

Center for State and Local Government Excellence

Paying it Forward

Frank Benest creates his legacy

Growing up in the hot, dry sameness of the southern California suburbs of the '50s and '60s, Frank Benest listened to his mother. Rewards and joys come from serving others, Rosy repeated time and again, as if the example she set as a teacher, VISTA worker and community volunteer was not enough. By the time John F. Kennedy called on Americans to ask what they could do for their country, Frank's heart was open and ready.



Frank Benest

His first local government job was as a junior recreation leader when he was 15. Today, he's an energetic 59, wrapping up nine years as city manager of Palo Alto. He's compact and tough – the kind of tough you have to be when you're running a city of affluent, well-educated, activist liberals who have strong ideas about what they want from their local government.

But the nitty gritty of running a city can wear down even the true believer. Four years ago, other city managers Frank's age were retiring in droves. Frank himself found his job more humdrum than challenging.

Palo Alto was doing a lot of recruiting then but having problems finding seasoned managers. Although Frank had faced stiff competition early in his career, "in this day and age, if you find one good quality candidate you do a jig. That's how bad it's gotten."

Deciding what's important

Most local governments are in the same boat. A survey by the national association of city and county managers showed that half its members are over 50 and a growing number will be eligible to retire in the next few years.

To make it worse, focus groups with young professionals revealed that Kennedy's call to service seemed to stop with Frank and his fellow boomers. Their children saw public servants as overworked, underappreciated, abused. Years of anti-government rhetoric, starting as early as the Carter administration, had taken their toll.

Frank's soul-searching suddenly accelerated when his personal life turned upside down. He lost his wife to long-standing health problems, leaving him with two young children. Then he was diagnosed with life-threatening cancer and underwent radiation and chemotherapy.

Faced with reinventing himself, Frank asked, "What's important and how do I want to spend my life?"

Frank had been involved with state and national efforts to attract what they were calling "the next generation" to local government, and he began to notice the depth of passion he felt for it.

But how do you get people's attention? How do you unstick the status quo? How do you inspire your already over-committed colleagues to give their time and energy to a problem they could just as easily leave for the next person? And, after they've spent years pushing out work and supporting their staffs, how do you convince them their real job is nurturing those who will follow them?

Taking up the challenge

Enlisting the help of several professional associations, Frank mustered a small army. They spoke to every audience that would have them. They wrote articles for the magazines, journals and newsletters

local government managers read. They told stories of cities that were finding ways to attract young talent.

Little by little, Frank would look out at his listeners and see heads begin to nod. The light was dawning: local governments had a quiet but growing crisis on their hands.

Today, when the subject of the next generation challenge comes up at a professional meeting, you don't have to explain what you're talking about. More and more governments are doing something about it.

They've started exchange programs to give young staff experience outside their usual areas, paid summer internships for undergraduates, fellowships for grad students, and opportunities for high school students to learn about careers in local government by "shadowing" staff. They've trained managers to talk with employees about their career goals and set up websites on which staff can share their knowledge and experience.

Giving that's its own reward

Ironically, it's the senior managers who are getting as much out of it as anyone. They are coaching and mentoring young managers, serving as city managers-in-residence at universities. By talking and writing about what they've learned about cultivating leadership, they can rise above the daily details of managing a city to reflect on the legacy they want to leave behind.

In the beginning, Frank assumed he'd taken on this challenge for his usual reason – as a way to help others. But this time he saw he was reaping deep and profound rewards for himself. Ostensibly at the end of his career, he was energized, with a new passion for his work. And he was readying himself to move on to the next phase in his life.

Frank retires at the end of September. He plans to teach, write, consult and give his time to preparing the way for those who will come after him.