable," Tom said. "Celeste was leading this process with support from me. We were able to complete this function and provide the necessary support to the user departments in a satisfactory manner."

"The three of us work well together. If any of us need help with anything, we just help each other out. We just make it work," Celeste added.

The collaboration doesn't stop with Finance. Tom, Cindy, and Celeste also work closely with the other departments.

"In the mayor's court, we have one clerk of courts who reports to me," Tom said. "Celeste is the primary backup in her absence. We have court days

generally twice a month, and Celeste provides direct support. There are times when the court days occur on a payroll week, so we have backups and processes in place in case payroll needs to be worked on during this time or if any other of Celeste's responsibilities need to be worked on as well, such as cash collection and depositing."

"Being a small city, everybody knows everybody, and we all work well together," Cindy said. She pointed to the city's grant process as a good example of successful inter-departmental collaboration. "The departments depend on me to get all the paperwork together, so we can turn in the grant. If we're not on the same page, it could get lost in the shuffle. We've never missed a deadline, but it could happen if we weren't on the same page," she explained.

Celeste agrees that collaboration helps keep everyone on the same page, which in turn helps the city operate more efficiently. "If everyone understands the process, or at least a little bit of the process, they'll know why it's important to have things turned in and why we have certain deadlines," she said.

"I think we've done a good job as far as communicating to some of the departments if our needs are not being met and making sure they understand what we need, when we need it, and how this might affect them," Tom said. "At the end of the day, the departments want to understand how it affects them. That's really what they care about."

Cindy believes collaboration can also lead to more efficient processes in an organization. For example, the city was experiencing problems with the way it processes facility rentals. A group of employees, including one who had recently taken a Lean Six Sigma course, got together to analyze the process, and then developed and implemented an improved process.



**TOM RAGUZ**, DEPUTY CITY  
ADMINISTRATOR/FINANCE DIRECTOR



**CINDY SIMKO**,  
ACCOUNTS PAYABLE



**CELESTE WESTFALL**,  
PAYROLL

The key was bringing everyone together to understand each of the different steps in the process. “The problem was that we had too many people with their hands in it, and we’ve got it down to a science now. We have one person in charge, which makes it run so much more smoothly,” she said.

Interdepartmental collaboration can also help local governments solve problems. “As finance officers, I think we could all do a better job of trying to understand the challenges that other departments are facing,” Tom said. As an example, he explained that for many of Brooklyn’s departments, especially the public safety departments, recruitment is an ongoing challenge. With this in mind, as part of the city’s process to renew its collective bargaining agreements with the public safety unions, staff compared Brooklyn’s public safety wages to other nearby municipalities and found that they needed to make some adjustments to stay competitive. The hope is that this wage adjustment will alleviate the issue.

Tom believes that for collaboration to succeed in an organization, it needs to become part of the organizational culture, and employees need to build relationships with their colleagues. “People react differently to you when you have an established relationship,” he pointed out.

Along with collaboration, Celeste said that regular communication among team members is essential for organizations to operate effectively. She explained that the Finance team and the Clerk of Council, who also reports to Tom, hold biweekly meetings to update each other about what they’re working on. She explained that she learns a lot at those meetings and that they help make sure the team is

on the same page with their varied responsibilities.

Cindy agreed that the biweekly meetings are very helpful. “If we’re having an issue, we can openly discuss it among the four of us. If there’s something I can’t figure out, they can help me figure it out.”

Tom agrees that communication is essential, noting that managers create an environment where staff members are confident enough to ask questions. “One thing I’ve learned throughout my career is to have enough confidence in yourself to ask the stupid question. Oftentimes, people are afraid to do that, and then it backfires on them down the road,” he said. “I think management’s responsibility is to instill the confidence in your team to ask those stupid questions.”

To illustrate, he shared an example from a recent team meeting where the subject of tax increment financing (TIF) funds came up. At the meeting, Cindy asked what a TIF fund was, prefacing her question with an acknowledgment that it doesn’t have anything to do with her job. “I had never explained to her what a TIF fund is, but it does indirectly impact her because we’re paying bills on it. She didn’t understand what it was, so she asked the question. I’m glad she did that. It was a great question,” Tom said. 📧

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