



## Tough Times Listening Tour

Author : Mike Smith

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A few months ago I created the Training for Tough Times Committee, which has been chaired by Frayda Bluestein. Other committee members are David Ammons, Rich Ducker, Gini Hamilton, Chris McLaughlin, Kelley O'Brien, Brad Volk, Donna Warner, and Gail Wilkins. The basic idea was to see if we could develop training that would help local governments deal with pressing issues caused by the current economic conditions. I also hoped that this training would be a potential source of much-needed additional revenue. The committee surveyed folks at the School about what they already were doing and what they might be interested in doing. The webinar on recent legislation was a direct outgrowth of interest expressed in the survey results.

A subcommittee composed of Gini Hamilton, Kelley O'Brien, and Donna Warner is working on two related ideas. The first is a series of webinars focused on dealing with tough economic times, which will be offered during winter and spring of 2010. The subcommittee hosted a brown-bag lunch meeting a few weeks ago to brainstorm ideas for the webinars. There was an interesting discussion about how to help public officials, especially elected board members, think about the long-term impact of their responses to this tough fiscal environment. The discussion generated a lot of good ideas and the subcommittee will pull together some proposed webinars and seek volunteers to develop them.

The second idea involves developing regional training on tough economic times that would be offered during Fall 2010. Rather than just come up with our own ideas about regional training topics, the subcommittee proposed conducting a series of listening tours to learn more about what local officials might want from the School. In addition to topics for the training, the listening sessions might yield information about how best to deliver the regional training—and they also might



help us identify ways to reach new regional audiences. This relates to the question of how we reach local officials who are not already “members of the club.”

Here's where I come into the picture. With help from the subcommittee members, I am conducting the listening tours. The first round of tours involves eight separate meetings with officials who are attending existing School events or events sponsored by our partners—like the League of Municipalities and the Association of County Commissioners. The second round will involve scheduling special opportunities to hear from other interested stakeholders, including some folks who are not our usual suspects. I am especially interested in hearing from officials from small towns who may not have used our services. I've only done two sessions so far. The first was with a diverse group of students attending Municipal and County Administration. The second was a small group of elected officials who were in Chapel Hill last week attending either Essentials of Municipal Government or the related LeaderShop session on understanding financial statements.

I begin the sessions by talking about our budget challenges (very, very briefly) and thanking them for their support, especially paying their membership dues. I ask them to describe how their local government has been affected by the economic downturn and what pressing challenges they are facing? What training could we provide to be helpful? The first two conversations have been informal and wide-ranging. I've been impressed by the thoughtfulness of the officials—they all really seem to enjoy being asked for their thoughts and ideas. The sessions have been a lot of fun.

It is premature to draw any conclusions this early in the process, but here are a few ideas that have emerged. One theme has to do with helping local officials think critically about how to achieve efficiencies through the effective consolidation of governmental services. This comes as no surprise, and they would love our help in learning more about best practices around consolidation. One person described the challenge of convincing their younger workers that they should do whatever work needs to be done during tough times. Those workers are more likely to respond that whatever needs to be done “isn't the job I applied for.” How do you manage those differences? One group expressed interest in learning more about how to break down silos within their organization and foster greater collaboration. Sound familiar? I have also heard more concerns about coming unionization and what it might mean for local governments. Elected officials expressed interest in finding ways to generate more local revenue, not surprisingly, and they want a better understanding of the fiscal relationship between state and local government.

This gives you a flavor for what I am hearing so far—no real surprises, and some areas where we might be able to help. I'll continue working with the Training for Tough Times Subcommittee to identify possible topics for regional training next year, and I'll keep you posted about what I hear at future listening sessions. I also will blog later about the possibility of a standing training committee, which I think might be a good idea.