

Joint Venture Silicon Valley

The sign on Palo Alto City Manager Frank Benest's door invokes Eleanor Roosevelt's admonition: "Do something every day that scares you." "It is a reminder," he says, "that if you can solve a problem inside the boundaries of your organization, it's not a very big problem. Solving big problems always means pushing outside your boundaries."

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His focus on collaboration across organizational boundaries has naturally led him to Joint Venture: Silicon Valley, where he serves on the board and champions the Silicon Valley Economic Development Association ([SVEDA](#)). "He is our barrister in the public sector," says Russell Hancock, Joint Venture President and CEO. "He has been a tireless champion, opening doors and connecting us with people."

Developing commitment to government service

Frank jokes that his commitment to collaboration across boundaries began at conception. His mother, from a Jewish family in Lebanon, met his father, an Anglo Saxon GI from Kansas, aboard a freighter bringing her family to the United States after World War II. He credits his mother, a bilingual teacher and gerontologist, with being the key figure in shaping his values, particularly his commitment to public service. "I look like my father and act like my mother," he says.

Putting his boyhood love for sports to work, he got his first public sector job as a recreation leader in his native El Monte at age 14, and continued working in recreation jobs throughout college.

He entered a five-year BA program at Yale that required him to spend a year interning outside the country, and he landed a job "as the only Jew working for the Archdiocese in Mexico City." His assignment involved organizing a group of lay people to build a coop that provided retail, credit and medical services. In doing so he developed a facility for working with the *pandillas*, which he loosely translates as "the guys in the street."

“Discovering the incredible power of community action changed my life,” he says. It’s when I decided on a career in government.”

He began to hone his community organizing skills, becoming a state coordinator for the grape boycott in New Haven, and, after graduation, taking government jobs in recreation and human services in Southern California.

His first city manager job was in Colton, which had a majority Latino population, and where his activist approach to city government was exactly what was required. He worked closely with many agencies, broadening human services throughout the community.

After three years in Colton, he moved on to become city manager of Brea. “The government there was entrepreneurial and innovative,” he says, “and the challenges different. The focus was on land use, affordable housing and downtown redevelopment.”

It was while he was in Brea that he became passionate about the development of professional government sector leaders. He began to teach and write extensively on the subject, and become active in professional organizations.

“I first met Frank when I took a workshop from him when he was City Manager in Brea,” recalls Debra Figone, San Jose City Manager. “At that point he already had a growing reputation for being such a prolific writer and sharing his professional experiences. I was very inspired by him. He was high energy, thinking out of the box, having fun with a difficult topic, coming up with creative solutions. He had a strong passion and talent for teaching and connecting with us about what we do. He was also generous with his time, something I have really come to appreciate as I have gotten to know him professionally.”

Palo Alto City Manager

After eleven years in Brea, he was ready for new challenges and came to Palo Alto in 2000, lured by the city’s reputation and proximity to Stanford. Palo Alto liked his results orientation and forthrightness, and wanted him to create a sense of urgency about taking action.

“Palo Alto is unique,” he says. “Our environmental ethos is remarkable. We have the highest participation of any city in the US

for our green energy program, and, because of the wisdom of the the city's leaders a century ago, we own our own water, electric, gas, waste water and telecom utilities. It's also a city committed to workforce, and providing housing for people who make this town work."

His work in Palo Alto has been characterized by many innovative projects that transcend the boundaries of the city. One project of which he is particularly proud is the Opportunity Center, completed in September 2006, which provides housing for 70 adults and 18 formerly homeless families. The project was developed as a private limited partnership between the County Housing Authority and the nonprofit Community Working Group.

Don Barr, a Stanford professor and community activist, praises the role Frank played in helping to make the Opportunity Center a reality. "Until Frank came, the city's approach to homelessness was to pass a law making it illegal to sit on the sidewalk," Barr says. "But Frank was clear that Palo Alto needed top notch services for the homeless, and he felt those services should go beyond street level services to housing. He made it clear to the city planning department that he was supportive, he personally attended meetings to fast track the project, and his leadership helped to produce five unanimous council votes backing it."

"Something that sets Frank apart," Barr feels, "is that he brings his own personal values and priorities to the job. He uses those priorities as a guide, and merges them with what's best for the city."

Kevin Duggan, City Manager of neighboring Mountain View, also knew Frank by reputation for his success in Brea, and for his professional leadership before he came to Palo Alto. "As I got to know Frank as a peer, I was amazed by his passion and his energy," he says.

Duggan mentions project after project where the two cities have collaborated to improve services as well as professional development – a joint refuse recycling facility that also includes Sunnyvale, a waste water treatment plant in which Palo Alto is the lead agency and Mountain View a major partner, animal control and IT services that Palo Alto contracts to other cities, and the sharing of fire equipment.

Involvement in Joint Venture

Frank had read about Joint Venture when he was in Southern California, and his collaborative spirit made him eager to participate in the model when he arrived in Palo Alto. His first involvement was with the Silicon Valley Index, working on the Index committee with Marguerite Wilbur. When a public sector board seat became available, he eagerly joined the board.

He currently serves as the chairman of SVEDA, a regional partnership of economic development professionals who bring together public and private resources to ensure the success of businesses in Silicon Valley. He points to the organization's [Prospector](#) web site as a powerful and innovative economic development tool.

He is also a leader in the Grand Boulevard project, aimed at the transformation of El Camino Real. "This is a great Joint Venture project," he says. "El Camino is the main street of Silicon Valley and it's atrocious. Grand Boulevard has established a vision of what it can be, it has set design standards that are close to being adopted among the cities, and it will have a tremendous impact soon through its signature projects." One of these that Frank has championed involves the crossing at El Camino and Stanford Avenue in Palo Alto.

Looking to the Future

"Their values are in alignment with public service, but they only think of working in the volunteer sector. The challenge is to convince them that government service can be fulfilling."

Frank recently announced that he will be leaving Palo Alto to enter the "encore phase" of his career. He'll continue to devote himself to his profession by writing and teaching, as well as training and consulting.

He retains his fire for developing professional government talent. "A whole generation of boomers who entered government service will be retiring, and we need to develop people who are already in public service and attract new people. We need to market and retool what we do."

"The good news," he says, "is that most people don't know what we do. The bad news is they think government service is mind-numbing and bureaucratic. Their values are in alignment with public service, but they only think of working in the volunteer sector. The challenge is to convince them that government service can be fulfilling."

"Preparing the next generation for government service is Frank's brainchild," says Debra Figone. "It started as a program in the International City/County Managers Association (ICMA) because Frank kept waving the data in our faces, and planted the seeds, and was the impetus for the California ICMA to take purposeful steps to get the next generation of public service professionals to take our places. I've never seen anything in my 39 years in the business that has caught fire and taken off like this. You've got talented people participating on behalf of their agencies and their ideas get incorporated. In San Jose, because of Frank's work and the people San Jose assigned to work with him, we've started working with the East Side Union High School District to establish a public service academy at James Lick High School."

Leaving city government will also create an opportunity to devote more time to his children Noah, 14, and Leila, 9, and to pursue his interests in travel, particularly to the Middle East and Asia, and sports. He enjoys pickup basketball at Scott Park in Palo Alto, and retains his Southern California rooting interest in the Lakers and Dodgers, although his time in Palo Alto has made it a "tough call" to decide who to cheer for when UCLA plays Stanford.

Whatever the future holds, he will throw himself into it with characteristic passion and energy. "Frank is the Energizer Bunny," says Duggan. "He's been in Palo Alto during tough times, but he always looks to the future. He'll continue to make a major impact on our profession."

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Joint Venture Profiles

Current Profile:



Frank Benest

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City Manager

City of Palo Alto

Joint Venture Board of Directors

Board Champion, Silicon Valley Economic Development Alliance

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