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ENCORE JOURNEY: City manager recruits new local leaders



Frank Benest is focused on increasing the ranks of local government managers.

Frank Benest is stepping down in June as city manager of Palo Alto, Calif., after 36 years in local government. But he's not retiring. Instead, he's graduating to an encore career devoted to finding and preparing leaders to work in the public sector.

While serving as majordomo of one of California's most innovative cities for the past eight years, Benest has laid the groundwork for a campaign to convince more people to work in local government. Come June, he'll make it his primary concern.

Benest has been promoting careers in local government through his connections with other city managers. Among their initiatives are a talent exchange program that trades mid-career city workers between cities in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties, so that they can obtain greater experience, a statewide job coaching program and a Web site listing job opportunities in California cities and counties.

His encore career will be the fulfillment of a lifetime of activism that began when he took a year off from college to help create community cooperatives in Mexico. He later organized grape boycotts with the United Farm Workers.

Benest, who wears large aviator glasses and two plastic bracelets stamped "Livestrong" and "Dream," said his affinity for public service was instilled at a young age by his mother, a dedicated volunteer and gerontologist. "When we went to college, she joined VISTA. She was still worrying about what job she'd do next when she was in her 80s," he recalled with a laugh.

He carried his can-do spirit into local government. "There are two kinds of city managers," he said. "Some cities want administrative overseers. Others want people to make things happen." When you're the second type, as Benest has been, he said, "You tend to get into trouble."

Despite personal tragedy when his wife died in 2004 and a bout with throat cancer, he's made things happen. He was president of the city managers division of the League of California Cities in 2000 when the group began to see evidence of what he terms "a quiet crisis." He explained, "Baby boomers were just beginning to leave, and we began to see that the people that would be taking our places were not prepared."

He attributes the looming shortage of qualified city leaders to the difference in size between generations (80 million baby boomers versus 50 million Gen-Xers) and to changing values. "Younger professionals want more balance in their lives," he said. "We have not done a very good job of marketing the joys and benefits of our work. They see us as overworked, abused bureaucrats who have no time for family."

The good news, he said, is that the next generation shares the boomer values of wanting to save the planet and solve social problems. "We were the JFK generation. We all wanted to make a difference. Many of us went into public service," he noted. "Young people see the nonprofit sector as where they are going to align their values. We need to show them that local government is where all the action is."

Working for a city enables you to have direct input into decisions and see policies implemented quickly. "There is less pigeon-holing in narrowly defined jobs. You can see the positive impacts of your work on the way home," Benest explained.

In addition, in these days of declining retirement benefits in the private sector, public sector perks are generous. For example, Benest will be retiring with 72 percent of his regular salary and lifetime medical benefits. "At age 59, I get to start a whole new life," he said.

He's particularly excited about a new program that places city and county managers in universities for a week to teach undergraduate and master-level students with an "in the trenches" perspective of what it's like to work in local government. The residency program also provides the managers with an opportunity for self-renewal. So far 13 California universities and Arizona State University plan to start the program this fall.

He realizes there are not enough young people to fill the job openings created by boomers retiring from local government, in many cases earlier than from the private sector because of the generous benefits that await them. As a result, the California affiliate of the International City/County Management Association is reaching out to women and senior managers of color to interest them in leadership roles.

Although he thinks it would be impossible for anyone without local government experience to step into the role of city manager, he has successfully hired a few people from the private sector for some high-level city positions.

For Benest, the biggest surprise is that his work in preparing people to step into the shoes of departing city administrators is "a two-sided coin." He mentioned the importance that developmental psychologist Erik Erikson placed on caring for and supporting the next generation and Erikson's belief that if you don't address that need, you cannot move forward yourself.

Benest said, "I thought I was doing this work for other people, preparing the next generation to take our place. I discovered I was doing it for myself, too."

by [Terry Nagel](#)