



GFOA's **Manuela Sasot** checked in with **Erica Broome** (left), revenue planning manager for the City of Rock Hill, South Carolina, and **Joel Manning** (right), finance manager for the Chester Sewer District in South Carolina, about GFOA's Utility Finance Forum and issues currently facing their organizations.



Erica Broome | City of Rock Hill, South Carolina

Could you share a project or initiative you're especially proud of?

One initiative I've been working on that's really been at the forefront is leading the monitoring and management of our utility rates and funds for the City of Rock Hill. I oversee operation revenue across all of our utility services, and that responsibility has allowed me to help develop more of a strategic and transparent approach to rate setting and fund management. This includes conducting regular financial reviews of each utility—electric, water, sewer, and stormwater—to ensure that rates are not only recovering costs but are also positioned for long-term sustainability. This has allowed me to work directly with all the departments at the city, to support our ability to reinvest in things like infrastructure, and to deliver reliable service to the residents.

In the role you play in aligning your city's vision with its operational planning, how do you build public trust and approach fiscal transparency?

At the City of Rock Hill, transparency begins with clear communication and thoughtful planning. The city prioritizes presenting financial information in ways that are understandable to residents and other stakeholders, which involves not only sharing raw data but also explaining the rationale behind every decision. I collaborate closely with several departments to ensure that strategic initiatives are linked to our measurable outcomes. This approach allows residents to see how their tax dollars translate into real-world results. My own background outside of government has helped me appreciate the importance of transparency.

What are some unique challenges [and opportunities] you've faced when aligning community needs on one side with budget constraints and regulatory compliance on the other?

A key challenge, but also an opportunity, is ensuring that our resource allocation reflects both fiscal responsibility and equity. Community needs evolve rather quickly at times, so we must respond in ways that are efficient but also inclusive. Balancing the cost of capital investments with affordability, especially in utilities and public infrastructure such as water pipes or sewer pipes, is always at the

forefront. Working with the deputy city manager's office gives me a broader view of how all the departments in the city contribute to the city's goals.

What drew you to your role on GFOA's Utility Finance Forum leadership committee, and what have you gained from being part of this group?

I joined the Utility Finance Forum about nine months ago, and I wanted to help shape conversations around some of the most pressing issues in public utilities—namely, affordability, infrastructure investment, equity, and climate resilience. It's been a great collaborative space where we can have webinars that identify subject matter experts and foster a network of professionals who are navigating similar challenges. Being part of the forum has really expanded my professional toolkit and reaffirmed the power of shared knowledge and diverse voices.



Joel Manning | Chester Sewer District

What would you say are the most pressing financial challenges for wastewater utilities right now?

Our top three challenges are growth, growth, and growth. South Carolina's booming, and being just 45 minutes from the City of Charlotte is only fueling it. The growth is fast, and honestly, nobody was ready for it. With around 4,500 customers and no ability to tax—just fee-based revenue—we have to run like a business. That means figuring out how to fund expansion without going broke. Grants are a lifeline. We're in the middle of a \$50 million project, and we've secured

funding to cover more than half of it, but each grant comes with its own reporting headaches—I've got five separate bins just to keep track. And then there's PFAS and PFOS—the “forever chemicals.” Freedom of Information requests are piling up, and the question is how the water and wastewater industry is going to manage that. Because the cleanup isn't going to be cheap. This growth, paired with these challenges—it's real, and it's going to take careful planning and resourcefulness to keep up.

How do you use benchmarking data to evaluate the utility's performance and efficiency?

That's a good one, because we always get compared to other entities—like Rock Hill, which is just 20 minutes north of us. And we always joke that the only thing we have in common is proximity. You can't just look at rates and say it's apples to apples. You've got to actually talk to folks—ask how they operate, what they do differently. Every utility is unique—one might maintain 90 lines, and we handle 200. So, you have to extrapolate—look at cost per foot or mile and try to normalize the data. That's the real benchmarking. But you also need to be careful who you're comparing yourself to. I sat in a class with someone from Hilton Head Island—service expectations there are way higher, so naturally their costs are too. Sure, I love how much they pay, but it reflects that elevated service level. So it all comes back to customer engagement. For example, when there's a sewer backup, how quickly do folks expect us to respond? What level of service are they willing to accept?

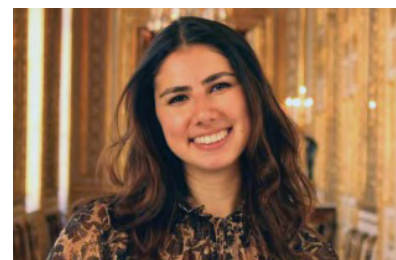
What advice would you give to someone who's new to utility finance or interested in working with small issuers?

First instinct? I might say “don't do it.” But really, if you're stepping into utility finance or working with small issuers, just be ready to carve out time. Go with what you have and don't let the drive for perfection stop you from delivering something good. Sometimes you won't have every data point, and

that's okay. Just give the best info you can. Ask questions constantly. I still always ask why we're doing something, and if this is the best way; should we go direct lender or out to market? What worked five years ago may not fit now. Know your rates, understand your ratepayers, and look ahead—not at what your community is today, but what it'll be in 10 or 15 years. When setting rates, plan for replacements and depreciation, even though people hate those words. Deferred maintenance can sneak up on you and lead to rate shock when things break down. So always leave yourself some cushion because sooner or later, something's going to need fixing.

What is something that you are excited about working on in the coming year?

I really enjoy GFOA's Utility Finance Forum and Small Government Forum. They're invaluable for sharing knowledge. But what I'm most excited about this year is wrapping up our big project with Rock Hill. (This sewer treatment project will allow CWR to add capacity to serve the rapidly growing Richburg area more efficiently and cost-effectively than increasing the size of an existing plant. Once the connection is completed, the existing plant can be taken out of service, saving approximately \$300,000 a year.) Grant reporting is new territory for me, and I've learned a ton already. The ultimate goal is rate stabilization, so customers see steady rates and we're set up to handle future growth. I truly believe this project will leave things better than we found them, and that's something I'm proud to be a part of. 🍷



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