

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Jim Kupfer

Chief Financial Officer for Public Works,
Kenosha County, Wisconsin

Jim Kupfer talks with GFOA's **Mike Mucha** about his recent experiences with the county, including overseeing infrastructure improvements, managing an ERP project, and serving in the county's COVID-19 vaccine clinic.



“
I look for
individuals
who raise
their hand,
get involved,
and take
initiative.”

Jim Kupfer, the chief financial officer for the Public Works department, has been with Kenosha County for 10 years. The county's finance team includes an overall chief financial officer, plus dedicated positions to oversee finances of public works, the sheriff's department, and human services. Finance staff are located in both a central finance office and throughout the decentralized departments. The county has benefited from a long-term relationship with Kenosha-based accounting firm Andrea and Orendorff, which provides staffing services that include the department-level CFO positions and other key staff. This unique arrangement provides greater ability to recruit, maintain existing employees, and provide stable leadership.

Before coming to the county, Jim worked in the private sector in executive-level finance positions. He credits this experience with allowing him to be successful over the past 10 years at the county—even though the private sector and public sector are very different, experiences carry

over. As the CFO for Public Works, Jim oversees finances for facilities, parks, planning and development, highways, the county's partnership with University of Wisconsin-Madison, and two golf courses. His experience in the private sector in Kenosha County allows him to better understand the needs of these industries and to help coordinate county resources to better collaborate with area businesses.

At the same time, Jim notes that working in county government really can be very different from the private sector, especially the constant challenge of balancing competing priorities. While the county works to support economic development, build strong infrastructure, and develop educational and recreational opportunities, it must also ensure that the needs of public safety, human services, public health, children and family services, and more are being met. Jim explained that the budget is critical for not only identifying the financial cost, but also identifying priorities—and budget decisions often involve many considerations beyond what makes good financial sense. And the county offers a lot to people of Kenosha County, with limited resources.



When asked what skills or traits he looks for in his team members, Jim said that technology skills and subject matter expertise are important, adding, “I look for individuals who raise their hand, get involved, and take initiative.” Whether in government or in the private sector, taking the initiative is something that helps bring people together, solve problems, and ensure that services continue to meet needs. Being able to take on new projects while making sure existing programs and services operate smoothly defines most successful local governments—something that is especially true of Kenosha County.

Approximately 5 years ago, the county started the type of new project that many governments have come to dread—replacing an ERP system. Jim volunteered to take a lead role, and he coordinated both internal and external teams throughout the project. Drawing from Jim’s experience in the private sector, as well as the collective knowledge and experience of many others throughout the county, the project went live on time, on budget, and for the planned scope.

What made the project successful? Jim provides a few tips for other governments. First, find someone who has been through an implementation before. One reason that ERP projects are difficult is that most governments do them so infrequently. Second, document expectations up front, clearly define milestones, and find consultants that you can trust to deliver—and then don’t be afraid to challenge and push your vendors. Last, make sure to involve people who will be using the system. Allow them to step up, and give them ability to do so. Senior management needs to be supportive and to recognize the importance of training and testing. Jim credits the ability of staff from around the county wanting to get involved and participating together—with support from the top—for the county’s success.

As with all local governments, the past 18 months have been challenging. For Kenosha County, that’s meant dealing with the impacts of COVID-19 while continuing to provide critical services related to both the pandemic and normal operations of the county. Jim explains that in the Public Works department, things did not slow down.

Members of the finance team and employees throughout Kenosha County came together to volunteer at the County’s vaccine clinic, pictured above.

In fact, the county’s economic growth continued to accelerate during the pandemic, creating the need for new infrastructure. County staff needed to adapt and find new ways to work together, even when the office was closed during the pandemic—and Jim felt that staff were prepared to work from home and that the transition went smoothly. Over the past year, the county has continued with its capital plan and has worked with municipalities in the county to assist with highway and infrastructure projects, bike trails, lakefront redevelopment, and downtown revitalization efforts. In addition, working with partners at the Kenosha Area Business Alliance, Jim’s team in Public Works—which includes the Planning and Development division of the county—helps coordinate additional outreach for businesses, job training programs, and continued infrastructure improvements to support Kenosha’s growing industries.



About Kenosha County

Kenosha County is located in southeast Wisconsin, between Chicago and Milwaukee. With a population of approximately 170,000, the county is the eighth most populous in the state, but it has led the way in terms of economic development. Since 2013, the county has added more than **11,375 jobs** and seen more than **\$2.4 billion in new investment** and **20 million square feet of development**. The area has the second-largest concentration of manufacturing in the United States, and access to metropolitan areas in Illinois and Wisconsin provides an additional competitive advantage for distribution and logistics. Over the past few years, Amazon and Uline have increased their operations in the county considerably, resulting in more jobs but also more traffic congestion and demand for infrastructure improvements.



Since 2000, Kenosha County's population has grown at a rate of

12.6%

(higher than the state and national growth rates of 6 percent and 9.7 percent respectively.)



Recent technology updates, including the implementation of the new ERP system a few years ago, allowed for more remote work. Jim also sees the last year as proof that governments can adapt and that finance staff in particular can volunteer and contribute to the community in ways beyond a traditional finance role.

Over the past few months, the county's Health Services division coordinated efforts across the county to set up and run a vaccine clinic. The Facilities division was able to secure space using an old department store and staff from across the county had the opportunity to volunteer in the clinic to help with patient registration, controlling crowds, and other administrative tasks. Jim, along with other volunteers from the finance team, volunteered for regular shifts. No one complained about the extra tasks; they just wanted to help. Even though this meant doing more on off hours or on weekend for to take care of his regular duties, Jim said it felt good to help and to work hand in hand with other county employees to help Kenosha residents. It was a great team effort. In addition, other staff from the finance team had opportunities to use customer service skills and take shifts in a county call center that was set up to provide

information and answer questions related to the vaccine. Employees from all over the county came together to help.

As the county works now to fully re-open and move beyond COVID, finance staff continue to partially work from home. While managing a team working remotely is different, Jim finds that some of his initial concerns did not materialize. For example, supervising employees wasn't that different. Staff were held accountable for working getting done. In addition, concerns about working productively at home (or without home disruptions) really weren't that different from being in the office. "At home it's your child asking you to make them lunch or needing quick help with a school zoom session. In the office, it's your co-worker coming over to chat about the weather, weekend plans, or the Packers," he said. Both environments have challenges, but at Kenosha County, he's found that staff like working from home, and the county has been able to maintain communications and teamwork, and even save on some facilities costs. Jim expects that schedules will be more flexible with some people working occasionally from home.

Several world-class companies are headquartered in Kenosha County, including Snap-on Tools, Jockey International and Uline (pictured above).

Going forward, there is no shortage of new opportunities or ways to get involved in new projects as the county continues to grow and as other governments in the area pursue their own economic development plans. Jim highlights GFOA as a resource for new ideas, new perspective, and subject matter expertise that may not exist at the county. For example, throughout the county's ERP implementation a few years ago, staff relied on GFOA consultants for an external perspective. Now, as the county looks forward to implementing new GASB standards for leasing, using funds from the American Rescue Plan Act, or migrating the county's ERP system to the cloud, he expects GFOA to be a valuable resource in providing training, answers to questions, connections to other practitioners, or simply new ideas.

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