



# with Nate Reinhardt

BY MIKE MUCHA



**Mike Mucha**, GFOA's deputy executive director, spoke with **Nate Reinhardt**, the finance director for the City of Shakopee, Minnesota, and past president of the Minnesota GFOA, about the city's growth, the challenges with clearly communicating financial information, the importance of building a strong network, the value of mentorship, and the role of fun in local government.

**Mike: Thank you for taking the time to talk. How are things in Minnesota?**

Nate: Great. We are starting to see the end of winter, which is nice. Currently there is no snow on the ground and things are getting a bit warmer.

**Tell me a little about the City of Shakopee and your role within the finance department.**

I am currently the finance director for the city and lead a small but great team that really accomplishes a lot. In our department, besides me, we have an accounting manager, an accounting specialist, and an accounting clerk. The accounting specialist and accounting clerk split banking, receivables, and payables. Our accounting manager is similar to an assistant finance director. In general, my primary responsibilities are budgeting, capital planning, long-term planning, debt issuance, debt management, auditing, and investments. The City of Shakopee is a rapidly growing area. We have a population of about 47,000 residents, which has doubled in the past 20 years. We also are an entertainment destination, at least from a Minnesota perspective. The area is home to Mystic Lake Casino, Valleyfair Amusement Park, Canterbury Horse Track, and the largest

renaissance festival in the United States. A new 19,000-seat amphitheater is under construction and will be the largest in the state when it opens.

**That's quite a lot of activity. You manage all of that with a four-person team? Are there other finance positions in other departments?**

We are pretty much it for the city, although payroll is included in the human resource department and utility billing is done by a separate utilities commission.

**What is one of the biggest challenges Shakopee faces, as a growing city?**

There are challenges, but I would say that being a growing city actually benefits us. We have a growing tax base and a lot of positive energy around here. Our biggest challenges, like other cities, would be related to staffing and public safety. Finding qualified police officers and accommodating increases in personnel costs can be a challenge, and our fire department has been transitioning from a paid on-call department to a full-time fire department. Right now, we have a mix of full and part time staff, but as we work through the transition, it's been important for our finance team to understand the budget implications and where to anticipate additional costs related to recruiting,

onboarding, training, and equipping staff. As one example, we've been remodeling our fire stations to have 24/7 capacity.

**Speaking of growth and the need to remodel facilities, I saw that you have a new capital planning process. Any other initiatives within the finance department?**

That's correct, we revamped our capital improvement plan (CIP) to change the format and look out 15 years instead of just five. We also added a 20-year equipment replacement plan. This all helped us prepare a long-term financial plan. It has also puts us in a good position to anticipate what may come down the road in the future. Right now, like most other governments we are watching the situation with state and federal funding and potential tariffs to see what impact that has on us.

**In looking at your work history, I see that the City of Shakopee is the fourth local government you've worked at in Minnesota. How did your previous positions help prepare you for your current role?**

Working with the various governments has been very beneficial to my professional development. All the organizations I've worked for have been a little different from each other. I started at Carver County and then moved to the City of Waseca, and then the City of Brooklyn Center. I learned something at each spot that I was able to take with me from each role. I can say that at each location, I was able to be involved with a project that provided a new type of experience. Each position had slightly different responsibilities. At the City of Waseca and in Carver County, I had responsibility for payroll. The City of Brooklyn Center operates two off-sale liquor stores. Now, in Shakopee, I have the opportunity to work with other departments on some of our larger economic development projects.

**Did you always want to be a finance director?**

I went to college for accounting, but working in local government wasn't what I originally had in mind. I'm not

sure many people go to school thinking they'll end up in this role. For me, a job with one of the big four accounting firms seemed attractive. I started at Abdo Eick & Meyers in an audit role. At the time, I was just happy to have a job and was planning on gaining some experience before deciding what I really wanted to do. As it turned out, I was working with local government clients and decided to switch over. Since then, I've never really looked back. I really enjoy the work that I'm doing, especially working in a growing city like Shakopee. We have a unique culture and a great team. I work with some really kind, intelligent, and creative people. Like most other cities, we identified a set of core values including integrity, accountability, and a desire to be welcoming, but we also include fun as a value.

**That is unique—I don't think I've ever seen another city with fun as a value, but I can see how it fits with Shakopee's role as an entertainment area.**

It's true, too, and it does come into play. Our city council is working on taking advantage of state legislation that allows us to create a social district. In Minnesota, a social district allows people to carry and consume alcohol as they walk the streets within a designated area, and we see this as having a positive impact for our entertainment area—getting people there and having them go between a concert, the horse track, and restaurants. I would also say that having fun at work does make a difference, and there are little things that can contribute to a fun atmosphere. It isn't uncommon to have various fun little activities throughout the month such as bike rides and chili cook-offs. The other day, the city organized an event that allowed staff to go skating at the ice arena during lunch. Within the finance department, we also teamed up with our communications team to create a fun video highlighting our taxpayer receipt.

**Let's talk about your taxpayer receipt. The city was recognized as part of GFOA's fiscal fluency challenge for**

**what you did with it. Can you describe how it's different than traditional reporting?**

Our taxpayer receipt is a tool on our website that allows you to enter the value of their home, and it will provide an itemized receipt of how much they paid for various city services with property taxes. The receipt looks like one you would get from a store. It's a pretty simple concept, but one that works. I don't think people really care what the overall city budget is, but they do care what, specifically, they're paying for. The taxpayer receipt puts it in their perspective and provides information on what their city property taxes support.

**What was the public's reaction when you rolled this out?**

The reaction has been great, but we've also worked hard to really communicate it. We worked with our communications department to market the tool and try and raise awareness. It was featured on the city's social media channels. We also created a fun video that takes a comedic approach. I mentioned that one of the city's core values is fun and this video fits that. You should take a look; they did a great job. We ended up getting over 15,000 views in the first couple of weeks from posting it, which says something about a finance video.

**Why do you think finance officers struggle to communicate financial information?**

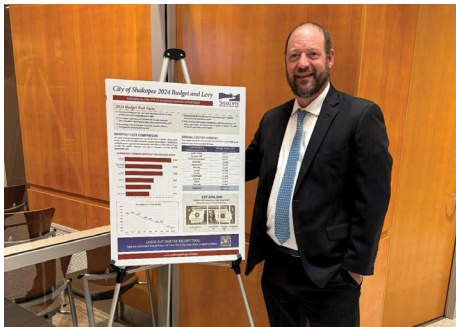
I would agree that it's difficult. If you think about it, we are really trying to communicate for two different audiences at the same time. On one side, we need



**Shakopee finds a fun way to talk about property taxes**  
Really. Take a look:

[youtube.com/watch?v=5DpuyRuv2iM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5DpuyRuv2iM)





The City of Shakopee's Budget Board is a single poster that visually communicates quick facts, making the city's budget more relatable for residents.



to comply with GASB regulations and include everything that is required by GASB—some of which hardly makes sense to me, and I have an accounting degree. On the other side, we have our elected officials and members of the public. The terminology is confusing. Local governments in general use a lot of jargon. I think we need to really focus on using plain language. On top of that, when you involve numbers, especially big numbers, most people can't relate. Plus, these financial reports and budget books end up being 200 pages or more. I believe most people would prefer a cliff notes version, if it was available.

**I know from my own experience, writing a concise summary can be more difficult than a long explanation. Would you agree?**

Oh yeah. With me, when I'm writing something, I want to tie out every penny and explain every minor difference, when I should focus on the audience perspective and look at the big picture. In my view, the public just wants to know how decisions impact them and quick information on what they're getting next year. I know GFOA has been promoting rethinking budgeting—you could create another project and call it "end overthinking budgeting."

**Is there something that you wished the public understood about the city's finances that you don't think they quite comprehend?**

I don't think people realize how much value they get for their tax dollars. This

is why we implemented the taxpayer receipt. We've also created what we call the budget board. It's a single poster that communicates quick facts. I don't believe anyone really wants to read a long narrative anyway—just relatable facts.

**Since you live in a different city from where you work, how much attention do you pay to your own city's budget?**

Well, actually, to be honest, very little. I will click on links if I see something interesting on social media. At times it's nice to see what they're up to. I live in Victoria. From what I've seen, they do a really good job, but I can't really tell you anything in detail.

**Somewhat funny that for all the effort that goes into getting Shakopee's residents to understand the city budget, you don't look at your own city's budget.**

I guess. Probably a terrible thing for me to say, right? Thinking about it now, I'm more concerned with what I pay. When my property tax statement comes, I open it to see that I'm paying. I do care about what the city is doing if it does impact me on a personal level. If they were building a park near my house or a remodel of a city facility, those type of things I would be interested in.

**I understand what you're saying. I think I'm the same way. I pay attention to what impacts me. In my mind, I don't need to worry about the details in the operating budget because I trust the city's finance professionals to worry about that level of detail and continue to provide quality services. Would you agree?**

Yeah. I would say that's accurate. Finance directors take our roles as stewards of taxpayer money very seriously. We try to be transparent. We also work to make sure we're providing value for those dollars.

**What do you think you can do to help build trust as a finance officer?**

That's a great question because I think it can be difficult. In Shakopee, we've tried to relate finance information on a personal level with the taxpayer receipt and focus on communications. However, while trust is difficult to earn, it can be easily lost. Part of building trust is making sure nothing bad happens. However, as finance officers, I think the public perception of us is interconnected. If something unethical or irresponsible happens in a different form of government or in a city in a completely different part of the state, that might hurt all of us.

**I agree, and it's part of what makes public finance a unique industry. To some extent, even though we serve different governments, we are in this together. I had the privilege of participating in the Minnesota GFOA conference a few years ago, and I can say there is definitely a connected group of finance offices. It was one of the best state conferences I've ever attended. How did you get involved with the Minnesota GFOA?**

I actually got involved first with the national GFOA when I was working in Carver County. It was probably a few years before I did anything with the Minnesota GFOA. I remember going to the Minnesota GFOA annual conference and having a great time. The conference was awesome. After that, I slowly started getting involved more and more. I served on the conference committee for a number of years. I was willing to volunteer wherever I was able to help and have been involved with mentorship and the technology committee, and I served as the president in 2023 and for five years on the executive board. From those experiences, I've met so many people, and that has real value. People are able to connect and then leverage that relationship when we are back in the office to answer questions.

**Now that you've been involved with planning the Minnesota GFOA Conference, what's the secret? How do you put on a conference that creates those meaningful connections?**

First, I appreciate you saying that we put on a good conference. The members of the planning committee are all volunteers. I like to think that we bring together a nice mix of people who have done it before with others who can contribute fresh ideas. We put a lot of emphasis on making sure we find engaging speakers and that topics are relevant. We also have a committee that is very passionate about getting people together to socialize, meet new people, and have fun.

**The conference I was at, you hosted a bags (also known as corn hole) tournament that was fun and a great way to meet people.**

Yes. We've done that for a few years now. It's a great event. Last year we also hired a company that brought in arcade games, pool tables, dart boards, and other things like that. We usually have live music, too. We've also been lucky to have a great venue that brings people together. And as a result of those connections made during the conference, it's much easier to reach out when I have a problem or question.

**Obviously, the local connections provide a lot of value for state level GFOA associations. If you were to compare the benefits you get from the Minnesota GFOA versus GFOA, how would you describe it?**

I really enjoy participating in both. They are similar but also very different, and I think both provide a lot of value. From a Minnesota GFOA perspective, a lot comes down to proximity. I'm more willing to reach out to other finance officers from Minnesota because we face similar issues related to the local economy or state statutes. The national GFOA really has great resources that we can't produce at the state level. I love some of the research that you guys do. I read the articles in *GFR* and appreciate the different lenses that you can apply and how it helps me challenge the status quo or think about things from a different perspective. I

also think GFOA does a wonderful job on the federal level to track what we need to know. The library of best practices is nice when you need them. I could keep going—the CPFO program, the Leadership Academy—there are a lot of resources. In my opinion, GFOA also puts on the second best conference that I go to every year.

**One thing I wanted to ask you about is the Minnesota GFOA mentoring program. A lot of organizations struggle to develop a successful program.**

Our mentorship program is something we're proud of. Originally, we borrowed a few ideas from one of the organization's corporate members who has a successful program, but it has evolved and is now an important part of the Minnesota GFOA. We started the program in 2013. Participation rates have varied each year; for the first few years we would be around ten mentor and mentee pairs, but lately we've been much higher. This year we have 34 pairs. We start the process in the fall at the conference and host a training and luncheon with everyone participating. There you meet your mentor/mentee. We also provide training where we can set expectations. We bring back previous years' participants to talk about their experience. Now, when we meet, we ask everyone who has been involved with the mentoring program to raise their hand, and it's probably one-third of the audience. It's a cool thing to see how many people have benefited.

**How do you recruit people for the program? Do you struggle to find enough mentors and mentees to create the pairs?**

The program is open to anyone. We've had pretty good interest from people early in their career, or others who have recently gone through a job transition. There are quite a few people each year who get hired by local governments who don't have any public-sector experience, or who may be coming in from another state. I think we do a good job of trying to match mentors and mentees with similar interests. Matching can be difficult. I'll admit it can be difficult when you have a

senior-level mentor with someone very early in their career. I think some of our best mentors are those who recently completed the program as mentees.

**Are there any mentors that you benefited from in your career?**

I don't know if I had a formal mentor, but I definitely have learned things from each boss I had at different jobs. To some extent, I wish I could turn back the clock and participate as a mentee when I was earlier in my career. It would have saved me a lot of stress and time. Looking at it differently, I guess the network I have here in Minnesota, along with connections from GFOA, provides a similar experience. If I have a question or run into a problem, I'm able to make a call. To me, that is one of the coolest things about working in local government. I'm not sure there's another job out there where I can reach out to a competing organization and get honest, helpful advice. At the same time, I love when I'm able to share what's worked for me with others.

**If you were able to turn back the clock and take your career in a different direction, is there something you would do differently?**

I don't think so. It's now been 20 years since I started working in local government. I get to work on complex projects that are unique and challenging but that also benefit the community. I get to work with some really good people. I also get to have fun while I'm doing it. What's not to love? 🍷



**Mike Mucha** is deputy executive director for GFOA and director of GFOA's Research and Consulting Center.