



Charting a Career Path

AN INTERVIEW WITH NICKIE LEE BY JARA KERN

Jara Kern, writer with Right Angle Studio, spoke with **Nickie Lee**, the deputy city administrator for the City of Prairie Village, Kansas, about charting a career path in public service, how finance directors can move into city management, and how best practices and trends are changing over time.

Nickie started with the City of Prairie Village as finance director before moving into her current position in June 2022. Before that, Nickie served in various executive roles, including as the finance director for the City of Topeka, Kansas, and the assistant city administrator for the City of Smithville, Missouri. Nickie is a member of GFOA's Budget Committee and is the treasurer for her local chapter of Women in Public Finance.

FINDING THE PATH

Recalling how her career began, Nickie said, "Like a lot of people, I didn't imagine that I'd be working in local government. In retrospect, though, the example was all around me. My mom was a public school teacher and my father was a mail carrier. Early on, I knew I wanted to help people because I had a passion for service—but it took me some time to figure out what that meant. Equally important to finding out what you want to do is learning what you don't want to do." She gained experience through internships, including with nonprofits. In addition, she began asking friends and colleagues what their parents did—and this ended up being key to finding the path. One friend mentioned that her dad was the city administrator for the City of Mission, Kansas, and this lit the

spark for Nickie, who reached out to him. "I met with him, and this was my 'aha' moment—this work was all about helping people every day with essential services. I went from having this general sense of wanting to help people, and being open-minded and asking around, to finding the right field for me."

With a bachelor's degree in English, she knew that she would likely need to pursue a master's to advance her career in this new field. "Luckily, I was already living in Lawrence, which is home to the Kansas University Master of Public Administration [MPA] program, one of the country's top programs for city management. I applied immediately—and really everything from that moment affirmed this is the right career for me, as it's continued to be a passion and a great fit."

SEEING THE IMPACT EVERY DAY

Nickie emphasized that one of the best things about working in local government is seeing the impact of her work every day. "I drive to work on the road we helped build. I visit the park we help maintain. With my colleagues, I'm part of essential service delivery—services like water, transportation, public education, and infrastructure—that is fundamental to our everyday lives. It's very fulfilling."

She pointed to the redevelopment of Meadowbrook as a public-private partnership and a prime example of how local government can work to shape communities. In 2015, Johnson County Government, the City of Prairie Village, and the Johnson County Park and Recreation District announced the planned redevelopment of the Meadowbrook Golf and Country Club into a mixed-use development with parkland, playground, and residential facilities offering multiple housing options, including senior living and multifamily. While she joined the City of Prairie Village after the project was underway, Nickie was able to contribute to its success as finance director. "The city originally took out general obligation bonds for half of the project, but the private development portion of the project has been so successful that we were able to take advantage of interest rates in 2022



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and refinance all the debt into special obligation bonds. Now, we expect to pay off the debt up to 10 years sooner than our original schedule." With more than one million visitors annually, the green space of Meadowbrook is a highly visible and valuable addition to Prairie Village—and an example for Nickie of the impact those in public positions can have on a community.

Of course, Prairie Village faces its challenges, too. Nickie talked about the decisions the city faces as a landlocked, fully developed suburb of Kansas City. "One of the things we love is that we've always been a community with a variety of housing types. The market, though, has become very competitive, and it's pricing people out. We've started community conversations about what we should

do, and how we want our community to be in the future." Such efforts have met some resistance, in addition to stoking some underlying tensions and divisions. To address the issues on the government side, Nickie said, "We created a housing committee and updated our comprehensive plan, and we are bringing forward proposals and ideas to our planning commission to generate discussion and input on what we should allow in these zoning areas. We are also examining every aspect of our housing policy. It's really one step at a time."

CHANGE IN ROLE, CHANGE IN MINDSET

As she began her MPA, Nickie already had a sense that she wanted to be a city manager one day. "The MPA degree is

really about the big picture, and finance is one class in an entire program," Nickie recalled. "Earning that degree prepares anyone for developing a broad perspective."

Her early career included a position as budget manager before she moved into finance director roles. Then she took the position as assistant city administrator for Smithville, Missouri. "I had the opportunity to learn how local governments in Missouri do finance, as opposed to Kansas. Some aspects can be very state-specific, and for our dual-state metropolitan area, this experience added to my knowledge." Nickie also credited the position in Smithville with developing her ability to work on community-specific challenges, and to see them from the top down in addition to the finance side.

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Now, as deputy city administrator in Prairie Village, Nickie oversees community development, including building codes, code enforcement, planning, and zoning in addition to her day-to-day work with the city administrator, mayor, and council. “All of these areas are so different from finance. Finance can be cyclical, in that some of the same things happen every year. The nature of development, building, and planning means that the challenges are less technical—and much more adaptive. I also have much more interaction with the public now, in this role.” Nickie also oversees finance, so she was part of the process of hiring her replacement. The relationships she built as finance director with city council members and other staff have been fundamental to her in her new role, too, as she had already built solid relationships and earned trust that would otherwise have taken additional time to build.

Nickie shared lessons that can benefit other finance directors looking to move into city manager roles. “Finance directors can get pigeonholed, perhaps more than any other role in local government. Speaking from experience, I know that if you have a good finance director, you want that person to stay in the role. It’s a critical position. My first piece of

advice is to speak up. It can be awkward to approach the city manager or the mayor to specifically express interest in other work, but it’s essential. In addition, a lot of finance directors who have successfully made the transition to city management have invested in an MPA or a public management certificate. It’s about gaining that big-picture view, and it also shows a level of commitment—that you’re serious about wanting to develop that broader perspective and bring it to your work.” When reflecting on her time at Kansas University, Nickie stressed the value of the hands-on experience she received through her full-time internship, the focus of the second year of the program. “That year of learning on the job is a huge strength of the program, which embraces practical experience as just as important as what happens in the classroom.”

CHANGES IN THE PROFESSION—AND IN BEST PRACTICES

As a finance professional, city administrator, and member of GFOA’s Budget Committee, Nickie has had a front-row seat to some of the biggest shifts in the public finance field. She noted that best practices on budget communication have gone through significant change. Not too long ago, best practices guidance was to create a lengthy printed budget book. Today, recommendations focus on using different formats including websites, dashboards, social media, presentations, and other forms of engagement to communicate key information to the public. She also referred to the Budget Committee’s work on updating the GFOA best practice on strategic planning and stressed the importance of finance directors becoming more involved in strategic planning and working collaboratively with other leaders to facilitate a discussion on priorities.

Nickie also discussed what governments can do to attract more talent into the profession. “First and foremost, the key to being competitive is being flexible. In this field, people can easily find remote jobs. In addition, while government faces some reputation challenges right now, we have an opportunity to really focus on the mission, to really sell this as part of the value of working in this field.”

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS, BUILDING A CAREER

Nickie focused on the importance of relationship-building for finance officers at every stage in a career. “It’s really important to get to know the people you work with, from elected officials to colleagues. Take a few minutes before or after a council meeting to start up a conversation and get to know the people you work with.” She talked about the importance of learning the ropes as a finance director, from becoming adept at communicating highly technical information in clear, bite-sized pieces to learning to never embarrass anyone at a meeting—public or otherwise. “It’s so important to never put anyone on the spot, to always prepare them beforehand. No one likes to be surprised, so preparation goes a long way.”

Nickie also talked about the value of finance professionals sharing their stories. She reads the content in *GFR* and makes time to listen to FINE(ance) Fridays. “Every story is different, as there is no one path to local government. Each of our stories inspires the next generation—and you never know when you’ll plant the seed for someone.”

She also underscored the importance of networking. “Having a network of colleagues is so important in this field. GFOA really helps with this, through the conference and opportunities with your local GFOA chapter. Participating is invaluable and will make you happier in your career, too.” ■

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