



Meetings with Managers: Durham County

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I met this afternoon with Mike Ruffin, the Durham County Manager. Mike is a graduate of our MPA Program and a thoughtful person. He managed in Cabarrus County and Person County before coming to Durham. I thanked him for paying Durham County's membership dues. I make it clear to each of the managers that I never take their dues for granted, and I especially did not assume that everyone would pay this year. I also mention the importance of the dues given our state budget cuts. Mike said that the School is critical to local governments in North Carolina and he was determined to continue supporting us through the membership dues. He offered one example of our value. Mike went through our basic administration course over twenty years ago and considers it the best educational experience of his career. He recently sent one of his employees to the course and was delighted when she had exactly the same reaction. The course is different and better than it was twenty years ago—and that consistent level of excellence is remarkable. Congratulations to Greg Allison, Brian Newport, and everyone who helps to plan and deliver the course.

Like all of the managers I've visited, Mike is much more worried about next fiscal year. Durham County managed to put together the budget for this fiscal year without making many cuts, but that will not be possible next fiscal year. Mike feels like managers across the state have "picked the low hanging fruit," and next year they may have to begin cutting services, laying off employees, and reducing benefits. He also believes that local governments must develop new ways of doing business because we will not return to the economic growth of the recent past. Mike worries that many local officials do not recognize the permanence of the economic changes and what it means for the management of cities and counties.



He would love for the School to help local officials think about how they operate more creatively in the future. There is a growing literature about promoting innovation and entrepreneurship, and it is not limited to the private sector. It is tempting to dismiss those concepts as empty clichés and simply the latest trend. I think that would be a mistake. Mike is not the first manager this year to ask for our help in thinking differently about government. I want to learn more about the principles of innovation and entrepreneurship, and especially how they might be applied in the public sector. This almost certainly would require us to move beyond our own comfort zone in thinking about government. But wouldn't it be cool if we could get our arms around these concepts and help North Carolina local governments become models of innovation for the nation? What do you think?