



## Meetings with Western NC Managers

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Last week I traveled to Asheville for a dinner meeting with several city and county managers from western North Carolina. On my way to Asheville I stopped in Morganton and had lunch with their city manager, Sally Sandy. I won't try to recount the wide-ranging conversations, but let me hit a few of the highlights.

City of Morganton. I met Sally Sandy at her office in City Hall, which is located in a beautifully renovated hosiery mill in downtown Morganton. It reminded me of our building because the architect nicely integrated the old and the new. The building renovation was a public-private partnership and it includes a number of private condominiums. Morganton is struggling like lots of North Carolina communities because their economy was built around manufacturing (furniture and textiles) that is no longer thriving, at least not in this country. The city has invested in downtown businesses, including the restaurant where we ate lunch, and on the surface the situation looks reasonably good. Many of the downtown businesses are struggling to make it, however, and the city is trying to figure out its economic future. Morganton has been blessed with stable political leadership, but it is an enormous challenge for leaders who literally grew up in a different economy to make the transition to a new one. The community has assets that many do not have—like Western Piedmont Community College—and yet it still is an enormous struggle.

Buncombe County, Asheville, Waynesville, Black Mountain, Madison County. I had dinner later that evening with the managers from these local governments—hosted generously by Wanda Greene, the Buncombe County Manager. A couple of our MPA alumni joined us—Marcie Onieal (Black Mountain) and Jeff Richardson (Assistant Manager in Asheville).

The following messages were reinforced strongly in all of my conversations. It is a tough time for these local governments. This year the City of Morganton furloughed city employees for five days, and that likely will be true again next fiscal year. That translates into a 2% pay cut each year. They are not filling many vacant positions, but at the same time elected officials are unwilling to eliminate services. It means that lots of employees are doing more than one job. They value the ability to call on the School more than ever. Sally Sandy said that they are using our expertise as a way to fill some of those vacant positions. The managers see payment of our membership dues as a good investment. They recognize and appreciate the fact that we are providing more services than ever before—they are especially grateful for the webinars and the blogs.



It will be extremely difficult for most of them to send staff to Chapel Hill for training—their elected officials will not permit it. **The managers made a special plea for more regional training for the foreseeable future.** If we can come to them, or at least reasonably close to them, they will pay the registration fees and participate. Sally Sandy recently participated in training in Asheville on the fiscal condition analysis tool, which she described as the best training she had ever attended. If a course is held in Chapel Hill, however, the travel costs make it impossible for most of them to take part. These folks value the training and want it for themselves and their staff, but they need it closer to home until their financial picture improves.

It always is inspiring for me to meet with our clients in their communities. They are proud of their work and incredibly dedicated. They value you and the work you do for them.

I recognize that we are taking many programs on the road, and it is more time-consuming for us to provide regional training. Our partnership with Western Carolina University (managed by Fleming Bell) offers a vehicle for taking many of our programs to that part of the state, but the need for regional training is just as great in other parts of North Carolina. In thinking about your teaching for the near term, I hope you will seriously consider offering courses on a regional basis if traditionally they are available only in Chapel Hill—even if it means reducing the length of the course to make it possible. I know that many of you are doing exactly that, and I appreciate it. More importantly, our clients need our help to make it through this challenging time, and they will greatly appreciate it.



Sally Sandy



Wanda Greene



Jeff Richardson



Marcy Onieal