

The Administrator

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Budget-conscious annual conferences

Association after association is making tough decisions to cut back on annual seminars, conferences and meetings this year, understanding that tough times call for tough decisions.

And while they may not be overtly following the lead of the N.C. City and County Management Association (NCCCMA), which streamlined its recent summer seminar in New Bern/Craven County, the NCCCMA can take pride in knowing that it was one of the first to tackle such a tough decision — and whether to even have an annual meeting or not.

(Some may recall that an unofficial vote was taken during the business meeting of the winter conference back in February, asking for a show of hands of who all in the room thought they would be able to attend the New Bern meeting. About half raised their hands.)

“Our Board of Directors is very concerned about the financial issues being faced by counties,” N.C. Association of County Commissioners (NCACC) Executive Director David F. Thompson told *CountyLines* recently. “As a result, they instructed staff to examine ways to reduce our registration fees for the Annual Conference. We want to do everything we can to make sure that county commissioners and managers can take advantage of this wonderful educational opportunity.”

The NCACC’s annual conference will be held August 27-30 at the Hickory Metro Convention Center. The conference’s early registration fee (which was good until July 27) was cut from \$225 in 2008 to \$169 this year, while the regular registration fee dropped from

\$250 last year to \$199 this year — a reduction of more than 20 percent.

The NCACC’s sister organization, the N.C. League of Municipalities (NCLM), has also tried to streamline its upcoming annual conference. (This year’s League conference will be held October 25-27 at the Greenville Convention Center.)

Among the ways the NCLM has been budget conscious: an exhibit hall lunch on Monday, October 28, and no closing luncheon on Tuesday, October 27.

The quick “hand vote” back in February shows that managers in particular appreciate the educational value in these types of conferences and meetings. NCLM Executive Director Ellis Hankins certainly hopes that is the case. Hankins recently wrote in *Southern City* that municipal officials are “probably in the stretch-and-squeeze mode — stretching every dollar of revenue and squeezing the last drop of value out of each expenditure. ... But in your efforts to cut back,” he warns, “remember that some investments are necessary to improve your most valuable assets — your staff and your leadership.”

Hankins acknowledges that reporters “sometimes jump on travel expenses ... writing in detail how much travel to a particular meeting costs and the price of every meal.” Those who go that route can make the mistake of knowing “the cost of everything, but nothing of the value.”

Both the NCACC and the NCLM conferences will offer pre-conference workshops designed to improve the efficiency of county

and municipal officials. In addition, the League’s conference is offering a one-on-one economic development consulting session for registered conference participants from towns with populations less than 5,000.

“We are talking about the value of training and professional development,” Hankins wrote. “We are talking about the value of learning and finding new and better ways to do what needs to be done. We are talking about the value of a well-trained workforce and well-trained leaders.

“Especially in tough financial times.”

Powell Bill program number change

Effective August 6, 2009, the telephone number for the Powell Bill Program will change. The new number is 919-715-2347. The remainder of the contact information for the program remains the same and is as follows:

Betsy G. Williams, Powell Bill Program Manager

NCDOT Office of Inspector General

1507 Mail Service Center

Raleigh, NC 27699-1507

919-715-2347 (phone)

919-715-5520 (fax)

bgwilliams@ncdot.gov

Compensation, severance, and bond issues: are we on Main Street or Wall Street?

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Scenario No. 1:
The city manager landed a new position with another community. The feelings of appreciation for all that he had done for the community during his 15-year tenure evaporated quickly when it was disclosed that his take-away compensation was nearly two times his annual salary. The final payout was for his unused vacation days, sick leave, executive pay, and other accrued benefits.

All the items had been duly laid out in an employment agreement negotiated when he was initially hired. No doubt the city's tight budget in the economic downturn, higher unemployment among the residents, and news of the recent excesses of Wall Street contributed to turning the spotlight on this situation.

Advice:

Comparisons with Wall Street compensation levels are not fair as the compensation provided to public service executives is nowhere near what managers in the higher levels of the pri-

vate sector earn. Those who dedicate their careers to public service have no expectation of earning such amounts. Lack of transparency, perceptions of greed, and questions about whose interests are being served can, however, play out on both Wall and Main streets.

The interests of the local government manager and the employing jurisdiction are separate and sometimes in conflict when the terms and conditions of employment are being negotiated. ICMA members have a responsibility to be reasonable, fair, and clear about what is being requested. Elected officials have an obligation to seek advice, from either internal resources or a third party, as they cost out compensation requests. This is one instance where a member's duty to the public's interest and duty to his or her own interest are not identical.

One challenge, of course, is that the governing body in place at the end of the agreement may not be the one that carried out the initial negotiations. Other unforeseen factors can make those initial negotiations now seem

unwise. After an employment agreement is negotiated, however, both parties have an ethical obligation to comply with the terms of the agreement. The public we serve will judge whether there was true value for the service provided.

Scenario No. 2:

The county manager's employment agreement states that she will receive an annual bonus as part of the county's compensation program. In the early years of her tenure, the county commission was supportive of her efforts, and the bonus amount was decided in a private conversation with the board chair. The county manager never asked for formal approval as the board chair told her that he was authorized to represent the wishes of the full commission.

Years went by and the process remained the same. When an entirely new group of commissioners was elected, commissioners were stunned to learn that the manager had received the largest bonus available every year of her tenure without formal approval by the commission.

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Calendar of Events

NCACC Annual Conference
August 27-30, 2009
Hickory Metro Convention,
Catawba County

ICMA Annual Conference
September 13-16, 2009
Montreal, Quebec, Canada
For information, go to
www.icma.org

NCLM Annual Conference
October 25-27, 2009
Greenville

ICMA Southeastern Summit
April 15-16, 2010
Courtyard Nashville Downtown
Nashville, Tenn.

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For comments or suggestions, please contact Matt Lail, editor, at (919) 715-3929, fax to (919) 733-9519, or mlail@nclm.org.



ICMA offers Economic Crisis E-Debit Card

From ICMA.org

The Economic Crisis E-Debit Card provides ICMA Full members in service to local government in the United States with a \$200 credit and Affiliate members in service to local government a \$100 credit to use toward their membership renewal, ICMA Annual Conference registration, or ICMA University events or programs.

This unique new benefit is part of ICMA's ongoing efforts to support members through these challenging economic times.

Eligible members will have two years to use their Economic Crisis E-Debit Card, until June 30, 2011. It's easy and simple to use this credit, no plastic card is involved. Just use the code "DEBITCARD."

What can the e-debit card be used toward? Membership dues renewals and professional development activities offered by ICMA:

- Dues renewals
- Membership reinstatements
- ICMA Annual Conference



- ICMA University workshops and events, such as the regional summits
- Emerging Leaders Development Program (ELDP)
- Leadership ICMA
- Webcasts
- Audio conferences

While the e-debit card is not applicable to first-time dues payment for new members, new members will get the information once they become a member as part of their welcome packet to use the e-debit card for other items listed above.

Will members receive a card in the (snail)

mail? No, these are virtual e-cards. Members will not receive anything by snail mail. Members will not receive an individual card or card number; everyone uses the same "DEBITCARD" code to redeem it.

How long are the cards good for? The cards are good for 2 years and have an expiration date of 6/30/2011.

Can a member use part of his or her debit card value now and part later? Yes, ICMA will keep track of the member's debit card value. Note that the debit card will redeem for up to the full value of the service or product purchased; any remaining value may be applied to future purchases.

Is the card retroactive? No, the e-debit card can not be used for previous transactions. Eligible members will have until 6/30/2011 to use their balance.

To check your e-debit card balance, visit <http://icma.org/debitcardbalance>.

Go to ICMA.org for more information about the E-Debit Card.

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Advice:

If the compensation standard, metric, or amount is not spelled out clearly in the employment agreement, always seek and obtain approval of the governing body before accepting a bonus or other compensation. Don't take a bonus that you have determined on your own or one that has not been formally approved.

Scenario No. 3:

During the most recent election cycle, one candidate ran on a platform of reducing government waste and improving services. His strategy for accomplishing this goal? Replace the city manager! The candidate won the election and appeared to have a majority on the council.

The manager had negotiated a modest sev-

erance in his initial agreement. The council president who lost his bid for reelection to this candidate strongly suspected the manager would be terminated after the new council took office, and he approached the manager with a proposal to increase his severance. The manager wondered whether a severance increase under these conditions would be ethical.

Advice:

Perceptions that we are feeding at the public trough are harmful to the profession. Even if the outgoing governing body agrees to change the severance provisions, will it appear to the public that it's just another golden parachute (albeit a small one) to the outgoing manager?

The best time to negotiate a reasonable severance provision that will provide some financial

security for you and your family is at the beginning of employment or during a normal contract renegotiation. Members are encouraged to use the ICMA Model Employment Agreement, which can be downloaded from the career resource center at jobs.icma.org.

Have you encountered an interesting challenge while negotiating compensation or benefits or collecting them? Please feel free to share your experience with ICMA by sending me an email at mperego@icma.org. All stories or comments will be considered confidential unless otherwise noted.

—Martha Perego, ICMA-CM
ICMA Ethics Director
Washington, D.C.
mperego@icma.org