



The Right Skills for the Role

AN INTERVIEW WITH GLENYS SALAS
BY JARA KERN

Jara Kern of Right Angle Studio spoke with **Glenys R. Salas**, director of budget and fiscal analysis for the City of Saco, Maine, about transitioning from the private to public sector, using data to drive better decision making and continuous improvement, and how government finance professionals can make more of their networks and connections.

Glenys has followed a unique career path to her role in government finance. After earning a Bachelor of Science in business with a focus in marketing, she moved into marketing analytics roles with Unilever, NUK USA, and Ai Media Group. In 2017, with a newly kindled interest in electoral politics and local government, she joined the City of Saco as finance director and treasurer. In the six years since, her role has expanded as she has shaped processes and planning in her community. Glenys is also active in GFOA's Women's Public Finance Network and serves on the board of the Maine Municipal Tax Collectors and Treasurer's Association.

Making a leap—of sector, skills, and community

Early in her career, Glenys found her marketing sweet spot in data analytics

roles. Business analytics unlocked opportunities to drive growth and continuous improvement—and to see the results in business growth.

At the time, Glenys was living in the New York City area, but when the finance director position at the City Saco opened up, Glenys saw it as a chance to make the leap to the public sector. Located just south of the Portland, Maine, area, Saco is home to a population of 19,000 residents—and is rapidly growing. The challenge lay in navigating the transition. Fortunately for her, as she recalls, “The city administrator was open to thinking differently when filling the role. He wanted to bring in someone who had a data mindset and tech experience and was willing to think creatively about what a finance director for a mid-sized municipality in Maine could look like.” While working in data analytics roles, Glenys had earned a master's degree in data analytics from Villanova University. Her education and experience prepared



her to understand the software and reporting side of finance in a different way. “Because I had become interested in government and we wanted to move to Maine, the role was a perfect fit.”

Glenys was eager to bring her skills to her new role—and immediately saw opportunities to do so, starting with the budget process. She led two key projects for the city. The first was transforming the text-heavy budget presentation into a more visually driven, audience-friendly format. “Reporting, analytics, and data



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She also used her marketing background to change the budget conversation. “In marketing, everything starts with the product, and it drives price and budget. The product of government is our services to the community,” Glenys explained in relating how she repositioned the budget conversation to start with city services rather than cost. “Services are the foundation of what we do, and the foundation of a strong community. Good service delivery draws more people to a community, which results in rising property values and more revenue. This, in turn, can fund the necessary cost increases on existing city services as well as new city services.”

Glenys pointed out that it took two or three years for the nature of the budget conversation to fully shift—but it did. “In the last two or three budget cycles, the conversation has been about what more

we can do for the community of Saco, as in what services we can add. We haven't had a conversation about cuts for years. This change has been great for our citizens and for our staff, who feel much more comfortable and confident in front of the council when talking about the budget.”

Six years into her tenure with the City of Saco, Glenys oversees the budget process from start to finish, managed in collaboration with the city administrator. She is also responsible for all reporting related to the budget and to Saco's annual comprehensive financial report. Glenys also administers the annual audit and leads work related to financial planning and financial analysis, including coordinating the city's annual capital planning process, in addition to participating in several city committees, including the long-range planning committee. She is particularly passionate about strategic planning. “I love thinking about the strategic plan and how we can make it a reality. Our capital planning process now goes out 30 years, so we can think really long-term.”

Glenys and her family also live in Saco, and she relishes when her work has a positive influence on the community. She describes a parking lot by one of Saco's beaches that used to be unpaved, leading to parking and access problems. “When I first started, I advocated for paving it. It took three years of talking to the Department of Public Works, but we got it done. Now it's paved and striped, and the parking is no longer a problem. It's very rewarding to see the results in our community when things are done right in the finance office, as well as other departments.”

Glenys sees opportunities for others in the private sector to make the transition to a career in local government finance. In her opinion, some roles make the transition more easily than others. She pointed to experience in government auditing for CPA firms or government services in banking as examples of roles that can offer fast transition. Other types of experience may require a bigger leap, but a business background provides a solid foundation. Glenys has sage advice for anyone considering the transition: “Get involved with your local government as a citizen, through committees. Volunteer your time and start to build connections with people working in local government. They will know of opportunities and open roles.”

Harnessing the power of technology

Glenys's marketing background was key to repositioning the budget conversation. In much the same way, her education in data analytics has been essential to driving change in her role with the City of Saco. With her skills and experience, she has been able to identify opportunities for process improvement and shorten the learning curve for implementing systems, tools, and automated processes to go from data to decision making more quickly and effectively.

She shared a few transformation examples. “When I started,” she explained, “there were a lot of workarounds because the general ledger account codes were not configured the way the reporting was configured. So, I cleaned up all the general ledger account codes because I understand both how these tables work together and how important good foundational data labeling is to reporting.” This change made

reporting easier, more precise, and more efficient. Using her data analytics background, Glenys also changed the way capital asset infrastructure data was imported into Saco's financial software, and she has been able to apply statistical analysis to the community's tax bills—which has been useful while navigating a period of tax increases. The changes she has implemented have also improved forecasting, especially when it comes to tax increment financing (TIF) districts. With 30 percent of Saco's assessed valuation captured in TIF districts, it's important to be able to forecast anticipated revenue accurately and easily out a decade or more in evaluating such measures as 30-year bond issuance.

Harnessing the power of technology has enabled Glenys and her team to work smarter. Today, more opportunities are on the horizon with automation, AI, and machine learning. While governments navigate the promise and

pitfalls of these emerging technologies, Glenys noted, "AI is only as effective as the data you put it into, so if you're not inputting really good detail on your invoice entry, capital assets, or infrastructure management, you're going to be challenged with applying an AI model with precise output. Smaller municipalities like Saco don't always have enough input information."

Capital planning for a growing municipality

Saco's growth has driven an increased focus on infrastructure and capital planning. Since moving into the role of director of budget and fiscal analysis, Glenys has increasingly focused on capital planning and the city's 30-year plan. She and her team have built custom forms that allow department heads to input capital asset projects into the capital planning process at any point during the year. In addition, she has focused on importing infrastructure management

data into the financial planning software for analysis and reporting. Recently the department rolled out a scorecard to measure sustainable funding levels. Together, these tools have helped Glenys and her team identify opportunities for continuous improvement, down to specific utilities and projects. She pointed to growth as evidence of progress: "Ten years ago, the city allocated only \$60,000 a year to manage our infrastructure assets. Now, after a decade of focused work, our capital plan is \$8 million annually." The city has produced materials on this transformation to share the process and results with other midsized municipalities undertaking capital planning.

Maximizing the benefits of membership

Glenys is a member of New England States GFOA and Maine GFOA, as well as a member of GFOA's Women's Public Finance Network (WPFN). She is a frequent contributor to GFOA's online member communities. She also serves on the board of the Maine Municipal Tax Collectors and Treasurer's Association. Ultimately, she sees membership and participation as express routes to accessing information and building a vibrant network.

"Coming from the private sector, I had a lot of questions, and I didn't know where to go for answers. GFOA's online member communities offered great guidance, including a suggestion on a capital planning software that I've just implemented. I also enjoy providing input to others. Whether you log in once a week or once a month, it will benefit you."

She values building relationships through WPFN that help her better balance work and home, as well as accessing robust training and certification through the Maine Municipal Tax Collectors and Treasurer's Association. Some smaller communities in Maine may not have their own finance officer, so participating in the association is a way to build connections across the state. "Building your network through membership and participation is one of the best ways to advance your knowledge and make new connections. It's absolutely worth the time you invest in it." ■

Jara Kern is a marketing strategist at Right Angle Studio.

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