



Meetings with Managers: Wilmington

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Categories : [Local Government](#), [Meetings with Managers](#)

Date : August 25, 2009



Last Friday I had lunch with Sterling Cheatham, the City Manager for Wilmington. He has worked in a number of different local governments—Arlington County, VA; Greenville, SC; College Park, MD; Aiken, SC; and Norfolk, VA. He was admitted to our MPA Program but instead elected to attend American University because he received a better financial aid offer. His advisor at American? Carl Stenberg. I thanked Sterling for paying our membership dues, and he was passionate in saying that Wilmington “gets a great return on its investment.” He talked about the quality of our work, the depth of knowledge and resources, and the wonderful support.

The same bad estimate by the tax office that created problems for New Hanover County also affected Wilmington. For the city it meant a 10% shortfall in projected tax revenue after the budget had been adopted last fiscal year, and so they had to “batten down the hatches.” The steps they took to manage that financial challenge put them on a path for dealing with the downturn in the economy. They created a common template for evaluating services and then asked the council to establish priorities for making a 5%, 10%, or 15% budget reduction. What things would they stop doing under each scenario? Last November the council adopted the 10% cut scenario and they ended the fiscal year with a modest surplus—for the current fiscal year they implemented another 10% cut and likely will cut another 5%. In working with city employees, Sterling tried to give them much clearer information about the budget rather than technical overload as in past years. He told me that he felt they “crossed the language barrier.” He also encouraged them to submit budget suggestions on the web and they have responded. The agreed-upon goal for getting through the crisis has been no layoffs, no pay increases, and no tax increases. So far they have met that goal.

The most pressing issue mentioned by Sterling involves access to email under the public records law. He is under the impression that Wilmington “has been targeted” by their newspaper, along



with Charlotte and Durham, to increase the transparency of government records. They had reached an agreement with the local newspaper that most government email would be placed in a common folder for public review, but other emails identified as “private” in the subject line would not be made available. The newspaper is no longer happy with that arrangement and wants to see the “private” email. Sterling would love for us to provide Wilmington with some general training on public records and include a special focus on email. He also has followed the new state law that requires ethics training for governing board members and requires them to adopt an ethics code. He would like our help in developing the ethics code because he fears that otherwise they may end up with a statement “that everyone should do the right thing.” I told him that Fleming and Norma are working on ways to help local governments comply with the new law.

In talking about *Popular Government*, Sterling seemed pained and said that “if it went away he would really miss it.” Then he immediately said that he would eliminate the magazine and do something online. He finds *PG* less of an aid because it doesn’t give him enough practical, technical information. It gives him a general sense of what is going on in the state, but he says that he has other ways of getting that information. Sterling thinks we should get information out faster to public officials and that we should do more of it online.