

A Report on

# What Keeps Local Government Managers Up at Night:

## Results of Focus Groups in Northwest, South and Central Florida

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Submitted by:  
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## INTRODUCTION

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Ten years ago, a focus group discussion was held with some Florida local government managers at the Florida City and County Management Association's (FCCMA) Winter Institute. The purpose of the discussion was to understand the challenges faced by Florida local government managers. At that time, Robert Sheets, President of Government Services Group (GSG) sponsored this session by providing a facilitator (Dr. Honey Rand, Environmental PR Group) to manage the discussion. Subsequently, Dr. Rand summarized this discussion in a report that was submitted to FCCMA via the John Scott Dailey Florida Institute of Government (IOG) and the Center for Florida Local Government Excellence (CFLGE).

This year, the IOG, CFLGE, and GSG again collaborated to bring a diverse group of Florida local government managers together for a similar purpose by organizing a series of focus groups in three areas of Florida: Northwest Florida (Freeport), South Florida (Plantation), and Central Florida (Longwood). Dr. Rand again facilitated two of these sessions and CFLGE Executive Director Dr. Bob Lee and IOG Executive Director Jeff Hendry co-facilitated the other session.

Focus group participants were asked to discuss their greatest challenges today, and in the future, and what they needed to manage it all. None of the participants were provided questions or discussion points in advance. Rather, every effort was made to ensure open discussion among participants who have different levels of experience, different backgrounds and different resources.

All three sessions were recorded and used by Dr. Rand to prepare a summary for the IOG and CFLGE. A final version of that summary is herewith submitted to FCCMA with the expectation that FCCMA leaders will be able to utilize it to facilitate decisions on future training webinars and workshops, as well as use it to help guide advocacy efforts.

## **Northwest Florida**

Northwest Florida has been double- and triple-punched over the last 10 years. The Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the recession, hurricanes, and the ongoing fight with Georgia and Alabama over freshwater flows to Apalachicola Bay are among them.

Understandably, some of these issues weigh heavily in the thinking of managers. But, that's not all. Their jobs are complicated by the demands and actions of state and federal agencies and legislation.

The three main areas of concern in Northwest Florida include:

- Finances
- Internal Issues
- External Interference

These are necessarily broad areas of concern. The hope is to be able to recognize the similarities and differences among the communities and be able to identify categories and issues to meet needs and share solutions.

| <b>FINANCE</b>  | <b>INTERNAL</b>  | <b>EXTERNAL</b>   |
|---|--|---|
| Funding mental health and drug rehabilitation               | Disaster preparedness – counties more prepared than cities | Florida Legislature – 1% sales tax, other rules changes, erosion of home rule |
| Infrastructure development, broadband, roads, utilities     | Planning horizons (10-15 yrs.)                             | State Interference CRA, FDOT  |
| Infrastructure replacement                                  | Workforce development (pay, benefits, millennials)         | Circuit Court ticket processing   |
| Deferred maintenance catch-up (public buildings, utilities) | Loss of institutional knowledge                            | FEMA  |
| Public Private Partnerships (beaches)                       | Educating elected officials                                | Vacation Rentals By Owner VRBO  |
| Low millage = alternative funding                           | Social media communications                                | Litigation  |
|   | Community outreach/engagement                              |   |
|   | Diversification of police                                  |   |
|   | Medical Marijuana management                               |   |

Some of these issues are social, some economic, some political and others environmental. Some cover the same source of challenge (state government) but over different issues (interfering in local taxes or fees, limiting the ability of local governments to collect fees, etc.).

## THE ISSUES

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Even though finances have been categorized separately, funding the challenges that exist internally and externally are also at issue. Several managers expressed frustration that “Tallahassee” too frequently interferes with local efforts to generate or use funding. Specifically, local sales taxes, business licensing and community redevelopment funding.

Managers point out that it can take 10-15 years to properly plan, implement, and resolve community challenges. With “Tallahassee” changing the rules every year, managers feel that it’s virtually impossible to make headway.

Several managers shared stories of gaining community support for a local sales tax (one indicated support at 63 percent) only to have the legislature change the rules to require 66 percent support. Generally, there is a feeling that even if the local sales tax is put in place the legislature “attacks” it every year. Since these tax dollars provide a significant percentage of a small community’s revenue, removal or reduction of the local sales tax would likely have devastating consequences. Along those same lines, managers are challenged to properly tax VRBO’s (Vacation Rentals By Owner), Uber, and a variety of other services. Local governments do not license these businesses. At issue here, is that local governments are often dependent on the Clerk of the Court to collect payments. In some cases, this has been its own challenge. Clerks sometimes resist providing this service.

**They told us it couldn't be done. It was a tremendous effort by a number of different organizations or chambers and others, but we were able to pass that in our county...then the legislature changed everything.**

Likewise, there is frustration over Community Redevelopment Agency Funding. City and County managers feel a little like Charlie Brown when Lucy moves the football just as he’s about to kick it.

Last year, the Florida Legislature made a change that essentially allowed some beaches to become “private” when they had previously been open to the public. For communities that rely on tourism revenue, this had a significant impact. After the hurricane, the owners of these “private beaches” wanted financial support for re-nourishment projects. The only way to access those dollars is through local governments who insisted that easements be put in place for public access.

Even before the last hurricane, there were issues with aging infrastructure, in some communities significant. After the hurricane, there is even more demand for repair and replacement. The managers point out that it’s difficult to locate that sweet spot where you “take care of the old stuff, while building the new.” At the same time, the hurricane has resulted in water, wastewater and solid waste revenue reductions because the big complexes simply have no demand.

Another significant and growing expenditure is law enforcement and criminal justice. Some managers attribute this to a growing drug and mental health problem in their communities. Jails, some said, are temporary housing for those with mental health issues. Additional dollars for rehab and treatment simply aren't available.

There was general agreement that alternative funding sources are needed in both big and small communities. The preference is, however, to have sources that are locally controlled. There is a sense that Home Rule is under constant assault.

**What we found out was the city was not prepared...Not in any way, shape, or form were we prepared.**

There is also the issue of litigation. Local governments are being sued from inside (staff) and out (residents, others). While there was a lot of agreement about this, managers are unsure as to their options, other than respond to the suits. Several had examples of employees being caught with pornography on work computers who were terminated for cause and who are suing to get their jobs back. One had an example of a resident following a fire truck responding to an alarm...when the truck stopped, the vehicle rear-ended the truck and now the driver is suing the city. There were more examples.

Among the most difficult challenges for managers are the internal issues. Needing support from elected officials and the community and trying to bridge these occasionally different perspectives.

Managers agreed that the workplace is changing and unless government changes too, it will not be able to recruit the next generation of leaders: millennials. Government's model of OK pay with a solid benefits package just has little appeal to millennials. They are looking for something else. Their values and needs are perplexing to managers—even those close to their age.

Managers are concerned about the loss of experienced workers to retirement or to the private sector. The loss of knowledge coupled with the constraints of recruiting have left shortfalls not just in management but in water departments, drivers and a wide variety of other skills and professions.

The culture that has been established over decades: do more with less, has bottomed out for managers. They have done more with less. There is nothing left to do now but rebuild. In considering a new organizational chart, one manager realized that 18 people reported directly to him/her. Over time, staff reductions have eliminated so many positions that remaining managers are covering too many areas, too many people. "I spend my time settling squabbles, every day," the manager reported.

To that end, there was discussion about changing the “culture”. The question is, where and how to start? Elected officials struggle with investing in the long-term needs. They want to show what was accomplished during their term. Immediate gratification comes from installing sidewalks or opening parks. It does not come from replacing water or wastewater pipes. Elected officials may want new parks or libraries or sidewalks, but they don’t make the necessary connection between those things and the staff it takes to manage or maintain them. Some managers are undertaking an education process with their elected boards, knowing that even if they are successful in gaining support, they will have to do it all over again come election time.

It was shared that reconciling the planning horizon among the various governments is also difficult. Local governments may need to plan and invest as much as 10-15 years into the future. When they need to work with another agency, the planning timeframes may differ. For example, the Florida Department of Transportation may be planning on a 30-year horizon. Managers have to be concerned about roads failing today. And, even when they are able to scrape together funding for the road, they have seemingly arbitrary rules to deal with—you can build 100 feet, but not 150 feet—and that’s before the environmental regulations kick in.

Communication is a critical area of concern. One manager admired the local Sheriff’s approach—with deputies in every community service group (Kiwanis, Rotary, Lions, etc.). They make connections on a personal basis, getting out the word that needs to get out. It seems to work. Another manager pointed out that a weekly meet the manager meeting with coffee and donuts has had a significant effect in reducing the number and tone of the comments at commission meetings. Even so, there is significant misinformation in the public sphere. Some blame social media, while others blame traditional media. In both cases, managers lament the need to spend resources to fight, let alone get in front of an issue. Still, it’s on their minds and to-do lists.

**Getting back to pre-storm conditions really just puts us back where we were—already struggling—and then you add on a political factor, and how do you plan for going forward? Infrastructure before the storm, that was an issue... it's certainly now an issue after.**

**Communication in this social media environment is a problem. I think the government has a hard time keeping up. It seems 50 percent of the population has a negative mindset because we haven't got the right information out there first. Communication, public perception and engaging with residents is going to be a challenge in this environment.**

## FOR THE FUTURE

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Managers were asked, “if you could have something in the future, what would it be?”

If there was one stand out area it was having more regional meetings so that those who don’t know each other can develop relationships. The feeling is that while there is value at the state meetings, there is significantly more value in sharing challenges and solutions in a much more concise geographic area. They refer to this as “regional partnerships”. This is not a rank-ordered priorities list, but there was general agreement among panelists that they could use some help in these areas.

- Support of elected officials
- Move beyond doing more with less
- Citizen education and engagement: sharing a vision
- Understanding Millennials
- Encourage people to take care of their own problems
- Regional discussions among city/county leaders
- Do something about state interference in home rule
- Find new ways of doing things in the workplace to compete with the private sector
- Find ways to be more flexible

All of these provide ample opportunity for training, sharing and service development.

## **South Florida**

For the purpose of this report, issues and concerns raised by focus group participants have been categorized. However, these issues consistently crossover categorization. For example, climate change is an external issue, but there is a cost to make communities more resilient, and it's significant. Communication is a management issue, but it has a major social component...that is, the channel through which we communicate is one thing but the content of our communication, the messaging, is another.

Here are the major issues covered by category.

| SOCIAL                        | MANAGEMENT                                      | EXTERNAL ISSUES     |
|-------------------------------|---|---------------------|
| Civility                      | Union Demands                                   | Attack on Home Rule |
| Understanding Government      | Staff Recruitment and Retention                 | Social Media        |
| Lack of Trust and Credibility | The Changing Workplace                          | Lawsuits            |
| Gangs                         | Aging Infrastructure                            | Mass Violence       |
| Aging Population              | Managing Diversity                              | Climate Change      |
|                               | Financing Needs                                 |                     |
|                               | Regionality                                     |                     |
|                               | Performance Measurements                        |                     |
|                               | Communication (Community, Commission and Staff) |                     |
|                               | Procurement Processes                           |                     |

### **SOCIAL**

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This focus group has considerable concern about the lack of civility in public discourse. That includes the public addressing elected officials, elected officials addressing one another and addressing staff. While some point to the general political discourse today as setting the tone, this devolution has been many years in the making.

There is specific concern about the lack of understanding for an appreciation of government. Civics is no longer taught in school and hasn't been for many years. This lack of exposure leads to ignorance which is pernicious. Over time it has meant that people seeking and holding office have no real understanding of government structure and function. This coupled with what one respondent called "the Google Effect," means that managers, staff, including the board attorney, recommendations are not trusted. Leaders can sit at the dais and Google the items on the agenda to find a better solution or a place where their solution worked. Managers admit they are guilty of this as well when staff is making recommendations.

At two ends of the social spectrum are different issues: gangs and an aging population. As with the other issues, there are costs associated with both. Typically, aging issues are both cultural and economic. Many of the issues associated with these two concerns cannot be resolved at the local level. Still, ensuring appropriate housing inventory for aging residents can be accomplished through zoning and transitional housing. Moving from one type of housing to another, including assisted living, can be accomplished through zoning and incentives. These options, however, have an economic cost.

**And for 50 years, my commission voted 5-0 on everything. And all of a sudden, now we're seeing 3-2 splits. I see a distinctive change in the conversation and the tone of the conversation.**

With so much on the public agenda, managers find prioritizing more challenging than ever before, and making choices more difficult than ever.

## **EXTERNAL ISSUES**

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One consistent issue that affects local government's ability to fund projects and priorities is the persistent attack on home rule. Respondents had issue after issue—specifics—of the ways the Florida Legislature has taken funds and authority away from local governments. Sometimes they take both.

Some examples include:

- Unfunded mandates
- Vegetable gardens in the front yard
- Straws
- AIRBNB
- Business licensing receipts
- Communication services taxes
- Occupational licenses
- Scooters

Coupled with what is seen as interference at the state level is the reluctance of residents to pay for services. As one city manager said, “a cable bill gets raised \$5 per month and people complain, but they pay it. Raise taxes \$20 per year and you are taking food off the table.”

Social media is another major external concern. Managers feel that live streaming creates an atmosphere of reality TV, encouraging some citizens and elected officials to perform for the camera as much as address the issues.

Clearly this also relates to the social concerns of civility. Within the broader context, how do or how should local governments engage in social media? On the one hand, the failure to engage could be viewed as a failure—the absence of a factual or balancing retort to much of the emotion that is now prevalent on social media. On the other hand, engaging in the social media space is yet another expense. Respondents struggle with the return on investment, and don't know if the expense of social media engagement will have an appreciable effect on the discourse. The answer is, of course, a very local one based on the issues and the ability to consistently engage.

**But it's more the impact it's having on how our cities are run and decisions that are getting made and policies that are getting set that I find is going to get scary.**

Another concern is lawsuits. One participant shared an instance where a lawsuit went on for two years. Two others shared instances where an employee was found with pornography on a work website and when dismissed, sued to get reinstated. Local governments are sued by citizens, contractors, employees, non-profits and companies that want different policies or zoning or outcomes on a specific bidding process.

There may be some policies or processes to help manage frivolous or long-shot lawsuits. For example, some local governments have offered a stipend for companies to bid on large projects with the provision that accepting the stipend precludes them from suing the issuing local government. Others have created ordinances that require plaintiffs of cases dismissed or lost to pay all costs associated with the case—including staff attorneys.

Mass violence is something that keeps city managers up at night. It's not the capability of handling the horror on the ground...first responders are trained for that. Rather, it's the aftermath, the way people are feeling, the fear...how does a city manager help the community heal? "I keep wondering what I would do if I were the Mayor or Aurora, Colorado."

**The manager in today's society has almost a parochial responsibility to be able to lead a community through an incident of mass violence.**

This is a growing issue for police, fire, hospitals and cities. It's the gunman at a theater, shopping mall or school. It's the gas explosion. It's the chemical plant release. There are many dangers in the world today and, eventually, they end up in the hands and on the shoulders of managers.

Inland communities are affected by wind and rain and unusual temperatures. Florida's agricultural communities have to be as concerned about extended drought as they are about inundation. Coastal communities may have to abandon water supplies and other infrastructure to meet present and future demand, as well.

There is clean up after a major event. Debris removal, infrastructure replacement, service restoration: water, sewer, trash pick-up and more.

One city manager described sitting in the Emergency Operation Center waiting for a hurricane—a Category 5—that was heading straight for her community. Having lived through Hurricane Andrew, the manager was anticipating the results for this much smaller city. Fortunately, the hurricane fizzled before reaching them. That city manager may not be alone thinking about what could have happened, but how do city managers ensure that their cities and their residents are prepared for what may come and what may come after?

## MANAGEMENT

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Nearly always, management and funding are conflated. Today, more than ever, after years of doing more with less, managers are at the end of their ability to do so. Weighing heavily on managers is how to prioritize and fund today's needs while planning for the future. Aging infrastructure is of great concern—and it's not just water, though that is a priority.

Union contracts for police and firefighters, those vital first responders, make up a significant portion of virtually every city budget. Even so, these necessarily generous contracts sometimes contain hidden costs that rob communities of flexibility in their budgets. One manager said that going through the contract page by page revealed payments that were far above and beyond fair pay and retirement benefits.

This was shared with the council along with the budgeting cuts and choices they would have to make, and the manager was empowered to deny those costs. Immediately, the union declared an impasse and attempted to appeal to the council, which was prepared to respond.

**We're going to be getting to the point where we're spending millions and millions of dollars on nonsense over and above well paid employees with expensive benefits, such as pensions.**

**There are the effects of climate change just in a general sense and things that are going to be a little bit over the top from a recovery standpoint and how to deal with the community.**

Even so, another manager pointed out that many cities are merely confronted with another contract approved by another city of similar size and resources. “We need to work more closely together,” several said.

Managers need more flexibility in procurement. While they understand the essential need for accountability, they are seeking a means of procurement that will allow them to explore alternatives. For example, a company brings them an idea to improve water quality in a beloved local pond, but the manager is not permitted to sole-source the project. Being forced to take the lowest cost bid can sometimes be a detriment to long-term results.

One manager pointed out that an All-Star baseball player is considered elite if they bat .333. It was pointed out that means two out of three at bats the player does NOT get a hit. In local government management, a single failure can set back trust for years. This culture of perfection creates an environment in which there is no point to try, yet managers continue to try new things—forced by circumstances or funding or exasperation.

**The tool I wish I had right now is procurement codes that favor entrepreneurial activity. The whole public procurement process really stymies entrepreneurial activity.**

At least one manager suggested that having a performance measure dashboard would be helpful. While such tools exist, many are prohibitively expensive for small communities. Some managers suggested if there is little trust between staff and the elected board or the community, few people will be interested in a data-driven discussion about successes, much less failures.

The workplace is changing. Three areas that managers feel they need assistance include: managing diversity, recruiting and retaining talent.

Like the issue of civil discourse, several of the managers attribute the inability to recruit to the demise of civics training. Students aren’t exposed to the importance of civil service and decades of derogatory comments about bureaucrats have left a dearth in potential leaders and employees. If students are not exposed to civil service as a career option, they can’t imagine themselves as local government managers in the future. Moreover, they cannot possibly understand the value of public employment.

One participant said that sending the Human Resources staff to high schools to talk about local government and civil service is making a difference, but most agreed that it would be better to have civics curriculum restored.

Managers recognize that while communications won't solve their problems, more effective communications could improve some of their current issues. One manager pointed out that initiating "Mondays with the Manager" where residents can come for coffee, doughnuts and discussion has helped open lines of communication and provided opportunities to both educate the community and engage them. Another manager started a monthly newsletter and has noticed a change in tone of communications with residents.

**We need better programs or ways to get our messages out to the public to inform them of what we actually do—to appreciate the value, to recognize it better.**

Still, managers are frustrated that people don't know about the services available in the community—department by department—or appreciate the value of those services. Readers don't like it when library hours need to be cut, and parents are upset when ballfield use needs to be limited.

This issue goes beyond finding the tools and channels to communicate with the public. Managers want help figuring out how to communicate with new commissioners and councilmembers who have no government experience and don't know how government works.

In a changed workplace, how can managers effectively communicate with millennials and Gen Z? "They aren't motivated by money," noted one manager, "but they can't see the gratification of service either."

Finally, in looking for solutions to their challenges, managers are increasingly exploring regional relationships; moreover, it's not just roads, water and sewer. They are concerned about schools and other regional resources as well.

At the end of the focus group, participants were asked to determine a rank order of issues, a prioritization of sorts based on issues identified by the International City County Manager's Association. The issues are based on two reports: 19 on 19: Predictions on Local Government from 19 Experts; and partnered with Alliance on Innovation to prepare Big Things: The Next 20 Years in Local Government.

**How do we impact issues that are regional—that we don't necessarily have a direct impact on—but that have very local implications?**

First, they ranked the order of the issue, then among the issues identified as most important, they were asked to rank order those responses. As you can see, the managers had a wide-ranging discussion about the things they are confronted with every day and when forced to make choices, the vast majority focused on what could be largely labeled "social issues."

Overall, the managers would like more support determining what's coming in the future and what to invest in to be ready for it.

The table below outlines issues identified by ICMA. Managers were asked to rank order the priority of each issue, then based on the top choices, rank the most important issue. Each number represents a single vote. For example, 3 means three managers selected that as the most important issue.

| <b>INFRASTRUCTURE</b>                 | <b>Rank order by Subject</b> | <b>Rank Order Top Class</b> |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Technology Acquisition and Deployment |                              |                             |
| Solid Waste Management                |                              |                             |
| Disaster Recovery and Resilience      | 1                            |                             |
| Financing Infrastructure for Water    | 3                            | 1                           |
| Sustainability                        | 1                            |                             |
| Transportation                        | 2                            |                             |
| <b>MANAGEMENT</b>                     |                              |                             |
| Leadership                            | 2                            |                             |
| Performance Management                | 1                            |                             |
| Innovation                            | 2                            | 2                           |
| Organization Culture                  | 2                            | 2                           |
| Ethics                                |                              |                             |
| Financial Literacy                    |                              |                             |
| <b>SOCIAL ISSUES</b>                  |                              |                             |
| Equity and Inclusion                  | 5                            | 1                           |
| Immigration and Related Issues        | 1                            |                             |
| Opioid Epidemic                       | 1                            |                             |
| <b>ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT</b>           |                              |                             |
| Opportunity Zones                     | 1                            |                             |
| Developing a Smart Community          | 6                            | 1                           |

## Central Florida

As with the other groups, many of the issues expressed by the central Florida managers are linked. For example, concerns about financing and funding hinder planning and technology investments. Concerns about the many ways the legislature removes or redirects funding sources impacts total revenues. After decades of tax cutting and revenue diversion, managers are now concerned about the backlog of needs: infrastructure, staffing, resiliency, and recovery, which all require funding.

As one manager of a small community put it, “Some places are just one hurricane away from insolvency.”

The table below highlights the significant concerns raised by this group.

| Finance                              | Internal                           | External Issues          |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| The gap between revenue and expenses | Recruitment and Retention          | Legislative impacts      |
| Investments                          | Technology                         | Consolidation            |
| Drinking water                       | Planning                           | Collaboration            |
| Transportation                       | Malfeasance and unethical behavior | Homelessness and poverty |
|                                      |                                    | Rising waters            |

## FINANCE

For many communities, there is a significant and growing gap between available revenue and expenses. One city manager underscored this by pointing out a recently-received bill for beach renourishment--the cost: \$1 million. The manager has no way at this time of paying the bill.

Another manager pointed out that \$7 million less in taxes is collected annually than was collected in 2008, but the cost of Sheriff operations has increased by \$25 million since that time. At the same time, populations have continued to grow along with service demands.

Managers aren't just concerned about amenities; they are concerned about meeting their core mission. These concerns are not limited by the size or location of the community. This is a widespread management issue.

**We made cutbacks, particularly in our general funds, and we've never been able to staff back up to a level to handle the growth that occurs in our communities, and so, now, we've got 10 years of built-up capital and personnel needs that have been left unfunded.**

Under these circumstances, many counties are turning to half-penny or more sales taxes. Some have been very successful with residents voting over successive 10-year terms to pay.

Even when significant investments like a revitalized downtown or waterfront are approved and budgeted, managers have to anticipate lawsuits that can indefinitely delay a project and increase costs. It also delays the time when such a project can begin adding to economic development and community revenues.

One manager pointed out the property tax form of revenue generation is antiquated and cannot provide funds necessary to meet core missions. At the same time, alternative revenue has been taken or diverted or threatened year after year.

“It seems as if as soon as a new revenue stream is identified, the legislature moves to take it,” noted one participant.

Three significant investments weigh heavily on managers: technology, drinking water, and transportation.

These managers believe that drinking water will be a divisive and expensive need. Many agreed that while they know this, the public is mostly unaware of it. Managers cited the “water wars” of Tampa Bay, the recent Polk County Regional Water Cooperative establishment and their challenge of the Peace River Water Authority 50-year permit, and the Central Florida Water Initiative. Conflicts over water are just beginning they noted. All of the alternatives will be much more expensive. How will it be funded? Managers think the answers will come in the form of regional solutions.

Transportation is a similar issue. It’s disruptive and expensive. Failure to plan and execute suitable transportation alternatives leave commuters in gridlock, affects business recruitment, and negatively impacts the quality of life.

The absence or presence of technology infrastructure can affect education opportunities, business recruitment, medical services and a wide variety of other services and systems. Small communities simply do not have the funds to invest in technology infrastructure, though one manager said they have made libraries a central location to access WIFI and public computers. “We make computers available to kids for homework, so they have a safe place to work even if there’s no computer at home.”

## **INTERNAL**

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Recruitment and retention are a significant and growing concern. This isn’t limited to administrative staff. Special skills workers are also hard to recruit. “Just try to find a plans examiner,” said one manager. Another agreed, “...or a building inspector.” The fact is police, fire, water departments, and others are finding it increasingly challenging to find qualified employees.

Part of the problem is also external. “There’s no call to public service,” laments one manager. “There’s no inspiration.”

“And, when we can find them, we just need them to stay five years,” added another.

Still, local governments have implemented programs to try to cope with the challenge. One works with a local university, speaking to classes and recruiting near-graduates. “This gets us 1-2 per year,” the manager said, “which is 1-2 more than we would have had otherwise.”

**Law enforcement, fire, public works, parks and rec – they’re all screaming for help. We can’t recruit the way you might have been able to 10-20 years ago.**

There was both sense and consensus that starting when students are younger would do better. Even that has limitations. One manager shared this:

“We have a junior high civics day, where the students come in – eighth-graders – I teach them how to calculate the millage on a house. They’re given a house and a piece of paper, and they learn how to calculate their millage. They add all their houses up together, and of course, they don’t make enough money to support all the requests that their friends have made as the fire chief and the public works director, so they sit as a mock council, and they try to balance the budget. It’s very difficult, and you can see the wheels turning in them.

And then, we have another segment where we turn them into city planners. We give them a blank template of the town’s border and say, ‘You have to build a town, and these are some key components that you have to have in your town. Where are you going to put them? What’s it going look like?’ It’s inspiring.”

But, the manager notes, it’s just one day, and then they are gone. “How do you instill a love of public service into students?” another manager asked.

As challenging as the issue of technology infrastructure is, the managers noted that operational technology has also lagged. Outdated equipment and software leave local governments vulnerable to hacking and workers frustrated with slow, antiquated systems. Even when managers have staff that are excited and engaged and looking for technology to increase efficiency, there are obstacles, including limited IT support.

“I have this group that is innovative and proactive, and they found some software that would increase our efficiency,” said one manager. “They tried it and wanted to implement it, and it was a good idea.” The problem was there was no budget for fresh innovation that would make staff more efficient. It’s demoralizing.

It's the kind of thing that can affect retention.

"If you want to attract millennials; if you want a small city that is attractive from a quality of life perspective; if you want to attract new residents, jobs, and businesses; you must have technology infrastructure in place," observed one manager.

But it's more than that. All communities find it especially challenging to plan for improvements. The need is so great and the funding so limited. How do managers decide where to begin? They're not sure.

Within this uncertainty, managers say that unethical behavior, especially by elected officials, has become another issue to manage. The group was divided with some saying it's just not an issue while others find themselves keeping track of the things they know about, suspecting there is more than they know. Elected officials receive four hours of training in ethics, according to one manager. Another laughed that, clearly, it's not enough. Even so, managers didn't believe ethical issues and malfeasance are more prevalent today. It's just that when it is discovered, they are far more exposed.

"There are just certain people who behave that way," one manager noted.

**There are just certain people who behave this way. I don't think it's any worse or any better at this time. I think we just hear about it more because it's easier to find out with social media.**

## EXTERNAL

The theme of legislative impacts came up repeatedly during the focus group. Managers agreed that what keeps them up at night is thinking about what the Florida Legislature is doing to cities and counties. At first, they echoed what other managers have said about Home Rule and unfunded mandates, but this discussion moved beyond that, recognizing both as too vague for most people. The litany of service and business regulations and funds removed from cities and counties is a top issue for managers. From Uber to vacation rentals, from communications to scooters, the managers can recount the things that have already been affected and anticipate others that are contemplated or may be coming.

For example, one manager noted, medical marijuana has been a boom to Colorado, Washington, and California. But those states require redistribution to local governments. Florida has no such wealth redistribution law or ethic. "That means local government will have to deal with traffic accidents, monitoring, continued law enforcement, while the generated taxes stay in Tallahassee."

Managers are perplexed by what is perceived as legislative hostility. Some theorize that the legislature is Republican while Florida cities are mostly Democrat. Central Florida managers suspect partisanship is at work. This was also suggested by respondents in other groups. Another manager theorized that senior staff at the legislature have legacy issues from previous legislative challenges mounted by cities and counties.

The managers also noted that business leaders often transition to elected office. While those business leaders were active, effective and supportive locally, when they get to Tallahassee, things change. These business people know that CRAs are critical for redevelopment and economic development. Yet, the Florida Legislature, which is comprised mainly of lawyers and business people, have spent two years “trying to gut” them.

According to one city manager, it’s the structure. In the House, whatever the leadership wants, it prevails and members who fail to adhere to these ideals, get nothing done. The Senate is a little bit different, but even when managers can talk to them, there are other issues.

When communities enlist their business leaders to weigh in, this is problematic as well. “How do we know what’s real and what is dead on arrival,” asked one manager. “We get business leaders to weigh in, and they’re told, ‘It’s going nowhere’ so they feel like we’ve wasted their time.”

Still, managers see more collaboration and cooperation in the future. They cite the Polk Water Cooperative and the voluntary effort in Volusia County. They point out that often such collaborative efforts are driven by scarcity or pressure from agencies. Florida has been running out of cheap water for a long time. Communities are realizing the environmental cost of overworking water sources is a high price. The cost of developing new water supplies is significant, and grants are typically not available to single political bodies—funding is available for collaborations.

Collaboration and consolidation are not limited to water. Financial pressures are forcing cities and counties to think about fire, police, administration buildings and a wide array of other facilities and services.

“Water and sewer are more easily regionalized,” said one manager. “But fire and police, there is a specific pride of ownership that goes with these services.”

Water is a revenue-generator in many communities, so, really, consolidation is a bit harder than collaboration.

While some services and facilities can be regionalized, even if it’s difficult, the challenge of poverty and homelessness remains a local issue.

Local businesses demand that governments take steps to remove the persistently homeless from streets and camps.

**What's needed is wraparound case management involving all the churches and services that try to help. This provides a focused effort to help people successfully navigate.**

Respondents agree that because resources simply don’t exist for this challenge, the community needs to be involved. “There needs to be a place where they can go every day,” said one manager. “The challenge is to help those who want to be helped by preparing them for re-entry when they are ready.”

Generally, managers believe that the best way to handle this issue is with a central location where multiple and substantial services can be provided. The state has largely stepped away from the issue. While nonprofits and churches try to help with haircuts, feeding, and clothing, this is not a management solution.

One manager noted that such a service exists in their downtown area. While it’s a nonprofit and doesn’t pay taxes, they do support fire assessments and other community service fees.

One community has established a board to discuss resources and initiatives but admits that it is still a “put out the fire” kind of issue.

For coastal and economically distressed communities, homelessness is particularly challenging. Coastal communities have to manage the stigma of tents in areas where tourists tread while economically depressed areas can do little more than rely on churches and nonprofits to feed and provide clothes for the homeless.

Another issue unique to coastal communities is preparing for sea level rise. One manager said that insufficient resources exist to prepare. While contemplating preparation, managers are concerned about the next big hurricane. “A category 4 can wipe out any community,” said one participant, “but as we look at infrastructure replacement, we have to reprioritize those services most threatened by environmental devastation.”

How long until a local government decides dissolution is the only answer because there's no money to rebuild after a devastating event? asked one manager.

The following chart demonstrates the rank-order selection of priority issues. There was considerable consensus in this group.

The table below outlines issues identified by ICMA. Managers were asked to rank order the priority of each issue, then based on the top choices, rank the most important issue. Each number represents a single vote. For example, 3 means three managers selected that as the most important issue.

**What happens when some small city says, "Guess what? We want to become unincorporated. There's no point in us being around. We can't support what people want."**

| INFRASTRUCTURE                        | Rank order by Subject | Rank Order Top Class |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Technology Acquisition and Deployment | 1                     |                      |
| Solid Waste Management                |                       |                      |
| Disaster Recovery and Resilience      |                       |                      |
| Financing Infrastructure for Water    |                       |                      |
| Sustainability                        | 1                     |                      |
| Transportation                        | 4                     | 4                    |
| MANAGEMENT                            |                       |                      |
| Leadership                            | 4                     | 1                    |
| Performance Management                |                       |                      |
| Innovation                            | 1                     |                      |
| Organization Culture                  | 1                     |                      |
| Ethics                                |                       |                      |
| Financial Literacy                    |                       |                      |
| SOCIAL ISSUES                         |                       |                      |
| Equity and Inclusion                  | 5                     | 1                    |
| Immigration and Related Issues        | 5                     |                      |
| Opioid Epidemic                       | 1                     |                      |
| ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT                  |                       |                      |
| Opportunity Zones                     | 1                     |                      |
| Developing a Smart Community          | 5                     |                      |

## SUMMARY

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Ten years ago, when this kind of study was last completed, managers were in the midst of The Great Recession. They were worried about finances. They were worried about the cost of negotiated union agreements. They were seeking new ideas, new revenue streams and new management alternatives. At the time, one manager said that, “Normal will be redefined.” Ten years later, he was right in some ways, many of them not good. Managers are still concerned about the cost of negotiating union agreements. They are still worried about financing and with 10 additional years of flat or reduced taxes, those concerns have in some ways defined the “new normal”. At the time, managers expected that the reduced revenue would undermine the sense of entitlement and that has not happened. Ten years ago, taxes were cut because of the recession. Ten years later, and despite the economic recovery, tax cuts have become part of the culture—to the point that some managers are worried about meeting core mission requirements.

That’s enough to keep anyone up at night.

Unfortunately, in the intervening 10 years, new challenges have appeared, some old challenges have expanded, and the political climate has deteriorated. While the details of these concerns are recounted within the report, there are some key considerations.

- The Florida Legislature
- Funding today and tomorrow
- Identifying, recruiting and retaining qualified staff

While funding was a concern 10 years ago, it’s a different kind of concern today. Then, it seemed situational. Today, it seems culturally embedded. Ten years ago, managers knew episodic recession affected revenue. Today, they have to manage through a political and culture climate that has already demanded they do more with less. They believe they are at the point where they are just going to have to do less even though demand has grown.

Ten years ago, a handful of managers noted that Florida’s tax system is antiquated. It needs to be changed to reflect the changed demographic and the current needs. It was discussed this year with recognition of the challenges to such a proposition.

The activities of the Florida Legislature are painted with the broad brush of “attack on home rule” and is of considerable concern.

Then, there's climate change.

New and growing challenges faced by managers include questions about climate change including the threats of sea level rise and more and stronger storms. Attendant to that, they know that communities need to be more resilient and that the cost of rebuilding can be debilitating. Then there is FEMA. Grateful for support and funding, to some managers it feels like FEMA is playing a sad game of "gotcha" as if the governments weren't on the same team, serving the public.

Big and small communities, those land locked, and those coastal face issues related to climate change. Some worry about winds and water, others are worried about sea level rise and saltwater intrusion. No matter the specific issue, managers are concerned about how to prioritize the things that can be done and how to pay for it/them.

Nearly every manager is concerned about succession planning. The pressure to identify, recruit and retain qualified staff at a technical and professional level is more difficult than ever before. Managers are concerned that succession planning is nullified by the fact that people don't stay. Complicating the issue is the lack of respect for government service in general and (sometimes) the disrespect of staff by elected officials and the public.

This is a significant cultural change from 10 years ago.

It relates, however, to the challenge of the changing workplace. Millennials are a mystery, though there appears to be some hope from Generation Z that follows them. Still managers want to understand this changing workplace and the people that will work there.

These are challenging times. There is tremendous uncertainty.

While it's always challenging to manage a city or county, the profession has always attracted people who are problem solvers. That's as true today as it was 10 years ago.

## **WHAT MANAGERS WANT**

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- To develop the support of elected officials
- To move beyond doing more with less
- Citizen education and engagement: to develop a shared vision
- Help to understand Millennials and GenZ values
- Regional discussions among city/county leaders
- Do something about state interference in home rule
- Find new ways of doing things in the workplace to compete with the private sector
- Find ways to be more flexible in procurement and in the workplace
- Create opportunities for more regional collaboration
- Trend analysis: help prepare for the future
- Trend analysis: help determine smart investments
- Re-establish civics in middle and high school
- Seek partnerships with universities to develop apps for performance measurement and communication.
- Develop tools for communication that can be tailored to local governments
- Facilitate more coordination and cooperation between the Florida Association of Counties and Florida League of Cities

## TABLE OF ISSUES

| FINANCE   | INTERNAL  | EXTERNAL   | SOCIAL   |
|---|---|--|--|
| Infrastructure development, broadband, roads, utilities Infrastructure replacement (after disaster) Deferred maintenance catch-up (public buildings, utilities) | Workforce development (pay, benefits, millennials) The Changing Workplace/ Managing Diversity/ Recruitment and Retention /Loss of institutional knowledge | Florida Legislature – 1% sales tax, other rules change, erosion of home rule Legislative impacts /Attack on Home Rule / State Interference CRA, FDOT/ Vacation Rentals by Owner VRBO | Civility   |
| The gap between revenue and expenses / Financing Needs  | Technology  | FEMA   | Understanding Government / Educating elected officials |
| Public Private Partnerships (beaches)   | Communication (Community, Commission and Staff) Community outreach/engagement/ Social Media   | Consolidation/ Collaboration/ Regionality  | Lack of Trust and Credibility                          |
| Low millage = alternative funding   | Medical Marijuana management  | Social Media   | Malfeasance and unethical behavior                     |
| Drinking water  | Disaster preparedness – counties more prepared than cities  | Homelessness and poverty   | Aging Population                                       |
| Transportation  | Procurement Processes   | Climate Change / Rising waters   |  |
|   | Planning horizons (10-15 yrs.)  | Union Demands  |  |
| Issues Raised by One or Two Managers  |   |  |  |
| Funding mental health and drug rehabilitation   | Performance Measurements  | Circuit Court ticket processing  | Gangs  |
|   | Diversification of police   | Litigation   |  |
|   |   | Mass Violence  |  |

This section cross-tabulates, connects or combines the results of the three focus groups. While this section refers to large and small communities, inland and coastal, it does so only within the context of the specific issue addressed. The sections: Finance, Internal, External and Social are somewhat arbitrary to establish a framework for discussion purposes. Sections could be moved. For example, “issues with the legislature” are both a financial issue and an external issue. A decision was made to categorize it as Finance since some of the most egregious actions of the legislature fundamentally affect local government finances.

## **Finance**

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In all of the groups there was significant concern about legislative action that would continue to erode local government ability to regulate and collect fees from specific goods and services. The examples are plentiful with the latest being Vacation Rentals by Owner, Uber, CRAs (Community Redevelopment Agencies), tax changes and others. Some new proposals are making their way through the legislature while the focus groups were meeting. Lumped into the category of eroding “Home Rule,” local governments just don’t know what’s coming next.

Infrastructure is heavily on the minds of managers. They are concerned about developing new facilities, but they are equally concerned about deferred maintenance and infrastructure replacement after a hurricane or natural disaster. Disasters are of particular concern for smaller communities with low millage rates.

It’s not just infrastructure. It’s water. Managers are painfully aware that water sources are going to be harder to identify and develop—separate from the issue of infrastructure. It was in this context that many talked about the benefits of regionalization. Managers believed that roads, too, could be regionalized.

For most of the managers, there is insufficient funding to meet the need. They describe this as a “gap” between revenue and expenses. They want to identify funding alternatives. Some have described successful public/private partnerships and would like to explore these kinds of relationships further.

## **Internal**

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Workforce issues weigh heavily on the managers. Diversity. Recruitment. Succession Planning. Pay and Benefits. Managers explained that their people are “aging out,” but there are insufficient numbers of staff to replace them. Pay and benefits are one issue, but there are others.

The managers recognize that the workplace is changing. They are trying to figure out how, with the constraints of government, they can create a dynamic work environment.

Whether they represent small or large communities, managers are thinking about investments in technology. From upgrading software and computers in the workplace to creating Smart Cities, they recognize that without high speed, ubiquitous access to the Internet, they will not be able to attract businesses and new residents. Moreover, some are concerned that without access, education will be negatively affected.

Communication is a huge issue across the board. Some of this ties to the social concerns- lack of respect, lack of civility, no fundamental understanding of government and related issues. Even so, many want to establish effective lines of communication with elected officials, staff and the community. They are concerned about the effect of social media on civil discourse and torn between wanting to enter that space and participate, and yet concerned about costs and consequences. Some want to expand traditional ways of communication (direct emails, face-

to-face) while others believe the efficiency of social media may outweigh the risks. They are concerned about the cost to establish and maintain social media communication.

Managers are anticipating new challenges including managing medical marijuana proliferation. Police will do some of this work, but communities that drug test staff are concerned about how to ensure that staff is not high at work. Specific training is required for this and policies need to be developed so that expectations are clear to everyone. They are concerned about funding the cost of monitoring and expect that revenue that is generated from sales of marijuana will not be distributed in any fashion to local government.

Some managers said they needed to do a better job of preparing for natural disasters. They noted that counties are generally better prepared because they have to be.

Several managers indicated they would like to have an improved, flexible procurement process though one pointed out that the system is designed to be accountable, not efficient. Even so, managers are considering multiple blanket contracts in specific areas, but are looking for alternatives.

Finally, while recognizing their planning horizon is typically 10-15 years, they are struggling with meeting today's core mission while anticipating future needs. They want help to determine trends to help make decisions about investments for the future.

## **External**

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Foremost on manager's minds is legislative activity that undermines local authority and funding and places new unfunded mandates on them.

While FEMA was explicitly mentioned by only one group, this could well be an issue for others.

Along with cultivating public/private partnerships, managers are generally leaning toward consolidation, collaboration and developing regional initiatives to meet shared challenges. While pointing out that services like fire and police are a point of community pride, concerns about funding these services are significant. Union demands for ever-increasing benefits and pay are consuming a higher percentage of local government budgets. Such consolidations have to be carefully considered. Some communities are considering co-location with city/county administrations to save operational costs. All such negotiations are fraught and challenging. Even so, managers see cooperation as a significant tool in the future.

Homelessness and poverty are a growing issue. In larger communities, tent cities and persistent, visual homelessness create tension between business interests and local government. In smaller communities, poverty is an issue. Managers agreed that there is a segment of the homeless who have chosen homelessness as a lifestyle, though they are a minority.

Questions about climate change is a real concern for the groups. Some were grappling with the aftermath of a major hurricane, others dealing with rising seas and coastal inundation, some

stressed as they watch a hurricane threaten to blow through the community, then pass. Coastal, inland, large and small communities are contemplating how to become more resilient; they face choices about where to invest and are seeking advice and support to prioritize those investments.

## Social

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Civility is a concern. Managers point out that some newly elected officials have no respect for government, they do not trust staff, and many don't even understand the difference between a city manager form of government and strong mayor. Some citizens, too, seem to have lost their self-control, yelling at elected officials and staff.

The behavior happens in person, but it's also experienced online, exacerbating name calling and accusations of dishonesty.

A few managers indicated there have been issues with malfeasance and unethical behavior. Elected officials receive training when they first take office and receive training in Sunshine Laws, conflicts of interest and other relevant areas. However, generally, managers find, that more people who are called to public service today are not called to serve, but to self-serve. Some managers say the problem is no worse than before; it's just better publicized. Others think the problem is worse.

Managers are beginning to think about what their communities will need as the population ages. Different housing mix? More public transportation alternatives? Different communication tools? They are guessing and would like advice on the options.

## One-Off

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Several issues were raised by a single local government. While it may have fostered minimum discussion, there was agreement that it was a management issue, just not the one that "keeps me up at night."

While this relates to the issue of providing service to the homeless, paying for mental health and drug rehabilitation services is also a "demand" of the general population. Beyond medical marijuana, a couple of managers mentioned the opioid crisis. One manager indicated that the community jail has become a holding facility for the mentally ill and drug abusers. There are insufficient funds to provide real care and rehabilitation.

A smaller community manager indicated that having structured performance measures for their core mission would be helpful—particularly as an app. There is the STAR community system, but it is prohibitively expensive for smaller budgets. STAR has merged with the Green Building Council. It's a one-size-fits-all approach to planning, programming and prioritizing. It does nothing with funding solutions.

Like workforce diversification, the diversification of first responder forces is also a challenge. Managers worry that these public servants don't look like their communities—which can lead to

other issues.

One manager complained that the local circuit court stopped processing fees for tickets—a vital financial resource—and suggested the manager “find someone else to do that.”

Litigation is a growing issue. Unhappy developers, disgruntled employees, accidents, little league, environmental issues, and others are subject to lawsuits. They are expensive consuming not just financial resources, but they drain emotional and psychic resources. What, the managers wonder, can they do to reduce litigation and increase collaboration?

Managers think about mass violence—not in the sense that first responders surely must, but about how to help the community after and through a healing process. One or two managers mentioned gang activity as a significant challenge. Beyond the policing issue, this manager is concerned that poverty feeds gang recruitment.