

Q&A

with City of Orlando Chief Financial Officer **Chris McCullion**



CHRIS MCCULLION

GFOA's **Timothy Martin** connected with City of Orlando Chief Financial Officer **Chris McCullion** as part of GFOA's new series, FINE(ance) Fridays. This article was adapted from Episode 5, "See the Products of My Life Improving My Community."

In finance, working your way up the professional ladder toward the position of chief financial officer can be the culmination of a lifelong pursuit toward career excellence and an acknowledgment of the highest level of leadership skills. Christopher McCullion rose to his current role as the CFO of Orlando, the fourth largest city in Florida, by the time he hit his mid-30s. That conversation alone would be worth tuning in; however, there is more.

Go to gfoa.org/fineance-fridays for a full recording of the Q&A for the rest of the story.

How did you end up in local government? Was this something you knew you wanted to do from the time you went to college?

At the time I was looking at colleges, I thought about medical school and really considered veterinary school. In my younger life, I thought I would enjoy working with animals. I worked at a veterinary hospital through high school, which just seemed like a natural fit. When I started, my first declared major was microbiology and cell science, which is a world away from what I ultimately ended up doing, but that was what I was thinking about at the time.

So, how did you find local government? Was it something that happened while you were at the University of Florida?

I decided fairly early on that microbiology wasn't really what I wanted to do. I looked back at what credits I already had from high school advanced placement classes, and I had taken a class on the federal government. As a placeholder, I switched to political science. The more I got into those classes, the more I really liked them. I also started to take a lot more classes on state and local government. Those classes were kind of eye-opening for me.

The real entry into a career in local government service started with an internship that I got with the City of Gainesville. One of my political science professors encouraged me to apply, and I did. I had a great interview with the administrative services director. And one thing led to another, and I ended up being offered an internship in the city's Office of Management and Budget. That was my first professional job, and it was my first finance-related job. At that point I didn't think it would turn into a permanent career; it was really just something that one of my professors encouraged me to consider. So that's how I started.

So how did you move on from the internship to a full-time job?

The internship went well, and within a few months the budget director encouraged me to apply for a regular position as a staff assistant. I ended up getting that job, and as a staff assistant they gave me opportunities to work on the city budget, interact with departments, and work with the city manager. It was pretty much like a budget analyst in training.

After I had been doing that part-time for a year while going to class, one of the budget analyst positions opened up. I applied and was offered the job. At the time, I hadn't yet graduated, but I had been there long enough to show them that I really loved the work. They took a risk on me in that I had the job before I technically met all the requirements.

Looking back, I'm grateful to have had that first opportunity and experience in local government. I'm glad I took those initial jobs—the internship and the staff assistant job. Neither one was one that I had my sights on, but I was able to get a foot in the door, get to know people, and prove myself. In my case, it really worked out in my favor and set me on the path for who I am today.

We see this with a lot of our members, who got into local government by accident and then ended up making a successful career out of it. What was it that hooked you? What is it that you think makes working in local government such a rewarding career?

The best part for me is that everything I'm working on—whether it's building a budget for a capital project, forecasting for our long-term financing plan, or trying to help the police chief figure out how to finance new radios for his officers—involves the community that I live in. And so, every day, I get to work on things that improve the quality of life for me, and for my friends and neighbors here in my own community.

You know, other levels of government—federal government and state government—do important work, but it's really at the local government level where I can look out my office window and see the projects I'm working on. As I look out the window right now in my office, I see the Dr. Phillips Performing Arts Center, which is a world-class performing arts center that I've worked on for many, many years, and it's right out my window. I just love that I'm able to invest time and effort and put something into improving the community that I that I live in.

Speaking of your community now, how did you transition to the City of Orlando?

I ended up going for my master's degree at the University of South Florida. At that time, I started thinking about what was next. Gainesville is an incredible college town that's got a lot to offer. I knew that I could have had a great career in Gainesville, but I wanted to try something new. At the time, I was in my mid-20s. I was just looking for the next place to grow and start establishing some roots. Orlando is an hour and a half away from Gainesville. I had plenty of friends here. I started looking at job openings in Orlando and just happened to find an open budget analyst position at the city of Orlando, something that I had done for several years in Gainesville.

FINE(ance) Fridays



Each **FINE(ance) Fridays** podcast features a candid conversation with a GFOA member. We talk about their life's journey and the important people who helped shape their path through a successful career in public finance. In their pursuit of building stronger communities and fiscal responsibility, you begin to see patterns emerge: a hardworking drive, a dedication to safeguarding public funds, a willingness to share and pass their success on to others, and a good sense of humor.

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Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts

You did have an interesting start to your career in Orlando. Is it correct that you were also economic development manager and city treasurer when you were 28 years old? How does that happen?

Sometimes I tell people that I was at the right place at the right time. There was a lot of change and opportunity when I first started here at the City of Orlando. That's only half the story, though. The other half is that I came in with a skill set that was needed. In my short amount of time in Gainesville, I learned a lot. I had some great mentors, and the City of Gainesville was incredibly well run, so it set a great example.

I was also not afraid to try something different. I had never been an economic development manager. It was one of the departments that I supported on the budget side. The opening was an administrative job that included helping with the budget for the department and helping the economic development director. It allowed me to work on some great economic incentive deals and other exciting things that I

wanted to try out. I learned a tremendous amount in a short amount of time in economic development.

Overall, the experience added to the layers on insight and knowledge that prepared me for future opportunities that came up down the road. For example, during my time in the department, I was able to interact with the mayor and establish a relationship. This led to the mayor appointing me as city treasurer. Each step of a professional journey is important, and for me, it built on prior steps.

I think in higher levels of organizations, not just in government, a breadth of experience is really important. That experience can help you see things from different perspectives. Now, even on my own team, if there are opportunities for individuals to move out of the finance department and into an operating department to learn some new things, I always encourage them to take them. Take those chances, because in my experience, nothing but good things come from trying new things and broadening your perspective.

For those new to government, any advice you would give based on your career so far?

Relationships are very important. Trust is very important. Having confidence in your team is very important. So treat every opportunity as one to continue building those relationships.

Would you also say that it's important to prepare for the unexpected? I know that recently governments have been dealing with a lot of new situations, but wasn't it right after you became treasurer that the Great Recession happened?

Yes. I was appointed by the mayor in September 2008. Literally a week or two after that, Lehman Brothers went bankrupt, and that was one of the first major events that caused the Great Recession. I was responsible for three defined benefit pension plans—a lot of operating investment money. That was definitely a scary time. Even though I had some treasury experience in Gainesville, I really didn't have the background or knowledge or experience on my own to deal with something like that in a vacuum. In fact, it's probably rare for anyone to go through something like that and still be around the next time it happens.

Every morning was something different. The phone calls from the media, the newspapers, the local TV channels were all asking about the city's tax base, the city's pension plans, was the city going to be able to make pension payments. I did the best I could. But the reality is, it proved the importance of teams and teamwork. I had a lot of great people around me who had been here for a while, and they helped get me up to speed quickly. We did it together and stuck together. Somehow, we managed to work our way through it.

How long did it take the City of Orlando to come out of it and recover?

We have a special type of tourism here. You know, for many parents with young kids there is a trip to Disney World at some point, right? I know that many like to bring their children during the ages of five to seven. So even if they postponed a trip for a year or two, they eventually are going to try and come visit the park. We actually rebounded much more quickly than I ever anticipated. You know, Disney spent a lot of money during the Great Recession in their parks to create new and exciting offerings, so their investments during the downtime helped us to recover as well. I know other places weren't as lucky. We still talk about how slow the economic recovery was for some, and I know there are places in the country that were still struggling from the effects of the Great Recession, 15 years later.



Chris Answers Five Less-Serious Questions

What your favorite vacation spot? Is it Disney World?

Orlando has a lot to offer. In fact, we joke about staycations in our backyard and the fact we can go to these great resorts and have these great experiences, but I like to get out of town just like everybody else does. I actually just recently got back from Cape Cod. So that's near the top of my list now for a great vacation spot. Quiet. Great weather. I love Boston, too. I love the energy of cities. New Orleans is a favorite of mine. I love the history of that city and the culture there. Also, being in Florida, we have some great vacation spots. The Florida Keys are highlights and easy to get to. If anyone hasn't been there, I would definitely recommend that you take a look

What's a bucket list item that you'd like to accomplish soon?

I just got back from my first time to the Grand Canyon. I did that during the pandemic break when domestic travel was just about the only thing you can do. That was on my bucket list. I want to see more of Europe. I still have a lot to see in the United States, but hopeful that I can see some of the European cities I haven't been to.

If you could have one superpower, what would it be?

I think everybody always says flying. That seems like a pretty common one. That sounds kind of fun. Maybe I'd say predict the future although that may be kind of scary. So, I don't know. I'll just say flying.

Last question. When is Pi Day?

I know that one. Pi day is March 14.

Congratulations. I know that you would be surprised the number of people that get that answer wrong.

Yep. A good friend of mine is a high school math teacher. So, we always send each other a text on March 14. Hey, Happy Pi Day. Just a little math nerd humor.

Did the experiences that you went through during the Great Recession prepare you for the pandemic of 2020?

During the Great Recession, the challenges were different. However, there were similarities in that we were concerned about revenue. How are you going to be able to continue to provide high-quality services to your residents? We were able to identify our vulnerabilities on the revenue side and understand the importance of reserves and how to use them. And so, going into the pandemic, I was able to sort of point back to the policies that we established after the Great Recession and show people here the reason we were in a great position was that we made good decisions during the middle of a crisis. We worked to encourage decision-makers to continue making good, smart, strategic decisions in the middle of the pandemic.

Again, though we had a new situation where no one had much direct experience to rely on, we could draw parallels. How are we going to continue to provide police and fire support? Where should we be investing in our community to deal with the worst impacts of the crisis? I think we were a more resilient organization, having gone through the Great Recession, and that positioned us well to deal with the impacts of the pandemic. We're a year and a half or so into this. I don't know how long it's going to continue to impact us, but it certainly is. While things are open, Florida is still in a tough spot with the number of current COVID cases and residual impacts.

Back in April 2020, things shut down. The airport simply dropped to zero traffic. I have a chart on my wall that I look at just about every day, which shows the source of all the tax collections for the last couple years. Before the shutdown, we were collecting \$25 to \$30 million per month from the airport and it dropped to almost zero. You have to look at it a couple times and make sure you're reading the right line of the report because it just doesn't click in your brain.

We've really worked to diversify our economy here, but we're still driven by tourism, particularly in the metro area. We felt that during the pandemic. A lot of people suffered, and in local government, our job is about trying to improve the quality of life for people who live here. Not only were we working to make sure that the city could make payroll and pay vendors, but we also wanted to figure out how to support the community. Our mayor was great, providing confidence and support to the community and encouraging safety precautions.

We also really tried to think outside the box and do things that we wouldn't normally do. We were going into areas of public health, which are typically a state function here in Florida. We spent time trying to figure out how we could use city resources to help people. For example, we don't have a public health department—the county and the state have that. We saw ourselves as leaders in the community whose job it is to solve problems. We worked to find ways to support those other agencies doing this work. How can we support the county? How can we support the state? I'm proud of that with all things considered.

Solving problems and helping others is a common theme among finance officers and I want to ask you about a story you shared with me before about learning from your peer GFOA members in other governments. Can you tell our audience the story about how you were able to learn from others through GFOA, even early in your career?

When I was starting out as an entry level budget analyst, not all of us had GFOA memberships. Some at the city did, but I did not. When the *Government Finance Review* magazine came around, we all passed it around the office and read it. I remember that we even put a little sticker on the front so that we could write everyone's name on it to make sure they had a chance to read it. It was a hot commodity. Each magazine was passed around between all the junior analysts. It was an important learning opportunity. There was so much valuable information in there, especially as you're starting out in your government finance career. Case studies, lessons learned, best practices, trends—there was just a wealth of information there. For me, I was able to benefit from articles on finance, economic development, community development, land use. It's not just about the money. Everything that the GFOA hits on really touches all of the core functions of government. The magazine always considered the finance officer's role.

I learned a lot through reading the *Government Finance Review* early on in my career, and I still look forward to getting it every other month. I read every issue that comes out and I learn something from every issue. It is a real benefit that GFOA provides to its membership, and it's an excellent resource for people who are trying to build their understanding about this work that we do.

I'm glad that now you get your own copy now as a GFOA member.

I do. I finally worked my way up where I can have my own GFOA membership. However, I know that some people in the building don't have a membership, so I make sure that they get to see the magazine, too.

Timothy Martin is GFOA's senior manager for member engagement.



To listen to the full **FINE(ance) Fridays** conversation, like the role a finance officer plays in healing a community following an unspeakable tragedy (the 2016 Pulse nightclub mass shooting that left 49 people killed and 53 more wounded), go to gfoa.org/fineance-fridays or search for GFOA on your favorite podcast platform. Episodes 1-4 are also available for download or streaming. New episodes are released on Fridays.