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**WORKING AS ONE. ADVANCING ALL.**
CONTENTS

5 League Priorities to Get New Spotlight
Series of articles to run on WRAL

12 Vision 2030 Readiness Tool
Get prepared for the decade ahead

14 Firefighter Cancer Presumption at Issue in House Bill
Legislative update

21 Wilkesboro Revives its Downtown
Here We Grow feature story

29 Mark Your Calendars: The 2020 Census Means Everything
Our once-a-decade chance to make it count

36 Educating Residents about Service Lines and Offering Important Protection
Preferred Partners Spotlight feature story

6 Always a Fighter
Sen. Gladys Robinson’s humble beginnings shape her humanity, drive

16 Down-to-Earth Leadership
William Pitt never forgets the “why” in public service

22 People, the Smartest Piece of a ‘Smart City’
Take tech out of it—your people are the key

25 City Kids: How Youth and Local Government are a Perfect Match
The symbiotic relationship between the next generation and city governments, and how the two are meant for each other

32 Putting Local Government Experience to Work in Higher Office
The best experience starts at home

34 Let’s Get Real on Data to Address North Carolina’s Digital Divide
New site demonstrates need for better data, more investment
INSIDE

1 Board of Directors

4 Speaking Out: A Difficult Balancing Act

11 Facing Forward: The Budget is Not Just a Financial Statement

38 Risk Management Services Board of Trustees

39 From the Trust Perspective: Health Benefits Trust Pool Readies for 2020

40 Talk of our Towns

44 Taking the Field: Leadership, From The Ground Up

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North Carolina cities and towns value their employees. That is not some simple platitude. It’s the truth. And that truth is borne out in how cities and towns treat their employees, with solid pay and great benefits for work that often involves a fulfilling mission of service to a larger community. Every job in every town and city contributes and plays a role in that mission.

To see the value that municipalities of all sizes place on their workers, look no further than the state’s Local Government Employees Retirement System.

It is one of the best-funded pension systems in the country. A lot of times, both the local government retirement system and state government retirement system are lumped together – as the pension investments are all invested together. But the two systems are accounted for separately, and even considering the strengths of the state system, the local system, or LGERs, is even better funded, with a funding ratio above 90 percent and assets over $26 billion.

The reason for that strong funding is the longstanding, historical commitment by local governments to making solid contributions in good and bad times. In 2018, those contributions totaled more than a half a billion dollars, while employees contributed about $400 million to the system through their payroll deductions.

In that same year of 2018, the system paid out nearly $1.5 billion in benefits.

To cite just a few examples, cities and towns, on average, if you break it down by job, are contributing about $4,000 per year for retirement benefits for city clerks and planners, and about $2,500 per year for sanitation workers.

And those contributions are rising because investment gains in the system have been slow in recent years. In each of the next three years, contributions by local governments will increase by 1.2 percent of payroll, representing $76.4 million in additional cost in each year. That will happen as employee contributions remain the same as a percentage of pay.

Obviously, local elected officials’ ultimate duty is not to local government employees, but to the voters who elected them and the taxpayers who fund those salaries and benefits.

It is a difficult balancing act to try to keep property taxes reasonable and affordable while also paying for the services – typically delivered by those hard-working employees – which help residents and make local quality of life better.

But it is also clear that to provide those services in the best way possible, cities and towns must attract the best people possible to fill municipal jobs – from police officers and fire fighters to building inspectors to those on street crews. Competitive salaries and good retirement benefits are crucial.

That said, striking the right balance between being good employers and good guardians of the public purse is never easy and never will be. Local government employees would do well to understand the difficulties we elected officials face in that regard, as would voters and taxpayers.

Push that equation out of balance in one way, and voters will toss council members or county commissioners out of office; lean it too far in the other direction, and residents won’t see the services that they’ve come to expect.
League Priorities to Get New Spotlight

By Scott Mooneyham, NCLM Director of Political Communication and Coordination

Everyone knows it. People are busy. It’s not easy to bring public attention even to the issues that affect everyday life, even when change is in the air and that change may not be in the interest of large segments of the public.

The challenge of bringing people’s attention to critical public policy issues has become even more difficult as the footprint of traditional newspapers has declined and news sources become more fractured in the Internet Age.

That’s a big part of the reason why the N.C. League of Municipalities entered into a partnership with WRAL’s Techwire in 2018, using its platform to help elevate the investments that cities and towns make to grow the economy through HereWeGrowNC.org. WRAL, a Raleigh-based news outlet, has one of the most visited websites in North Carolina, one that attracts readers from across the state and nation.

In 2020, that partnership will expand to include a focus on some key issues of importance to League member cities and towns, and the state as a whole: broadband access, short-term rentals, and rural challenges and resiliency.

Beginning in February and into the spring, look for articles and videos appearing on the main WRAL homepage and then hosted on a page for all six of the issue-based stories and three accompanying videos.

Among those articles will be case studies looking at two rural municipalities, Rockingham and Williamston, as they deal with the challenges facing so many rural communities – the closing of textile mills and other manufacturing plants, water and sewer system viability, and how to reinvent their economies amid these global trends. We will also examine how cities and towns are addressing the rise of short-term home rentals through online platforms like Airbnb, and how that can affect traditional neighborhoods – with very different approaches from Asheville, Wilmington and Nags Head. And we will cover, from the perspective of real people suffering real consequences, the effects of poor internet access across significant areas of the state.

To get a little flavor of some of these pieces, here are few teasers of what you will find:

• “The story of textiles is that they exited out. So, we had to go to work like a lot of communities did,” said Monty Crump, Rockingham City Manager.

• Williamston’s story is only different in that its loss and its investment were relatively recent. Many North Carolina towns faced similar situations in the 1990s and early 2000s when textile and furniture mills were shutting left and right.

continued on page 43

From the mountains to the coast to the capital, short-term rentals are a growing issue.

Photo credit: Ben Brown
Sen. Gladys Robinson won election to the legislature just in time for the wave of change that removed her party from its leadership spot. That was 10 years ago and the power dynamics have mostly held, with Republican majorities in both the House and Senate. While that’s posed plenty of challenges for Democrats like Senator Robinson in shepherding ideas for legislation, her life story is about fighting through as the underdog and making sure her family — and now her broader community — has what it needs to succeed. Education and community health are big focuses for her, and she says she knows there’s a good formula for bipartisanship and togetherness on such needs. She said she experienced across-the-aisle teamwork while serving on the UNC Board of Governors, and during a visit to a small European nation 7,300 miles away, and knows it’s possible here. In politics it’s sometimes improper to say it’s personal, but Senator Robinson’s extraordinary and empowering background does bring out strong rays of humanity. It was on her mind as Southern City stopped in for a recent visit.

Experiencing political difficulties under the current power structure in the General Assembly, you might often have to think about your initial reason for serving. What was
it that initially pushed you into the legislature?

I had served on the UNC Board of Governors for 10 years. When I went there, part of my interest was going to the legislature. (Former) Sen. Bill Martin, who served District 28, was a friend of mine. Bill also had sickle cell and was one of my clients. So I had a long history with Senator Martin, and he would file legislation, I worked with him, I would come to Raleigh as an advocate. I chaired the state sickle cell council for 12 years, I helped to implement newborn screening for babies to make sure they were tested for sickle cell. So my history with making sure the laws respond to the needs of the people is long, both in education and health and all. In 2000, I was interested in coming (to the legislature). When Bill ran for the U.S. Senate and didn’t win, and Senator (Katie) Dorsett wanted to run (for the state Senate seat)... So I went to the Board of Governors, she came to Raleigh, so my interest has been here for a long time, in terms of making laws. When I was on the Board of Governors, I was able to see what we were able to do in terms of working with the legislature, and that was a good thing because we had a bipartisan Board of Governors. We worked together. The Democrats were in control then, appointed Republicans to the Board of Governors. (House Speaker) Tim Moore was one of them... We worked together to try to create a better system. And of course there were issues that I was concerned about, and I fought hard for HBCUs (historically black colleges and universities) because the disparity in funding was awful. We got the bond, we built schools, we built buildings on campuses across the state... We were able to get some things done together. I learned a lot, and I educated other folk a lot about that. After being on the Board of Governors for 10 years, Senator Dorsett retired. I was certainly interested in coming to the legislature... My interest has been health and education, and to help with that.

That level of cooperation (on the Board of Governors) — how did that experience match with your expectations entering the legislature?

My experience on the Board of Governors led me to think that if we could have bipartisan cooperation on the Board of Governors and improve a system that was really a good system and understand the importance of education at the higher level, and early education, preschool and all that, and how our universities feed the economy and help to grow early childhood development and all that, then I thought that if we could do that there certainly we could do more here in Raleigh in the legislature. So it was disappointing to see that, hey, that didn’t exist here (laughter). It may have existed at one time, but certainly it doesn’t exist now. (But) I’m not backing up. I’m not backing up.

Does anything call to you from your childhood that shapes the fighter you ended up being?

I grew up poor. Very poor. It was seven of us in our family. My mom worked and cleaned houses in white communities where people were
wealthy. She later went to be a cook in the school cafeteria and fed a lot of children who didn't have money. And my dad only had a second grade education, but he was a landscaper.... He trimmed the trees for the City of Columbus, he planted trees, he could tell you about every flower there was. He did it all. But he only made $50 a week, and it wasn't enough to support us, yet it wasn't little enough to get us into public housing. So we didn't have the opportunity to move into the first public housing where my friends moved because my dad made too much money. So we had to survive on what little he made. He worked three jobs. He worked on the weekends ... until he died at 72. And so it was hard growing up. And my mom worked hard. But they both believed in education. My oldest brother, who's about 13, 14 years older than me, went to Savannah State University. He was the first one in my family to go to Savannah State, he went on a football scholarship. And so it was one of those things, my parents said, "We'll get you out of high school. Can't do anything else. We want to make sure you finish high school, and if you can't go to college, make sure you get a job doing well." My other brother went to the Marines and made a career there. And then one of my sisters went to college thinking she had a scholarship, got there, found out she didn't. And so it was devastating for her. But she picked herself up and became the first black operator for Southern Bell (the regional telephone company), and later became an engineer. Without a college degree. Because she worked just that hard.

I was the next child, very smart, I was valedictorian, all that — even though they didn't let me speak. We looked at children by income. Even during segregation, people discriminated based on who your parents were. My parents weren't known. They were poor, so they wanted the next young lady (in the graduating class) to be valedictorian, but I was smarter. But they didn't give me the opportunity to speak and to do these things. But I got all kinds of scholarship offers... everywhere, you name it. I ended up going to Bennett College (in Greensboro), because I had an English teacher from Bennett. So, you know, that kind of inspiration, and I had a 5th grade teacher who bought me my first pair of heels, who bought me a clarinet, who said, "You can do anything you want to do." Those teachers were inspirational for me. They made the difference. What my parents could not do, they did for me. So I became empowered because of them when I came to Bennett. I immediately got into the community, and in the '60s, this is the mid '60s, help with advocating and doing strikes for garbage workers, for cafeteria workers — like my mom, who didn't have a decent wage. So my community activism started when I hit the campus. My psychology professor said you don't learn as much on campus; you learn it in the community. So we're in the community doing that. And my first political piece actually outside of those strikes was Henry Frye's campaign. He was running to be in the N.C. House of Representatives, and I was a college student, and we did door to door, registering people to vote, getting folks out to vote, etc, so Henry was elected — and that resonates with me. It resonates with me what college students can do. We were so involved, just doing a lot of...
stuff in the community. We weren’t just on campus. And so that began my political career.

People so often invest in things and property, luxuries, but when you see someone who has value and you invest in them like the teachers who invested in you...

And I forget to talk about that. Some people say they think, “Oh, you’ve always been where you are now.” Nope! Oh, no! I’ve been real poor, seven of us, mouths to feed, sometimes we were hungry without food. But you could rely on if big momma had food, you had food. My great aunt, who was on what was then called “welfare food,” she had food. Spare cheese, some flour to spare. And mom fed everybody; we couldn’t figure out how she did that...

Folk need to know, and I don’t do it often, tell them how I grew up. And that certainly inspires me to do what I do for education, for health, et cetera. We couldn’t afford the dentist. My dad had to pull our teeth, because we couldn’t afford to go to the dentist...

It’s important to me.

There’s a level of persistence throughout that whole story...

Oh yeah. We’ve got to get it done. It’s been my passion to make sure that all the other children and grandchildren in my family get a college education... So wherever there are children in our family, we make sure that they have an opportunity to go to college, and other kids if I can help them... We did it as a parent. My husband and I had two daughters, and he — he was a supervisor, manager at the post office, where I was a nonprofit leader. But the understanding was I would make sure the girls had everything they need... I was PTA president at seven or eight different schools. Every time a child was in a school, I was PTA president. Not because I cared about me being PTA president. I cared about the other kids whose parents didn’t come to school, and people will tell you that. That I cared about them and I fought for those schools to have the kind of teachers, the kind of equipment. I saw one of the former superintendents who lives here. Pete Eberhart was superintendent in Guilford County Schools... and I was a nightmare to Pete! (laughter) I was on the street one day and we were protesting, positively, and he said, Gladys Robinson, you were a nightmare, but you were good and I’m so glad you did what you did, because that’s what parents do, that’s what PTAs do... So I have continued that, that kind of mantra.

If you’re in office for the right reasons, and it’s obvious you care about what you do, sometimes you
can see that same quality in people who are ideologically different. You disagree, but can tell they believe in what they’re doing. Does that commonality make it easier to talk to the other side of the aisle?

I can tell you there have been some good experiences. In my second term here, I served on the Public School Forum Board of Advisors and I went on as soon as I got here, because I had been a part of the university system, the Board of Governors. But the second term here, there were some of us who went to Finland to see why their education, why their kids were the highest performing. What are we missing here? (Robinson and a band of other officials including former senator) Louis Pate, who is a Republican and whose wife was a teacher, she went too... There were Republicans and Democrats. Tim Moore went as well, too. And so what we did as well was we went to their schools, went to the lower grade schools, looked at their early childhood development programs, what they did with their schools, and learned that Finland supports early childhood development even with the parent in the home, to make sure that parent is educated about it, that you need to read to the child, what do you need in terms of support here in the home for that child. And it goes all the way through! Of course at their high school level, the children choose a track — either I’m going to college or I’m going to work. I don’t like that as much because I don’t think you should track kids. But they’re successful at either track they choose. They perform well. We looked at their legislature. They have several parties. What they said to us was, “Yeah, we fight and we disagree, but all of us agree on education. We agree that education is a priority, we’ve got to fund it.” I said wow! That resonated. And so we came back saying, wow, that’s great, now we need to make sure that we support and fund early childhood development, that we do that for public schools, et cetera, and I’d felt like wow, we’re going to get something done. And in the House they worked on it, we worked on it over here. Louis Pate and I talked. But we couldn’t get anything done. I am certain that Louis got stopped by his colleagues, because I think that Louis really has a kind heart, he has a good heart. Louis helped me to pass the breast cancer bill, because I couldn’t get it through. He’s the one who got it through (the Rules Committee) for me... so we could get it done. Louis and I could work together, and Louis really cared. But I am sure that his colleagues are the ones who said, no, we’re not going to let you do that. So there are people who care, and people want to get the same kind of results... (Senator) Jim Davis and I, Jim’s a dentist and he and I fought on the floor — boy he and I fought on the floor sometimes (laughter). I don’t mind fighting on the floor sometimes. But Jim cares about mental health, substance abuse issues and so on. And he and I have done some forums together. And in principle we agree on those issues! We really do. When it gets to the other issues, oh, no (laughter).

How about with local officials in your district? What’s communication like?

This year I chaired the delegation, the Guilford County delegation, and of course we have one more
It’s budget season. Few other times in local government will carry such weight, and consequences of the resulting product can emanate far into your town’s future. It is now that you will dig into the numbers, review and maneuver state requirements, and take up perhaps the ultimate mantle of your position: financial leadership.

Whether you are elected or appointed, this budget will likely be the most important document you produce this year. Challenges abound during this time. But so do opportunities.

The budget is a chance to express your leadership. Each municipality has a statutory budget officer, but who leads the budget process can differ from town to town. In all forms of government, though, certain deadlines will need to be met. Keeping to that schedule while supporting the city staff more directly involved will result in a stronger and more robust civic organization.

The budget is a chance to display your effectiveness. The duties of local governance are difficult, and the terrain is restrictive. Regardless, the responsibilities will rest solely with town leadership. How will you navigate these challenges? The impact of your direction will be operationalized during the budget process.

The budget is a chance to prepare. It’s a forecast. Even though you will pour a great deal of time, effort, planning, and strategy into this process, the year-end numbers will likely differ from your estimates. The day-to-day practice of governing is constantly evolving and dependent on countless, ever-changing factors. It is your duty to adapt. It is your budget’s role to provide solid footing.

Most importantly, the budget is a chance to actualize your values. This process puts to paper the city’s priorities, as decided by its leadership. This is where the strength of your vision is tested. You may have a formal strategic plan, and you certainly have long-term goals. Are they a priority? Are they driving discussions? The content of your budget reveals those answers.

For a moment, flashback to your best days on the campaign trail, or your moments of anticipation before taking on an appointed position in City Hall, when ideas and optimism flourished. You entered the fray understanding the responsibilities. You were ready to take on the fiduciary duties. Perhaps more than anything, you sought the opportunity to translate your wisdom and hometown pride into hometown service.

Depending on the state of your municipality, there may be several avenues for realizing those ideas, or there may be few. Yet, there will always be the budget.

The League has resources available that you can call on during budget time. The annual revenue projection memo is produced in late March of every year and provides NCLM’s experts’ best guess of how state-collected local revenues will trend in the year to come. Quarterly revenue reports provide interim updates on those revenues throughout the year. The League surveys its members every April regarding what type of cost of living adjustments and merit increases are being budgeted for.

And the League’s four Municipal Operations Consultants are former local managers and finance officials who are available to be called upon for questions and guidance along the way.

More than just a financial statement, it is the policy statement of the town. It is the strategy. It is the master plan—your declaration of your town’s intentions and goals. It is the embodiment of your leadership. Make sure it is put to good use. SC
In 2016, NCLM finalized a comprehensive strategic plan: Vision 2030, a forward-looking framework that has established key guidelines for what North Carolina municipalities should look like a decade from now.

Its conclusions were not arrived at lightly. With support from the UNC School of Government, this years-long process involved extensive information gathering, a forecasting of trends, and a statewide tour meant to solicit feedback from key stakeholders. What resulted is a set of six operating principles that, together, paint the picture of a best-in-class city.

By 2030, our goal is that...

• Municipal governments exercise greater control over their revenues, structures, and functions.
• Municipalities demonstrate the value they add to the community’s quality of life.
• Technology is widely used for service delivery, citizen engagement, and economic development.
• Municipalities widely practice productive partnerships with counties, other governments, and the private sector.

And we’re going to help you get there.

• Urban and rural municipalities routinely work together for economic success.
• Municipalities are able to quickly adapt to cultural and demographic changes in their communities.

This vision was born of a desire to allow North Carolina cities and towns and their residents to chart a course that will enable all—regardless of size or make-up—to thrive, to meet the challenges of the 21st Century, and to continue to reflect their own diverse visions for themselves.
The Vision 2030 Readiness Tool will be introduced this spring, and will provide a clear roadmap for cities and towns to achieve these objectives.

The process, which will begin with a face-to-face meeting with a League representative, will create a road map. First, we’ll evaluate where you are in terms of the six key objectives. Next, we’ll generate a report, or plan, which will lay out key steps you can take moving forward. And finally, we’ll serve as a constant source of support moving forward.

This is not a one-off meeting. This is an ongoing journey, and we are at the ready to help you every step of the way. “This is a way to make Vision 2030 real,” said Jennifer Cohen, NCLM Director of Business and Membership Development Services. “We’re not just highlighting weak points or celebrating strengths. We’re establishing clear ways for our cities and towns to grow over the next decade into strong, thriving municipalities.”

The Vision 2030 Readiness Tool will roll out over the next few months. If you are interested in beginning the process as early as possible, please contact NCLM Assistant Director Julie Metz at jmetz@nclm.org.

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Firefighter Cancer Presumption at Issue in House Bill

By Scott Mooneyham, NCLM Director of Political Communication and Coordination

In early May of last year, the North Carolina House passed legislation that would create a presumption that nine forms of cancer are occupations diseases for firefighters when covered under the state workers compensation laws. Doing so, it would change who must carry the burden of proof when firefighters make workers compensation claims involving those forms of cancer.

Currently in North Carolina, firefighters must show that their cancer was caused by work conditions; under the bill, it would fall to their employers — mostly municipalities — to prove that the nine listed cancers were not caused by work conditions.

House Bill 520 passed unanimously in the House. It did not move in the Senate, but remains eligible this year.

The legislation, though, continues a trend across the country of shifting the burden of proof in these cases onto local governments, meaning higher costs for firefighters in workers compensation coverage costs.

It is important to remember that these are workers compensation claims, and that full-time firefighters typically have health care insurance coverage through their employment — something that is sometimes lost in media coverage of these case and the larger issue. Nonetheless, firefighters and their advocates point out that they can still be left with hefty out-of-pocket health expenses, run out of sick days to cover workdays lost while out of the job and left with other disability costs.

They also argue that the fires that they fight today expose them to more toxic chemicals than ever before, linking that to the higher incidence of certain cancers in firefighters than in the general public at large.

Those arguments have proven convincing in many state capitals.

Thirty-three states have approved legislation that puts the burden on municipalities and other employers in workers compensation claims involving first responders for certain occupational-related cancers and diseases, according to the nonprofit First Responder Center for Excellence.

Firefighters are deserving. The issue with the proposal, however, is that it creates an unfunded mandate by the state and that the workers compensation system was set up to treat all local government employees equally, a fact set forth in a 1951 court case that involved firefighters and additional benefits.

There may be other solutions that avoid litigation, including some that could put money into the hands of firefighters more quickly. Just changing the presumption will not avoid court fights. That has been proven true in other states that have adopted legislation similar to HB 520.

In fact, League staff has been in discussions to explore other options that might prove more valuable to

The North Carolina bill concerning firefighter protections is very similar to legislation in other states. Photo credit: Thinkstock
There is good reason to explore these options. In those 33 states that have adopted cancer presumption legislation, many are finding that providing benefits through the workers compensation system has not been the panacea that firefighters believed. Cases are still being litigated, and firefighters in need of an immediate benefit are not receiving it.

In Texas, where presumption legislation was approved in 2005, 87 percent of claims made under the law are still litigated.

Increasingly, though, more states are looking for ways to address the issue outside of the workers compensation system. Approaches in Georgia, Mississippi and Alabama are focused on providing a lump sum benefit for firefighters diagnosed with certain cancers upon their diagnosis.

Providing such benefits — either through additional insurance outside of the workers compensation system, a state benefit program or some combination — gets needed money to firefighters more quickly and is much more affordable for employing municipalities.

After the Alabama law was passed last summer, Decatur City Fire Chief Tony Grande told the Trussville Tribune, “Sometimes the potential battle with workman’s comp can be overwhelming when you’re already in a bad situation.”

Alabama legislators, meanwhile, called the legislation a “win-win,” bringing new benefit resources for firefighters and doing so at a more affordable cost for municipalities.

Meanwhile, in North Carolina, the House bill sits in a Senate whose leaders have been very reticent about upsetting a balance made in the workers compensation system, regardless of who is affected. After all, that balance is important not just to workers and public employers, but private employers as well.

That doesn’t mean that the legislation couldn’t pass in 2020. It might mean there needs to be a better way. SC
William Pitt never forgets the “why” in public service

By Ben Brown & Jack Cassidy, NCLM Communications

A leader isn’t a suit and tie.
Sure, dress for the occasion. Honor decorum. But be a human first, learn with good faith, build capacity to help, and be real about the consequences, says William Pitt, the Washington City Council Member now rounding out a year as president of the N.C. League of Municipalities.
“Respect is earned,” he says. Sitting in a conference room in the Washington Municipal Building, Pitt makes it clear that he does not use the term “politician,” despite holding six terms as an elected official. He rejects the connotations of the word, the survivalist gamesmanship—the aspects of leadership that don’t work for the constituents. Rather, Pitt said he sees any honest place in leadership as crucial time to self-evaluate, listen and serve.

It’s also borrowed time. Pitt especially understands the temporal nature of elected office, and squashes any feeling of career-like permanence, keeping his mind on why and how he’s there to begin with. He brushed with a reminder in the 2019 municipal elections, his name literally drawn from a basket to win what had been a tied race for his council seat, truly every vote counting.

“When you get elected,” he said, “you never know how long it will be.” He’s also candid about his first run at office, back in the 1980s. “I dutifully failed at it,” he said, speaking
"I'm a big proponent of education for elected officials," Pitt said. "It is not sexy. But it's things you need to know."

Positioned as such, he won election in 2008, kept his classroom mind in session and learned to operate on a decision-making system he calls "Role, Goal and Toll."

"The actions of a city council have a three-pronged effect on the growth of that community," Pitt explained.

A council member's role, he said, is to acknowledge that there's always more to learn and always a reason to keep an open mind. He or she is there directly due to voter approval and an expectation of good for the community.

"The goal is, what is your reason for doing this?" Pitt continued. "Why of it like a win for personal growth."

"As I was told by the former (League) director, Ellis Hankins, 'Learn more, come back, and you'll be great one day.'"
do you even want to do this?” He said a big piece in becoming a real leader is to “understand yourself better.”

“Your toll is, no matter how much you do, there are consequences,” Pitt asserted. “Everything you do has a cost, whether it’s a dollar cost, whether it has a cost to the community... Everything has a cost.”

Beyond there, it doesn’t matter who tailors your clothes, he suggested; it’s all about what you can get done. Even small implementations go the distance, Pitt said in mentioning his pride in the creation of a safety zone at the police department for the exchange of goods purchased off websites like Craigslist.

“I saw it in Williamston,” Pitt said. “And all it really involved was a sign (denoting the safe exchange location) ... to keep the people safe. It cost the city about $170.”

It’s significant to Pitt that he learned of the idea outside of city limits, from a neighboring government, which is one aspect of the League he has enjoyed and continues to tap. Pitt thinks all government officials should “step outside their boundaries” and share solutions. He’s served on every policy committee in the League’s portfolio, sought and won the organization’s vice-presidency, which he served alongside then-president Michael Lazzara (the mayor pro-tem of Jacksonville) before becoming president.

He cited a conversation he had with Lazzara that further separated the ego from the office. “When it’s all said and done, five or 10 years from now... it’s going to be William who?” People’s minds have probably moved on from who served on council in the past or what they got done, even as they enjoy the results of that person’s service. Anyone who’s real about that and continues to serve is in a better position.

“When I served on (the City of Washington Electric Utilities Advisory Board)” he said, “I was really happy we were able to do extensions for our customers, because sometimes you can’t pay your bill on time. I was able to help that board come up with a series of extensions so that customer had additional time, and to offer some things to customers that they don’t know about.”

Project Help, for one, rounds up customers’ utility bills, supplying a special fund that helps other residents pay.

Pitt is also proud of the city’s downtown WiFi, created with a development group and run by city government as a convenient way for downtown-goers to tap in and check email or transact quick business. The city utilizes the Municipal Building as a physical connection between city government and residents, who can pay utility bills there and also access the recent addition of a license plate office. For residents who might have a hard time making it out there, Pitt likes the idea of a mobile city hall, like a food truck that can visit different neighborhoods.

The theme of impermanence pervades Pitt’s approach to office, but so does legacy. Walking through downtown Washington, Pitt passes historic building after historic building before making his way to his favorite part of town, the boardwalk that overlooks Pamlico River. It’s a scenic tour through a town better off than when he found it.
He’ll keep the role as long as the citizens of Washington will have him, and as long as he’s effective. But when it’s time to go, it’s time to go.

“Traveling across this state you get to see and hear things and you get to meet folks who are just like you and just as committed,” said Pitt. “But the main part about staying committed is to know when to walk away. Walking away from elected office is hard... There’s a gospel song that says, ‘I don’t feel no ways tired...’ Your family’s health and your life are just as important as that piece of legislation. They’re more important.”

There’s no fear of time running out. If anything, Pitt celebrates the finiteness. Standing in the Washington Council Chambers, Pitt reflects on that role once again, connecting it with his love of photography.

“It’s like capturing a sliver of time, a single moment.”  

SC

From the fire department to city hall, Pitt is a true public servant.
Photo credit: Ben Brown

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Wilkesboro Revives its Downtown
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In each edition, Southern City will regularly feature one of the local stories uploaded by member municipalities to HereWeGrowNC.org as a part of the League’s campaign promoting investments by cities and towns that aid economic growth. To learn how your local story can be featured, go to HereWeGrowNC.org.

A decade ago, Wilkesboro touted the same rich heritage it does today—one of old brick and a mountainous horizon. From every historical and geographical standpoint, nestled in the semi-High Country of western North Carolina, downtown should have been bustling with visitors and residents alike.

But it was not. That character sat idle. Nothing was happening.

“Downtown was neglected,” said Wilkesboro Planning and Community Development Director Andrew Carlton. “There was no investment. After 5 p.m., there weren’t many people out and about and, especially on the weekends, there wasn’t anything to do downtown.”

Town Council and local officials recognized this problem as early as the 1990s. But while the concern was expressed, little was done. It wasn’t until 2009, when part of downtown was designated federally as a Historic District, that the true value of the area came into focus.

“We knew early on that there was interest in doing something downtown…. But nobody formulated a plan,” said Carlton. “That Historic District was a slap on the back that got everybody moving again.”

That first step was a step back and a look around, appreciating what was already present. The next steps were more proactive. Working through a consulting group, Wilkesboro put together and adopted its master plan in 2011. Initially, they went big. The proposal was for an entirely redeveloped downtown—both the business district and Historic District—and laid out Wilkesboro’s vision for an updated city center.

The unavoidable political and financial challenges then arose as expected. Wilkesboro embraced those pressures, allowing them to mold their plan into a palatable project. What began as a full-scale reconstruction was ultimately narrowed down and repackaged into two main phases, each of which needed to surgically address the goal of the initiative.

Put simply, that goal was to get people downtown—not for the immediate impact of increased economic activity on any given night, but rather for two long-term purposes: to increasingly build community and, through the crowds, to highlight the commercial opportunities to investors. It would shine a light on the people of the town as engaged, active participants. That would attract entrepreneurs, who would create additional attractions and opportunity, which would bring more people, then more investors, and so on, in a self-sustaining chain reaction of community revitalization. It was the town’s role to put the sequence into motion.

continued on page 43
Jim Alberque’s recipe for an efficient, forward-thinking town has three ingredients, and they’re all people. Talented people, service-oriented people, curious people.

It’s a somewhat surprising list considering Alberque’s role as the Emerging Technology Director for the City of Raleigh, where the emphasis is on finding and leveraging new tools, not personnel. The embrace of both technology and humanity seem at odds. But in defining the term the way he does, Alberque ties those assets together and reframes the futuristic Smart City idea into something far more inclusive.

“While I personally have a passion for technology and leveraging technology to solve problems, I consider that there are non-technological solutions that are innovative in nature, that can help solve problems,” said Alberque. “I try to take technology out of it. When I think of a Smart City, I think of a willingness to try new things to solve existing problems.”

This updated definition is a welcome change. Under the widely accepted terms, the Smart City idea trends more towards a theoretical exercise, only useful in practice if you could start a city from scratch with an unlimited pot of money. Like smartphones, smart TVs, and smart cars before it, this smart product would see cities built almost solely of new technologies.

The U.S. Department of...
Transportation promoted that idea in 2015 when it launched the “Smart City Challenge,” which asked mid-sized cities to “use data, applications, and technology to help people and goods move more quickly, cheaply, and efficiently.” And it is perhaps most played up through Alphabet (owner of Google) and their Toronto-based subsidiary Sidewalk Labs—a utopian project that, in its own words, “aims to combine forward-thinking urban design and cutting-edge technology to radically improve urban life.” The visuals conjure not an improved city, but a new one altogether.

Alberque, by evoking the humanity behind the undertaking, re-opens the possibilities and re-elevates the issues that the movement was meant to address. Namely, that these ideas—whether they be a new technology or more primitive solution—are designed to serve, not usurp, the people of the community, and there’s a great deal of potential we’re letting atrophy by not embracing that ethos.

“We’re not driving technology for technology’s sake,” said Alberque. “We’re trying to understand challenges that departments and citizens are facing, and marry them with existing technologies that can solve those problems or gain insights into the challenges.”

In the Town of Cary, a similar roadmap is laid out as it pertains to smart solutions: Evaluate the status quo, set a target for improvement, and then creatively figure out the route there.

“Take technology out of it,” said Terry Yates, Smart Cities Chief Innovator for the Town of Cary, told NCLM’s Ben Brown on episode 38 of the League’s podcast, Municipal Equation. “(We) identify the problem, then identify the outcome we would like to see.”

Cary put the principle into practice by transforming their town hall campus into a makeshift small city, complete with facilities, utilities, parking, and other municipal essentials. It was a civic test kitchen. Here, technologies were implemented and then studied. Companies flocked to Cary’s simulated city, installed their equipment, and proved its usefulness in addressing problems the town had identified.

The arrangement benefited every party involved. For Cary, the town was able to avoid the risk of potentially implementing a costly, ineffective technology, and was able to do so affordably, as they were using property that they already owned. Additionally, the area of implementation itself was small, making the testing process relatively straightforward. And for the vendors, the value associated with the opportunity to showcase their products outweighed the costs it took to stage the tests. Shortly after its introduction, the mock city had received more than $100,000 in donated services, equipment, and licenses.

The typical Smart City approach would point to the technologies that emerged from the model city as the “smart” outcome. The updated concept, though, would point to the model city itself—an economical achievement of creative problem solving. At the Smart Cities Connect Conference in 2017, where Cary’s innovative model city was featured, Austin, Texas Mayor Steve Adler made this point clear. “At its very core, a smart city is a city that has been able to look inside and identify what its challenges are — what its people and residents need to have the quality of life they want to have — and to craft unique solutions that enable the city and the community to deal with those challenges,” Adler said in his opening remarks. “That truly is what a smart city is.”

To both Alberque and Yates, the top-down approach, where solutions need to be implemented on a city-wide scale, start with people and their ideas. The platforms they conceive, whether that’s a model city or a new way of looking at data, are the heartbeat of the cause. Upon implementation, however, the impact reverses direction and transforms into a bottom-up process, which now analyzes the proposed solution in terms of its on-the-ground, human impact.

It’s a question of equitability. Who will this affect, and how will...
this affect them? The answers to those questions can only come from the community itself, and should come from a place of informed understanding, which requires transparency on the part of the town. As Alberque puts it, evaluating community impact is not an elective, altruistic exercise. It’s central to the social structure of the municipality itself. In other words, it’s the entire point.

“We are constantly rechecking our narrative to make sure that we are not only doing a good job of the actions, but also doing a good job of sharing that and engage with other groups,” Alberque said.

It’s on this point that small cities have a smart city advantage. Social ties are strong in smaller municipalities, and democratic feedback, whether that be through community meetings or voting, will be heard.

The challenges then reside in the numbers—the amount of money available and the amount of staff capacity in town hall—and budgets are tight. Thus, progress will be made in the currency of creative ideas, both large and small. Cary, though not a small town, developed its test city using a space it already had. Similarly, Raleigh puts as much emphasis on its owned assets as it does any outside solution.

And on the small scale, the creative answers need not be grand. Alberque is reminded of a story he heard from an assistant city manager of a small town in North Carolina. The story is about this particular town’s public works employees, who, while working on leaf collection, faced a persistent problem with pests. It affected both the citizens and the worker’s ability to perform their roles.

So, they came up with a solution. They attached a sprayer to the leaf collection apparatus.

“It eradicated the problem,” Alberque said. “That is a group of people who saw a challenge and were willing to try something new, when they didn’t have a lot of resources to bring to bear or a lot of time to have big strategy meetings. “That has stuck with me.”

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FRIDAY NIGHT PING PONG GAME

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Fresh out of college, filled with passions and finding a path, the fellows of the Lead for North Carolina program are not unlike many other recent graduates. Unique, however, may be the level of impact they are making. Micro-transit projects, community development initiatives, wide-ranging social research, land use plans, communications strategies—these achievements cover only some of the successes of the 2019 cohort, a group with largely no previous experience. That freshness may actually be their most valuable attribute.

“The curiosity and inquisitiveness that comes with being new and being young is helpful—it can breed good ideas,” said Sarah Arney, now working in Kinston after recently graduating from UNC-Chapel Hill. “The positivity and, maybe, naiveté—feeling like this is something I can change, or this is something I can improve. How could this be better? How could this be different? Those are good questions to ask.”

When evaluating the effect of youth on local governments, Lead for North Carolina provides a pretty compelling test case. The fellowship’s first installment took 16 bright and budding graduates and placed them into cities and counties around the state, 12 of which were economically distressed, Tier 1 communities.

Supported by the League and the UNC School of Government, the program lowers the barriers to entry on both ends of the equation. The fellows are eased into their burgeoning career and receive ongoing education, and the communities themselves receive...
an influx of talent that they may otherwise be unable to afford. On average, the communities save more than $25,000 compared to if they had hired a full-time equivalent.

This backing targets two key challenges for local governments: budget restraints and limited staff capacity. By eliminating those factors, the fellowship provides a cleaner look into the affect that new ideas, new perspective, and new talent can have on the local government setting.

Start with the towns. In North Topsail Beach, the community suffered through Hurricane Florence in 2018 with a limited staff, and as a result, public outreach during the storm was poor. The citizens made their complaints known. Enter India Mackinson, a graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill whose course of study—a BA in environmental studies and a minor in media and journalism—uniquely aligned with the town’s previous shortcoming. Relying on this background, Mackinson developed an emergency communications strategy that was implemented almost immediately upon her arrival in fall 2019.

“When we saw Hurricane Dorian coming our way, we knew it was a huge priority for staff to make sure that citizens knew what was going on,” said Mackinson. “We got a lot of positive feedback. It was a huge improvement in communication.”

In Elizabeth City, Shom Tiwari improved hurricane resiliency by evaluating the town’s sewer system and proposing targeted upgrades. In Elkin, Danielle Key serves as the festival director for NC Trail Days and heads “Explore Elkin”—a tremendously successful community outreach program that plans and promotes local events. And in Kinston, Arney has launched “Kinston 101,” an educational program that aims to develop involved citizens into local ambassadors.

There has also been a noticeable rise in civic pride, seen most clearly in two locations. Berekia Divanga made that impact in Washington after only a few months, when she nominated the city to be the NC Rural Center’s Small Town of the Year, detailing, as she said, “all the ways Washington is great—and I wrote it..."
from experience.” It won. “That was big time,” said Washington councilman and NCLM President William Pitt. “Municipal governments need young bright people. “They bring things to city government that people like myself do not know. Young people are the key.”

Wilson experienced a similar boost of civic pride through not only the great contributions of fellow Dante Pittman—which includes direct work on a micro-transit pilot project—but almost more so through just his presence. Wilson is Pittman’s hometown.

“You can tell among community leaders and folks who are interested in what’s going on in Wilson, when they see someone come back who cares and who has a sense of service, it inspires them in a way that not many things do in local government,” Pittman said. “It’s a privilege for me to know that something as simple as coming home to work on behalf of my hometown has inspired so many.”

To each of them, pursuing this program fell in line with a pervasive professional goal, which was to exercise their talents in the fulfillment of a sense of service. In some cases, it has affirmed the fellow’s initial long-term plans, whether that be non-profit work, government involvement, or community activism. And in other cases, such as Saoirse Scott’s, the experience brought murky career paths into focus.

A few months in a local government setting highlighted just exactly what community impact can look like.

“Before, I thought that I would want to work for a large campaign or do something on a very large scale,” said Scott, whose fellowship is in Edenton. “Now, the direction I’m going to take will be on a much smaller level. I hadn’t been as open to moving to a small town. Now, that’s what I want.”

It’s a common epiphany. For recent graduates, where to direct one’s talent is a pivotal question, and more and more often, the only fulfilling answer will be one that also takes into account the desire for public service. The proverbial question of “What do you want to do with your life?” is now accompanied by the follow up of, “And why do you want to do it?”

To NCLM Director of Business and Membership Development Services Jennifer Cohen, municipal government is the perfect, if not surprising, home for those attributes.

“There’s a synergy between what youth wants and what municipal government as a career path can deliver.” Photo credit: Ben Brown

offering multi-discipline engineering, land planning and recreation, and consulting services
“There’s a synergy between what youth wants and what municipal government as a career path can deliver,” said Cohen. “You really can be hands on, you really can innovate, you really can make exponential difference. The skills that youth have right now are the skills that local governments need.

“Plus, it’s not charity—it’s a stable career.”

Walker Harrison discovered this synergy first hand. Graduating from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2019 with a BA in Geography and concentrations in Environmental Systems and Geospatial Analysis, Harrison had a passion for how people interacted with space and the places they live in. He also wanted an active and difference-making career that both occasionally moved him away from the computer screen and directly addressed those elements of placemaking that were so attractive to him.

“What to do? That was a question I was really working through,” Harrison said. He considered city planning, but wasn’t sure there was a job out there that could exactly meet his demands. Then he went to the local government offices of Spindale.

“This has been the best education on what planners actually do,” Harrison said. “Each day, I know I’m working on projects that I know help the community. And the really interesting thing, we’re serving the citizens, even if they don’t recognize that we are.”

Can this symbiosis exist outside of a financially supported program? By placing young talent into municipal government settings at all, the fellowship makes notable progress in moving that enterprise forward, but there are limits, particularly on time. The fellowship ends. And when it does, the burdens on local governments rush back in.

The goal, then, should be to leave a legacy—leave the town in a better place than when you found it. It’s a mission each fellow seemed acutely aware of.

“I have made incremental progress,” said Liam Brailey, who is working in Anson County. “I don’t think I’ve made long-lasting progress yet, but I’m very hopeful that I will make those changes or help the county get on the path to those changes. Hopefully those things that I add will outlast me.”

The benefits of new ideas and youthful perspective seemingly shine clear. And to the detractors, what is the alternative? As Pembroke’s fellow Shayla Douglas wrote in an op-ed in the Richmond Observer, the current status quo is that “over 70 percent of local government workers are eligible for retirement, and no one is coming to fill these rolls.”

As Brailey puts it, the problem of a lack of youth in government—or, more accurately, the insurmountability of that problem—mirrors closely the problems that the fellows are presently solving. It’s uncertain whether towns can attract young talent. It’s certain, though, that they should try.

“A lot of times, people just need to hear someone else say it’s possible before they can get their hopes up again.”

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New year, new you, new desk calendar loaded with trivial “holidays” you didn’t know existed, like Penguin Awareness Day (Jan. 20), Stuffed Mushroom Day (Feb. 4) and Bunsen Burner Day (March 31). Even with the help of a calendar, it’s difficult to keep up with, particularly on days double-booked with observances. June 26, for instance. It’s simultaneously Take Your Dog to Work Day and Chocolate Pudding Day — a logistical nightmare if ever this writer has heard one. (Veterinarians says dogs and chocolate shouldn’t mix.)

And don’t forget this double-decker date: April 1 is both Fun At Work Day and Census Day. While the former sounds a tad merrier, the latter, Census Day, marks one of the most important group efforts your town will experience all decade.

Prior issues of Southern City have combed through the basics and implications of the Census, but 2020 is now here, and repetition of these points is crucial to hammer home why Census Day is arguably the least trivial day on the calendar, experts say.

“The word’s gotten out that North Carolina is a great place to live. We’re growing by a net of 100,000 people a year. That’s about the size of Wilmington, every year, and have been doing that for the past 20 to 30 years,” Bob Coats of the N.C. Office of State Budget and Management recently told a gathering of North Carolina mayors. As the governor’s official Census liaison, Coats’ role is to make sure as many people as possible understand the gravity of a decennial census and what they can expect in participating. “Having a picture of what that extra growth looks like — what is the nature of the people that are moving into North Carolina, where are they moving, and what sort of challenges does that present to you as local leaders? That’s a key point of why the Census matters so much.”

The April 1 date is less of a one-day observance and more of a reference point for Census officials, and by extension the country. How many people were living in your household on that date? How do they identify in terms of race? Were you the home’s owner at the time? Renter? Those questions and a few other basic data queries represent the 2020 Census, nine questions in all. The activity is constitutionally mandated every 10 years, and the info collected through it informs how countless federal, state and private decisions play out, from how electoral districts are drawn.
where industries choose to build and hire. From federal coffers, $675 billion is divvied up to communities based on Census data. And just imagine a municipal planning department without access to reliable growth figures or comparative points.

Yes, lousy participation in the Census can cost your community and the state dearly, officials say.

Fortunately, Coats got a laugh from the N.C. Mayors Association when he asked its members, just to be sure, whether anyone was surprised to learn a decennial headcount was coming. Another laugh followed when he asked if any local government represented in the room could live without those federal allocations.

“These are taxes you’ve already paid,” Coats noted. “So for anybody who doesn’t get counted in the Census, the economic impact goes to some other community.”

What’s next

Census experts are adamant that local officials are vital in these efforts, in making sure all neighborhoods and possibly hard-to-count populations understand what the headcount is all about and how personal information — which the U.S. Census Bureau keeps confidential for a full 72 years from the point of collection — is used.

A big piece of the 2020 operation is the internet; it’s the first time the Census Bureau is encouraging responses to the questionnaire online. The Bureau assures its security infrastructure will keep the data safe and private, though indeed not every household is connected to the web, so their occupants will either visit their local library’s computer room or submit responses over the phone or via paper form.

Beginning in March, Census mailings will go out to all households, with internet, phone and paper response options available. Coats suggested that local communities should schedule Census assistance in places with internet access. A “motivation” media campaign will hit the airwaves from March to May to drum up public interest.
After April 1, Census Day, non-response followups will commence to make sure every last household is represented. This will include door-to-door visits from Census employees, who will have a photo ID with a U.S. Department of Commerce watermark and other credentials. (To show how earnest the Census Bureau is about this, it began its 2020 headcount in remote parts of Alaska.)

By December 31, state populations must be reported, which is significant for North Carolina as it may result in one new congressional seat here (if not two).

Getting into 2021, the ink is still wet; local and tribal governments unsatisfied with their headcount results can contest them with the Census Bureau in hopes of a more accurate figure.

Face-off!

In a new offering this time around, individual communities — neighboring towns, for example — can actually enter into friendly competition to see which has the better response rate. The Census Bureau will be tracking response rates that the public can visualize via online map, and its Community Challenge Toolkit can create a good-natured motivator for municipalities or counties. Coats pointed out that quick responses to the Census improves the quality of data and lowers operational costs. The toolkit is found online at https://2020census.gov/en/response-rates.

General Census info pertinent to North Carolina is online at https://census.nc.gov.

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Not so long ago in North Carolina, holding local elected offices — or at least being actively involved in local politics in some capacity — was seen as almost a necessity in order to seek higher offices such as state legislator. In the 1950s and 60s, the North Carolina General Assembly was heavily populated with former city council members, county commissioners, school board members and attorneys who had represented local governing boards.

More than a half century later, that has not completely changed, but the pathways to the General Assembly and other higher offices are certainly more varied.

During the 2019 legislative session, seven state senators and 18 House members had previously held office on municipal governing boards. In the Senate, two other members — Senate leader Phil Berger and Sen. Valerie Foushee — had worked extensively with municipal governments. (Berger served as town attorney for Mayodan for three decades; Foushee worked as budget administrator in the Chapel Hill Police Department.)

In the House, 18 state representatives had previous experience serving on elected municipal governing boards. Another three had some experience working in municipal government or through advisory boards.

Similar numbers have experience in county government, and a handful of North Carolina legislators served on local school boards.

Those numbers are significant, but considering there are 170 members of the General Assembly, better than half have little to no background in local government.

Four new challengers in the Senate — including NCLM immediate past-president and Jacksonville Mayor Pro Tem Michael Lazzara — and seven in the House will be looking to add to those numbers in elections later this year.

In addition to Lazzara, they are: Patrick Harris, former Director Emergency Services for Smithfield in Senate District 11; Mills River Council Member Brian Caskey in Senate District 48; Asheville City Council Member Julie Virginia in Senate District 49; Havelock Commissioner Jim Kohr in House District 3; Durham City Council Member Vernetta

Putting Local Gov’t Experience to Work in Higher Office

By Scott Mooneyham, NCLM Director of Political Communication and Coordination
Alston in House District 29, Hope Mills Town Council Member Frances Vinell Jackson in House District 45; Winston-Salem Council Member Dan Besse in House District 74, Salisbury Mayor Pro Tem Al Heggs in House District 76; Thomasville City Council Member Wendy Sellars in House District 80 and former Morganton Human Relations Commissioner Cecelia Surratt in House District 86.

Besides those potential newcomers to the legislature, four former legislators with municipal governing backgrounds are seeking to return to the General Assembly: former Fayetteville City Council Member Wesley Meredith, Winterville Town Council Member Tony Moore, former Cornelius Town Council Member John Bradford, and former Matthews Town Council Member Bill Brawley.

According to a couple of people who have been there and done that, those with backgrounds in local government bring an ability to build consensus to address policy problems and have typically already gained a strong understanding of many of the policy issues facing legislators, as well as understanding government budgeting and finance.

“My local government experience was very beneficial, especially in terms of the budget process and setting priorities,” said former Rockingham mayor and state Sen. Gene McLaurin. “Those with local government experience just seem to have a better perspective on decisions that are made. You can still be effective without it, but it was very helpful to me. Local decisions are usually well thought out, and there is usually a very deliberative process.”

McLaurin also noted that local government involvement in economic development, whether recruiting industry or preparing sites, is another part of the job that translates well. “Economic development is all about partnerships,” he said.

Lucy Allen, an NCLM past president and former mayor Louisburg, pointed to her involvement in both the League and National League of Cities as helping in both understanding key issue areas and understanding the perspectives of those elected officials from places very different from Louisburg.

“It is very difficult to get people to look past their own interest, whether as mayor or as a legislator. You cannot operate in a vacuum, and you have to be open to other people’s ideas,” Allen said.

Lazzara, at last year’s Town & State Dinner, noted just how connected state and local government are on so many levels, which is another reason that understanding of local government can be key to legislative effectiveness.

“Every day, state and municipal leaders are working to bring more and better jobs to their communities. They are working to preserve health care facilities. They are working to ensure that we have the necessary transportation and communication networks so that commerce can flourish and people can be connected. And, we work together to keep our communities safe and secure,” he said while speaking to several hundred legislators and municipal elected officials.

That work in those same areas will not change in 2020 or the foreseeable future, making an understanding of local government as crucial as ever. SC
That key portions of North Carolina do not have the kind of internet access that they need in order for people to thrive and local economies to flourish is not news, particularly in those places themselves. Residents of those areas understand that that to succeed in the modern economy, or simply to enjoy their retirement, they need fast, reliable internet access.

To make that point, municipalities have been educating and must continue to educate key stakeholders – businesses, political leaders, and other influential decision-makers – that we need more tools to ensure North Carolina thrives in the digital age.

One place that is helping in that effort is a new website, begun by the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, a national non-profit which champions the empowerment of local communities to solve and address their own challenges. The new site can be found at nc.localbroadband.org. The site is a hub that is focused on collecting data to demonstrate the need for more investment in better broadband, as well as educating everyone on the importance of empowering local governments to strike these deals to improve access.

A big part of making the case for more authority for local governments to address this challenge is the utter lack of decent access in large swaths of the state. NC.localbroadband.org features a speedtest that can collect highly accurate location information that can be used on maps to respond to common claims from the big service providers in Raleigh that they are solving the problem.

We encourage you to take advantage of and promote this site and speedtest so that policymakers will have real data about actual Internet access speeds in homes and businesses. Though the official Federal Communications Commission broadband maps are a laugh-line to anyone working on this issue, they are used by cable and telephone company lobbyists in.
These companies oppose key legislation supported by the N.C. League of Municipalities and N.C. Association of County Commissioners, HB 431 FIBER NC Act, and have been working to try to defeat the bill. Amazingly, at least one of these same companies has embraced this exact public-private partnership model in other states.

CenturyLink has engaged in public-private partnerships in Virginia, Minnesota, and a very high-profile one in Springfield, Missouri.

The challenge of connecting all of North Carolina to modern internet access is beyond the capacity of private sector companies alone, even with all the subsidies being made available from the state and federal government. Meanwhile, many smaller, nimble Internet service providers stand ready and willing to enter into these partnerships with local governments once policymakers remove the reins that are slowing the race to bring better broadband to rural North Carolina.

In a time when people and businesses are having to relocate due to insufficient broadband access, we have to ask ourselves whether we have done everything possible to give communities the tools to incentivize the needed investment.

North Carolina law currently hobbles the entity most responsible for solving basic infrastructure problems – local government. This is the time to enable partnerships between enthusiastic local companies and local governments that want to help solve this problem.
Educating Residents about Service Lines and Offering Important Protection

In each edition of Southern City, the Preferred Partner Spotlight features one of the League’s Preferred Partners, select vendors that have entered into agreements designed to save cities and towns money through bundled purchasing and service arrangements.

Our Services Include:
- Educates homeowners and reduces local officials’ frustration
- No cost for North Carolina municipalities to participate
- Affordable rates for residents
- Increases citizen satisfaction

Important features of the program:
1. Program pays for the repairs, not your residents
2. Customers are provided with a 24/7/365 repair hotline staffed with live agents
3. All repairs performed to local code by rigorously vetted, licensed and insured local-area contractors
4. Encompasses all aspects of administration - educational outreach, billing, customer service, repairs, customer satisfaction measurement and partner reporting

Thirteen North Carolina municipalities currently offer the program, which has saved North Carolina homeowners over $3 million in repair costs over the past three years. This is only program of its kind endorsed by the National League of Cities and multiple state municipal leagues.

The program is offered by HomeServe, a leading provider of home repair solutions in North America, with an outstanding national reputation. We encourage you to consider joining more than 600 U.S. cities in adopting the NLC Service Line Warranty Program for your municipality.

For more information, please contact Jim Golden at 786-514-8014 or jim.golden@homeserveusa.com or visit NLC.org/serviceline
**2019 NCLM HIGHLIGHTS**

**LEGAL**
- 200+ legal consultations from 120 cities and towns

**WORKERS’ COMPENSATION**
- $22M Total Premium Booked as of 7/1/2018
- 99% Renewal Retention
- 469 Workers’ Compensation Trust Members

**BUSINESS & MEMBERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**
- 540 municipal members served by 5 field consultants
- 900+ face-to-face visits
- 726 CityVision 2019 attendees
- 83 total meetings and events
- $4,549,742.65 delinquent debts collected for 350+ municipalities

**NATURALLY SLIM**
- 108 HBT members who signed up for Naturally Slim classes in 2019 lost a total of 444lbs

**TELEDOC**
- 1,668 individuals have used Teledoc in 2019

**PUBLIC & GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS**
- Represented cities and towns on 330 bills filed, with over 60 of them critical
- Town and State Dinner: 96 legislators and 373 League members
- Rebrand: all new League collateral
- Municipal Operations Consultants: consulted with cities and towns on finance and budgeting, utility system integrity, etc.

**PROPERTY & CASUALTY**
- $22M Total Premium Booked as of 7/1/2018
- 99% Renewal Retention
- 403 Property and Casualty Trust Members
- Total Insured Values increased 14.81%, from $7.2M to $8.3M

**LAW ENFORCEMENT TRAINING**
- Dangerous Crossroads Training: 5 classes, 93 municipalities
- Use of Force Risk Management Training: 5 classes, 68 municipalities
- Active Shooter Training: 6 municipalities

**RISK MANAGEMENT CLAIMS**
- 3,483 total claims received in 2019
Member-Driven and Municipal-Minded.

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The goal is to stay ahead of the curve. Everything from pharmaceuticals to networks to medical care is evolving, and the danger of falling behind is always present. However, with new leadership and a high-level strategic vision, we can better forecast the industry’s future and prepare to thrive.

The benefits of this approach will be numerous. First and foremost, it will keep the pool competitive and affordable. Strong forecasts will result in a strong pool, and from that position of strength, we can smooth out the annual health insurance premium trends. With a robust pool, we'll be able to keep rate increases below those national trends.

How? Through managed health programs, services to help participants navigate the health insurance process, efficiency, and streamlined processes. For example, even with similar procedures, there can be a dramatic difference in cost from one place to another. An MRI here will not imitate an MRI there. Our goal, through partnerships and information sharing, is to achieve the best possible price in all situations.

By working with our providers and partners and trying to better direct those services, we can drive down costs. In doing so, we will lower the premiums that our members see.

Most importantly, this will improve care. With our analytical approach, we can look at the types of claims that our participants are experiencing and understand where the best care can be provided for those claims. Our direction is evolving, but our goal is the same: for the members to be well.

These improvements, which will be achieved through strong, forward-thinking leadership, will be a boon to all. For members, costs go down. For the League as a whole, the HBT pool continues to strengthen. And moving into the future, as we establish ourselves on the forefront of this constantly changing industry, we all will benefit from the flexibility and adaptability that our strengthened position will afford.
Western North Carolinians Honored with Attorney General Josh Stein’s Dogwood Award

Attorney General Josh Stein today announced that Casey Cooper, CEO, Cherokee Indian Hospital, Cleveland County Sheriff Alan Norman, Franklin Mayor Bob Scott, and Highlands Mayor Patrick Taylor have received the Attorney General’s Dogwood Award. These awards are given annually to honor North Carolinians who are dedicated to keeping people safe, healthy, and happy in their communities.

Casey Cooper
"Casey Cooper is showing a strong commitment to keeping the Cherokee people safe and healthy day in and day out," said Attorney General Josh Stein. “I appreciate his work to further chronic disease prevention and health education.”

Casey Cooper, BSN, MBA, FACHE, is the Chief Executive Officer of Cherokee Indian Hospital. Casey has devoted his career to American Indian health care. Throughout his tenure among the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, Casey has worked as a primary care nurse, community health nurse, nurse educator, and nursing manager.

Sheriff Alan Norman
“Sheriff Alan Norman is doing important work to protect public safety in Cleveland County,” said Attorney General Josh Stein. “From his commitment to keeping people safe from sex abuse to his tireless work to hold the dealers and traffickers who profit from people’s addiction accountable, I appreciate his leadership.”

Sheriff Alan Norman is currently serving his third term as Cleveland County’s sheriff. A second generation law enforcement officer, Sheriff Norman has worked in law enforcement for more than 35 years. “It is a shame that sex offenders prey on our children and society,” said Sheriff Alan Norman. “Both are our future and it is my job to make sure that the public is informed of sex offenders within Cleveland County.”

Mayors Bob Scott and Patrick Taylor
“Mayors Bob Scott and Patrick Taylor were extremely helpful to my office and me as we worked to negotiate the best deal for health care in western North Carolina,” said Attorney General Josh Stein. “My office conducted an extensive review of the Mission/HCA transfer and Mayor Scott and Mayor Taylor provided extremely helpful on-the-ground insight throughout that process. I appreciate their leadership in standing up to protect the people they serve and their health care.”

A native of Greenville, SC, Mayor Bob Scott has lived in Franklin since 1967. He is a graduate of Western Carolina University, the FBI National Academy and Palmetto Military Academy, and the South Carolina National Guard’s Officer Candidate School. He retired from the Western Carolina University Campus Police Department where he served as executive officer. Mayor Scott currently serves as a Director of the North Carolina League of Municipalities.

“I am humbled to receive this award,” said Mayor Bob Scott. “However, I am receiving it on behalf of the men and women of Franklin, Highlands, and Macon County who..."
Winston-Salem Again Ranked as a Top 10 Digital City

For the 18th year in a row Winston-Salem has been ranked as one of the top 10 most technology-savvy cities of its size in America by the Center for Digital Government, a national research and advisory institute. Winston-Salem ranked sixth in the center’s 2019 Digital Cities Survey of cities with a population of 125,000 to 249,999. The annual study ranks the use of information technology by local governments.

The 2019 survey ranked cities for their use of digital technology to make their communities “more secure, user-friendly, efficient and resilient,” said Teri Takai, the center’s executive director. “Their efforts are making technology a driver of better, smarter, more responsive government.”

The center honored the city for implementing new software that uses GIS data for the city’s code enforcement personnel; for new 311 call center technology that provides a more streamlined experience for users; for the city’s new website, and for the city’s continued focus on cybersecurity, including mandatory cybersecurity awareness training for all new hires and the formation of an “enterprise cybersecurity team” within the Information Systems Department.

Tom Kureczka, the city’s chief information officer, said the city’s top 10 rankings for 18 years running affirms the city success in maintaining existing services while investing in next-generation systems and technology.

“The I.S. staff has worked hard at providing new and improved services to our citizens, while not compromising our continued focus on cybersecurity requirements,” Kureczka said. “Our goals included providing the public a new door into City Hall — a virtual door — and increased openness and transparency, while continuing to ensure our community that we are protecting their information and privacy.”

Winston-Salem is the only city in its category to be ranked in the top 10 every year since 2002, the first year the city participated. This includes a first-place ranking in 2014 and second-place rankings in 2003, 2008, 2011 and 2017.

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CITY OF STATESVILLE
NORTH CAROLINA

SENIOR PLANNER
PLANNING DEPARTMENT
SALARY RANGE: $52,983.63 - $87,423.23

The City of Statesville, Population 25,797, is seeking an individual to fill the position of Senior Planner. The candidate selected will be responsible for performing difficult professional work in developing and implementing planning policy in relation to land development regulations and activities; performs a variety of difficult administrative professional tasks in support of the Planning Department; participates in review, research and implementation of major land development policies and ordinances; develops, reviews and implements land regulatory ordinances in relation to site development; conveys objectives and requirements of the department to the development community; analyzes, develops and communicates statistical data and reports and other demographic reporting; investigates and responds to difficult, complicated citizen inquires and complaints coordinating a staff response; recommends and assists in implementation of goals and objectives for the department; establishes schedules and methods for providing services; plans, coordinates and administers the activities and functions of Boards and Commissions, as assigned; processes and finalizes requests for annexation into the City; cross trains in various departmental functions to enhance service delivery.

REQUIREMENTS: Graduation from an accredited college or university with major course work in urban planning or related field and extensive experience in professional planning, land development regulation and policy writing; thorough knowledge of modern planning and development principles and of the social and economic implications of planning; thorough knowledge of modern land use, zoning, populations and sub-dividing concepts; ability to prepare comprehensive plans and studies; ability to establish and maintain effective working relationships with City officials, fellow employees, developers and the general public; ability to communicate ideas effectively both orally and in writing; or any equivalent combination of experience and training which provides the required knowledge, skills, and abilities; possession of a valid N.C. Driver’s License.

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EOE
The Local Elected Leaders Academy offers programs, workshops, and courses designed to instill needed leadership skills in today’s municipal and county elected officials. Participants will learn how to set and achieve strategic goals, strengthen existing bonds, and facilitate new connections as elected officials.

**UPCOMING COURSES**

**Ethics for Elected Officials Webinar**
Live Date: December 10 • Available On-Demand

**Strategic Public Leadership: Developing Your Futurist Mindset**
February 28 • Greensboro

**Evaluating Manager and Board Performance**
February 31 • Kernersville

We asked. You Answered.

Results of the Elected Officials Needs Assessment

- **98%** said demonstrating good emotional control is either EXTREMELY or VERY important to being an effective local elected official.
- **70%** responded that knowledge of the law is either EXTREMELY or VERY important to being an effective local leader.

Lack of knowledge about the law and policy processes is cited most often as the biggest obstacle to success for elected leaders.

Thank you to Prudential for their support of training for elected officials.

Thank you to Prudential for their support of training for elected officials.

Jacksonville Police Department Awarded International Award

A Leadership in Community Policing Award has been accepted by a City of Jacksonville delegation from the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

The Award recognizes promising practices that utilize effective and long-lasting partnerships to make local, national, and global communities safer.

Accepting the award at the Chicago meeting, was Jacksonville Mayor Pro Tem Michael Lazzara, Jacksonville Public Safety Direct and Police Chief Mike Yaniero and Deputy Police Chief Ashley Weaver. The award honors agencies for programs that exemplify the principles of community policing and strengthen community trust through active and inclusive community collaboration.

Jacksonville Police Department’s project to reengineer Use of Force principles, policy and procedures resulted in more positive interactions, partnerships, and improved problem-solving in the Jacksonville community. The action to reduce Use of Force in arrests, was in part inspired by the One City campaign which encourages all to treat one another with respect and civility.

The delegation accepted the award during the IACP’s Annual Banquet at the 2019 IACP Annual Conference and Exposition in Chicago.

“Community Policing is not just a program for our agency, but part of our operational framework” said Chief Mike Yaniero. “We are very proud of the community policing mindset of our officers in their day to day duties.”  

SC
Wilkesboro Revives Its Downtown
continued from page 21

“We hoped that after Phase II, the private sector would take care of the rest,” said Carlton. “We are already seeing that after Phase I.”

Nearly 10 years after the Historic District designation and with just one phase complete, the change has been significant. Almost $15 million of public and private capital has been invested downtown, 18 downtown buildings have been improved, and 26 new businesses have opened. The result is activity: outdoor concerts at the new pavilion, festivals, gatherings, and movies in the park. In other words, there are things to do. And for businesses and citizens alike, there’s a reason to be there.

Most notably, the town renovated three downtown public spaces, leading to the new Carolina West Wireless Community Commons, updated Wilkes Heritage Museum courtyard, and expansion of the Yadkin River Greenway Tyson Trailhead. There are also streetscapes, sidewalk widenings, and other pedestrian-centric redesigns. Underneath the new exterior is a revamped infrastructure system as well, ensuring the area’s future viability.

Those public sector investments, which began in earnest in 2016, addressed just three blocks. Phase II would expand that, with a focus on Main Street. But should the project cease today, the progress achieved already may be enough. It’s accomplished its larger goal of carefully organizing a revived and restructured local economy, and there is a long runway for progress ahead.

Most important, there are people downtown again. The hoped-for chain reaction is in motion.

“That’s what we hang out hats on, trying to create a higher quality of life for all demographics and all age groups, to make them feel good about where they live, where they’re moving to, and where they’re raising their kids,” said Carlton. “We’re trying to make sure everybody feels like this is their downtown. This is the heart and soul of their community.”

A recent official report on the project may say it best: “The Town of Wilkesboro recognizes that special places do not happen by accident.”

League Priorities
continued from page 5

Dozens of towns saw their largest property tax payer and utility rate payer – sometimes making up a quarter of those revenue streams – gone overnight.

• “Broadband is so important because no matter what your business is, efficiency is the bottom line. It doesn’t matter if you have the greatest product in the world — if you’re not manufacturing it efficiently, that’s a loss. If you’re not selling or marketing it efficiently, you’re losing,” Carter said.

• Once again, a big part of the goal was to preserve the character of Wilmington’s historic districts, as well as discourage gentrification and keep neighborhoods resident-centric. But there is that balancing act. The city also recognized that renting on a short-term basis represent economic opportunity for some residents and provides options to visitors.

As these stories are published, the League will be sure to use its electronic newsletters and social media platforms to direct all of our members to read more about these issues of growing importance to cities and towns.

Sen. Gladys Robinson
continued from page 10

Democrat than Republicans, but even the Republicans said they were going to support me to be chair... All of them supported me in becoming chair. And what I said to them is we are different parties, but we represent the same people, and what I want from them is, we aren’t going to agree, but I ought to have some issues that this whole delegation is going to get on board and support for Guilford County. And we did that! We did that with the mental health center. We met with the (county) commissioners in terms of trying to get the funding they needed... to match their money for mental health, so we did that. We’ve had town hall meetings of course, and some come, some don’t come, but in general, we’ve worked together. They worked with me on the tornado relief funding for Guilford. I proposed and asked for millions of dollars for east Greensboro, where I represent, and (Senator) Jerry (Tillman) signed on to that with me, and so we’ve had some things that we’ve worked together on... Community kinds of things, we support. The local officials, what I tell people is that if it’s something that has to do with what local government has authority on, I don’t do that. I don’t get into their space, and I don’t expect them to get into mine. If there’s something they need, I expect them to talk to us.

SC

SC
Leadership, From The Ground Up

By Paul Meyer, NCLM Executive Director

In our nation’s history, only two U.S. presidents came into office having previously served as mayor of a city or town – Grover Cleveland, who served as mayor of Buffalo before becoming governor of New York and then being elected to the presidency, and Calvin Coolidge, who briefly served as the mayor of Northampton, Massachusetts.

When you think about it, that is a fairly staggering and sobering fact.

Local government, whether serving at the municipal or county level, has its own rewards. It’s less partisan and more practical. For local officeholders, having the ability to turn policy into tangible results that you can see taking root and having real effects on people’s lives may be reason to want to stay in those positions for years or decades.

Still, serving on a town or city council or a county commission can also be a great place to learn skills like coalition building and how to work across governmental levels, and to educate yourself on issue sets that involve local, state and federal government. And those skills and that learning translate well when locally elected officials move on to higher office, whether at the state or federal level.

With that in mind, you might think that more people would jump into local offices before setting off to conquer Raleigh or Washington.

But as we see with through the history of the presidency, that is not always the case.

In Raleigh, nineteen current sitting House members have served on town or city councils, while seven sitting members of the state Senate have spent time on municipal elected boards. Roughly around the same numbers have served on boards of county commissioners. And there are a handful of state legislators who — though they never held local elected offices — have or continue to serve in working capacity or in an advisory role to local governments. Those include the current respective leaders of the House and Senate, House Speaker Tim Moore and Senate President Pro Tem Phil Berger. Speaker Moore has worked in a county attorney position for Cleveland County, while Senator Berger served as town attorney for Mayodan for three decades.

Read about newcomers with municipal government backgrounds filing for higher office in ‘Putting Local Government Experience to Work in Higher Office’ on page 32.

That seems like pretty good representation by those with local government experience, until you consider that there are 170 total seats in the North Carolina General Assembly.

Obviously, those without local government experience bring their own experiences from a variety of backgrounds — whether in business, other areas of government, the non-profit and charitable sector, or through social and community activities.

And those experiences can prove valuable in the state policy setting process. No one would argue that those perspectives are not needed as legislators pass laws that affect a wide range of people and how we conduct our lives.

Even so, what is so key in having a background in local government is gaining an appreciation for the individual visions of local residents and how their needs can be so different from one place to the other.

That being the case, I hope we see those numbers rise in the future, and that NCLM can play a more substantial role in preparing municipal officials who wish to make that leap into higher office. Our Advancing Municipal Leaders trainings are one way that we are better preparing those officials for the offices that they hold today and tomorrow.

But doing that and more, we can fulfill a key organizational value of being responsive to citizens and better answering to them in meaningful ways that affect their everyday lives. SC
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Kendrick M. is known as “Mr. Parks and Rec Worldwide” in Greensboro, where he serves as the city’s special events coordinator. Kendrick helps bring fun events to life in his community.

When it comes time to do his taxes though, he doesn’t play around. Instead, he gets help from LGFCU. For the 2017 tax season Kendrick used LGFCU’s in-branch low-cost tax services. For the 2018 season, he prepared his own taxes using TurboTax.

“I was glad TurboTax was available ... plus, I appreciate the member discount.”

Kendrick M. / Member since 2014
Special Events Coordinator, Greensboro

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