INTERVIEW

From Policy to Practice

Mike Mastrobuoni on growth, challenges, and community

BY MANUELA TAPIA SASOT

GFOA intern **Manuela Tapia Sasot** checked in with **Mike Mastrobuoni**, budget director for the City of Somerville, Massachusetts. They talked about communicating the reasoning behind financial decisions, maintaining a creative mindset around problem solving, and treating every challenge as a chance to grow.

Mike Mastrobuoni graduated from Northeastern University in 2008, entering the workforce in the middle of the Great Recession. He began his career at the Cambridge Housing Authority, where he learned what it meant to help run a large organization and saw firsthand how operations, finance, and strategic planning intersect. At the same time, he pursued a master's degree in urban and regional policy at Northeastern. While many of his peers steered away from numbers, he was drawn to using them as a way to support a wide variety of projects. That interest eventually led him to Somerville, where he found a role in budgeting that sits at the intersection of policy and finance.

"When I started, our budget was about $150 million, and my role was split between budgeting and performance management," he recalled. "As our budget grew, the opportunities grew. We developed this role into a full-time position and added staff to show that investments in support functions really pay off." Today, the City of Somerville has an operating budget of $380 million, and the finance team plays a central role in enabling new initiatives that wouldn't have been possible a decade ago.

Leading through growth and complexity

Working directly under the city's chief financial officer (CFO), Mastrobuoni's role centers on four core responsibilities. Alongside his team, he leads the development and management of the city's operating budget, ensuring that departments have the resources they need. He is responsible for long-range financial forecasting, keeping the city's fiscal outlook positive and aligned with key performance metrics. In partnership with the director of infrastructure and asset management, Mastrobuoni co-leads the development of the city's capital investment plan, which covers major projects from water and sewer systems to horizontal and vertical construction. Finally, he prioritizes training and communicating about the reasoning behind financial decisions, an area that has grown increasingly important over time. "If people don't understand where resources are going, they can't make informed decisions. My job is to make those connections clear—for colleagues, policymakers, and the public," he explained.

For Mastrobuoni, the transition into management was less about mastering the technical side of the work and more about developing a new set of skills. "I was trained as a subject matter expert, not a manager," he explained. But budgeting came naturally. Planning, forecasting, and strategy were familiar territory, but running meetings, but setting expectations, and building relationships required a different approach. Supported by his CFO, he has worked to build a team culture grounded in openness and constant learning, even creating informal spaces where new managers can share challenges and advice. "I think when you're trying, people respond well to that," he said. "It shouldn't be something we're afraid to talk about. Management is hard, and we get better at it by being honest about that."

Innovation—and constraints

Mastrobuoni's work comes with competing priorities that collide daily. Housing affordability, infrastructure upgrades, and social services are all on the table, and Somerville's residents are vocal about their expectations. "The demands are high because our residents expect a lot from us. And that's a good thing—it pushes us to be innovative in how we allocate resources." That progressive spirit has led the city to create new offices, such as Immigrant Affairs and Racial and Social Justice, while also adding finance staff across departments to support them.

But meeting those ambitions is not simple. Massachusetts law restricts how much local governments can raise property taxes, which account for approximately 70 percent of the City of Somerville's revenue. The city has been able to boost its budget through new development, but that growth has limits. At the same time, aging infrastructure continues to strain finances; water and sewer rates are climbing by 10 percent each year; and major school projects have required voter-approved debt exclusions that add to residents' property tax bills. "Our universe of needs is extraordinary," Mastrobuoni said, "and so far, people have been willing to pay for it."

Right now, one of the projects that excites Mastrobuoni most is participatory budgeting. With $1 million allocated by the mayor, Somerville has completed two successful cycles, drawing inspiration from the City of Cambridge, which has run the program for nearly a decade. "The really cool part about it is that it mixes all the different pieces of our work together," he said. "It's communicating, it's teaching, it's working with volunteers—it gets people fired up." The program has funded resident-driven initiatives such as food security programs and new bus shelters, projects that might not have been prioritized through the regular operating budget but reflect what residents value most.

At the same time, fiscal uncertainty is forcing a cultural shift. After years of rapid growth, the city now faces limits to how quickly its budget can expand. Mastrobuoni and his team are taking a more conservative stance, working through GFOA's Fiscal First Aid framework and reassessing long-term forecasts. "We used to be a community that did more with less. Now we've been a community that does more with more—but the pace of growth won't continue forever," he explained. "We need to make sure we're in a good place long term."

Looking ahead, one project he wishes he had more time to pursue is a comprehensive financial training program for department heads and staff. While the organization has embedded finance managers across departments, onboarding remains piecemeal. "If I could do one thing, it would be to create the most amazing onboarding from a financial perspective," he said. "It would pay so many dividends. We want a broader understanding of opportunities, risks, and controls across the organization so the responsibility doesn't always fall on the core finance team."

From the budget office to the ballot box

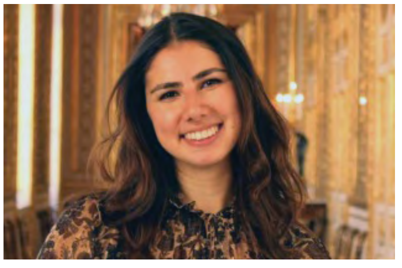
When asked whether he sees himself more as a "chef" or a "cook" when it comes to budgeting, Mastrobuoni didn't hesitate to embrace the metaphor. "We need to be strategic, proactive, and creative," he said. "I want people to see the budget office as a team of financial problem solvers." For him, that means approaching requests not as obstacles but as opportunities—if there's a legal and sustainable way to achieve a department's goals, his team will work to find it. That creative mindset, he explains, rests on a solid foundation of technical knowledge. "You need to have your basics down in order to be creative, so you know when you can mix and match," he added—a philosophy that makes a great chef.

Mastrobuoni's decision to run for the School Committee for Medford Public Schools grew out of both professional expertise and personal experience. After moving from Somerville to Medford, he sought ways to contribute to his new community, joining the City of Medford Water and Sewer Commission, where he still serves. But as his children entered the school system, he explained, he wanted to do more. The school became a more important part of his community, and with Medford Public Schools facing a slate of major financial and strategic decisions—including building a new high school, launching a new strategic plan, and hiring a superintendent—he saw a natural fit with his experience.

Drawing on a decade of municipal finance experience, Mastrobuoni emphasized his ability to think ahead, navigate uncertainty, and make sure resources translate into results. He framed his candidacy for the school committee as one of "steady stewardship" at a critical moment for the district, confident that he can serve as a force multiplier rather than a newcomer still learning the ropes. Canvassing, he says, has been energizing, especially when conversations shift away from politics and toward the "nuts and bolts" of governance, where he feels most at home.

Lessons in leadership

All in all, Mastrobuoni advises his peers in local government finance to "find the parts of your role that get you excited, and don't be afraid to ask to support new things," he said. Failure, he added, is part of learning, a lesson he shares as readily with colleagues as with his seven-year-old. For him, the key is to keep asking, "What's next?" and to treat every challenge as a chance to grow. In local government, where needs are endless and staff are stretched, that openness not only helps individuals shine but makes the whole organization stronger.



Manuela Sasot *is an intern in GFOA's Research and Consulting Center.*