

The President's Column

By Brad Martens, MCMA President, Shoreview City Manager

I'm honored with the incredible opportunity to write the president's column for this important newsletter as I serve as MCMA president. I've always looked forward to receiving the newsletter and finding inspiration from my peers. My hope is that I can somehow continue that tradition moving forward.

Becoming the MCMA president was not on my list of priorities. However, I have always wanted to be of service to my organization and my peers. Service to others has been foundational to me in all of my roles, from my parks and recreation days planning teen programs on Friday nights, to my current role today as city manager of Shoreview. Our roles in public service give us a unique opportunity to make a meaningful difference for those around us.

In order for us as leaders to continue to serve others, we must continuously improve ourselves. I have Don Salverda to thank for instilling this value in me through his green folder of inspiration, quotes such as, "readers are leaders," and of course the A, B, C's (A is for attitude, B is for behavior, C is for character, etc...maybe you had to be there). Due to this need for self improvement, I have chosen to use my short time as president to highlight the need to invest in ourselves as much as we do our teams. For that reason, I announced my intention to take on the ICMA credentialing initiative at the annual conference in May and asked that others join me to apply before the July deadline. I'm excited to share ICMA

recently announced that 16 individuals from Minnesota are recommended for credentialing status in October! That brings our state number up from 34 to 50, a 47% increase! (I'll add that we passed Wisconsin, who has 44 credentialed managers, which makes it even more enjoyable.) These public servants have chosen to commit to improving themselves, which will increase their ability to serve others. Way to go!

"In order for us as leaders to continue to serve others, we must continuously improve ourselves."

I'd love to see more of our peers commit to this continuous improvement opportunity through the ICMA credentialing process, and there are chances to do so before the next deadlines on Oct. 2, 2023 and Jan. 2, 2024. The process is very manageable (\$125 and a few hours of your time), and creating an annual improvement plan will help you make the time to continue to invest in yourself year after year. By doing so, you will enhance your ability to serve your team and your community. I'm more than happy to help you through the process if you wish.

I know that the ICMA credentialing process is not available to everyone or may not be of interest to you. No matter what your situation, I hope you will take this opportunity to think about a way to make the time to regularly invest in yourself. I know that if you do, you will not only improve yourself, you will also be a positive influence for those around you. ◻

– Contact Martens at bmartens@shoreviewmn.gov

Appointments and Other Professional News

- **Rebecca Schrupp**, city administrator, Canby, has been appointed city manager, Morris.

Do you have a new appointment or other professional news to share?

Contact Madison Hagenau, MCMA Secretariat, at mhagenau@lmc.org.

MCMA Board Meeting Recap

By Madison Hagenau, MCMA Secretariat

The MCMA Board met on July 21. Highlights of the meeting were:

- Discussion of goals and priorities for President Brad Martens' term.
- Appointment of members to 2023/24 committees.
- Debriefed 2023 Annual Conference and discussed early plans for the 2024 Annual Conference.
- Interviewed and appointed GERALYN BARONE to the position of senior advisor.

Reaching the MCMA secretariat

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Your senior advisors are here to help!

An Exciting New Chapter

By Matt Fulton, ICMA Midwest Regional Director

After over 40 years in local government and five years supporting community engagement and data driven decision making, it is very exciting to let everyone know about my appointment as ICMA midwest regional director. ICMA has been such an important association and resource throughout my entire career, and this new connection provides me the unique opportunity to support the needs of ICMA members and local government professionals in the Midwest region, which includes Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, Illinois, Ohio, Missouri, Michigan, and Indiana.

Having served on the ICMA Executive Board as a midwest vice president, I have a keen appreciation for the value ICMA provides to its members at every stage of a person's career — regardless of whether it is in a suburban community or rural environment.

I think we all appreciate the professional networking opportunities ICMA provides through its conferences and training opportunities; they are invaluable resources for identifying best practices, finding technical information, topic experts, and policy guidance, and providing training programs to help meet all of the challenges we face everyday in our work. I suspect many of us have relied on ICMA's job board as we have explored professional opportunities and, speaking from personal experience, have looked to ICMA for support as we transition from a community.

As a former chair of ICMA's International Task Force, it is also relevant to acknowledge ICMA's renewed commitment to bringing international best practices and local government leaders from around the world together to learn and support the needs of professional management globally. It is an exciting vision that I hope to help ICMA move forward with.

I really want to acknowledge MCMA President Brad Martens' priority of encouraging members to become ICMA credentialed managers. ICMA has just initiated a new learning platform that makes the credentialing process more beneficial and easier to achieve. Being credentialed is a very effective way to keep your skills sharp. It is also an important commitment to lifelong learning. In the dynamic world we all find ourselves in, staying sharp is a key to success.

For those of you who know me, you will likely appreciate how well aligned this new appointment is for my personality and skill set. For those of you who don't know me yet, or at least not very well, I look forward to getting to know you better and being a resource for you.

For all of you, I hope you will feel comfortable looking to me for support in your work, the challenges you face, and in being a strong advocate for professional management in local government.

– Contact Fulton at mfulton@icma.org

“I have a keen appreciation for the value ICMA provides to its members at every stage of a person's career — regardless of whether it is in a suburban community or rural environment.”

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Meet the New MCMA Board Member!

Mike Funk (1st Term Director)



Mike Funk has 27 years of experience in local government and was appointed Minnetonka's city manager in June of 2022. He joined Minnetonka in 2019 as the assistant city manager and became the interim city manager in 2021 when GERALYN BARONE retired. Prior to that, he served as assistant city manager/director of human resources for Maplewood and city administrator for Minnetrista and Olivia.

Funk has a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and a Bachelor of Science in Sociology from Southwest Minnesota State University.

Mike is married to Anne Finn, many of you know her as the director of intergovernmental relations (IGR) for the League of Minnesota Cities. Mike and Anne have lived in Minnetonka since 2009. They have four boys ranging from ages 19-22. The two eldest, Carson and Noah, graduated from the University of Minnesota and St. John's University this past spring and have landed their first full-time adulting jobs. The youngest two, Riley and Conor, just began classes as a sophomore and junior at the University of Minnesota and are housemates at a fraternity. In their downtime, Mike and Anne enjoy the cabin, spending time with family and friends, and empty nesting with their dog, Mollie. ◻

– Contact Funk at mfunk@minnetonkamn.gov

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SAVE THE DATE!



The 2024 Spring Annual Conference will be held at Madden's on Gull Lake, May 1-3, 2024!

Planning is underway, so stay tuned for more information in the coming months about the 2024 Annual Conference! ◻

Photo: Family Destinations Guide

Been There, Done That!

Unsolicited Advice from Your Senior Advisors

Navigating an Involuntary Transition: Part 2, When the Other Shoe Drops

In this spring's issue of the MCMA newsletter, the "Been There, Done That" article featured Part One of a two-part series regarding preparing and navigating an involuntary termination. Part One focused on early preparation and intervention steps managers can take over time to reduce, minimize, and hopefully avoid an involuntary termination. Part Two addresses steps managers can take to effectively manage an involuntary termination and how to move on with their career.

MCMA members have two excellent resources that provide further detailed information regarding being a manager in transition. "Members in Transition: A Guide" is a publication of MCMA and is available from their website. "The Members Guide to a Career that has Ups, Downs, and Detours — An ICMA Transition Guide" can be downloaded from the ICMA website.

Imagine the following scenario:

Despite your best efforts, you are about to learn at the conclusion of tonight's council meeting that it will be your last. A surprise agenda item is a council vote calling for your immediate termination. After years of dedicated service, successful initiatives for the community, good past evaluations, and good relations with the council — or so you thought — the motion for your termination mentions vague reasons such as "poor communication style" or "need to move in a new direction" or "it's time for a major staff change." You didn't see it coming, and the shock hits you like a ton of bricks.

This is just one of many scenarios under which managers experience an involuntary termination. Sometimes, termination may be a total surprise like this example. Other times, there may be warning signs and hints that managers see a long way off that things are about to go awry. Despite best attempts to head it off, a termination is often inevitable. Regardless of how it happens, the immediate and burning question becomes, "What do I do next?"

You should stay calm and in control, do not overreact, accept the reality of what has happened, and proceed with the following steps.

CHECK YOUR DOCUMENTS

Hopefully, you have a contract, employment agreement, standardized benefits or some other legally-binding agreement that specifies terms and conditions of which you are entitled in the event of an involuntary separation. Familiarize yourself with such provisions and be prepared to make your case to ensure they are honored. Usually, you will be limited to what is prescribed. Occasionally, governing bodies may provide additional benefits to reach an amicable solution. Governing bodies tend to be anxious to get the issue of terminating their manager behind them and want to minimize political fallout.

Developing an employment agreement is beyond the scope of this article, so consult MCMA and ICMA for specific guidance on developing employment agreements. At a minimum, you are entitled to a payout of unused sick time, vacation time, personal time off that has been accumulated but not yet used, and any other benefits to which other employees are usually entitled.

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PREPARE YOUR FAMILY, CHECK YOUR PERSONAL FINANCES

As a public official, your departure will be the subject of local news and social media. Be sure to effectively inform your spouse or partner and children what has just occurred and warn them that media reaction could be negative. This is especially crucial if you have school-aged children who are highly susceptible to negative information, misinformation, rumors, and innuendo at school or from classmates. Prepare them for what they might hear and give guidance on how to react.

One of the areas of stress with an involuntary termination is the cessation of a paycheck in the very near future. Even with a lucrative severance or contract buy-out, eventually, the money runs out. Revisit your monthly expenses and levels of bank accounts, and make spending adjustments to prepare for a downturn in household income. Try to delay major expenditures, and reduce monthly spending to provide a cushion for what could be a protracted period of time with reduced or no income.

ATTEMPT A NEGOTIATED DEPARTURE

It is advantageous to leave on the best terms possible now that a departure is inevitable. The nature of the relationship you leave will likely follow you to your future employment pursuits, and it's best to carry as little baggage from your last position as possible. Strive for an amicable parting relationship to preserve your professionalism and high integrity.

Your separation will be somewhat contentious, but resist the natural temptation to lash out in self-defense. Taking the high road will yield a better separation package, enhance your personal reputation as you depart, and could be a determining factor in securing your next position.

Often, governing bodies will reciprocate and want a positive separation. Firing their manager or administrator is a difficult and messy decision for them. Contentious separations from their chief appointed official can backfire and hurt them politically, so they usually want to minimize political fallout and get past it.

DEVELOP A MEDIA RESPONSE

The termination of a local government official is big news, and the local media will want to report your and the governing body's perspectives on the matter. The first consideration is timing; it is best not to respond too soon as events may still be unfolding. Off-the-cuff comments made in the heat of the moment could bring negative ramifications. If possible, try to avoid commenting for a day or two as the dust settles.

However, it is important to respond at the right time. Failure to respond timely indicates you are hiding or avoiding the media, who are simply doing their job. Your response should be calculated, measured, and guarded. A gag order may be part of your separation agreement with the governing body. If such a restriction exists, be sure to honor it.

Resist the natural temptation to disparage or otherwise denigrate the governing body. Making disparaging comments about the other side makes you look petty and vindictive. Be the adult in the room by taking the high road and refusing to burn any bridges. Your reaction will follow you to your future job search efforts. You can certainly make your case in a positive light without unilaterally blaming the governing body. The goal should be to preserve — and even enhance — your reputation with your response. A measured amount of humility will go a long way toward accomplishing this.

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CONSIDER HIRING AN ATTORNEY

Whether or not you should hire an attorney to help ensure a fair exit strategy is a decision that should be considered. Legal advice can be helpful if the separation appears to be contentious or if, for example, the governing board appears to be backtracking at honoring the terms and conditions of a separation as delineated in the contract or any other agreement.

Be aggressive in securing the terms and conditions of a contract to which the governing body previously agreed. Sometimes, an attorney is necessary to ensure your interests are protected. Knowing you have legal advice will likely cause the governing board to re-consider not honoring the agreement. Such action will only increase the political tension in the community on the governing body and prove contrary to an amicable separation. The governing body usually wants to avoid this if possible.

If, however, there are no problems with honoring such terms and conditions and you are satisfied with a mutually beneficial, negotiated exit strategy, legal advice is likely not necessary. There is no need to ramp up the level of contention if it is not necessary.

If you decide to seek legal advice, be sure to use counsel outside your departing organization. The city or county attorney may once have been part of your administrative team, but they no longer are. They work for the governing body now, and any legal representation on your behalf is a conflict of interest they will avoid.

Finally, legal advice will add to the personal expense at a time when you can least afford it, so it should be avoided if possible. Before hiring an attorney, contact MCMA for suggestions of firms or attorneys who may be of assistance.

INFORM ICMA/MCMA, COLLEAGUES, FRIENDS, SENIOR ADVISORS; USE THEIR ASSISTANCE

You have likely developed an extensive network of professional friends and colleagues, and this is no time to let stubborn pride stand in the way of asking for help. Many colleagues have likely also been involuntarily terminated and can provide support, comfort, and suggestions for dealing with the stress, anxiety, fear, and other emotions you may experience. Call on them.

The MCMA state association and ICMA have resources that can help as well. Let them know you are now a manager-in-transition and want to find out what assistance can help ease this experience. Be sure to contact your MCMA-appointed senior advisor. These seasonal, retired managers/administrators are there specifically to assist current managers/administrators with support, guidance, and suggestions on navigating the challenges of transitioning.

TALK TO YOUR STAFF JUST PRIOR TO DEPARTURE

As you are packing up your personal items from your office, be sure to call together your staff, especially department heads, and share your perspective. You have likely developed very positive working relationships with these employees, and they deserve to hear the circumstances of your departure directly from you. Doing so gives you an opportunity to express your appreciation and for them to share departing thoughts. This closure will ease anxiety on both sides about what is occurring. Continue to avoid making negative or disparaging comments about the circumstances of your departure or the governing body.

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TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

After a career spent taking care of your jurisdiction, now is the time to take care of yourself. It's natural to feel shame, guilt, anger, resentment, and embarrassment at being fired. Depression and feelings of low self-esteem or self-worth can easily overtake a person.

Most managers/administrators are terminated not because they lack the knowledge, skills, or abilities to do the job. They are terminated due to politics, personality differences, changes in elected officials, or changes in community priorities — all reasons usually beyond the control of the manager/administrator. Your overall health and well-being are now of paramount importance.

The ICMA handbook referenced at the top of this article has some suggestions:

- Return to old hobbies, interests, sporting activities or cultivate new ones.
- Develop routines or activities to get out of bed in the morning and outside your home.
- Undertake delayed household projects, especially ones needed to sell your home.
- Get plenty of physical exercise to help stay positive and think clearly.
- Maintain healthy eating and sleeping habits.
- Consider counseling if necessary; secure access to the EAP as part of your exit strategy.
- Stay engaged with reading material and stay updated on news events.
- Consider community education classes to pursue a hobby or new skill.
- Spend solitude time reflecting on your situation and planning next steps.
- Spend time at a local library and using free services.
- Stay connected with friends, relatives, and colleagues.
- Help your children and their school with volunteer activities.
- Seek opportunities to develop friendships outside of work.
- Consider short trips with family to get a break from the community.
- Stay involved with community service and civic clubs and organizations.
- Rely on your faith for personal strength and support.
- Build a relationship with someone you admire; seek a coach or mentor.
- Maintain professional development activities.

If the city/county has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), ask for continued access to this service. This can be a great resource for you and your family members to address personal and/or financial issues.

Finally, if the governing body is willing, you may want to negotiate outplacement services to assist with the job search — especially if it has been some time since you have looked for a job and especially if contemplating a career change.

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ACCEPT REFERENCES FROM PAST EMPLOYERS, FAVORABLE ELECTED OFFICIALS

Like any job application, references from past employers are important for securing a new position. For applicants who have recently experienced an involuntary separation, potential employers will likely put more weight on past references as they attempt to piece together the full picture of your employment history. Many separation votes of governing boards are not unanimous, and often a minority of votes support the manager/administrator.

If possible, secure a reference or letter of recommendation from those elected officials. Most elected officials understand these are volatile positions and departures occur for various reasons, such as politics or personality compatibility — not simply because of negligence, lack of skills, or incompetence. Involuntary terminations do not necessarily lead to career-ending outcomes.

EXPLORE CAREER OPTIONS

Experiencing a transition provides an opportunity to re-assess your career and possibly chart a new course. After years of heading up a local unit of government, one should ask themselves if they wish to continue this career with a different jurisdiction, explore possibilities with a related but different line of work, or undertake a completely different career. Take time to consider these big-picture questions because the events that follow are wholly-dependent upon what you decide. Here is an opportunity to perhaps develop different skill sets and introduce variety into the next chapter of your career.

Alternatively, you may decide your passion for top local government management remains, and you just need to find the right jurisdiction. This is the time to re-evaluate your career goals. Wherever your interest lies in light of your termination, it is beneficial to ask yourself these big-picture questions before your next job search.

Securing the next preferred job can take time — often upwards of many months, a year, or more — which can add to financial pressure. While searching for the ideal position, consider interim or part-time jobs while you continue your permanent position search. This helps broaden skills, encourage motivation, and stabilize personal finances. Alternatively, enrolling in community education courses also helps broaden skills.

PURSUE JOB SEARCH

Now that you have decided the direction of your career, the application process is similar to past application experiences. However, most employers now require applications be submitted electronically, and screening interviews are frequently done via video conferencing.

Your involuntary termination is sure to come up during an interview. Be prepared for this question by owning what happened. Be honest, truthful, and candid. If the interviewer has done their research, they likely know the answers to the questions and are anxious to see if your answers match. See this line of questioning as an advantage. The carefully-crafted media response you adhered to during departure will pay dividends. It gives you the opportunity to convey your side of the issue, describe the matter in a positive light, and correct any misinformation or negative rumors. If the interviewer does not bring it up, mention it yourself because the question will linger with the interviewer if the issue is not addressed.

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The interviewer will be aware of the media coverage from your last employment. Your response, through the initial media and now during an interview, reveals much about your character and integrity, so be gracious to your former governing body. Maintain the high road by refusing to speak ill of them, and convey appreciation to the former governing body for the opportunity to serve that jurisdiction.

There is a natural temptation to accept the first offer that comes along, even though it may not be the ideal opportunity. Despite the financial pressure to secure a replacement income, avoid jumping at the first offer if you can afford it. The personal and professional consequences of accepting the wrong job will hamper future efforts to secure the right one.

Experiencing an involuntary termination can be personally and professionally traumatic to a manager or administrator. But it does not have to be career-ending. The old adage, "Life is 10 percent what happens to you and 90 percent how you react to it," is very true. By accepting the reality of what has happened, taking care of yourself, and embracing the rare opportunity to hit the reset button on your career, a manager/administrator can survive and even thrive from the experience of once being involuntarily terminated. ◉

- Jeff Weldon, *Senior Advisor*

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