



WITH SAMANTHA BABICH BY MIKE MUCHA

Mike Mucha, GFOA's deputy executive director, spoke with **Samantha Babich**, the chief administration officer for the Renton Regional Fire Authority, about a career in fire service, what it's like to build a finance organization, the benefits of transparent budget decisions, and how governments can improve their recruiting.

Mike: Can you tell us about the Renton Regional Fire Authority and your role as chief administration officer?

Samantha: Renton Regional Fire Authority, or Renton RFA as we call it, was established in April of 2016 when Renton voters decided to separate fire protection and life safety services from the City of Renton and create a special purpose district. We originally began operations in July 2016. Our organization serves over 138,000 community members across 38 square miles of response area, just south of

Seattle, and last year, we provided more than 23,000 emergency responses to the Renton community and surrounding jurisdictions. We have five divisions: response operations; EMS, health, and safety; the office of the fire marshal; support services; and administration. I joined the team two weeks after operations began and quickly took on the role of the chief administration officer over the administration division. As CAO, I oversee finance, IT, human resources, communications, and administrative support. Together, these sections conduct the behind-the-scenes work that makes the more visible aspects of the organization possible.

That's interesting that residents voted to create another government. It seems like we hear more focus around consolidation. What was the driver for creating a Regional Fire Authority?

We are seeing an increasing number of RFAs pop up across the state. One of the biggest benefits we have experienced

is the ability to diversify our funding. Typically, fire departments under the umbrella of a city are beholden to property tax as a primary funding source. As you know, property taxes are based on assessed property values and can often contain revenue growth restrictions. In Washington, there is a one percent cap on property tax revenue growth year-over-year, which does not keep pace with inflation. When we branched out to form the RFA, the voters also approved what is called a fire benefit charge, or FBC, which allows for an additional funding source. Unlike property tax, a FBC is based on the size, risks, and resources needed to protect a structure, making it a much more predictable source of funding, and more directly related to our organization's cost to protect life and property. When you pair these two funding sources together, they provide more financial stability to the organization and more freedom to not only bolster existing services but truly assess and respond to the needs of the community.

Before accepting your current role in Renton, you worked for another fire service organization. Is there something specific about fire service that you enjoy?

When I was in college, I thought I wanted to be an attorney. I received a degree in justice, but I quickly realized that criminal justice was not for me. In the 90s I worked in the .com and technology sector in the Seattle area and found that to be very stimulating, but it lacked the public service element I was drawn to. In 2003, I moved to Idaho and was working on finishing the basement of my home. I reached out to Kootenai County Fire and Rescue to approve a permit that I needed to move forward. When I went in to discuss the permit, I also found out there was an opening for a business manager. I applied, got the job, and fell in love with the work and the people. My role was to manage the administrative support functions for the organization, but I really just became a part of the family. I enjoyed all of the challenges, the opportunities, and the success stories from my time there.

That's a great story, as other governments struggle to hire finance officers.

It is. I didn't really know much at all about fire service and wasn't expecting to apply for a job. And it turns out that I didn't even need the permit I went to discuss. You just never know where or when an opportunity will open up to you.

When you started with Renton RFA, the organization was brand new. What was it like to develop policies and processes from scratch?

It was both stressful and exhilarating. It felt a lot like working in the .com industry in its early years where we were building something from the ground up and anything was possible. When I went to work for Kootenai County Fire and Rescue, they were working to modernize their systems and processes, and I was able to bring my knowledge and experience in the tech sector to the public sector. When I started at Renton RFA, the chief asked what I wanted from the position, and I said that I loved building and wanted to be a part of creating an organization from the ground up. Turns out, the organization was a good fit for what I wanted in my career journey, and I think I have been a good fit for the needs of the RFA as well.

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What was the most challenging part?

We didn't know what we didn't know. We were learning, building, and growing all at the same time. Coming from Idaho, I wasn't familiar with the Budgeting, Accounting, and Reporting Systems (BARS) used in Washington. Our first finance person came from the private sector, so there was a bit of a learning curve for her in government accounting. When we started, we had no chart of accounts, no policies, and no ERP system. So, like I said, we did a lot of learning and building at the same time. Kind of like designing and building a bridge as you are crossing it.

Are you still adding policies and implementing new functions, or have things stabilized?

It's been almost seven years, but I would say that we are still adding new policies. One of our financial analysts came back from the Washington GFOA conference with information about GFOA's Distinguished Budget Presentation Award. She asked if we could apply for next year, but I suggested that we do it now, because why wait? We ended up submitting it for the award in February. I'm proud of what we produced. It's concise and really communicates the story of Renton RFA.



It connects our values, mission, and guiding principles to how we spend money. It also made us take a hard look at our finance policies to ensure that we had all the proper ones in place.

Is there anything you would have done differently, or do you have any advice for other finance officers who may be facing the challenge of creating a finance organization?

I'm not sure we would have done anything differently—maybe we'd have decided on our ERP system a little earlier. It took us a while to implement the system, but having the technology in place is necessary. In terms of overall guidance, I would say start with the end in mind. You need a clear vision of what the organization should look like and then work backward. I had ten years of finance experience in the fire service before coming to Renton RFA and felt like I had a pretty good feel for what elected officials and the fire chief would want from our finance team. Once we knew what that end looked like, we were able to develop processes, reports, and many other little things to support the plan.

The RFA website and budget talk a lot about the organization's mission, vision, and guiding principles. How do those align with financial processes?

Our vision, mission, and values posters are everywhere in our facilities. We all live by them. Our organization's vision is to make our community safer, healthier, and stronger. In finance, we often use this as our compass when setting our budget. Everything we fund should tie back to this vision. For example, we have recently funded a new service in our budget called FDCARES. This program is intended to service frequent 911 users with non-emergent care needs and provide proactive services to remove their dependency on the 911 system and the hospital emergency departments. This not only improves the level of care for our most vulnerable community members but also takes stress off our emergency

responders by ensuring that they are ready for truly emergent calls. As far as our values of professionalism, integrity, leadership, loyalty, accountability, and respect are concerned, we lean into these when we are unsure of what the right decision or course of action is. The right thing to do is usually pretty clear when you use our values as a lens.

Having finance staff work together with fire personnel is a focus of GFOA's partnership with the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) to develop better budget practices for local government fire service and to ensure that fire chiefs have an understanding of finance issues. How would you describe the relationship between administrative services and fire chief at RFA?

I'm thrilled to hear about the joint effort between GFOA and IAFC. We have membership in both organizations, and the collaboration this project is working to achieve is spot on. In my current and former organizations, they embraced the CAO as a position to help advise the fire chief just like any other division chief. The relationship between administrative services and the fire chief can be a challenge if you are not on the same page about how funds are allocated. Fortunately, I have a very positive working relationship with my fire chief and enjoy coming to work each day. Finance is often perceived as the one who only says 'no' and who holds the purse strings too tight. As finance officers, I think the best thing we can do is to be as open and transparent as possible.

Fire chiefs are really under a lot of pressure to perform, but protecting the community and ensuring the health and safety of our first responders is always a priority. Apparatus and equipment are highly specialized and expensive. Staffing response operations 24x7x365 is also expensive. When I started in Idaho, the fire chief built the budget, and finance would ensure that expenses aligned with revenue. Because much of that work was done in a silo, it seemed like we were always defending the budget and resource allocations to the firefighters. So, in 2006, we opened up the budget process to everyone in the organization and really engaged our membership to help us determine our priorities. It was amazing to see how many firefighters came to meetings on their own time to help guide the budget process. Having discussions



in the open helped make those decisions more transparent and strengthened the trust between the firefighters and administration.

In addition to our elected officials and our citizen advisors, approximately ten percent of our Renton RFA members are involved in the budget process in some way. Most are budget managers with responsibility for either a division, a section, a special team, or a special program/project. It is a very collaborative process. Sometimes discussions can get tense. People have opinions, and that's okay. Elected officials, leadership, and even new firefighters can provide feedback and weigh in. We want to have all of the ideas out there. I love the way we do it now. There are no secrets and no hidden agendas, just complete transparency.

I believe strongly that while many new fire chiefs could benefit from better knowledge of finance, at the same time administrative staff need to really get out and spend time with the first responders. By getting boots on the ground, you get to see what their needs are and gain a greater sense of and empathy for what it is that they do each and every day to protect our residents.

You also oversee IT. How has cloud technology changed the way that fire service operates?

Cloud computing is great. I fell in love with technology tools to streamline processes using automated flows in 2005. At Renton RFA we leverage everything we can out of the Microsoft power platform. We have

reduced paper to support sustainability and reduce clutter. Most of our forms are electronic which trigger workflows that send information to the teams that need it, ensuring timely information flow throughout the organization. The IT team here has also worked to develop two automated bots. They work to gather and analyze data from our IT systems and publish information to screens that we have hung throughout our offices and firehouses. Our ERP system is entirely in the cloud, which allows us to work from any device anywhere, at any time. We take the approach that we want to make use of technology for everything that it can do and save the human touch for things that need a human touch. Coming to work is exciting and has a start-up feel to it. We don't have anyone telling us no; it's about what's next.

That's impressive. When used strategically, technology can help lessen the impact of hiring challenges that many governments face. I also learned a bit about WA Fire Careers. Can you explain more about this program?

One of the challenges in the fire service is recruiting—it's just hard. We have more retirements than incoming firefighters. At Renton RFA one of our primary goals is to build a membership that is representative of the community we serve. In the South King County area, it seemed like we were all trying to hire the same people, at the same time. We participate in a joint training consortium with other agencies which allows us to train together, but it also means that we are all hiring simultaneously,



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and only two times per year. In our area, candidates were routinely getting four or five job offers for each academy. When someone accepts a conditional job offer from an agency, the agency then incurs costs for medical testing, psych evaluations, background checks, and gear to prepare the individual for the academy. Some departments had the same costs for the same candidate. When the candidate finally selected their final choice, the other departments were left to start over or lose a spot in the academy. It was painful. With WA Fire Careers, Renton RFA joined Enumclaw Fire, King County Fire District #20, Puget Sound Fire, and Valley Regional Fire to approach recruiting and hiring collaboratively. Our joint recruiting efforts make the process

more accessible. Candidates take one test for all agencies and can get on a list for any of them. Firefighters then interview with the departments that select them and rank the departments they want to work for. At the same time, departments are able to rank candidates. We then use algorithms to match candidates to their highest-ranked organization, and each will receive only one job offer. We're no longer competing with neighboring organizations for the same people.

What a great idea, and a great example of governments working together. Do you see programs like this working for government finance officers?

I don't know. Hiring firefighters is much different than hiring finance officers, but I'd like to think that there could be opportunities for local governments to collaborate. If we were able to create more standardization, it might even be easier to fill positions and be more productive when new hires start.

As someone who has spent most of your career in public service, and with some time spent in human resources, what do you think the key to attracting talent is? How can government recruit the next generation of public administrators?

Government agencies need to approach their recruitment strategy with authenticity. As a leader, be honest with yourself about what your organization can and can't do. We tend to get so caught up in the formality of government interactions that we forget to be personable and help potential candidates truly feel connected to the work we do in our communities every day. My division has a great communications team, and that is something I think we do differently from other government agencies when we market our positions.

I'll give you an example. We recently hired a new human resources manager. He is a 30-year human resource veteran and former vice president of a major private sector organization. Realistically, we knew we could not pay him as much as he could make in the private sector, but we were able to bring him on board by positively communicating our culture, our diversity, our style of leadership, and our mission. A lot of people in the job market right now are seeking work that not only makes them feel valued but makes them feel like

they're providing value to others, and those are the people we want on our team.

We hired our IT manager in a very similar way. He came to us as a highly experienced professional out of the Seattle IT scene, but he was woefully tired of the negative culture and the lack of work-life balance. We showed him how he could have a home with our organization, and he came aboard. Not long after he was hired, he was doing some IT work at a firehouse when a community member in distress came in but could only speak Spanish. As a native Spanish speaker, he jumped in to translate and ultimately helped ensure she received the care she needed as quickly as possible. He later shared with me that the experience proved to him that he was meant to be here at our organization. He is a public servant at heart. That is the type of people you want on your team, and that is the type of people you attract when you approach your recruitment strategy with genuine authenticity.

I want to switch topics and ask your opinion on GFOA. You are well into your career in local government but only joined GFOA recently. What motivated you to become a member, and what do you hope to get out of your membership?

We have always encouraged membership in GFOA for our finance members, but when we applied for the budget award, I asked about getting my own membership. For most of my career, I thought that GFOA was all about finance, finance, and more finance. And it is, but there is more, too. I was recently looking at the program for the Portland conference and noticed there is quite a bit for someone like me.

From a financial perspective, I feel like I have more to learn, and I know that I will be able to use resources from GFOA as we get more involved in long-term financial planning. I'm very excited about the partnership with IAFC and am looking forward to getting involved more in GFOA. The ability to bring together different parts of the organization and build relationships is critical. I love that GFOA is focused on relationship building, both within finance and with other areas of government. 📧

Mike Mucha is the deputy executive director of GFOA.