



WITH ANNE BAKER

Administrative Services Director, City of Florence, Oregon

BY MIKE MUCHA



Mike Mucha, GFOA's deputy executive director, spoke with **Anne Baker**, the administrative services director for the City of Florence, Oregon, about her career in public service, volunteering with membership organizations, certification, and the most important skills necessary for finance professionals to become leaders.

Mike: Can you start by describing your current role with the City of Florence?

Anne: As administrative services director, I oversee finance, information technology, utility billing, and the municipal court. We have a pretty wide scope, everything from financial reporting to providing water and sewer service to citizens. I have an IT manager and finance manager who help with most of the meat of the department, and in my role, I focus more on working with our city manager and council, and making sure that we can effectively communicate needs from across the city so we can make good decisions about the use of city resources.

What are the biggest challenges facing Florence?

The biggest challenge is hiring and maintaining employees. Florence is a rural and located in a remote area of Lane County, Oregon. We are about 90 minutes from the city of Eugene and have a population of approximately 9,600. I'm sure our challenges at the

city are not unique and I know that others in Florence, including many businesses, struggle to hire. For example, in addition to not having enough accountants or police officers, we also have a shortage of doctors. Our community is an attractive retirement destination, and we are growing, but we don't have the places for new people to live—specifically younger individuals who would be able to fill open jobs. From a city perspective, we also can't afford to pay what others do. I've been with the city for four and a half years. During that time, I don't think the city's police department has been fully staffed. When we are able to hire new officers, we get them trained, and they have a tendency to move on for higher salaries.

Have you been able to work on these issues?

Recently, the city has been having more discussions about how to create incentives for younger generations to locate here. We also have an initiative to create more affordable housing and two planned projects. In my role, as administrative services director, I have

been involved in those discussions and have enjoyed it. This position has put me out there and I'm more aware of issues in the community. In my past positions, I would tend to work on issues related to just the finance department.

How did you initially get involved in government? Were you always drawn to public service?

I got started late in my career. I have a bachelor's degree in business administration/accounting and one in computer science, but I earned both after I turned 30. At the time, I intended to get my CPA and work for one of the big six accounting firms; however, when I was in school, I took a governmental accounting class. I really liked learning about fund accounting, I was pretty good at it, and my professor encouraged me to think about a career in government. When I graduated, I applied for jobs at a local CPA firm and with Josephine County. I interviewed at both and decided to give government a chance.

And now over the last 25 years, you've worked in a variety of positions for five different governments. What has led to your success?

I always have to be learning something new. For example, when I started with City of Albany, the city received the GFOA award for budget and annual comprehensive financial report (ACFR). I took on the task of putting together the city's first popular annual financial report (PAFR). In preparing the PAFR, I had to learn the idiosyncrasies of financial statements. I also had to learn how to communicate technical information in a way that citizens understand. That helped me a lot when it came later to working with elected officials.

Have you ever considered options outside of government?

In between my positions at Josephine County and Benton County, I graduated from University of Oregon with a master of accounting degree. As part of the program, you had to participate in a recruitment process, so again I put in an application to work at a CPA firm. I ended up working there as an intern and thought of switching, but I realized

that I really didn't like tax accounting. I also realized that government offers a better work-life balance. It's not that I wasn't putting in a lot of hours, but I appreciate that I am able to take vacation when I need to.

About that time, I also got involved with the Oregon GFOA (OGFOA) which continued to encourage me to look for new opportunities in local government. I really feel that each of my positions has set me up for success with for the next one. I took advantage of the OGFOA network for new opportunities. I didn't get every job I applied for, but I didn't give up. When I didn't get my dream job, I was able to realize that it wasn't because I wasn't qualified, it was because the competition can be fierce—and that is a good thing.

I want to discuss your involvement with OGFOA. What is it like being part of that organization?

It can be a lot of work, but very much worth it. At first, I was a bit hesitant to get involved. I wanted to be good at

my job, but also thought I could hide in the background. For a while, that did work. I was able to take advantage of educational opportunities and meet peers in other organizations. But at one of the conferences, I got roped into the IT committee for the organization. What they were doing intrigued me and seemed to leverage some of my academic background. Once I got more involved, I really started having fun. The more people I met, the more fun I had and the bigger my network grew. I ended up with more and more people who I could lean on, and the value of OGFOA really became clear. Those individuals then pushed me to take that next step in my career, pursue the new opportunity, and continue to learn. I pursued my certification through OGFOA and later also joined the certification committee. When I moved to the City of Albany, my boss was very supportive of my involvement in OGFOA and I took advantage of the opportunity to join the governing board of OGFOA, which then led to me becoming president of OGFOA in 2013.



Anne Baker (left) and some of her team members in the City of Florence Administrative Services Department get into the holiday spirit.

For someone who initially wanted to hide in the background, what was it like being president?

At some point after becoming president, I realized that you had to get in front of everyone and talk. I would say that I'm more of an introvert, but I learned through my OGFOA experience that I can be more extroverted if I need to. Public speaking was hard at first, but now not so much. This experience has definitely helped me when I have to present in front of council, talk with the public, or broadcast meetings online.

During my time with OGFOA, we also changed our name from the Oregon Municipal Finance Officers Association to the Oregon Government Finance Officers Association. We wanted to expand to better serve members from special districts, schools, the state, and other governments without those individuals assuming we only served cities. It also helped us align better with the Government Finance Officers Association. I'm proud of the partnership that we've been able to build with GFOA.

As a member of both GFOA and OGFOA, how do you differentiate the benefits you get from both?

I haven't always been able to be a member at both. Up until my job with the City of Florence, I was not a member of GFOA, and it wasn't until I got to the City of Florence that I was able to travel to a GFOA event. I believe the work that the state GFOA does is an extension of GFOA, and the state association works for me in a way that GFOA can't. GFOA can't offer training on state-specific issues like unique Oregon laws and regulations. Oregon has a very specific budget process that is probably different from all others. I look to GFOA for overarching best practices, information on GASB updates, or larger industry trends. I look to the state association for specific issues. For example, recently I was able to find out about information related to public meeting requirements in this state from OGFOA.

I also believe that state organizations had an advantage in the past with networking groups and were able to encourage better levels of participation;

however, that might be changing. The pandemic taught us all how to work remotely and that we can network remotely too. About a year ago, I joined GFOA's Women Public Finance Network (WPFN) and look forward to getting more involved in the programs that they offer.

How would you recommend that others get involved in either GFOA or their state association, knowing it can be difficult for some to make that initial connection?

Go to a conference, and when you are there, really try to participate. I do see a lot of members who just attend sessions but don't really take advantage of all that a conference can offer. If I was talking to someone who's new to government, I would also encourage them to join a committee or smaller group organized around issues you care about. Having this small group of peers to learn from or just discuss issues with is extremely beneficial. I really enjoy learning from others in committees. Our issues aren't our issues alone. You never know when you will meet someone who can help or offer something insightful. For me, I just needed to step outside my comfort zone and realize that others are in a similar situation. Once you do, it's fun.

You have been involved with the Professional Finance Officer Certification program with OGFOA and became a GFOA Certified Public Finance Officer in 2013. What led you to pursue the CPFO?

Again, I think it was my desire to take on more. In prior positions, my main focus was budgeting, but I knew that eventually, to achieve my career goals, I would need knowledge to manage an audit, issue debt, understand government investing, and more. CPFO was a great program that forced me to study—even when my current position made it difficult. I learned a lot. The exams were tough, but that means it was worth it. For a while, I felt like the Blue Book was my best friend.

Which exam was the most difficult?

I passed all on my first try except for treasury. That one took two tries.



Become a CPFO

Learn more about GFOA's CPFO program, the next step as you prepare for leadership positions in state and local government.

gfoa.org/cpfo

Has your investment in CPFO paid off?

Having a CPA license or a CPFO designation is a preference for most jobs that I've applied for. It does open doors and can set me apart from other applicants. For those hiring managers who may not understand the details of public finance, it can also provide credibility and recognition that I do have the necessary skills. I'm also proud of meeting the requirement for ongoing education. Having to accumulate continuing professional education (CPE) credits means that I commit to staying current. Now I have to stay informed on current best practices and don't want to waste the hard work that I put in to get the CPFO in the first place. I really believe that I wouldn't be able to do my job well without ongoing training, and the CPFO makes it easier to get approval for that training.

At GFOA, we talk all the time about needing to learn both technical skills and leadership skills. What leadership skill do you think is most important for finance officers?

The ability to communicate. Good communicators not only convey goals and expectations clearly, but also engage in active listening. You need to be open to feedback, either good or bad. If you don't listen, you won't understand how to resolve conflicts, keep your team aligned, or build trust.

I have also learned that having the ability to recognize and understand your emotions is important. Things in government can get emotional—whether we fund a project or not, can afford raises or not, or shift policy to benefit some in the community. Understanding and listening is important for you to better consider different viewpoints and remain composed under pressure.



A coastal city in Lane County, Oregon, Florence lies about 60 miles west of Eugene and has a population of nearly 10,000 residents.

As leader of your department, and one with many functions, how do you keep everyone aligned and working as a cohesive team?

Divisions can tend to silo themselves. I try to instill in them that because you are in finance or IT, what they do can impact everyone. If they realize how connected our functions are, they will think about

strategies or actions and how it impacts everyone. I also think this leads to better discussions with our team at a strategy level. I try to encourage dialogue within the team and feel that this also can help encourage people to ask for help if they need it. Hopefully no one is left out. Opinions do matter. It doesn't mean that we will always agree, but we shouldn't

be afraid to hear an opposing or slightly different view.

Did you always think you would end up as a leader in city government?

That's a good question. When I interviewed in Josephine County, the finance manager who interviewed me asked where I saw myself in five years, and I said I wanted his job. I did want to move up and did set my sights on being a finance director.

Any desire to move up even further on the organizational chart?

No! I want to stay away from being a city manager. I've seen that up close and don't like it. I do like the added responsibilities I have as administrative services director, though. In Florence, much like in other smaller cities, administrative functions are grouped, and I enjoy working with IT. I would encourage anyone in a similar position to get involved in other projects and teams. Get exposed to new areas. I'm not an expert in IT, even though I manage it, but understanding the big picture

Good communicators not only convey goals and expectations clearly, but also engage in active listening. You need to be open to feedback, either good or bad. If you don't listen, you won't understand how to resolve conflicts, keep your team aligned, or build trust.

Overcome Differences with GFOA's Perspectives program

This online learning experience equips participants with science-backed skills to improve communication and manage political issues in the workplace. Learn more:

gfoa.org/perspectives



with IT means I can better understand the big picture with finance. The same is true with other functions and departments here at the city.

Any other advice on working with staff from outside the finance department?

Make sure you have a good team, and then trust them. Rely on your team to help you find the best way to solve problems.

Great advice. Now a few questions to wrap up our interview. Is there anything you would do differently in your career?

Start earlier. I also wish I would have been more confident in my abilities earlier on. I wanted to move up, but I let doubt creep in more than I should have. My abilities were there—I just needed to realize it.

What is one thing you would change about local government finance if you could?

There are a lot of things I would change, but I'm not sure everyone would agree that they would be for the better. Right now, one change I'm confident in is that GASB needs to really look at what

The people I know in public finance are educated, ethical, and hardworking. They are here because they believe they can help provide the community with the best service, with what resources are available. And they care.

they are doing and the impact that it has on smaller jurisdictions. Some of the most recent standards have had big monetary impacts for our city. We don't have the staff to handle the new reporting requirements, so we rely on consultants, and they are expensive. The costs also seem to continue to grow as reporting becomes even more complicated. It takes us away from funding services or helping solve problems in our community. I don't think GASB realizes the stress they put on small governments.

What is one thing that most people outside of the profession get wrong about public finance or local government?

Waste. I hear a lot that governments have no problem spending money and that employees are lazy. This makes me mad. Coming into work every day, what I see are people who chose to be here because they want to make a difference. The people I know in public finance are educated, ethical, and hardworking. They are here because they believe they can help provide the community with the best service, with what resources are available. And they care.

Last question. If you had ten words to persuade someone to pursue a career in local government, what would you say?

Ten words is not nearly enough, but I will say that working for government is an important job. We are trusted by the community. We can see the direct impact of our work. We can also advance in our profession and become leaders. I think I'm a pretty good case for that. OK, here are ten words: Government work brings pride in your job and your community. 🇺🇸

Mike Mucha is the deputy executive director of GFOA.