

The President's Column

What Have I Learned?

By: Peyton Mastera, MCMA President, Dilworth City Administrator

A little backstory about myself: 11 years ago this week, my wife and I flew into Fargo, ND. What transpired in the 72 hours that followed would completely change the trajectory of our lives. I was 31 years old at the time, and I knew it was time to take the next step in my professional career, based on my education and work experience. Dilworth was hiring, I was available, and by the end of our third day, we were calling friends and family to tell them we were moving to northwest Minnesota.

Reality didn't set in until we boarded the plane to return home, and my wife started to cry. Then I found myself choking up, too, because she was. Was I ready for this challenge? Was I ready to move 1,000 miles from home? What if I hate this place? What if my coworkers hate me? Do I need to buy a snowblower? If I am asking myself this many questions, why am I doing this?

In the time leading up to accepting the Dilworth job, I had spent several years in my hometown, serving as a city planner for five years, handling the typical city planning tasks — zoning, land use, permitting, etc. After that, I transitioned into the role of "Projects Administrator," overseeing grant programs, large capital infrastructure projects, and serving as a liaison between city management and public works. These experiences, combined with my MPA background, had prepared me to lead a city. I believed this to be true. But I also had my doubts.

Nothing prepares you more for a job than on-the-job training. But there are some universal truths about managing an organization: You're working with people, communication is key, and co-workers look to you for guidance.

There is no objective metric that determines the success of my tenure in Dilworth. I can point to countless accomplishments, success stories, and positive performance reviews, but in the end, you are the final arbiter in determining the extent of your impact on the community. Yet, through it all, the following principles have become foundational to this job.

1. Do Not Dwell on What You Don't Have

It is easy to focus on what we do not have — the budget, the staff, or even the perfect project timeline. However, I have learned that what matters most is not what is missing, but what we can do with what we have been given (or not given). It is about making the most of every resource, building from where we are, and finding ways to leverage creativity and collaboration. A scarcity mentality only limits your ability to think strategically. Instead, focus on what you do have, and you will be surprised at how much you can accomplish.

2. Our Worst Fears Lie in Anticipation

Fear of the unknown can be paralyzing. Early on in my career, I had many sleepless nights, wondering

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Appointments and Other Professional News

- **David Chanski** has been hired as assistant city administrator, Farmington.
- **Chris Heineman**, city administrator, Little Canada, has been appointed city council administrator, Red Wing.
- **Matt Skaret** has been appointed city manager, Benson.
- **Mark Statz**, city administrator, Centerville, has been appointed city administrator, Forest Lake.

*Do you have a new appointment or other professional news to share?
Contact the secretariat at the information listed.*

MCMA Board Meeting Recap

By: Madison Hagenau, MCMA Secretariat

The MCMA Board met on Feb. 7 and April 4. Highlights of the meetings were:

- Debriefed 2025 MCMA Winter Workshop
- Final review of the 2025 MCMA Annual Conference Program
- Engaged in Strategic Planning Discussions

Reaching the MCMA secretariat

For MCMA secretariat services, contact:

Madison Hagenau

Engagement Manager
(651) 215-4048
Fax: (651) 281-1296
mhagenau@lmc.org

League of Minnesota Cities
145 University Avenue West
St. Paul, MN 55103-2044

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Contact:
Madison Hagenau
Engagement Manager
mhagenau@lmc.org
(651) 215-4048
Fax: (651) 281-1296

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Geralyn Barone, Eden Prairie
612-280-5248 • geralynbarone@gmail.com

Mark McNeill, Prior Lake
612-599-1941 • mcneillmh@gmail.com

Craig Dawson, St. Paul
651-699-8689 • cdawson956@hotmail.com

Jeff Weldon, Sauk Centre
320-557-8006 • jtweldon@gmail.com

Your senior advisors are here to help!

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if I would be successful, if people would respect me, and if I could handle the responsibilities of a leadership role. But as time went on, I learned that much of my fear lay in anticipation, not in reality.

I remember worrying about things like dealing with angry residents or having to make difficult employment-related decisions. When the time came to face these challenges, I found that the reality was often far less intimidating than my imagination had made it out to be. As leaders, we are often faced with tough decisions or daunting tasks, but it is essential to remember that most of the fear we feel is rooted in what we think might happen, not what actually will.

The key is to recognize that fear is normal, and we must move forward despite it. When we break down these fears and face them head-on, we realize that we are more resilient than we give ourselves credit for.

3. Ethics Matter

A friend of mine recently took a local government job, and not long into his role, it became apparent that he wasn't quite a match for the city council—and vice versa. This happens in any line of work. But the turning point came when he was asked to approve a special event permit under pressure from a city council member.

In mentoring my friend through this, I emphasized one crucial point: no matter what, he cannot compromise his ethics. Whether he stays in that municipality or moves elsewhere, the one thing he can always rely on with a clear conscience is his ethical obligation to the community and his colleagues.

In local government, our decisions carry weight. Not only because our decisions impact an organization, but also the community as a whole. When we act with integrity and stay true to our values, even when it is difficult, we build trust and set an example for those around us. It is essential to lead with ethics, because without it, nothing else matters.

4. Have the Courage of Your Convictions

Leadership is not just about making the right decisions; it is about standing by those decisions, even when they are unpopular. Throughout my career, I have had moments where I knew what the right course of action was, but I hesitated because I feared the backlash. Would the council approve? Would my colleagues understand? What if I was wrong?

But I have learned that having the courage to act on your convictions is what distinguishes true leadership. It is easy to follow the crowd and take the safer path, but leadership requires stepping into the unknown, trusting your judgment, and standing firm in your beliefs. The moments that test your courage often turn out to be the ones that define your legacy as a leader.

5. Everyone's Story is Different

One of the most profound lessons I have learned is the importance of understanding that everyone's story is unique. It is easy to assume that others see the world through a similar lens. Diversity — whether in background, perspective, or life experience — shapes how people view issues and approach problems.

During college, I had the opportunity to spend a semester abroad at the University of Sunderland in northeast England. That experience continues to shape my worldview, as it opened my eyes to perspectives I had never considered before. Prior

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to that, I had a narrow view of the world, despite thinking otherwise. I attribute much of my professional success to those four months in England, which deepened my understanding of culture and diverse perspectives.

In recent years, diversity, equity, and inclusion have gained significant national attention. Regardless of the ongoing discourse, these principles are fundamental to local government management, as outlined in ICMA's Core Beliefs, and should never be dismissed by those of us in this profession.

Embracing diversity in both thought and practice has made me a more effective leader. I have learned that the best solutions often come from the most diverse perspectives. It is not about agreeing with everyone or simply awarding opportunities based on identity, but about listening, learning, and growing from the wide array of experiences and viewpoints each person brings to the table. This approach makes you a more well-rounded manager, and your community benefits as a result.

The lessons I have learned in my time leading in Dilworth, and in my broader career are not unique. They are universal truths that can be applied by any leader. Leadership is not just about the decisions we make, but about how we lead others through challenges, fears, and uncertainties. It is about staying true to your values, embracing what you have, and finding the courage to face the unknown.

These lessons, and the ones you will continue to learn, will shape your leadership journey and ultimately determine how you will be remembered. As city and county managers, we have an opportunity to shape the future of our communities, and it is a responsibility we should never take lightly. 🗨️

– Contact Mastera at peyton.mastera@ci.dilworth.mn.us

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MCMA Internship Stipend Recipients

Every year the Education and Outreach Committee awards stipends for jurisdictions to provide a talented young person with real life experience working in local government management.

The Education and Outreach Committee of MCMA considers the following elements when selecting the recipients of the stipends: MCMA Membership Status, quality of the proposed work tasks and exposure to public administration and local government management and the organization's MCMA member, and program supervision and mentorship opportunities.

The 2025 stipends were awarded to the cities of Maplewood, Shoreview, and Bloomington! 🗨️

Thoughts from an Outgoing Past President

By: Brad Martens, Past President, Shoreview City Manager

Being a board member for MCMA is an extremely rewarding experience. It's also kind of like being a city manager. You get to be in the room for all the exciting discussions, you have to make tough decisions, you never have all the information, someone is always upset, you give the credit to others, and if you're lucky, like really lucky, someone might even say "thank you".

In 2018 I had the fortunate opportunity to join the board and after seven wonderful years, my time has come to move on. Over those years I've had the absolute pleasure to work alongside lots of great people and even help to do a little good. The people include 26 board and ex-officio members as well as three secretariats (the list is quite impressive and I'm honored to have had the opportunity to spend time in their presence). The help to do a little good includes being a part of the following:

- **Transitioning** conference planning services from GTS to the League of Minnesota Cities
- **Guiding** secretariat services from Kevin Frazell, briefly to Heather Corcoran, then on to Madison Hagenau
- **Voting** to make the women in the profession task force a permanent standing committee
- **Navigating** the pandemic, which included canceling the conference in 2020 and moving the 2021 conference to Duluth in the fall
- **Moving** the conference location from Grand View Lodge to Madden's on Gull Lake
- **Changing** the fiscal year to a calendar year (and several other bylaw amendments)
- **Helping** to increase the number of credentialed managers
- **Attending** various board meetings, writing articles, and having discussions on a wide range of topics on behalf of our profession

As I look back to 2018 and compare the association to where it is today, I can confidently say that MCMA is going in the right direction. I've heard (and feel) that conferences and committees are more open and welcoming, conference content continues to improve as well as the number of attendees, the membership is more diverse, and we continue to be financially stable.

We also have an absolutely fantastic, and now veteran leader in Madison Hagenau who deserves a lot of the credit for all the work the board accomplishes (thank you, Madison!).

I truly have appreciated this opportunity to serve and now look forward to stepping aside and enjoying my time as a member, taking advantage of all education and networking opportunities MCMA membership provides us. It should be noted that I'll also start judging the decisions of the new board. Can you believe they did that? 🍷

– Contact Martens at bmartens@shoreviewmn.gov

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Been There, Done That!

Unsolicited Advice from Your Senior Advisors

What has happened to the value of ‘pragmatism’ in our policymaking?

By: Jeff Weldon, MCMA/ICMA Senior Advisor

One of the many virtues of retirement is the seemingly unending ability to enjoy travel. That’s why my wife and I escape the Minnesota winter for two months every year to Gulf Shores, Alabama. Recently, I was sitting on the beach, enjoying 75 degrees, watching a distant barge steam into Mobile Bay, sand between my toes, a Cuban cigar in one hand, and a Corona in the other. This serenity is interrupted when I receive a text message from my good friend and fellow senior advisor Mark McNeill that says: “Hey Weldon, McNeill here, according to the rotation schedule, it’s your turn to write the next article of *Been There, Done That* for the MCMA newsletter.”

So began the gut-wrenching process of attempting to conceive a topic. As I consider the various conversations I have had with members, I was struck by how many barriers managers and administrators are experiencing relative to having or acquiring the proper information needed to make sound decisions. We can all agree that good decision-making is fundamental to good public policy outcomes. So, what constitutes good information? Presumably, it should be truthful, comprehensive, accurate, data-driven, and statistically reliable and verifiable. In other words, using information to help make decisions should be done in a pragmatic fashion. According to the dictionary, “pragmatic” is defined as “dealing with things sensibly and realistically in a way that is based on practical rather than theoretical considerations.”

A key attribute of pragmatism is the ability to alter positions in the face of new or changing information and embracing this new direction because new information has altered assumptions and could affect a future course of action. Pragmatism is the polar opposite of dogmatism, which is defined as “a fixed set of beliefs that are accepted without any doubts.” Dogmatism is sometimes considered ‘stubbornness, close-mindedness, rejection of new data or information that is contrary.’

ICMA’s Code of Ethics Tenet #5 and Core Competency #9 describe the value and importance of advising our governing board on public policy issues and aid in their decision-making. Such tasks require securing good information and providing advice through the steps of policy analysis we all learned in graduate school which are... say it with me... (1) identify and frame the issue, (2) develop a list of options, (3) determine pros and cons of each option, and (4) recommend the best option. This is a very sequential, logical, and pragmatic process. It employs the basic principles and theories of Frederick Taylor’s Scientific Management developed in 1911. It also requires critical thinking skills in our assessment of information.

But accomplishing this is easier said than done. In today’s 24-hour news cycle where news items are launched in three-second sound bites instead of with a comprehensive analysis, we just don’t have the time to thoroughly digest and process, let alone fact-check, complex issues and give them the attention they deserve. Instead, they are spread in dogmatic fashion, often fraught with half-truths, extreme bias, disinformation, and even outright lies often rooted in the next flavor-of-the-week conspiracy theory. This feeds into rumor mills that always spread faster than the truth.

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It becomes increasingly difficult to adopt a pragmatic process that is data-driven and ‘follows the science’ when considering, for example, the efficacy of vaccines or the real impact of climate change, when conspiracy theories promote blatant misinformation about them. How do we get to good decisions through effective policy-making in an environment where information is so easily and quickly contaminated? It seems pragmatism, as a means of making good decisions, has become a casualty in today’s modern political lexicon.

Similarly, the value of compromise has become increasingly diminished. Getting to a win-win situation requires ending a confrontation with a brokered solution whereby each side did not get all they wanted but can live with. It is based on the pragmatic determination that ending the conflict has a higher value than continuing the conflict amid an uncertain outcome. But compromise is today seen as a weakness instead of a virtue and becomes a zero-sum game. Today’s rules of “I must win and therefore you must lose” have forced us into tribalism where we retreat to our corners and would rather accept gridlock than a compromised solution.

Certainly, our Founding Fathers intended our government to be built on compromise with the built-in mechanics of separation of powers and checks and balances. A federal government with three branches, one of those branches having two chambers, is certainly not efficient; nor was it intended to be. It was intended to be safe from abuse of power and therefore dependent upon compromise and pragmatic thinking. President Jefferson once said, “In matters of style, swim with the current; in matters of principle, stand like a rock.” Yet, our national discourse has devolved into a crippled process of policy chaos usually resulting in gridlock. How long would any of us be able to get away with delaying adopting a city or county budget seemingly indefinitely by recommending in its place, a “continuing resolution”?

Pragmatism requires being receptive to alternative ideas and challenging assumptions in the search for the best information for decision-making. The book “Team of Rivals” by Doris Kearns Goodwin highlights one of President Abraham Lincoln’s pragmatic attributes of deliberately selecting a cabinet that held very divergent views on almost every issue. Several cabinet members were even outright political adversaries of Lincoln. Still, Lincoln understood the value of bringing together a collection of divergent opinions and attitudes that ultimately gave him the cross-section of ideas, opinions, and perspectives he needed to end slavery and the Civil War.

Another attribute of pragmatism is the ability to employ critical thinking that causes one to “play the devil’s advocate.” This is a loose phrase whereby an alternative attitude or approach is interjected in the discussion to consider alternatives or to anticipate problems or roadblocks intended to arrive at a solution. This method seeks to anticipate problems or challenges and proactively identify a response. The ability to pragmatically employ the practice of ‘playing the devil’s advocate’ is an effective tool in policymaking.

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“How do we get to good decisions through effective policymaking in an environment where information is so easily and quickly contaminated?”

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Throughout my career, I made it a practice in my role as policy advisor to the city council to frequently interject and say: “Let me play devil’s advocate for a moment.” I would proceed to describe alternative issues or considerations I thought were important to pragmatically consider within the context of our policy discussion. I always thought such comprehensive and open-minded deliberations were essential to improving the outcome of decisions and thus, the public policy process.

I recall at one point during a conversation with a former elected official where I apparently pushed that button one too many times. During an intense policy discussion about a controversial economic development incentive program, I played that card and my input ran contrary to his opinion. We had always had a good back-and-forth relationship in similar discussions so imagine my surprise when he interrupted me and accused me of being negative. I was further taken aback when he actually tried to prohibit me from ever saying the words, “Let me play devil’s advocate” in his presence. This elected official, for whom I had so much respect and had experienced so many productive conversations about crucial policy issues, who seemingly was always pragmatic in his thinking, had suddenly gone over to the dark side by being stubbornly dogmatic! He summarily dismissed any idea, concept, opinion, or thought contrary to his own preconceived notion. Unfortunately, this encounter forever altered, albeit slightly, the nature of our relationship about subsequent policy discussions — and not in a healthy way.

So where does this leave us? We should all recall what the ICMA Code of Ethics Tenets provides in terms of guidance relating to using our core competency of advising our elected officials about the public policy issues that affect our communities. Pragmatism is a basic foundational element of the critical thinking skills essential to effective policymaking and we must not abandon it. We must strive to strengthen its usage and effectiveness if we are ever to be successful in consistently achieving positive outcomes in public policy issues that affect our communities every day.

Enough of my musings. Back to the beach. ◻

– *Contact Weldon at jtweldon@gmail.com*

“Pragmatism requires being receptive to alternative ideas and challenging assumptions in the search for the best information for decision-making.”

ICMA Tampa

In June, registration will open for the 2025 ICMA Annual Conference in Tampa. MCMA is teaming up with our Iowa counterparts (IaCMA) to co-host a reception on Monday, Oct. 27. Be on the lookout for ICMA registration information as well as registration for the MCMA-IaCMA reception! ◻

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