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As a mayor, I am often reminded of all the things we have in common as local elected officials. For one, we all have a story about when we first considered running for office, and though our stories differ, we all ran because of a common belief that we had something to offer that would ultimately help our city or town work toward a vision of strength and prosperity.

And like clockwork, every fall we have another thing in common: we face the reality of fulfilling our duties by getting into the minutiae of creating and reviewing a new budget. Let's face it, this task is not exactly what inspired most of us into civic service.

Yet in many ways, the attention to detail we put into the budgets of our cities and towns ranks among the most impactful and significant work we do. That is because the budget document—and the process that creates it—codifies, in detail, the hopes and priorities of your city or town. The budget isn't a soapbox. It doesn't allow for grand statements and eloquent rhetoric. Instead, it simply and dryly details exactly where resources will be focused for your city in support of those hopes and priorities!

Creating a budget requires negotiation, the consideration of other perspectives, and compromise—especially when

faced with financial constraints. Charting a course for the future of your city is the leadership work of municipal officials; the budgeting process is the path toward the realization of hope.

As you read this issue, it is my hope you will be informed and encouraged by the challenges and solutions of your peers across the state, including some valuable insight and perspective of some partner agencies. The budgeting challenges we face this year may be unique, but I'm confident that the lessons we learn will serve us for years to come. Thank you for your dedicated leadership as you work toward the realization of your city or town's vision of strength and prosperity!

Soo Ing-Moody
Mayor, Twisp



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Cityvision

Spring 2021

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Even in a challenging budgeting season, cities focus on core fundamentals: ensuring vital communities with opportunity for all. And in our popular **NOTED** feature, we train our sights on levy lid lifts.

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BY TED KATAUSKAS

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Citybeat

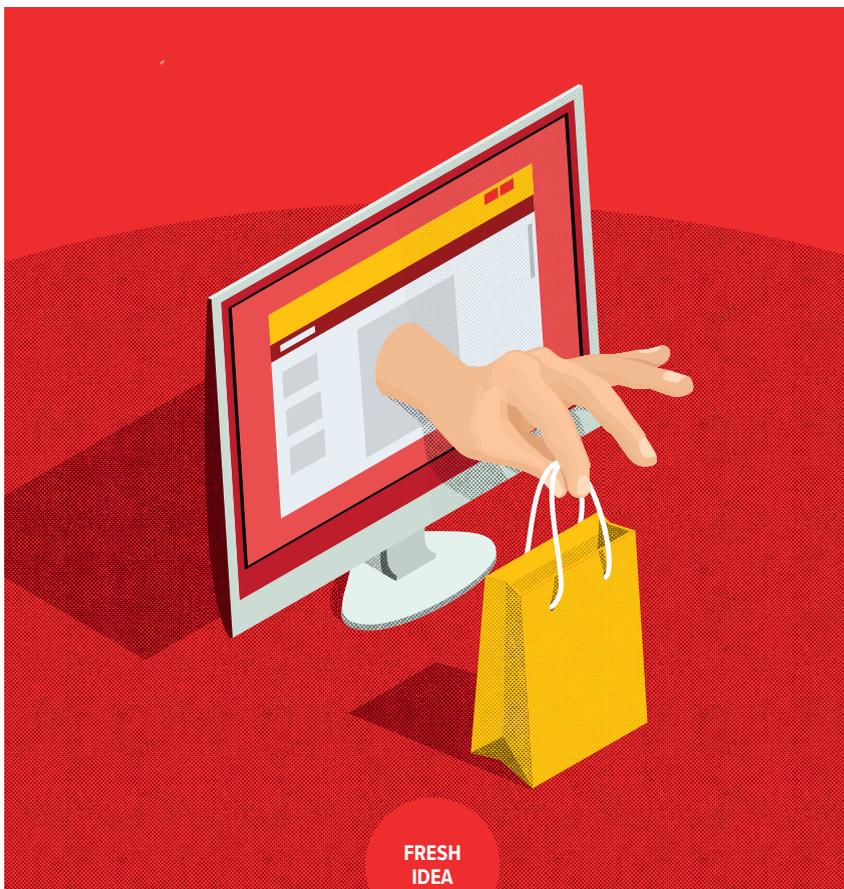
Diversity Higher

Even faced with pandemic budget cuts, cities invest in the essential work of equity and inclusion.

AS THE CITY OF TACOMA confronted a \$40 million general fund shortfall in June and protesters marched in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, its council passed Resolution 40622, directing the city manager to use racial equity (“overcoming systemic racism and all other forms of oppression”) as the top priority in balancing the 2021-22 biennial budget.

While city council considered many ways to balance the budget and preserve services, in the final approved budget the Office of Equity and Human Rights retained a staff of 10 charged with making sure that a five-point equity and empowerment framework guides decision-making across all departments. Established in 2015, the work of the office, once groundbreaking, seems more essential than ever, says Policy and Program Manager Mia Navarro.

CONTINUED ON P.10 ▶



Code Warrior

Kirkland fights to support its small businesses with online innovation.

BY EMILY ALHADEFF

WHEN THE FIRST Covid-19 death in the United States was reported at EvergreenHealth on February 29, 2020, the City of Kirkland became the national epicenter of the pandemic, and its businesses were among the first in the country to be affected by the crisis. And Kirkland emerged as a leader in innovating ways to support and help local entrepreneurs outlast it.

By year's end, the city's Covid-19 Economic Development & Small Business Relief program had distributed more than \$1 million, a third of Kirkland's CARES Act funding, to 207 small businesses and nonprofits. To augment the stopgap funding with long-term support, the city also created an online

marketplace that connects Kirkland businesses with local customers.

"I had an 'aha!' moment," says Assistant City Manager Jim Lopez, who says the idea came to him while brainstorming with Washington's small-business liaison team. "Local governments are already acquainted with digital business registries. Our concept was to take that familiar idea and to enhance it."

Recognizing that 80 percent of consumers shop online—a habit only heightened by the pandemic and statewide Stay Home, Stay Healthy orders—and that many brick-and-mortar shops lack the ability to conduct business online, in November the City of Kirkland launched ShopLocalKirkland.com,

a city-maintained website that's the digital equivalent of a main street with storefronts run by local businesses. Businesses that register with the service receive a complimentary digital storefront and can indicate multiple point-of-sale options to connect to consumers and transact online.

"We don't engage in any ecommerce," Lopez says. "We're simply a pass-through entity. Once people discover the businesses, we aren't needed anymore. And that's OK."

By the end of December, 441 businesses had registered and 223 had operational digital storefronts; the website had tallied 40,000 hits, generating 1,794 local business leads. To increase momentum, the city also developed a social media tool kit for registered businesses and adapted the tool kit provided by the King County Executive Office, with themes such as Take-Out Tuesday and Workout

"ONCE PEOPLE DISCOVER THE BUSINESSES, WE AREN'T NEEDED ANYMORE. AND THAT'S OK."

Wednesday. Once the platform was established, the city began to augment it with new features and programs, including Kirkland In-Car Dining, a webpage on the site listing the linked online menus of restaurants that deliver to city's Marina Park, where a lakeside parking lot has been converted into a socially distanced cyber drive-in with a view.

Noting that Kirkland modeled its program after BuyLocalAuburn.com, Lopez says other cities can replicate its success, so long as they have a digital strategy, a marketing plan, and buy-in with key stakeholders, like the chamber of commerce and its constituents. And as for Kirkland's dubious place in history as America's Covid-19 ground zero, notes Councilmember Amy Falcone, there is at least one silver lining.

"We're going to come out of this pandemic with a stronger community," she says. "That's going to last, I hope, forever." **C**

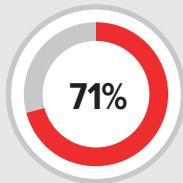
HIGH LINES

Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, most Washington cities have incurred additional expenses while transitioning city operations to meet the needs of residents and staff.

Based on responses to a survey AWC conducted last fall:



of cities have incurred increased costs in **OPERATIONS**



of cities have incurred increased costs in **INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY**



of cities have incurred increased costs in **PUBLIC SAFETY**



of cities have incurred increased costs in **PUBLIC WORKS**

Source: AWC Survey, October 2020

SLICE OF LIFE

EQUITY STAKE

Despite hitting a speed bump, Auburn's inclusion initiative pushes on.

BY EMILY ALHADEFF

IN JULY 2019, the City of Auburn passed a resolution to launch an equity and inclusion initiative. Dubbed Inclusive Auburn, the program seeks to eliminate racial and other disparities and promote access and opportunities for every resident and business.

"I believe that we've always had an inclusive focus," says Brenda Goodson-Moore, Auburn's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion program manager. The city, which straddles King and Pierce Counties and is the indigenous home of the Muckleshoot Indian Tribe, is growing and becoming more diverse. This initiative, she says, "takes it up a level by establishing an equity committee and tool kit that will be used to review existing policies, procedures, budgetary decisions, and laws to create and maintain racial equity in our city."

Earmarking \$141,150 for the two-year effort, Auburn contracted to work with Racing to Equity Consulting Group, a Seattle-based firm that partners with many nonprofit, corporate, and educational entities locally and internationally. From September 2019 through the end of February 2020, the firm convened a series of meetings, interviews, and trainings with Auburn's mayor, city council, department directors, and city employees, identifying systemic barriers that inhibit inclusion.

Then Covid-19 hit, stalling Phase II of the plan, which included training for all city managers and employees, as well as outreach and engagement to elicit input from community members and local leaders. Although the face-to-face trainings and focus-group sessions were canceled due to the pandemic, a citywide survey was completed at the end of 2020. Based on that data and interviews with city leadership and staff, in February Racing to Equity presented a report to Auburn's city council.

"With that assessment in hand, we have a foundation for our framework," Goodson-Moore says. "Once all city employees have completed their initial training, we will revise and implement policies, plans, practices, programs, and services designed meet the diverse and specific needs of our community."

That, she adds, might include balancing infrastructure projects so that improvements are spread equally across city neighborhoods or ensuring that the city is equipped with adequate translation services so that "linguistically diverse residents ... feel safe, welcomed, supported, and included."

In the meantime, Inclusive Auburn also has adopted an official Diversity and Inclusion Glossary, "a reference tool that provides basic working definitions to facilitate shared discussions," from *ableism* to *structural white privilege*. And once the pandemic danger has passed, Goodson-Moore looks forward to resuming Phase II of the city's the equity and inclusion journey, however challenging that may be.

"I understand that talking about racial equity in our city may be difficult for some of our residents and staff, but these are people's lives," she says. "It is through our discomfort that we will experience breakthroughs—start to create real, long-lasting, and sustainable change."



For more information:
auburnwa.gov



LEVY LID LIFTS

RCW 84.55.050 - Election to authorize **increase in regular property tax levy**-Limited propositions-Procedure.

(1) Subject to any otherwise applicable statutory dollar rate limitations, **regular property taxes** may be levied by or for a taxing district in an amount exceeding the **limitations** provided for in this chapter if such levy is authorized by a proposition approved by a majority of the voters of the taxing district voting on the proposition at a general election held within the district or at a special election within the taxing district called by the district for the purpose of submitting such proposition to the voters. [...]

(2)(a) Subject to statutory dollar limitations, a proposition placed before the voters under this section may authorize annual increases in levies for multiple consecutive years, up to six consecutive years [...]. Elections for this purpose must be held at a **primary or general election**. The title of each ballot measure must state the limited purposes for which the proposed annual increases during the specified period of up to six consecutive years shall be used.

(b)(i) Except as otherwise provided in this subsection (2) (b), funds raised by a levy under this subsection **may not supplant existing funds used for the limited purpose specified in the ballot title**. For purposes of this subsection, existing funds means the actual operating expenditures for the calendar year in which the ballot measure is approved by voters. [...]

(3) After a levy authorized pursuant to this section is made, the **dollar amount of such levy may not be used for the purpose of computing the limitations for subsequent levies** provided for in this chapter, unless the ballot proposition expressly states that the levy made under this section will be used for this purpose.

(4) If expressly stated, a **proposition placed before the voters** under subsection (1) or (2) of this section may:

(a) Use the dollar amount of a levy under subsection (1) of this section, or the dollar amount of the final levy under subsection (2) of this section, for the purpose of computing the limitations for subsequent levies provided for in this chapter;

(b) Limit the period for which the increased levy is to be made under (a) of this subsection;

(c) Limit the purpose for which the increased levy is to be made under (a) of this subsection, but if the limited purpose includes making redemption payments on bonds; [...]

(d) Set the levy or levies at a rate less than the maximum rate allowed for the district;

(e) Provide that **the exemption authorized by RCW 84.36.381 will apply** to the levy of any additional regular property taxes authorized by voters; or

(f) Include any combination of the conditions in this subsection. [...]

There are two types of levy lid lifts: Single-year and multiyear levy lifts, which may increase by a specific annual limit or index to inflation for up to six years.

Property taxes are the largest and most stable revenue source for most cities, on average 25 percent of city revenues.

Deadlines for placing multiyear lid lifts on the ballot: May for the August primary and August for the November general election (RCW 29A04330).

Levy lifts may be temporary or permanent, but the default is temporary. The levy will return to the amount the levy would have been prior to the voter approval, unless ballot measure expressly provides that the final year amount will be used to calculate future levy limits.

This provision approved in 2018 allows cities to exempt qualifying seniors or disabled persons from levy lid lifts.

RCW 84.55.010 limits city levies to 101% of the previous year, plus new construction. This arbitrary cap means that cities cannot keep up with the natural inflationary growth of expenditures.

AWC's fiscal flexibility bill HB 1069 would temporarily allow supplanting for levy lid lift revenues in counties over 15 million population. This restriction was removed for counties under 15 million in 2009.

Public Disclosure Commission (PDC) restrictions prohibiting use of public funds to support or oppose a ballot measure would apply to levy lid lift proposals.

THE QUESTION

WHAT DO YOU ANTICIPATE AS YOUR CITY'S BIGGEST BUDGET CHALLENGE FOR 2021?



Promptly enacting cost-saving measures and pressing pause on one-time initiatives allowed us to close initial budget gaps and pass a balanced 2021-22 budget. However, ongoing uncertainty about the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, the need to support our community's economic resilience and recovery, and our commitment to transforming anticracist systems will all challenge us to flex and build on our ability to adapt, innovate, and manage change.

—VICTORIA WOODARDS
Mayor, Tacoma



The biggest budget challenge for 2021 is road safety, the safety school-route infrastructure, streets, and getting back on our feet with the economy. Last year was challenging, but being on the Finance Committee, I see that we managed general funds and reserves by distributing them little by little throughout the year to top priorities. I do want our businesses to be able to reopen to continue the support for our constituents.

—JOSE CUEVAS
Councilmember, Wenatchee



Cost of labor is going to be a challenge. PEOPLE are our greatest asset, and they need to be prioritized. I was appointed right before the pandemic, and I want to thank the employees who helped me with what we needed to survive 2020. So how do we prevent a K-shaped recovery, balance our budget, and lift up the whole community out of the current situation we're in? Through policy and collaboration, together.

—BETSY WILKERSON
Councilmember, Spokane

TRAININGS

HEALTHY WORKSITE SUMMIT

APRIL 14-15 | ONLINE

National experts inspire innovation. The Healthy Worksite Summit brings wellness coordinators and other professionals together for a day of exhibits, panel discussion, and interactive workshops to promote idea sharing.

This conference is for:

- Wellness coordinators, human resources leaders, and management at public and private worksites
- Safety and risk management professionals
- Health professionals and insurance industry professionals

LABOR RELATIONS INSTITUTE

MAY 5-7 | ONLINE

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This conference is for:

- City and county human resources and labor relations directors and staff, managers and administrators, department heads and supervisors, attorneys, and elected officials
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Citybeat

Diversity Higher *continued from page 5*

"These events were really traumatic, really charged," Navarro explains. "The city has a deeper understanding of why this work is so important. It really put everything in a much clearer light for a lot of people who don't live racism every day."

Last summer, the City of Olympia found itself in a similar position, but without an office to take action. So in June, City Manager Jay Burney appointed Olivia Salazar de Breau (formerly a program assistant to the city's public works director) to serve as Olympia's first equity and inclusion coordinator, charged with creating a community-driven Social Justice and Equity Commission to advise the council and providing internal training and guidance to city employees.

According to Human Resources Director Linnaea Jablonski, who oversees Salazar de Breau in the position, this summer's protests and general civic unrest pushed Olympia to act. "It was a catalyst to be like, 'OK, we need to do this,'" she says. "And we need to do something now."

Months into the job, Salazar de Breau quickly realized that she was devoting almost all of her time to building relationships and connections with the community, seeking input on what a Social Justice and Equity Commission could look like. Like Navarro, she would need additional staff support to develop an equity and inclusion framework for the city and implement the program internally.

"If we're talking about helping the folks in our community and helping antiracism, that's not something we can do by just pulling people in for feedback every now and then," Salazar de Breau says. "We have to have folks of color at the table from the very beginning, leading the work."

At the start of 2021, despite a \$1.3 million reduction in the city's 2021 general fund budget, Jablonski received funding to hire another full-time equity and inclusion coordinator who would be dedicated to internal training and recruitment. As the hiring process continues, Salazar de Breau is looking forward to having another city staffer to share both the workload and the emotional demands of the job.

"It can be very traumatizing to do this work within an organization where you're trying to change the system from the inside," says Navarro, who shares experiences and perspectives with her Olympia colleague. "It can be helpful to have peers who face similar challenges, and you have that safe space to be and not having to fight in every space you're in."

As Salazar de Breau convenes a work group tasked with creating a permanent Social Justice and Equity Commission, one thing has already become clear.

"This work is not just the work of a chosen few," she says. "Racial equity work is the work of everybody in the organization." 

—Laura Furr Mericas



For more information:
cityoftacoma.org, olympiawa.gov

Cityscope



Q&A

Labor of Love

Granger Mayor Jose Trevino talks about how an early education as a migrant worker prepared him for the challenges of managing a municipal budget.

INTERVIEW BY TED KATAUSKAS

Granger Mayor
Jose Trevino

Jose Trevino
Mayor

You were born in Texas. What brought you to Washington?

In 1978, when I was 8 years old, we came here as migrant workers to work in the fields and orchards. We started cutting asparagus, then we'd move around the state, picking apples, cucumbers, blueberries, and strawberries, then we'd move back to Texas. We were homeless, so we slept in our car: me, my mom, and my brother and sister.

How did you end up in Granger?

My mom was a single mom and decided that these kids need more stability, so I'm staying here. We lived in Grandview, then Sunnyside, and came to Granger in the early '80s, then moved back to Sunnyside.

After graduating from Sunnyside High, you worked as an EMT, then as a police officer in a number of small cities around the state, including Granger.

CONTINUED ON P.12 ►



I came back to Granger in 2005 as a police officer, then got hired by the state in 2006 as a fraud investigator with the Department of Labor & Industries.

After a rough childhood, you and your siblings all landed on your feet. Who do you give credit for that?

Obviously my mom. She never raised us to play the victim; she always told us, “If you want anything in life, you have to work for it, and you never take handouts from anybody so that you never owe anybody anything.”

You were elected to Granger’s city council in 2013. What prompted you to get involved with local government?

I’ve always been interested in politics, and then getting into law enforcement and being a public servant, I saw how government agencies were run. I was always told, if you want to change things, you need to get in there and be that change. So I thought, “I’m going to get involved and do that.”

Describe Granger.

We’re a low-income community of 4,100; 36 percent of our population is below poverty, and 86 percent are Hispanic. Our biggest employer is the school district, but most people work in labor, out in the fields and orchards. It’s a community where everybody knows everybody, and everybody helps each other. We’re also known for Radio KDNA, which is the public Spanish radio station mostly for farmworkers.



Team Granger with one of their dinos: Clerk-Treasurer Alice Koerner, Mayor Jose Trevino, Public Works Director Jodie Luke, Fire Chief Ken Shipman, and Police Chief Steve Araguz

“THE WHOLE PURPOSE WAS TO HAVE THE INFRASTRUCTURE TO SUPPORT DEVELOPMENT, AND WE’RE STARTING TO SEE THE FRUIT OF THAT.”

You were appointed to fill a vacancy as Granger’s mayor in 2016, then were elected to the position in 2017. What issues did you grapple with initially?

When I took over in 2016, I inherited an \$84,000 deficit in our budget. That doesn’t seem like a lot, but for a small city like ours with hardly any commercial revenue, that was a huge challenge. I was appointed in November, and by the first part of January we had gotten rid of the deficit and had a cash carryover of \$100,000.

How did you get rid of the deficit?

It was actually really simple: I just put in a spending freeze. We started cutting expenses like magazine subscriptions and all these things that we were paying for every month. Every year during the budget season, I put up a spending freeze to make sure we have cash carryover.

How did the pandemic impact Granger’s budget?

We definitely had a reduction in revenue, just like every other city did. We lost out on property tax and some sales tax and a lot of fees that we collect in a normal year, like late fees for utilities because you can’t just shut off somebody’s water during a pandemic.

Are you doing anything different with the city’s 2021 budget?

We’re keeping the hiring and spending freeze we implemented last year in place, because we don’t know how long this pandemic is going to go on. And we’re going to be working on identifying additional revenue sources for the city. Our city is going to grow. It’s coming, and we’ve got to be prepared.

To that end, during your tenure Granger has been investing surplus revenue, and grant money, in upgrading the city’s water lines.

The whole purpose was to have the infrastructure to support development, and we’re starting to see the fruit of that. We have a general store that’s going to be opening here in town, and we have new housing developments coming in.

As a Spanish speaker, you’re a regular voice on local radio. What’s your message?

I say, “No matter what your citizenship is, you pay taxes here, and we’re here to work for you.”

Your biography certainly gives you credibility.

We speak the same language; we have the same culture. I think that helps a lot. They say, “He slept in a car for months, he worked in the fields, he bathed in a horse drinking trough because he didn’t have a bathroom or shower. He understands the struggle.”

Best thing about being mayor?

Working with an incredible city staff that is very dedicated and committed to the community. The success of this city is in part because of their work. **C**

BY THE NUMBERS

Granger

Cityvision digs deeper into the recent and prehistoric profile of an agrarian Yakima Valley community.

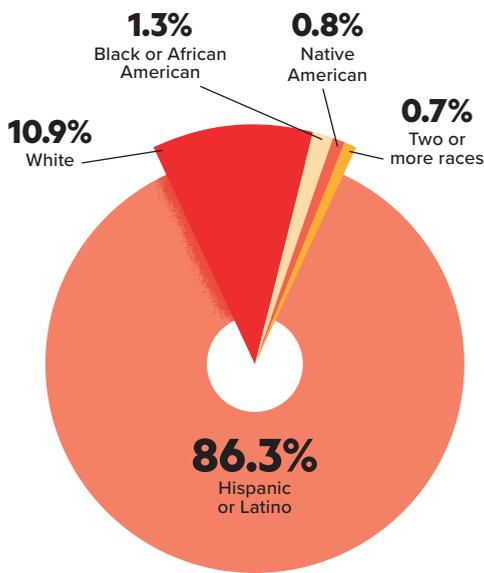
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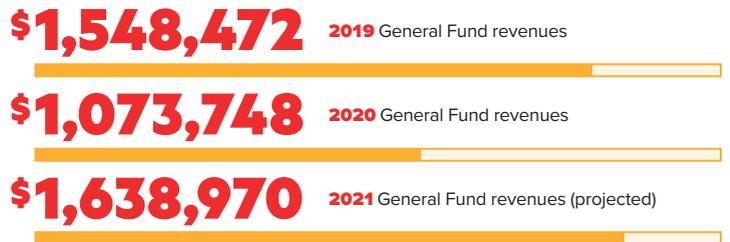
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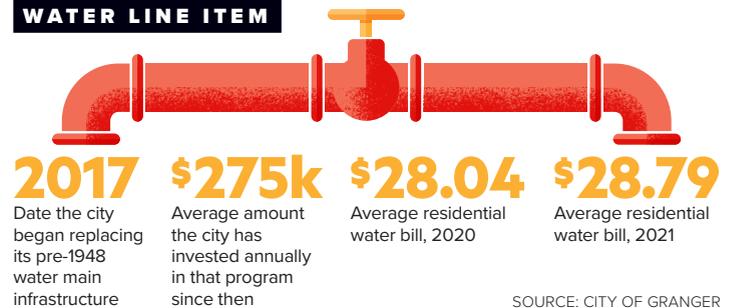


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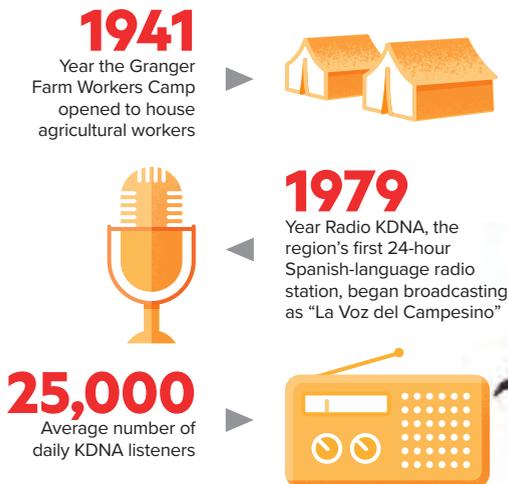


WATER LINE ITEM



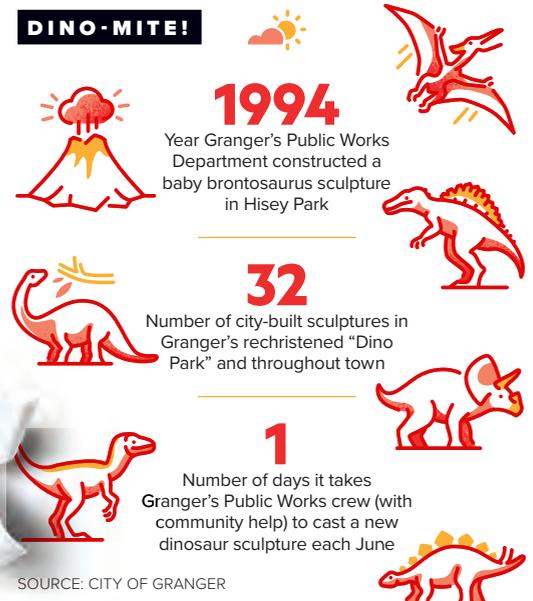
SOURCE: CITY OF GRANGER

RADIO WAVES



SOURCE: ELIZABETH TORRES, KDNA

DINO-MITE!



SOURCE: CITY OF GRANGER

Cheney applies lessons learned from agrarian prudence, main street entrepreneurship, and the local university to revitalize its unique community spirit.

HOME



Cheney Fire Chief
Tom Jenkins and
City Administrator
Mark Schuller

SCHOOLING

By Ted Katauskas

LANDLOCKED 50 MILES WEST of the Idaho border and 300 miles east of the Pacific Ocean, longtime Cheney locals like to think of their city as an inland atoll, a rural oasis that, prior to the pandemic, seemed largely insulated and isolated from the worries of the world.

“It’s off the beaten path: you’ll hear a lot of our citizens say the city of Cheney is an island in the middle of nowhere,” says Tom Jenkins, Cheney’s fire chief, who put down roots here in 2017 after more than two decades as a professional firefighter with the US Air Force on bases in six states. “If you’re coming to Cheney, it’s mostly because you live here or in one of our rural communities; I live 10 minutes into the wilderness, where I have my own little slice of Mayberry.”



Surrounded by the pastoral agricultural tableau of the Palouse just 20 minutes southwest of Spokane, Cheney's resident population of 12,500 prides itself on being a close-knit community where self-sufficiency and a can-do work ethic are worn like a badge of honor, yet everyone knows and looks after one another—and helps when needed. Two years after retiring as the City of Costa Mesa's police chief in 2006, John Hensley was so enamored with life in Cheney that he decided to reprise the role in his adopted hometown.

"I moved up here because of the four seasons and the beauty of the landscape," says Hensley. "After 12 years, I take it for granted how friendly folks are compared to Southern California. I spend a lot of time driving around in a marked police car, and I still am surprised at the waves I get, and how everyone flags you through a four-way stop. It's just a small-town feel that you see on TV sometimes when you watch a Hallmark Classic."

Even kids born and raised in Cheney tend to move back once they've experienced life in the wider world. After graduating from Cheney High, then Portland State University, then the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Piedmont, Italy (founded by Carlo Petrini, who pioneered the global slow food movement), Douglas LaBar returned to his hometown in 2012 to open a locally sourced gourmet café, The Mason Jar, in the heart of Cheney's four-block historic commercial district.

"I made it my master's thesis project to come back home and open a bistro using small farms to bring attention to localization in the community," says LaBar. "Downtown Cheney was definitely dead then. To try just getting people into the old part of downtown, never mind participate in my take on things, was a challenge, but we've adapted and changed and have become a staple of the community."

In addition to hosting cooking classes for the city's Parks & Recreation department, as well as festivals and community events (like a scones and tea reception for the local historical society) and a forum for guest lecturers from the university, business was so good a year ago that LaBar opened The Jar, a satellite drive-through near Eastern Washington University catering to students and faculty commuting to and from campus.

"Cheney is kind of a split-personality town," he adds. "It's half rural, small town surrounded by wheatland farms, so you get that essence. But then the college is here, the university, so there's also this split dynamic, with lots of education and a liberal side, that brings this bustle and energy to the community."

Predating Cheney's incorporation, Eastern Washington University is almost a separate city unto itself, with an enrollment that rivals the city's resident population and inspires a fierce allegiance to the Eagles, with as many local residents as students packing the bleachers at Reese Court for basketball and attending Saturday afternoon tailgate parties at Roos Field, a football stadium with red turf.

"Cheney is a special place," says City Administrator Mark Schuller. "There's an energy in the community, and a lot of that is tied to Eastern. Every fall, when you have a new incoming class of students returning, there's an excitement in the air that really drives the community. After a long dry summer when businesses tend to suffer a little bit, they come back with a vengeance when the kids return. This past year has been problematic in that the kids didn't come back."



SCHULLER MOVED TO CHENEY from his Ohio hometown in 2003 to work as a human resources administrator at EWU (his wife coaches the university's women's basketball team), then as human resources manager for the city in 2009, becoming city administrator in 2014. By the end of 2019 the city had emerged from recession-era austere budgeting championed by Cheney's mayor and council that developed a habit of socking away cash reserves, adopting a save-rather-than-spend approach that mirrors the community's ingrown agrarian savvy: learning to do without niceties even when flush with bumper-crop revenue in anticipation of lean times to come.

"We've referred to ourselves in the past as a Ford city, not a Mercedes city, meaning we don't overspend on luxury that doesn't contribute to our ability to serve," explains Schuller. "Being proper stewards of our resources is something we take a tremendous amount of pride in as a city... It's a bit of a cliché, but we do a lot with a little every day."

Cheney's austere budgeting is also a practicality born out of necessity, given constraints dictated by a cash-starved local economy.

"Over the past decade, one of our biggest challenges has been finding revenue to support our general fund," notes Schuller. "We don't have a huge retail base in Cheney; we have a lot of fast food and those kind of low-income retail establishments. We don't have car, RV, or farm implement dealerships, so we don't get those big dollars in sales tax."



Cheney native Douglas LaBar returned after an educational stint in Italy to open a gourmet café downtown.

“WE’VE REFERRED TO OURSELVES IN THE PAST AS A FORD CITY, NOT A MERCEDES CITY, MEANING WE DON’T OVERSPEND ON LUXURY THAT DOESN’T CONTRIBUTE TO OUR ABILITY TO SERVE.

—MARK SCHULLER CHENEY CITY ADMINISTRATOR

In contrast with the dynamic in Pullman, where according to one recent study Washington State University’s much larger student body injected nearly \$50 million into that city’s economy during the 2018-19 academic year, student spending isn’t the lifeblood of Cheney’s economy. With 81 percent of EWU’s undergraduate population living off campus or commuting from elsewhere in the region, the university’s cash-poor student population exerts an important but comparably minor influence on Cheney’s bottom line. Far more influential are EWU’s 3,000 full-time employees; the university is easily the city’s largest employer, followed by the school district, with 492 full-time employees at

12 public schools, and the city, with 88 full-time employees. But even that spending is eclipsed by EWU’s operating budget, which depends largely on enrollment—which has been declining in recent years—as well as appropriations from the state Legislature.

“I kind of run by the mantra, ‘As Eastern goes, we go as a city,’” says Schuller. “Typically, when Eastern is doing well, the economy is doing well, and we do well as a city because they are investing in infrastructure and doing things like creating jobs. When times are tough for them, generally we’re going to be in those tough times, too.”

When the pandemic emerged last spring, shelter-at-home orders, coupled with a mass exodus of students as the university shifted to online classes, transformed Cheney’s normally bustling downtown into a ghost town. Yet while other cities dependent upon retail-based sales tax revenue reeled from the impact of nonessential business closures, cash continued to flow into Cheney’s coffers, as construction at the university (in the final stages of a \$68 million Integrated Science Center) and the school district (a major expansion of the high school) continued unabated, with the city posting a 20 percent increase in revenue during the first quarter of 2020 and a 12 percent increase from the previous year during the second quarter.

By the end of summer, however, as construction activity slowed and the pandemic exacted its toll on the finances of the city’s largest employer (faced with a \$24 million shortfall in tuition and state funding, EWU instituted a series of cost-cutting measures that included layoffs, salary reductions, or furloughs for 400 employees), Cheney’s third-quarter revenues nosedived by more than 14 percent compared to July through September 2019, while fourth-quarter revenues were off by nearly 24 percent. Based on those ominous trends, Schuller and city leaders budgeted accordingly.

“Top priorities for funding were items that directly related to our ability to provide a high level of service to the community, city financial liabilities, and items related to employee safety,” Schuller explains. That included debt service payments for a recent wastewater treatment plant upgrade and the recent acquisition of a fire engine, as well as the purchase of personal protective gear for firefighters and police officers. While the city decided to forgo augmenting police riot gear—with its activist student population on hiatus, Cheney experienced none of the social unrest over policing practices that many other cities grappled with over the summer—it opted to fund additional de-escalation and inherent bias training for its 17.5 sworn officers.

And while the city continued to fund street sweeping and maintenance of municipal parks and playgrounds, it took a year off from the scheduled replacement of police patrol cars and fleet vehicles used by Parks & Recreation and utility workers. It also deferred the replacement of office furniture at city hall, as well as a citywide computer operating system upgrade. Those savings enabled Cheney to forgo employee layoffs and furloughs, while carrying a cash reserve of \$446,550 into 2021.

“We worked diligently as a city to build our reserves back after a low point in 2012, as the city dealt with the fallout from the recession and a significant lack of tax revenue,” Schuller says. “We made the decision to maintain our current level of reserves, as we have some concerns about the length of time it will take for sales and other tax revenue to return to the pre-Covid levels.”



Cheney Faith Center Lead Pastor Mark Posthuma helps run a community food bank that's been busy in the pandemic.

THE CONSERVATIVE, yet cautiously optimistic, economic planning modeled by the city resonates with businesses along First Street in the city's historic commercial district. At The Mason Jar, LaBar now appears prescient in his decision to debut an online ordering system in September 2019, along with asking the city to restripe the curbside parking outside the café as a designated 10-minute grab-and-go parking zone. Hoping to alleviate the lunch rush and streamline ordering, the service was all but unused for six months—until the pandemic did what no amount of promotion could.

“We had all this ready, and lo and behold, [the pandemic] happens and we're good to go,” says LaBar, who also serves as president of the Cheney Merchants Association. “We did have to shut down inside seating, but we were able to switch from that day straight on to ordering online. Those sales just picked up like crazy, and we didn't have to reinvent the wheel like some other people I know.”

LaBar was gratified that years of pitching a buy-local campaign resonated with the community: residents were spending their stimulus checks at The Mason Jar and other local eateries, and tipping generously. After receiving a federal grant, Spokane's Meals On Wheels began offering seniors vouchers to redeem at area restaurants, and LaBar noticed a similar uptick of orders from older diners and their caregivers. All told, the restaurateur, who employs as many as two dozen staff at both venues, says business during the pandemic has been off by 30 percent, far better than he could have expected.

The city's restaurants even benefit from their own local delivery service. Prior to the pandemic, after trying in vain to lure national

apps like DoorDash and UberEats to Cheney, LaBar and two other Cheney restaurateurs connected with Treehugger, a Spokane-based grassroots delivery service that allowed Cheney businesses to use its online app and digital platform. Local drivers for the city's own Eagle Bites (named after EWU's mascot) now earn more than they could with national services, and they provide restaurants with a cheaper alternative to national delivery chains as well.

“That's kind of our ethos, our push as a community,” says LaBar. “We're trying to find people who already have talents here to do lots of different things. Rather than trying to go outside our community and bring it in, we get people who are really invested already because they live here.”

As much as they would like to invest in their community, though, many Cheney residents can't afford to eat out, or for that matter, buy groceries. More than a third of the local population had been earning less than the federal poverty level before the onset of the pandemic, which only made matters worse. So since April 2020, volunteers at the Cheney Faith Center have been staffing a drive-through food bank that distributes 2,000 pounds of donated provisions each week, loading boxes of milk, produce, and staples into the trunks of as many as 100 cars that queue outside Cheney Middle School every Wednesday afternoon. In addition to food, the Faith Center also has doled out \$7,000 that parishioners have contributed to an emergency fund for those who need help paying utility and electric bills.

“Those who were financially insecure before, this has hit them hard,” says Mark Posthuma, Cheney Faith Center's lead pastor. “When you've lost your job and were making \$3,000 a month, to go to \$600, that hurts.”

Then there's the spiritual toll.

"The social and emotional impact has been significant," says Posthuma, who also has been fielding an uptick of calls from community members who have been experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depression. "It's kind of a catch-22: the thing we need to do we can't do, and that is start getting together. . . . There was this great environment that the city created, this really cool atmosphere in Cheney. All that went away, and that is tough."

One barometer of just how tough is the number of calls for help that have flooded the city's 911 system since the onset of the pandemic. With more than 11,000 students AWOL throughout most of 2020, Cheney's police chief expected the call volume to decrease significantly; instead, year-to-date calls dropped by just 1.7 percent, from 29,103 in 2019 to 28,600 in 2020, driven by the city's distraught resident population.

"Because people have been sheltering in place, there's been a lot of anger and wondering about what the future may bring—people living on edge because they've been cut back on work hours, and they take it out on another," says Hensley. "In the past, domestic violence was maybe three or four, after minor thefts, assaults, alcohol-related calls. Now it's our number one call."

Mental illness-related calls also have been on the rise; Hensley says the number of voluntary commitments from Cheney to Spokane's psychiatric hospital is the highest it's been since he arrived over a decade ago. And then there are calls like the one from a college student who just wanted to talk.

FF
**RATHER THAN TRYING TO GO OUTSIDE
OUR COMMUNITY AND BRING IT IN, WE
GET PEOPLE WHO ARE REALLY INVESTED
ALREADY BECAUSE THEY LIVE HERE.**

—DOUGLAS LABAR LOCAL RESTAURATEUR

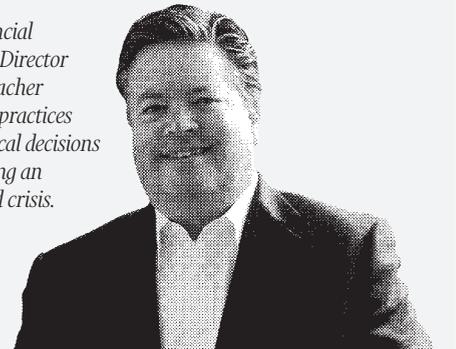
"She didn't go home, and she was lonely," he says, adding that the department's chaplain masked up and sat with her while she initiated a Zoom call with her family to make plans to return home. "That broke my heart. The isolation is starting to get to people, the cries for help."

Similarly, emergency calls to the city's fire department have remained constant despite the falloff in student population, decreasing by a mere 0.7 percent. The majority of those calls is medical related, with perhaps 20 percent concerning psychiatric issues. While morale in his department remains high, Jenkins watches for signs of critical stress in the department's 11 full-time and 18 volunteer firefighters, given the nature of those calls and their ties to the community.

"These guys were all born and raised in this community; they know every address like the back of their hand," he says. "Seeing loved ones, friends and family, coworkers and kids you

PLANNING SAGE Q&A DAVID SCHUMACHER

*Office of Financial
Management Director
David Schumacher
discusses best practices
for making fiscal decisions
while managing an
unprecedented crisis.*



At AWC's Mayors Exchange in January, you talked about a few critical decisions the state Legislature made early in 2020 to address the pandemic. Can you explain what happened?

At the end of last session, which was a supplemental short session, both the House and the Senate passed their budgets, and as they were going to negotiate the [final] budget, we started to hear about the virus as maybe being a serious problem. So their first response was they added less to the supplemental [budget] than they had been planning on doing to leave a little bit more money in reserve just in case things got bad. The second thing they did was they gave OFM \$200 million to address the pandemic, which was very helpful in those early days to pay for testing and the crisis things that hit us much quicker than anybody would have imagined.

In the end, the governor ended up vetoing some \$450 million from that four-year budget. Why was that decision made,

and what was cut?

It takes 20 days from when the budget passes until you sign or veto it. In those intervening 20 days, it became apparent that things were much worse than we thought, so we discussed things we might veto and things we didn't want to veto. It wasn't taking anything away from people, just things we felt we couldn't afford because we needed to have that \$450 million to plug holes in future budgets.

Did you apply any lessons learned from previous downturns to manage the state's fiscal response to the pandemic?

I have been through a few of these crises, but they're all different. At first you don't really know how bad it's going to get. So the early actions that we took—like stopping pay raises, installing furloughs—were just to try to save money until we figured out where we were. In previous recessions, the problem is if you're optimistic, then you have to keep cutting the budget every few months to get back in balance. If you're too pessimistic,

CONTINUED ON P. 20 ▶



Eastern Washington University Interim President David May

grew up with in school, their moms and dads suffering, that adds another layer of stress... To say that this city is in crisis mode—no, I think we are in survival mode. And a large part of that is because our older demographic population has been through life, and they either lived through the Great Depression or they remember their mom and dad talking about the Great Depression. That’s the generation that needs to say, ‘Young folks, it’s going to be OK. We’re going to get through this.’”

FOR THAT TO HAPPEN, those young folks will need to return in the fall, as EWU is planning.

“In a town like Cheney, the university is a lot more than just an economic driver,” says EWU’s interim president, David May. “We’re the entertainment on the weekends, with football games and basketball games, the theater, art exhibitions, student clubs and organizations putting on events... The vibrancy that a few thousand more young people bring to a community, to a college campus, is missing this year.”

But there have been positives.

“It’s hard to talk about bright spots in the midst of what we’re all going through right now, but I think we have proven we can do things that we used to be quite vocal about not being able to do,” he adds, referring to the university’s pandemic pivot to remote learning. “We would say it’s not possible to deliver this lab course online, and yet now we’re doing it because the impossible is only impossible until you have to do it.”

In that spirit, the city, like many rural communities long constrained by and frustrated with substandard commercial internet service, plans to debut a pilot project in the spring: a city-run internet utility, offering residents broadband access for just \$60 a month.

“The pandemic accelerated people’s outreach to us to say, ‘We really need you guys to step up and work on this for us,’” says Schuller. “One of the silver linings is just the resiliency of this community. Cheney has been a very resilient community for a long time. We’ve weathered a lot of storms, whether it was the recession in 2009 to 2012 or today’s pandemic.”

For one, and like most in Cheney, Schuller longs for the day when that maelstrom has passed, “when we can get back into Roos Field, that nice red AstroTurf field, and watch the Eagles play, and things are back to normal.”

And the home team wins. **C**

you overreact and do things you shouldn’t have done. Knowing those two things, we tried to save money without cutting services from people, because cutting services from people in the middle of a pandemic is a last resort.

Now that the dust has settled a little bit on 2020, how bad was the overall damage?

In June the forecast was way down, but in September and November those forecasts were up quite a bit, not up from where we started, but the hole that was projected ended up being much shallower than we thought it would be. The fact that we had reserves built up before this, and taking administrative action with the vetoes and furloughs and things like that, allowed us to balance the budget without slashing the current biennium budget at all. So in the short term, we were able to weather this without any serious adverse effects.

One important tool in making that happen was a state government hiring freeze. Pluses and minuses?

Not hiring new people is one of the easiest ways of saving money that you can do... A hiring freeze for some agencies that were understaffed puts them at a serious disadvantage, and it also puts the citizens who rely on those services at a disadvantage.

What about furloughs?

The furloughs we did

are behind us, but with our unions for the next biennium, we negotiated another round of once-a-month furloughs for most state employees. We are hopeful that we can find enough money either in the good revenue forecast or in federal congressional support that we don’t have to do nearly as many of the furloughs going forward.

Why are they part of the budget calculus?

This summer, because Congress passed the Shared Work Act, people who took furlough days were able to get unemployment insurance, so for most people who took furlough days in the summer of 2020, it saved money for the state budget, which is why we did it. But the employees didn’t necessarily feel the pain of that. That’s not necessarily the case going forward, which is why we’re hoping to avoid that.

Your advice to local decisionmakers when it comes to budgeting during a crisis?

Don’t overreact—but that doesn’t mean don’t have a plan. When things looked really bad, we asked all the agencies to plan for a 15 percent cut, options so that if it got as bad as it looked, we would be able to react. Be ready in the bad situations, do the easy stuff first, and be prepared to do harder stuff. And by easy, I mean relatively. Not giving raises is not something anybody likes, but it is certainly better than laying people off.

Citywise

“

Always remember that the purpose of public comment is to hear the views of your community, not to get into dialogue with them.

— CITY 101 P. 24 ▶



22 ANTICIPATING AND ADDRESSING PANDEMIC FISCAL PRESSURES
24 MANAGING PUBLIC INPUT **26** DEVELOPING CITIZEN-FRIENDLY BUDGETS



Sign Language

Keeping an eye on these five indicators can help cities anticipate and respond to coming fiscal crisis.

■ **Cash solvency:** Every percentage-point increase in the general fund balance is associated with a 1.3 percent decrease in the odds of fiscal distress in the years that followed the Great Recession.

■ **Budgetary solvency:** A thousand-dollar increase in total revenue per capita reduces the odds of fiscal distress by roughly 16.5 percent.

■ **Long-term solvency:** A single percentage-point increase in debt-to-revenue ratio increases the odds of fiscal distress by 0.4 percent.

■ **Revenue structure:** Each percentage-point increase in a city's reliance on the property tax as a revenue source is associated with a 3.2 percent decrease in the odds of fiscal distress.

■ **Socioeconomic environment:** A percentage-point increase in home prices decreases the odds of fiscal distress by 2.6 percent in the following year.

VITALITY CHECK

The human costs of local fiscal crises during Covid-19

ADAPTED FROM THE NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES

C **COVID-19 HAS DIRE** implications for the vitality of US cities. While cities play a crucial role in the direct provision of essential services that will affect the health and economic security of millions of Americans, they are also ground zero for a deep fiscal crisis. A recent National League of Cities survey of 485 cities reveals that nearly 90 percent of cities will be less able in fiscal year 2021 than in FY 2020 to meet their fiscal needs. Bluntly stated, without federal aid, Covid-19 will imperil cities' ability to carry out vital functions. The impacts on local economies and quality of life will be severe.

NLC recently published a report titled "The Human Costs of Local Fiscal Crises During Covid-19." Leveraging the extensive research and reporting on the Great Recession of 2008-09, we aimed to improve public understanding of the economic and social implications of city financial emergencies created by the Covid-19 crisis.

As a word of caution, these two crises differ in important respects that make a one-to-one comparison challenging. The prolonged public health emergency of Covid-19 did not define the Great Recession. Common to both crises, however, are intense fiscal strain on local governments and the demand for government intervention.

Our research begins with the assumption that not only are cities the "front lines" of emergency responses to Covid-19; they will also bear the brunt of the economic downturn caused by the pandemic. In contrast to Europe, where austerity has operated primarily at the national level, the burden of austerity in the United States has effectively been delegated by the national government to state and local officials.

Here is an overview of our major findings:

In the absence of adequate federal and state support, recessions mean austerity for local governments; no public service is safe from cuts.

Because of legal restrictions on deficit spending and borrowing, recessions confront local governments with limited options. They can cut expenditures through service reductions, layoffs, or hiring freezes, or they can increase revenue through tax increases, additional user fees, or asset sales. In the years that followed the end of the Great Recession, even as sales and income tax collections recovered, falling property tax revenue and decreasing aid from states and the federal government caused cities across the United States to make sizable cuts to public services.

Fiscal crises affect revenues and expenditures across the 50 states, regardless of which party governs.

The Great Recession inflicted economic pain on voters of every partisan stripe and across the ideological spectrum of American politics. A leading 2016 study found that the Great Recession negatively impacted 49 out of 50 Metropolitan Statistical Areas. Similarly, municipal officials across the country—in both Republican and Democratic strongholds alike—were faced with the reality of revenue shortfalls and the prospect of unprecedented budget cuts.

While not immediately visible, massive budget cuts inflict damage on local and regional economies.

Local austerity has had adverse effects on the quality of life in US cities. Most notable in this regard are cuts to basic infrastructure maintenance and repair. State and local governments own 90 percent of all non-defense public infrastructure assets and pay 75 percent of the costs to maintain and improve these assets. Historically, deferring maintenance or capital improvements is a common strategy in fiscally austere times. From 2009 to 2017, state and local infrastructure



spending as a share of GDP declined by 0.5 percent to just under 2 percent—the lowest level since the 1950s. Deferred investment has led to predictable deteriorating conditions.

Austerity policies that followed the Great Recession have left cities underprepared for Covid-19.

Despite an unprecedented economic expansion recently cut short by Covid-19, local governments are still grappling with the lost decade created by the Great Recession. Rather than inspire more robust government interventions or countervailing, countercyclical policies, the Great Recession reduced support for government activism on major social problems such as poverty, health care, racism, and income inequality.

Public attention to local fiscal crises was limited during the Great Recession. And when the human costs emerged, media coverage was virtually nonexistent.

However severe, the impacts of the Great Recession on US cities received little public attention relative to other major economic storylines. According to an analysis of media coverage, the effects of the recession on state and local governments accounted for 6 percent of news stories in 2009—the year that Congress passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Whereas nearly 40 percent of the sources in these stories were representatives of private-sector businesses, just over 10 percent were representatives of state and local governments. Perhaps most troublingly, even as unemployment surged, national coverage of the economy fell in tandem with an increase of major stock-market indices. Thus, by the time local governments began to experience the recession's effects, they were barely visible in major media outlets.

There are several leading indicators that can help us identify warning signs of local fiscal distress.

Forecasting the effects of economic recessions on local finances is difficult, especially when the pace and scale of economic recovery is contingent on how government policies shape not only economic activity but also the management of a novel health emergency. Nevertheless, there are numerous leading indicators of local fiscal distress that can help to warn policymakers about the possibility of an oncoming crisis. Building on the post-2008 literature, a recent study of 300 cities' fiscal performance following the Great Recession identifies five key predictors, listed in "Sign Language" (at left). **C**

This article summarizes NLC's "The Human Costs of Local Fiscal Crises During Covid-19," which can be found in its entirety at nlc.org.

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HEARING THE PUBLIC

How cities can help their communities manage pandemic anxieties

ANN G. MACFARLANE JURASSICPARLIAMENT.COM



Finishing School

When managing contentious public comments, such as those surrounding public school closures, ensure that commenters feel heard while not inviting further discussion. Talking points might include:

- The board has given lengthy and thoughtful consideration to the question of whether or not to hold school in person at this time.
- Relying on the best public health information we could obtain, the board decided to keep our physical schools closed until the infection metrics have reached a measure where we feel safe.
- We understand that this poses a serious hardship to students and parents, and that online learning is not as effective as in-person instruction.
- Speaking personally, I would have liked us to set an easier target to reopen. After giving this my best consideration, I voted against this decision. Since the majority decided it this way, I support the decision of the board.
- Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts on this challenging issue. I appreciate your commitment to our kids. I hope that with widespread vaccination, we will be able to reopen sooner rather than later. Again, thank you.

A RECENT REPORT FROM the Washington State Department of Health gives a grim picture of the impact of Covid-19 on behavioral health as of early 2021. After an initial honeymoon, we collectively entered the disillusionment phase of this disaster, with emotional responses plummeting.

While the vaccines are giving some hope, people are suffering. Their well-being, and their behavior, are showing the strain.

We're certainly seeing this in local government. City councils and other public boards across the nation are the target of anger and upset from the public. The governing bodies themselves are sometimes struggling to keep their equanimity and respond adequately to the challenging problems they face.

City leaders can show compassionate leadership during this particularly intense time, in part, by continuing to lead public meetings in an orderly way. Here are a few tips.

Ensure fair discussion at meetings.

It is vital to hold free and fair discussion at your meetings. Be sure that every board member has an equal chance to speak, and that the minority is not marginalized in discussion. It can be hard to maintain equal opportunity for all to speak when passions run high, but you must. The chair needs to keep a cool head and focus on facilitating the discussion.

Manage public comment effectively.

When people are upset, public comment sessions can be challenging. Always remember that the purpose of public comment is to hear the views of your community, not to get into dialogue with them. For some potential talking points, see "Finishing School," at left.

When an issue is very inflamed, the regular public comment period may be insufficient. You may want to schedule an additional public forum on the subject to preserve the board's time to work at its regular tasks.

Absorb the pain, and don't pass it on.

It's not easy to be the target of public pressure. Don't lash out or retaliate when you feel hurt. Just acknowledge that times are tough, your local government is doing the best that it can, and you are doing the best that you can. And recommit to

serving your community, even in these challenging times.

Your commitment to something bigger than the individuals caught in the current moment—to the greater good—will sustain you even in the worst of times. **C**

IT CAN BE HARD TO MAINTAIN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL TO SPEAK WHEN PASSIONS RUN HIGH, BUT YOU MUST. THE CHAIR NEEDS TO KEEP A COOL HEAD AND FOCUS ON FACILITATING THE DISCUSSION.

Ann G. Macfarlane offers consulting and training services on local government meetings through jurassicparliament.com. Her background as a diplomat and Russian translator enables her to provide insights to elected officials, citizen volunteers, and staff across the nation.





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BUDGET, FRIENDLY

Cities can enhance community engagement by developing a Citizens Budget.

ERIC LOWELL MRSC

WASHINGTON STATE law requires all cities to prepare either an annual or a biennial budget.

Outside of statutory deadlines for when versions of the budget are due, when public hearings are to be held, and when the budget is adopted, the law does not prescribe the format and structure of the budget document.

Many cities look to the Government Finance Officers Association and follow the guidelines established in their Distinguished Budget Presentation Awards program. The goal of the program has been to increase transparency in local government budgeting and foster budgets that serve as a policy document, a financial plan, an operations guide, and a communication tool—the last of which can be a struggle for many cities. Creating

a budget document that is informative and engaging for citizens is easier said than done.

Some city budgets are between 300 and 500 pages long. A document of such size can be intimidating to citizens on this fact alone. Additionally, the document can be filled with financial jargon and terms that make some readers' eyes glaze over. Citizens who lack financial literacy may find a city budget unappealing and too difficult to digest, and therefore they will not take the time to read it.

If a city truly wants to use their budget as an effective communication tool, an appealing approach is to create a Citizens Budget. A Citizens Budget is a document outside of the regular budget document that simplifies the presentation of budget information and hopefully encourages citizens to be more knowledgeable and

involved in their community. Inspired by a publication of the International Budget Partnership intended to help international countries develop Citizens Budgets, cities can develop Citizens Budgets of their own.

One of the key elements of developing a Citizens Budget is community engagement, since the purpose of city government ultimately is to provide services its citizens want and need. The City of Redmond has been using community engagement for over a decade to develop, organize, and present their budget. MRSC has a blog post on its website written by Redmond's now-retired finance director, Mike Bailey, titled "Building the Budget around the Community It Serves," which describes how community priorities are gathered and what the city does with that information to create their budget.

The process of community engagement requires staff time and resources, and in some cases the use of outside consultants, which can all be costly. However, there are training resources available for cities to use at little or no cost. The American Library Association (ALA) worked with





CITY 101



Municipal BYOB

ONE OF THE KEY ELEMENTS OF DEVELOPING A CITIZENS BUDGET IS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, SINCE THE PURPOSE OF CITY GOVERNMENT ULTIMATELY IS TO PROVIDE SERVICES ITS CITIZENS WANT AND NEED.

the Harwood Institute to develop a program of community engagement called Libraries Transforming Communities. The ALA website has a page called “Turning Outward Resources for Libraries” that contains a step-by-step guide for engaging with the community. One of the tools used in the process is the Ask Exercise, which comprises four questions:

- What kind of community do you want to live in?
- Why is this important to you?
- How is this different from how you see things now?
- What are some of the things that need to happen to create that kind of change?

It is easy to see how such an exercise, although developed for libraries, would be beneficial to cities wanting to engage with citizens and develop budget priorities.

After a city has conducted community engagement and created its annual budget, it needs to consider how to create the Citizens Budget. The document should contain the following elements:

- The economic assumptions underlying the budget
- The budget process
- Revenue collection
- Priorities in allocations and spending
- Significant new measures
- Area-specific and targeted program information
- Budget terminology (glossary)
- Contact info for citizen follow-up

Additionally, the document should be tailored to be read and understood by the general public, featuring helpful charts and plain language. According to the website plainlanguage.gov, which helps

governments create documents that are accessible for the public, some key elements of writing in plain language are:

- Avoiding long sentences
- Using active voice
- Using strong verbs
- Avoiding superfluous words
- Avoiding legal and financial jargon
- Avoiding numerous defined terms
- Avoiding unnecessary details
- Using a readable design and layout

Once the document is completed, the city should disseminate the Citizens Budget to the public. Cities should determine which avenues are the best for getting this information to its community: print, online, radio, video. Cities should assess their own community and do some combination of the above, and they certainly should promote the Citizens Budget is on the city’s website, ideally with links from the home page.

Cities should consider closely the audience they are attempting to reach. For younger individuals, providing links in social media posts or through text messaging is a good method, since this is usually their preferred method of receiving communications and information. Older citizens may still prefer to receive information in print. In this case, the city could use mailings or have copies available at the local library and other public spaces.

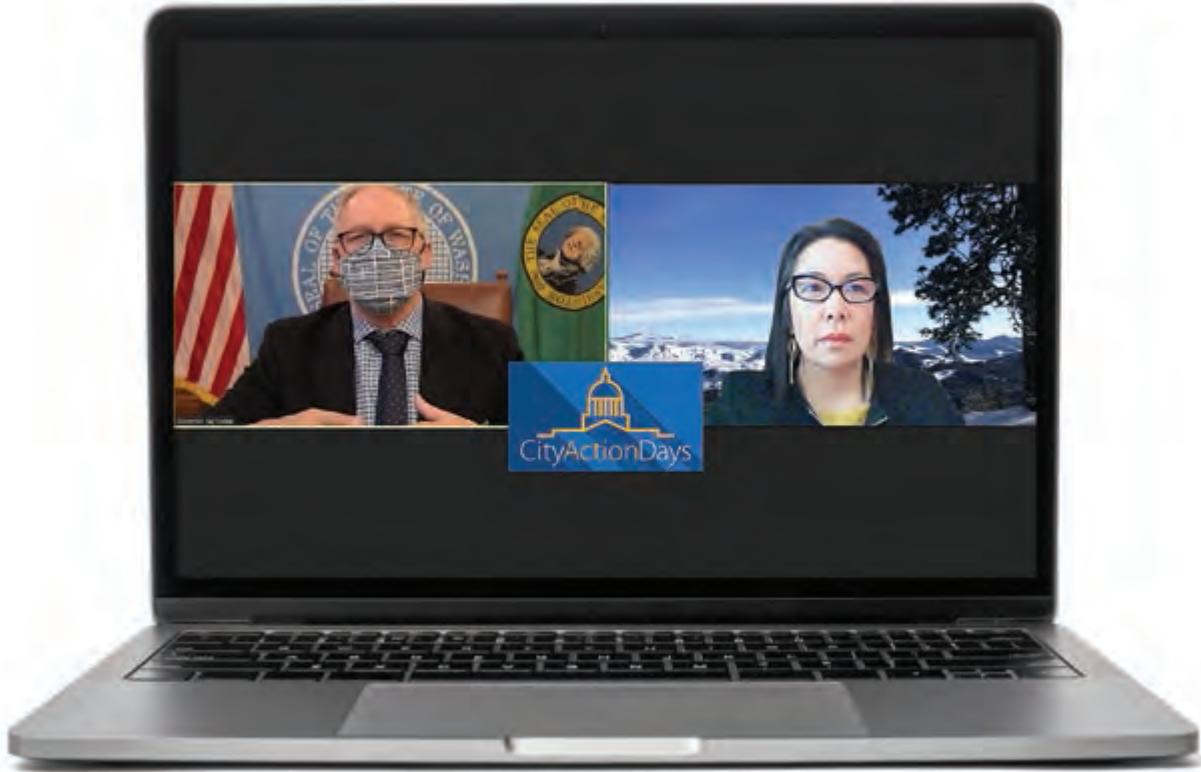
The final step in an impactful Citizens Budget is to analyze the entire process used to create and disseminate the document. Evaluating the effectiveness of what was done will help inform the Citizens Budget for the next year, so that cities can build upon the process through each subsequent budget cycle.

Citizens understand that governments are limited by their budgets, but for many individuals, standard budgets can appear confusing and less than transparent. A Citizens Budget can be an effective way to both inform the public and promote civic engagement. [C](#)

Eric Lowell joined MRSC in December 2020 as a finance consultant. He has been involved in local government finance, for cities and special purpose districts, for over 13 years.

Cityscape

AWC held its first all-virtual City Action Days legislative conference in February.



Weather or Not

In uncertain times, cities that lean into and learn from adversity sometimes reap fortuitous results.

THE LATIN PHRASE *omne trium perfectum*, which translates as “everything that comes in threes is perfect” or “every set of three is complete,” defines the rule of three: the idea that a consecutive trio of events or lessons learned is somehow more satisfying or conclusive than something that happens merely once or twice.

The recent history of City Action Days, AWC’s annual legislative conference, is a case in point. In February 2019, a winter storm that dropped more than 10 inches of snow at SeaTac Airport canceled the event for the first time ever. (The weather also shut down the state Legislature, so thwarted in-person city advocates didn’t miss much.) In 2020, City Action Days was the last major event AWC hosted before the pandemic arrived, with Stay Home/Stay Healthy orders shutting down business as usual all across the state.

This February, with the virus on the wane but the lockdown still in place, City Action Days for the first time ever was held virtually, with councilmembers, mayors, and city managers and administrators conferencing via Zoom. That turned out to be a good thing, too, because the date of the event coincided with yet another Snowmageddon that likely would have reprised 2019’s weather cancellation had the event not pivoted online because of public health concerns.

The lesson learned, of course, is that advocating for your city requires agility, determination, and improvisation. When faced with adversity—even a triple threat like wild weather, a global pandemic, and unfamiliar technology—cities can always find a way to keep the essential conversations moving forward. **C**

Mark your calendars



5 great conferences

Healthy Worksite Summit
April 14-15, 2021

Labor Relations Institute
May 5-7, 2021

AWC Annual Conference
June 22-25, 2021

Member Expo
October 13-14, 2021

City Action Days
February 10-11, 2022



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