

Meeting with Ron Smith, Iredell County Manager

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On Monday I visited Ron Smith, the Iredell County Manager, and Gary Page, the Rowan County Manager. I thanked both of them for paying their membership dues this fiscal year and for supporting the work of the School.

In July Ron Smith replaced Joel Mashburn, the long-time Iredell County Manager. One of his challenges is finding ways to encourage balanced growth across the county. The development of Mooresville at the southern end of the county has boomed, partly due to NASCAR-related businesses and because of its proximity to Lake Norman. For example, Mooresville will be the home of [America's Park, the largest youth baseball complex in the country](#). It will host week-long tournaments projected to bring 80,000 visitors to the community during the summer months. The development of Statesville at the northern end has suffered with the decline of tobacco and textiles. Statesville is working on streetscape improvements to its downtown, and the surrounding neighborhoods have some of the loveliest old homes in North Carolina. It also has [Mitchell Community College](#), a major asset located on a gorgeous campus only a few blocks from the central business district. One challenge to balanced growth may be the existence of two different and sometimes competing economic development commissions, one for Mooresville and one for Statesville.



Mitchell Community College

The budget challenges for Iredell County have been similar to those facing many other counties, which have included cuts of \$12 million over the last three years. County employees have not had raises during that period and two years ago they had one-week furloughs. Ron is encouraging his commissioners to take a more strategic approach with their decision-making. I mentioned our program on strategic public leadership and offered assistance if he and the commissioners were interested.

A growing theme in my meetings with managers has been their interest in exploring different ways of providing services. Does it make sense to contract out emergency management services? What about different kinds of transportation services that traditionally have been provided by the county? Is it possible to share a workplace safety officer with the city? These kinds of questions are not new, but my impression is that they are being explored more intensively as a result of the strain on local budgets. Anything we can do to help cities and counties think systematically about whether and how to contract or collaborate with other organizations will be timely and welcome. This trend may require us to ask questions in some cases about who are our clients. If a private employer or a nonprofit agency is carrying out public responsibilities, should we work with them as we would with public employees?

Ron is a huge fan of the School and talked about how helpful we have been throughout his career. He was here for a class just last Friday with David Ammons and Dale Roegnik—[Practical Analytic Techniques for Local Government](#). Ron said it “was as excellent as can be,” and he indicated that he already had talked with his finance director about how to use some of the tools. [I also have talked to a long-time city manager who attended the class and he was equally enthusiastic.] Ron also has been through our Emerging Leaders Program and he plans to attend [a regional offering of Budgetopolis](#) in January that will be hosted by David Saleeby, Manager for the Town of Troutman.

Ron is following a legendary manager in Iredell. I came away impressed by his intelligence and his thoughtful approach to addressing the many issues facing his county. I also loved his optimism about their future. I left thinking that the county is in good hands.



I'll blog soon about my meeting with Gary Page in Rowan County. Preview: A significant Civil War site was located in Salisbury. Can you identify it?