

Wittenberg Local Government Management Internship Program: An Organizational Stimulus Plan for Your Local Government

by Rob Baker

In these challenging and uncertain times, local governments across the nation are doing all they can to get the most bang for the buck in terms of resources used to deliver the essential services citizens need and expect. As many of you scramble to develop shovel-ready projects that could be funded under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act—the economic stimulus bill—do not overlook a program that can help tremendously with your efforts to do more with less.

The ICMA-supported Wittenberg Local Government Management Internship Program (LGMIP) can benefit your organization by providing a group of bright, eager, and energetic interns to help out with those projects that are either sitting on the shelf for lack of resources or that need a jump start of focused attention that your busy department heads and employees are unable to provide in these times of thinly stretched budgets and personnel systems.

Since its inception in 1994 and its new collaboration with ICMA beginning in 2003, the program has provided its local government hosts with enormous benefits that have accrued from the completion of dozens of projects that more than 65 interns have worked on and completed over the years. What we need, though, are more volunteer host local governments to step up and participate. By way of this article, I am asking that you give serious consideration to becoming a host.

WHAT IS IT?

LGMIP is predicated on the idea that the interests of the key stakeholders (students, local governments, and universities) can, and should be, mutually reinforced. Students all over the country are clamoring for meaningful internship experiences that will enhance their understanding of the real world of local government and help them make important decisions about their futures. At the same time, local governments always have projects that need focused attention, attention that is hard to provide with busy and reduced staff.

Finally, universities are seeking to provide unique, practical, and relevant educational opportunities for their students. LGMIP meets all these goals and has a record of success. The program is open to students from any college or university, is eight weeks in duration and consists of an internship component and a class-seminar component.

Students are placed as interns in a host local government department and given one or more projects to complete by the end of the program. On-site faculty members are accessible each day for students to consult on their projects and to facilitate the independent work that is required for them to complete their assignments.

Students also take a class two nights per week and are required to attend regular local government meetings. The typical schedule for the internship component is 8:00 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Thursday, and 8:00 to 12 noon on Fridays.

Students pay college tuition to participate and receive six to eight hours of college credit for successful completion of the program. The internships are unpaid; the only cost to the host community is to provide housing and utilities for the students and professor during the internship, which has been accomplished at each of our previous locales in a number of creative ways based on available on community assets. The host local government is also responsible for pro-

viding projects, a minimum level of staff direction and supervision, along with technical support as necessary, including computer hardware and software as appropriate to the projects that are assigned.

EXAMPLES OF STUDENT PROJECTS

Students have completed a variety of challenging assignments in each of the past internship programs. Although the projects have been diverse, they all share the same feature of outstanding benefits for the local government sponsor. The key reason local govern-

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ments have engaged this program is the dramatic impact the completion of several projects at one time can have on the community.

We bring the student power to do the identified tasks and the professional ability to oversee them, smoothly integrating our education of the students with the functions of your daily operations. If there are specific skills required for certain projects, we take these into consideration in our student recruitment and planning efforts.

Here are sample projects from recent years. A more complete list of projects can be found at the university's Web site at www.localintern.org.

FERNANDINA BEACH, FLORIDA (2008):

Community Development Department

1. CDBG target neighborhood data collection and GIS mapping, 2. Existing land use survey, 3. Tree census inventory.

Police Department

1. Data collection for accreditation, 2. Rewriting and updating policy manual.

Information Technology Department

1. Informational programming for CATV access channel, 2. Updating and revising Web page information.

City Attorney

1. Research and assistance on ordinance writing and revision, 2. Research on gaining ferry access to Cumberland Island National Seashore.

EAU CLAIRE COUNTY AND CHIPPEWA FALLS, WISCONSIN (2007) EAU CLAIRE COUNTY

Planning and Zoning

1. Conversion of paper land use maps to GIS and creation of property tax database, 2. Revision of comprehensive plan.

County Administrator's Office

1. Performance budgeting project launch, 2. Development of outcome performance measures.

Human Resources

1. Revision and updating of personnel policies and employee handbook.

Airport

1. Assistance with feasibility study of \$15 million airport terminal expansion, 2. Research on airport land use development options.

CITY OF CHIPPEWA FALLS

Human Resources

Updating and revision of personnel policies and administrative procedures handbook.

Finance

Implementing new financial tracking software for special assessments.

Parks and Recreation

1. Updating of city's five-year parks and recreation plan, 2. Updating of city's forestry management plan.

MEREDITH, NEW HAMPSHIRE (2005)

Planning and Zoning

1. Development of pre-zoning hearing administrative checklist, 2. Development of commercial signs and billboards inventory and database.

Police Department

1. Comparative research on policies and procedures, and development of policy recommendations relative to possession issues and minors.

Water and Sewer

1. Research and recommendations regarding water conservation methods, 2. Comparative research on water and sewer rates, 3. Revision of town service manual, 4. Research for revision of water and sewer ordinances.

Public Works

1. Street sign inventory and GPS identification database development, 2. GPS identification of culverts and manholes.

GRAND ISLAND, NEBRASKA (2000)

Planning Department

1. Conversion of paper land use maps to GIS, 2. Updating of landscape ordinance.

Legal Department

1. Comparison of first-class city occupancy taxes, 2. Study of handicapped parking compliance, 3. Development of interlocal agreement for law enforcement records management program.

Community Development

1. Community needs survey (CDBG program).

Emergency Management Department

1. Update of emergency operating guide and coordination of all agencies and departments in terms of emergency responsibilities.

KEY COMPONENT OF NEXT GEN INITIATIVES

ICMA support and sponsorship of this program grows out of its concerted efforts to increase awareness among college students about career opportunities in local government management. This is particularly important in the current climate of increasing devolution of government responsibility

to local jurisdictions, coupled with demographic trends indicating that local government administrators are retiring in large numbers and creating a quiet recruitment crisis as vacancies are not being filled fast enough.

LGMIP is one of several ICMA-sponsored initiatives designed to address these concerns. For more information, I encourage you to visit the ICMA Web site and learn more about its next-generation initiatives. These initiatives can succeed only if current local government professionals step up and provide the mentoring and internship opportunities that are necessary for the recruitment of bright young men and women into the profession.

Those colleagues who have agreed to host the LGMIP in the past have great praise for the students' work ethic and products as well as for the general uplift to the organizational culture that having several enthusiastic young people around can add to the work environment. Positive testimonials from local government host professionals are posted on our program Web site. Some brief excerpts from those testimonials illustrate the good impressions the program has made on colleagues around the country.

Cindy Johnson, the former city clerk of Grand Island, Nebraska, for example, noted this about the 2000 program: "The internship program undertaken by the city of Grand Island and Wittenberg University resulted in significant dividends for many. I would recommend it as a valuable learning tool for students, city department directors, and elected officials."

The town administrator of Meredith, New Hampshire, Carol Granfield, noted in her letter that "Meredith had eleven interns . . . that accomplished more than 15 projects. As a small community with a population of 6,700, which swells to 30,000 in the summer, there is a limited staff to accomplish many needed projects. I would encourage other local governments to participate in this outstanding program, and I would be happy to discuss Meredith's experience in more detail."

Tom McCarty, the county admin-

istrator of Eau Claire County, Wisconsin, stated that "The Wittenberg University LGMIP was very successful; the students completed research projects and reports that county and city staff simply did not have the resources to complete. All parties gained a significant benefit as a result of a small investment on the part of Eau Claire County and the city of Chippewa Falls.

"On behalf of the elected officials and staff of Eau Claire County, I would recommend local units of government consider hosting the Local Government Management Internship Program."

CONSIDER BECOMING A HOST

I hope the information in this article has piqued your interest in considering how the LGMIP might be useful to your efforts to stimulate your organizational culture and to get some much needed work done on important projects for a small investment. We are in need of host local governments each summer and hope to line up two or three hosts every summer so we can engage in better program planning and stable student commitment.

Most immediately, though, the program is looking for hosts for the summer of 2010. If you are interested in the possibility of hosting anytime in the future, including 2010, please visit our Web site for further information about how to apply, or contact Rob Carty at ICMA (rcarty@icma.org).

You can also contact the program by e-mail (jbaker@wittenberg.edu) or by phone (937/327-6105). I'd be happy to discuss the program with you and answer any questions you might have. **PM**

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