

In Practice

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FINANCE

THE CITY OF FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA

Seizing the Benefits of Collaboration Across the Organization

BY KATIE LUDWIG

Like many coastal communities, the City of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, makes a priority of climate resiliency. Due in large part to collaboration among the Finance Department, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and the Public Works Department, the city is finding ways to move its sustainability and climate resiliency efforts forward. GFOA recently spoke with city leaders to learn more about how their departments collaborate and the benefits collaboration provides.

Laura Aker Reece, the director of OMB, explained that some of her office's "best work in collaboration over the past few years has been related to funding and moving

forward initiatives related to sustainability." The city plans to issue a \$200 million stormwater bond, an effort that has included OMB and Finance, as well as Public Works, whose role included advocating to the public, explaining the timing of the projects involved, and delivering the work.

OMB has two divisions: Budget/CIP and Grants and Structural Innovation. Much of the work of the Budget/CIP and Grants division is developing the city's capital improvement plan (CIP). "We're the central piece for developing plans for our CIP with the departments, working with Finance to figure out how to pay for them all within our current rate structures and financing ability," she said. "We also work on special projects, a little bit of everything,

depending on what's going on in the city, so we really see ourselves as part of every team in the city."

One of OMB's chief partners in the stormwater bond effort has been Nancy Gassman, the assistant public works director in charge of sustainability. She is responsible for fleet services, solid waste and recycling, environmental and regulatory affairs, sustainability and climate resilience, and stormwater operations. "It's an eclectic group, all working toward sustainability and resilience within the City of Fort Lauderdale," she explained.

Another partner on the stormwater bond effort is Susan Grant, the city's director of finance. Susan is a proponent of collaboration because "none of us knows everything."

She finds value in getting diverse opinions from people throughout the organization and believes collaboration is especially important in a big city like Fort Lauderdale to make sure that an idea is fully vetted before it moves forward.

Susan emphasized the importance of developing solid working relationships as a precursor to collaboration. “I think you have to develop those really good, solid working relationships with everyone you work with, and that involves communication and trust. You need those two things so you can be honest with people and tell them the story as it really is. Once we’re all on that same plane, and we know exactly what’s going on, we can solve problems better,” she said.

Nancy agreed about the importance of developing relationships and stressed that phone or face-to-face conversations are the best way. “We live in a world of email. All of us get somewhere between 100 and 150 emails a day, and if you really want to create relationships, you have to pick up the phone, or you have to walk down to their office from time to time. You can’t create relationships by

sending email. I walk down to Laura’s office a lot more than I used to,” she said.

“In addition to the informal relationships, we also try to make collaboration a formal process using things like our FL2STAT¹ quality management meetings,” explained Yvette Matthews, division manager. Yvette oversees the city’s centralized grants process, helps develop the city’s annual budget, and manages special projects. She said the FL2STAT meetings bring all the players to the table to discuss issues and help ensure that everyone can play a part in the decision-making process.

As part of the FL2STAT initiative, the city holds quarterly meetings to discuss the status of CIP and grant projects, and monthly meetings to ensure strategic alignment on the city’s priorities. “I think what’s nice about those meetings is that it’s an opportunity to say, ‘Something’s not going well, who can help me make it go better?’ Sometimes that help comes from parts of the organization that you wouldn’t expect,” Nancy said.

Yvette agreed and added that the regular FL2STAT meeting has become

a “catalyst for collaboration” that provides leaders with useful feedback and advice and helps them identify resources they can use to achieve their goals.

Laura explained that it is not unusual for the city to have more than 600 capital improvement projects in progress and 100 grants open at a given time. “We’re always trying to meet and exceed these expectations that are put on us by our community, but the priorities keep changing and a new thing comes up—a new grant we have to work on or accept—so as a team, we try to use the FL2STAT meeting as a call out for help, but also to keep the manager and their team informed as to how we’re doing on our progress, too.”

Another example of successful collaboration is the recent effort to improve the city’s bond rating. “Traditionally, in a bond discussion with Moody’s or another finance group, you talk about your budgeting and reserves, and how you’ve addressed the traditional issues related to bonds. But during our bond discussion, we had a section on resiliency, and we had a section on cyber issues,” Nancy explained. The city wanted to demonstrate to the rating agency that it has adopted a culture of risk reduction, so in addition to representatives from OMB and Finance, the presentation also included staff from Public Works and Information Technology Services.

“That collaboration resulted in an improvement in the city’s bond rating. Standard & Poor’s assigned a AAA rating to both the city’s special obligation refunding bonds and general obligation bonds, which is especially notable for a coastal community in South Florida. In the long run, this rating is great for the residents of the city, but it’s also really great for the organization to be able to afford bonds to move these critical infrastructure projects forward, and that couldn’t have happened without all of the different pieces,” Nancy concluded.

Members of several departments sometimes visit problem areas together to make sure they all understand the issue.



Susan noted that the city's Emergency Operations Center (EOC) is another good example of collaboration. "I think that shows collaboration at its finest. This past year, we got through without having an EOC activation for hurricanes, but even when we go through exercises, we're all there, talking about what's going on in the community, what we need to do, and again, working those things out."

"I think because we've built really good relationships over the past year, we've gotten a lot closer as a team, and we're able to have some difficult but honest conversations," said Laura. "I don't always want to hear that I'm blowing it in a certain area, but the fact that people can tell me about it means we can figure out how to get to a better spot, or at least to understand each other's frustrations." Members of the executive leadership team haven't always been willing to make themselves vulnerable in that way, she said, and having those conversations has helped the team navigate some difficult issues.

"We have a city manager who has a sense of humor and is willing to say things plainly," Nancy said. "He gives us the opportunity to be lighthearted in situations that might become tense and to be able to say when a duck is a duck."

"I think that's the most important thing," Laura added. "You need support from the city manager because if the city manager is setting up an environment where you're competing against each other, instead of having a goal of working together, that doesn't work," she said. She went on to explain that in the past year the city manager encouraged the city's executive team to participate in the ICMA High Performance Leadership Academy. Participation was optional, but most of the team chose to participate.

"It was a big time commitment for everyone, but all of us, as an executive team, decided to do it because we wanted to build those relationships. We wanted to be on the same page as to how we're choosing to work together, to do those extra things

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NANCY GASSMAN
ASSISTANT PUBLIC
WORKS DIRECTOR

to make sure we're a high-performing team," Laura explained. She hopes that even though only the executives participated in the program, the lessons learned are permeating the organization.

Yvette believes they are. "It definitely trickled down," she said. "Even though the executives were the ones doing it, I think it really trickled down to the people who report directly to them, hearing about the program and how we could implement it in our individual teams—really setting that organizational culture of collaboration."

Nancy explained how this culture of collaboration helps the city serve its citizens more effectively. "Each year, the city commission sets between four and six top priorities in a workshop in January, and once those priorities are set, teams are developed around those themes, and they are almost always cross-organizational teams," she said. "They're wicked problems² [problems with so many interdependent factors that they *seem* impossible to solve] that have to be addressed by bringing diverse groups together."

A recent example of a city commission priority was addressing homelessness. "You don't address homelessness with just Public Works. You don't address it with just Public Safety," Nancy explained. "You need to create teams that are mission-driven to address these priorities."

Laura acknowledged that building a strong relationship with a colleague takes effort. "I think you have to work on it, just like any other relationship.

It doesn't just happen. You have to show up with good intentions. You have to work to develop the relationship, to build that trust, to be consistent. If you're not honest with somebody, or if you don't show up in a way where they feel like you're being yourself, you're going to lose that credibility," she advised.

Nancy agreed, adding that local governments need to adequately address the challenges they face. "Our challenges are significant. Some of them are unique, and some of them are not, but they're difficult, and you have to do it all within the amount of money that's in your checkbook," she said. "To do that, you have to be very intentional about talking about priorities, talking about what makes sense this year versus next year. You need that mutual recognition that this is how much money we have, so sometimes we have to have difficult conversations about how to get where we're going. There also has to be a spirit of collaboration."

She shared a story about funding for seawall repairs to help illustrate her point.

"High tides are a challenge for our city, so we threw a bunch of people in a van, and we went out to take a look at what was going on. We came across a park that had a problem with a seawall. It had happened very recently, and there was no funding for it. So, we're all standing there, looking at the seawall, and Laura says, 'I think we can fund this. I think I know where there's some money to fund this.' Suddenly, the door opened to take care of a problem that we hadn't known how to address," she said.

"Luckily, we had the money," Laura said. "It doesn't always happen like that, but I think involving us in understanding the challenges helps. We move projects forward when we can, and when we can't, at least we know what the existing needs are."

"I think we've all become cross-functional experts. You hear about the things Dr. Gassman is doing, and you put it in the back of your mind—but when a seawall grant comes up, I think, 'Oh, right, Dr. Gassman is working on seawalls, so this is



something for her.' The more you hear about what other people are doing, the more you're able to figure out who you should talk to, when you can talk to them, and how you can assist them," Yvette said.

Laura explained how OMB has also found collaboration to be an essential component of developing the city's ten-year revenue sufficiency projections. "A lot of times finance people sit in the corner and do their projections, and then they tell the manager and the commission. We've chosen to approach it a little bit differently in our city," she explained. When preparing their long-term revenue sufficiency projections, OMB takes the time to

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LAURA AKER REECE

DIRECTOR OF THE OFFICE OF
MANAGEMENT AND BUDGET

meet with program managers like Nancy to understand the long-term needs of the different programs. She cited the conversations to plan for the \$200 million stormwater bond as an example.

"To leverage \$200 million, we had to get to a certain rate structure," Laura explained. "Dr. Gassman was a partner in the financial piece because she understood that she couldn't just come to Budget and say, 'I need \$200 million.' We have to understand how we are going to charge our residents for something like this. How are we going to inform them about these needs? Dr. Gassman needs to be involved in the sanitation discussions, or in the stormwater or in the fleet discussions, because she understands why we're making the recommendations we're making, and what the manager's recommendations are. She can intelligently support what we're doing and not just make Laura the bad guy in the corner," Laura said. "She's in every meeting. She's engaged. It takes that time commitment to be part of the team."

Similarly, Nancy expressed her appreciation for Laura and her team's efforts to understand her challenges. "You've taken the time to go out on tours and see where our challenges are with sea-level rise, and your team has been engaged when we've had those conversations. I recently sat down with your new budget analyst for Public Works and gave him a presentation on

Top, from left to right: Laura Aker Reece, Nancy Gassman, Susan Grant and Yvette Matthews.

Left: A cross-departmental group comes across a problem with a seawall.



what the Sustainability Division of Public Works does and how some of the dollars flow through the organization,” she said.

“He talked to Laura and me afterwards, and he was so excited about the conversation. So, thank you for investing that time in him; it really makes a difference to our team,” Yvette said.

Nancy explained that those kinds of conversations are important for building trust and a common language. “I think that’s been one of the big things for me in public service—learning how to talk to a budget manager and use terms that resonate with them and having conversations with engineers using language that resonates with them. I’ve been very lucky to learn quite a bit about finance over the last couple of years because I have been involved in these bond conversations. I’ve learned what ESG [environmental, social, and governance] means to them, versus what it means to me as a public works operator. Part of that collaboration is learning to speak a language that resonates with the people we’re trying to work with,” she said.

When asked what advice they would give to other local government leaders looking to create a more collaborative working environment, the group focused on investing time in the act of collaboration.

“My advice would be to take the time,” said Laura. “I’m very Type-A, and I want to get through the agenda, but it takes longer to involve more people. It takes longer to invite people in to do the longer projections with you. It takes more coordination. It takes more time to meet with people and to learn about what’s going on, but it’s worth it. For me personally, that was hard to learn because I was working 12-hour days and stretched thin for time.”

Nancy advised that non-finance/budget folks invest time in finding unique ways to tell their stories and make their needs known. “Don’t expect someone to understand your perspective unless you’re willing to take the time to show them, to help them understand, to find the picture



THE CITY OF FORT LAUDERDALE

Population (2020 census) | 182,760

FTE | 2,873

ANNUAL OPERATING BUDGET | \$401 million (2022) (General Fund)

ALL FUNDS OPERATING BUDGET | \$900 million (2022)



that tells the 1,000-word story, to stand somewhere and watch the tide come in and get your feet wet. Until they experience that themselves, they won’t understand that what you’re talking about is actually important—especially if they’ve been working 12-hour days, and suddenly you want to take an hour of time they don’t have. How do you convince them to do that? I don’t think I’ve ever regretted taking someone out on a tour because it tells them things they can’t know otherwise,” she said.

“Knowing your audience gives you a leg up in helping them receive your message, and then to help you work toward achieving your goals. You have to get people to understand what your pain points are. I know what Laura’s pain point is: Her checkbook is only so big and there are lots of people who want her to write checks,” Nancy noted. “So, I can either come to her and say, ‘Hey, I think I have some ideas for some revenue, which will

make your checkbook bigger,’ or I can say, ‘Hey, I have a situation where I think I can reduce the requirements on your checkbook.’ That’s what resonates with Budget. You have to talk to people in a way that that helps them understand how you are connected, how your problem is their problem, and how their problem is your problem.”

Yvette also believes in establishing formal policies and processes to bolster collaboration throughout the organization. “Take the time to make the process formal. Take the time to make sure that you invite everyone to the table to have those standing meetings where people know they’ll be able to discuss their challenges.”¹

Katie Ludwig is a senior manager in GFOA’s Research and Consulting Center.

¹ <https://www.fortlauderdale.gov/government/departments-i-z/office-of-management-and-budget/structural-innovation-division/quality-management-system>

² <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/wicked-problems>