

SUCCESSION PLANNING FOR CITIES

General Overview

The term “succession planning” has appeared on most lists of city council goals and objectives for the past ten year. While the task of recruiting and retaining qualified and competent city employees may not have reached a “crisis,” it is getting close to that level in many cities, especially in the more rural parts of Iowa.

The hiring of qualified employees has become an issue for most city departments. The current political environment has made it difficult to hire police officers. The certification and licensing requirements has impacted cities’ ability to find water and wastewater operators. The pandemic and declining level of civility and mutual respect has made positions at city hall and the library less appealing than years past. Volunteer fire departments have experienced trouble finding volunteer fire fighter, especially people available to respond to calls during the 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM time period. City government is not alone when it comes to succession planning. Many private businesses are experiencing similar challenges.

Challenges of Succession Planning

The reasons for the difficulties related to succession planning vary by city, department, and location. Some of the more common causes include:

- Record number of “Baby Boomer” retirements.
- Fewer younger workers interested in a city career or job.
- The preference of younger workers to live within a short distance of a metro area.
- The challenges of meeting the needs of two career households.
- The lack of appeal of some city jobs, such as a law enforcement or wastewater treatment.
- Lower salaries or benefits, as compared to jobs in some parts of the private sector.

It is fairly easy to identify the reasons why success planning should be on everyone’s “radar,” but the more difficult task is how to respond. When it comes to succession planning, every city needs to expect it, plan for it and be ready to pay for it. There are some things that cities can do to plan for it.

Development of a Plan for the Future

The retention and training of current employees may be the single most important thing that cities can do for succession planning. The phrase “shop local” or “look within” could easily apply to succession planning. Cities need to identify potential candidates for future department head positions and then “prepare” those people to move up within the ranks. These employees will probably be less likely to leave the city for jobs in other areas of employment. Cities need to encourage their employees to obtain additional training or certifications and gradually assume more responsibilities. These employees may also need to be “rewarded” with higher compensation packages.

It may also be critical for elected officials and city administrators to review the current work environment and ask the basic question – “Is this a good place to work?” If city employees are not consulted or not treated with respect and appreciation, then it may be very difficult to retain good employees or recruit new employees. If an “internal audit” of the city’s overall culture reveals something that is less than civil, positive, and rewarding, then the city’s succession plan may not be successful.

Contracting For Services

There may be some city positions for which succession planning might be more difficult, such as wastewater operators, water operators, and police officers. In those cases, the city may have to seriously consider contracting for these services. There are a number of private companies that provide water and wastewater utility services through a contractual arrangement. Some cities contract with the county sheriff for law enforcement services. There are some smaller cities in Iowa that contract with nearby cities with larger population for various city services.

Making the Commitment

As in the Tom Cruise movie, "Jerry Maquire," the phrase "show me the money" may also apply to succession planning. An effective succession plan will cost time and money. Cities may need to budget for additional employee training, higher salaries, improved benefit packages, and better working conditions. While no city wants to increase utility user fees or property taxes, the consequences of failing to take action may be equally unacceptable or worse. The ultimate question might be – what's the alternative?

The last phrase that comes to mind with succession planning is that "time is of the essence." Perhaps, the worst thing a city could do would be to fail to recognize the need for succession planning and not address it. Succession planning is not an issue that City officials can ignore by "letting the next council deal with it." Cities need to face the reality that in order to be able to continue to provide municipal services to their citizens now and in the future, succession planning is essential for the recruitment and retention of a dependable and productive workforce.

Patrick Callahan
Callahan Municipal Consultants, LLC