

By Honna Rogers, City Manager, Signal Mountain



As my two-year city management internship comes to a close, I have realized how beneficial this program has been to me and others. During this time I have had the privilege to work with the cities of Cleveland, Athens, and East Ridge, the Town of Signal Mountain, the Athens Utility Board, and the Southeast Tennessee Development District (SETDD).

The program has equipped me to be an effective city manager. I feel very confident that I am leaving this internship with more experience in management than I would have gained by working in a city for two years.

There are many day to day functions that are not taught in a classroom. An important part of a city manager's job is to work with the council and keep them informed. It has been valuable for me to see the various types of interaction.

While the majority of my time was spent working on larger projects, I spent time with all types of employees to learn their jobs. This has given me a deep appreciation for how every person must work together to keep city functions running smoothly.

While working with the Athens Utility Board, I went on calls with the various departments (water, gas, wastewater, and electric) observing everything from the installation of new power lines to installing water lines and unstopping sewer lines.

A city manager must deal with county issues and my experience at SETDD helped me to understand the relationship between the two.

Grant funding can be critical for a city. I worked with the planning department on Community Development Block Grants and wrote a grant on my own, including supporting documents.

Beth Jones, SETDD Executive Director, stated: "I feel that this internship program with MTAS was invaluable not only for us, but also for Honna as she had the opportunity to work with a variety of municipalities across a broad range of issues and topics including: economic development (providing local incentives and building infrastructure); community development (recreation and housing rehab); solid waste planning; work force development and transportation issues. SETDD looks forward to future internship opportunities with MTAS."

According to Mitch Moore, City Manager of Athens, "This internship enabled Athens to conduct studies and obtain information that may not have been possible due to manpower constraints in the existing organization."

The types of projects I have worked on have been more complicated than are traditionally assigned to an "intern." An example is my work on East Ridge's budget. My assignment was to oversee the entire budget process. The city is divided into three divisions and I worked with each of these directors to formulate a proposed budget for Council. Once the budget was compiled, I realized that the city was faced with a large deficit. I proposed ways to decrease the expenditures and increase revenues.

I also worked on other complicated projects, such as a fire report. Janice Casteel, city manager of Cleveland, stated that "the fire report was critical to the City of Cleveland maintaining their Class 3 ISO rating." Joe Cate, past city manager of Cleveland, commented that the "quality of work produced by this internship was higher than any previous internship." He accredited this to the fact that this internship requires a graduate degree and, therefore, brings more qualifications to the job.

Lastly, I believe this internship program will benefit the field of city management. After two years of this type of intense training, the end result is a better city manager. Many current managers have commented to me that they wish they had been able to go through this experience.

Once in a city, a manager rarely has time to spend extended amounts of time in a single department. This internship allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of departments and experience their day-to-day happenings. I also had the advantage of experiencing different cities and seeing the various ways they handle similar situations.

This post-graduate experience allows me to carry different ideas into Signal Mountain as manager. This is experience I would not have if I had gone to work for a single city after graduate school. I also have been able to build a network of support throughout these organizations that I will be able to call upon with questions in the future.

Overall, this internship is a benefit to the intern, the cities and other entities, and the overall field of city management. Within a few years, many city managers will be retiring. The cities in Tennessee should work to assure that adequately trained professional managers are prepared to step into these positions. Doing so will benefit all the citizens of Tennessee.