

In Practice

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FINANCE

CITY OF THOUSAND OAKS, CALIFORNIA

It's Our Team

BY KATIE LUDWIG

Early in his career with the City of Thousand Oaks, California, Senior Financial Analyst Ryan Roman, who works in the Finance Department, asked Deputy Public Works Director Nader Heydari if his team could help with a project. Nader quickly responded, "It's not your department and my department. It's our team. It's the city."

These words had a significant impact on Ryan as a new employee, and they exemplify the collaborative culture that Thousand Oaks staff consider to be one of the keys to their success.

"We don't use the word 'can't' very often. It's 'how,'" said Cliff Finley, director

of the Public Works Department. "We work together because we're trying to solve problems. We discuss what we're trying to accomplish and why we're trying to do it. If we all agree that the intended results make sense, we discuss how to accomplish the task. Every staff member, regardless of their role in our departments, feels like they need to figure out how to accomplish their work more efficiently. That's how an organization empowers its staff and becomes more efficient."

Jaime Boscarino is the city's finance director. "Our biggest customer is Public Works because they spend the most money at the city. We work with them

a lot throughout the year—with all the department heads, really—as things pop up that they hadn't accounted for in the budget, or as laws change, as we have additional projects that we need to add to the budget," she said. "They're working with Finance throughout the year to identify funding sources and to figure out if we have capacity to do certain things. We lead the budget for the whole city, but it truly is a team effort."

"We spend a lot of money, so we work very, very closely with the Finance Department to be able to execute

Above, from left: Alexandra South, Nader Heydari, Ryan Roman, Cliff Finley, Jaime Boscarino and Brent Sakaide

our work,” added Cliff. “It’s a great relationship. They do a great job of helping us get work done,” he said.

Cliff explained that when he first arrived at the city in 2012, the working relationship between Public Works and Finance wasn’t as close. “The Public Works Department had its own purchasing group. We took care of all our own facilities and IT. We didn’t get—and didn’t want—any help with the budget. We were oftentimes at odds with the Finance Department,” he said.

Cliff’s experience of working for another local government had shown him the value of having a close working relationship with the Finance Department. He worked on convincing his colleagues in Public Works that Finance should be their “best friend” and he, with the support of the departmental directors at the time, cultivated relationships with his colleagues in the Finance Department.

“Jaime and I were both deputies at that time,” Cliff said. “We worked hard to develop a relationship, and all of those barriers just started to come down. It starts at the top. Once the leadership and the organization decide we’re not going to tolerate silos anymore, and we’re going to work together and find solutions, change starts to happen. It does take a while, but the organization ends up getting to where we are today.”

Ryan explained that his position is a result of the close collaboration between the two departments. “Public Works and Finance got together and said, ‘how can we make this position work for both of us?’” Jaime said that she and Cliff both had a need for a staff person to assist with developing, monitoring, and managing the Public Works budget. “We decided to work together and create this position that’ll impact and benefit both of our departments. By trial and error, just throwing things at Ryan, we’ve been able to make it work, and he’s provided real value for both of our departments,” she said.

In his role, Ryan works closely with the Public Works Department to help with developing the operating budget,

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RYAN ROMAN

SENIOR FINANCIAL ANALYST

the capital improvement budget, setting user fees, and expanding the asset management program. “I view collaboration as sharing ideas and using the strengths of our team members to work toward the common goal. I think it’s incredibly important not just for having success on a project, but also for enjoying your job,” said Ryan.

The close collaboration between Finance and Public Works recently led to the city being able to move forward on a solar installation and battery backup microgrids at city-owned facilities. The Finance Department handles facilities management for the city, and Public Works manages the engineering team and the sustainability team. The city’s sustainability manager came to Finance and recommended that the city move forward on the planned solar installation and microgrids sooner rather than later so we could take advantage of significant financing incentives. “By working together, we were able to advance the projects more quickly than would have occurred otherwise. It was about figuring out how we can make this work together,” Jaime said.

“It doesn’t stop. It’s not like, ‘Okay, we took on their facilities and now the work is done.’ We have to continue that collaboration between our two departments. It’s a work in progress. I’m not going to say it’s perfect and that there are never any complaints, but we continue having that open communication,” Jaime added.

Ryan gave an example to show what the commitment to open communication looks like in practice. “Sometimes finance folks and project managers speak a different language. We may use the same term, but it may mean something different to someone else, like fund balance. When a project manager hears ‘fund balance’ they may think about how much money they have left for their project, whereas Finance staff is referring to how much is left in the fund,” he said. To address this, the accounting team in the Finance Department set up a training session to go over charts of account strings, fund balance, and related topics. “We recognized there was some frustration there, and it wasn’t personal. It was because we weren’t speaking the same language.”

The city’s collaborative culture has also influenced the way it develops its biennial budget. Brent Sakaida is the city’s budget officer, and he works with all the city’s departments. “Collaboration is just basically pulling everyone’s strengths together, making sure that you have that common goal. The main factor is the communication. You have to keep the communication channels open, and we do a great job of that. Everyone is talking to everybody else and offering their best ideas to get the best product out,” he said.

Alexandra South is the city’s strategic communications and public affairs director. She oversees the digital and print communications the city issues, as well as internal communications. Her team of three people works with every department to make the community aware of the city’s programs and initiatives.

Alexandra explained how the pandemic has challenged the city’s public engagement efforts. “My first time working on the budget, we were in the depths of a pandemic and so we had to do a complete pivot away from anything that had traditionally been done and start from the ground up,” she said. “That has led to this year’s cycle, which is a robust effort because now we’re able to integrate all the digital

materials we really worked hard to develop during the pandemic, when we had no other choice. Now combining those with the in-person engagement, it's a much more dynamic effort."

"I started in this position in the middle of the pandemic budget engagement, and I was just immediately comfortable with Alex because she was open to anything," said Ryan. "The focus was 'let's figure this out.' It helped us come up with a good solution, something that I think was an entertaining and engaging product, because we were open to different ways of doing things. It wasn't just 'we have to do it this way.'"

"We are not creative people necessarily. We know the numbers. We wouldn't get the public engagement outreach campaign we have if we didn't work with Alex and her team," said Jaime. "They come in with all these great ideas that we would never even think of."

"You just don't know everything. One person just doesn't know it all," said Brent. "The more people that you include, the more you're bringing in different experiences, different knowledge. Once you start to build a team, the ideas just start to flow, and the end product is typically just better."

The city has embraced technology to enhance budget collaboration. "We did our operating budget kickoff last Friday. We recorded that meeting for anybody who couldn't attend and posted it on a site called iEvoive," Jaime said. "We post all our training to that site so any staff members can go on and watch the recording afterward."

Brent agreed and explained how technology has helped the city adapt. "When we went into COVID, there was a lot of communication about what we could put online and what we could do virtually," said Brent. "We have so many forms now that are basically online. We're not shuffling paper. That is because of the discussions that the city has about how do we make this better? How do we improve?"

The city has adopted hybrid work schedules—meaning staff can work

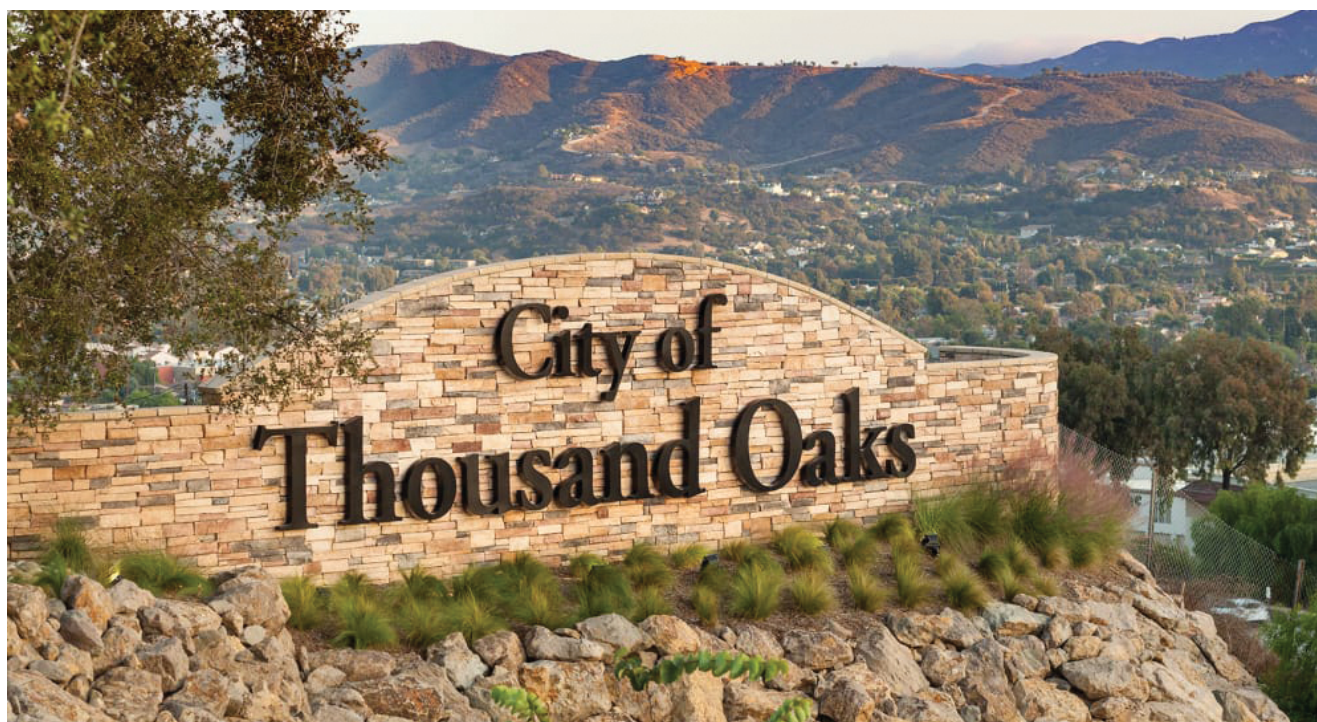


Close collaboration between the city's Finance Department and the Public Works Department made it possible to move forward on a solar installation and battery backup microgrids at city-owned facilities.

from home a few days each week—and has found that this has not impeded their ability to collaborate. "Staff is generally very happy with some flexibility in where they're working and when they're working, and I think that happy staff are more engaged, and, in my opinion, more productive," Cliff said.

Alexandra agreed. "In my opinion, having a hybrid work environment has increased our ability to reach out to people quickly, but also not have to

cancel meetings. We have all been able to just keep going, in whatever capacity and wherever we are. Not like grind culture or anything, but we are able to stay focused and do anything from anywhere. We've worked hard to facilitate that and make sure that everybody has what they need to make it happen, and frankly, it's as productive as before, if not more, because it's so easy to do pretty much anything you need to every day, no matter where you are."



"I'll just plug our IT Division, which is within Finance," Ryan added. "They make this possible for us. They're just so on top of every new technology. As challenging as COVID was, they made it so seamless for us."

The Thousand Oaks team offered some advice to other local governments that are working on becoming more collaborative.

"Collaboration takes leadership. People need to create a team and then create a culture of trust and collaboration within that team. That empowers the team members, and pretty soon your team gets stronger and stronger," said Cliff. "Then that strength builds through the organization and provides results, leading to success. And when people are successful, they love what they do."

Brent added that while it helps for collaboration to come from the top, it doesn't have to be the very top of the organization. Team leaders throughout the organization can create a culture of trust and collaboration within their teams at all levels.

"To me a key is building those relationships with your peers and with

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CLIFF FINLEY

DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC WORKS

your coworkers because then you get more comfortable with bringing things up to each other," Jaime said.

Ryan stressed that staff should create opportunities to collaborate. "Schedule a meeting, just start talking with other departments," he said. "We have a bimonthly CIP coordination meeting with Public Works and Finance to review projects, but the floor is open to other items. And through those meetings, you break down barriers, you answer questions, you alleviate frustration, and you build relationships."

Finance and Public Works also have a quarterly meeting to touch base on more general issues. "So many topics come up

in those meetings that probably never would otherwise," he added. "So, look for those opportunities. Ask where do we have areas that maybe need some improvement or better communication? It's so much easier now, with the virtual environment to set up a meeting and get those conversations happening."

Ryan added that an additional benefit of collaboration is that it leads to a better work experience for employees. "I've been in my new role for a year, and I've had the opportunity to work with Alex and her team, with folks at the Municipal Service Center, the wastewater treatment plant, and our engineering team, and these are people that I probably wouldn't have worked with in a normal financial desk position," he explained. "I've learned so much just from the interactions with them—from not only their technical abilities, but also their approach to their work. With collaboration, you break down the silos, but you also build those relationships, and it's made my network bigger and my job so much more rewarding." ■

Katie Ludwig is director of resource development for GFOA.