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OF STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

SIXTH ANNUAL PENNSYLVANIA LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYMPOSIUM

The Role and Value of Professional Municipal Management in Pennsylvania

September 24, 2026

Local Government Commission of the Pennsylvania General Assembly

MODERATOR

Amy Farkas, Township Manager, Patton Township, Centre County

SPEAKERS

Nicole Beckett, Associate Director for Public Service
Robert B. & Helen S. Meyner Center for the Study of State and Local Government at Lafayette College

Nick Steiner, Assistant Township Manager, Upper Macungie Township, Lehigh County

Jonathan Altshul, Township Manager, Cheltenham Township, Montgomery County

THE THEMES THAT FRAME TODAY

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Opening — Amy Farkas, Moderator

- The number one job in public service and management:
  Leave the community better than you found it
- Roles & Responsibilities • Trust & Respect • Priorities • Vision & Goals • Communication • Expectations • Public Service
- The Manager as strategist: setting direction beyond the day-to-day, thinking past a single term or budget cycle
- The Manager as generalist: finance, law, engineering, HR, and diplomacy all at once, without being a specialist in any one





WELCOME & FRAMING THE CONVERSATION

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Opening — Amy Farkas, Moderator



What a Manager Brings to the Table

- Communication • Trust • A clear chain of command
  • Getting to know the people you serve with

Framing the Discussion

- Why this matters now: As administrators and long-time secretary-treasurers are retiring, and few are positioned to step into that skill set; polarization and other pressures have cooled interest in public service broadly
- We have municipal managers in pockets of Pennsylvania, and the role can vary by region of the Commonwealth
- Today: what a municipal manager does, how that role interacts with elected officials, and why it's crucial to the future of our communities

THE ROLE, BY CODE

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Secretary-Treasurer Perspective — Nicole Beckett, Speaker



The Statutory Floor

- Borough Code and Second-Class Township Code both set a statutory floor for the Secretary/Treasurer: recordkeeping, minutes, financial custody
- Everything else, the governing body defines and assigns



Every Municipality Builds It Differently

- Same title, same statutory floor, very different job depending on the municipality's size and operations
- Every role is unique, even with the same code underneath it











OUR PATHS ARE ALL UNIQUE
WE ALL SAY WE "FELL INTO THIS"

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Secretary-Treasurer Perspective — Nicole Beckett, Speaker

What I Was Taught

- In my first municipality, a retiring secretary-treasurer was clear about the role: the role is to listen, not to weigh in or provide an opinion
- Bound by the township code and the position description
- Needed to seek out resources and tools on my own

Carrying It Forward, Then Growing Into It

- Held that same discipline in my next role, but grew enough to offer options when asked, never the decision
- Stayed steady, stayed in my lane, and built trust along the way

The Hard Part of Becoming a Manager

- The shift from staying quiet to being expected to give opinions and recommendations
- A conscious, ongoing adjustment — and why promoting secretary-treasurers into manager roles deserves more attention

BECOMING THE MANAGER

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Secretary-Treasurer Perspective — Nicole Beckett, Speaker

The Manager, By Code

- Borough Code (§1142) and Second-Class Township Code (§1301): both make the Manager the chief administrative officer, responsible to the governing body as a whole
- Both codes draw the same line: the Board or Council legislates, the Manager is responsible for the day-to-day operations and efficient administration of the business of the municipality

The Typical Path

- Backgrounds vary widely, but a common thread runs underneath: a master's in public administration and hands-on local government experience
- Why that matters: a manager is expected to be the most prepared person in the room — resourceful and confident under pressure
- Know your resources and tools



SETTING THE SCENE & WALKING IN

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First-Time Manager's Story — Nick Steiner, Speaker

Setting the Scene

- A second-class township, three-member Board of Supervisors, “working supervisor” model
- An election that ran on ending that model — the opening for a professional Manager

Walking In Underprepared

- No local government background; arrived to no computer, no phone, no personnel policies
- Building trust with the Board, the community, and staff, all at once, as the Board's own former colleague

THE WORK OF THE TRANSITION

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First-Time Manager's Story — Nick Steiner, Speaker

Inheriting the Treasurer/Secretary Role

- One person carrying finance, payroll, HR, records, right-to-know, meeting prep
- What consolidating that exposed about the township's systemic gaps

The Defining Risk

- 2019: a 50% tax increase to fund a road program and hire a Public Works Director
- The political risk during a still-fragile transition, paused by COVID uncertainty

WHERE THINGS STAND NOW

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SUCCESS AND ONGOING EFFORTS

- Told the Board at the outset: five to ten years to change the culture
- Wins: Public Works Director hired, data-driven decisions, the “good ol' boy network” curbed
- Streamlined board meetings and internal processes, with agendas and meetings planned and structured in advance
- Throughline: “be a good steward of the taxpayers' dollar”



BENEFITS OF COUNCIL-MANAGER STRUCTURE

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Veteran Manager's Perspective — Jonathan Altshul, Speaker



- Manager as ship captain, takes orders from Council/Board
  - Manager does not set policy, only executes Council's priorities
- Insulates community and staff from political pendulums
- Political neutrality is not an option, it is the professional standard
- Ensures long-term vision for fiscal stewardship and capital project planning
- Being a Manager is a full-time job with no/minimal professional distractions or conflicts
- Can train elected and appointed officials on relevant state statutes, local ordinances and municipal policies
- Ensures staff communicates as one voice, with a consistent message to elected officials



CHALLENGES OF COUNCIL-MANAGER STRUCTURE

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- Managers need thick skin, as they are a convenient scapegoat
- Manager works at the pleasure of the Council/Board, but not necessarily the residents
- Residents may not understand that the Manager does not set policy
- Council/Board, especially new members, may not understand the Manager's role or expertise
- Manager is expected to be an attorney, engineer, construction manager, planner, accountant, policy analyst and diplomat



PENNSYLVANIA'S VARIANCE & WHAT TO WEIGH

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The Path Forward — Nicole Beckett, Speaker

Pennsylvania's Variance

- Varying operations including utility management, public power communities, heavy zoning and land-use demands, significant public safety obligations, quality-of-life amenities, smaller communities with a different operational scope
- Professional management doesn't look the same everywhere, and that matters
- No one-size-fits-all manager — location and fit matter across Pennsylvania's many different regions

What a Community Has to Weigh

- Readiness and organizational capacity: does the community have the budget, staffing structure, and systems to actually support the role, or would a manager be set up to fail from day one?

- Governing body culture and appetite for change: is the board or council prepared to hand day-to-day operations to staff and hold the policy line, or will old habits keep pulling them back into the weeds?

EVEN WHEN THE CODE IS CLEAR, THE LANES ARE CROSSED

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The Path Forward — Nicole Beckett, Speaker

◆ The statute paints the lanes clearly: the governing body legislates in one lane, the manager executes in the other lane

◆ In practice, both sides cross lanes constantly, even once a manager is appointed

◆ Not a foul on the system, just the ongoing discipline of staying in your own lane and continuing the conversation when the crossover occurs



THE HONEST CLOSE

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The Path Forward — Nicole Beckett, Speaker

- Professional management isn't the right fit for every municipality, but every community deserves the conversation
- The question for the room: if not a manager, who's carrying the complexity of your operations, and is that the right person in the right role?
- Why any of us do this work: PUBLIC SERVICE in the form of leaving the community better than you found it, using the best information available at that time



WITHOUT PROFESSIONAL MANAGEMENT

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The Path Forward — Nicole Beckett, Speaker

- Compliance deadlines and funding opportunities missed, simply because no one was watching for them
- Purchasing, hiring, and contracts driven by relationships instead of process
- Elected officials pulled into daily operations, with no time left to actually govern
- Residents and elected officials getting different answers depending on who they happen to reach, with no single, consistent voice speaking for the organization
- Institutional knowledge that walks out the door every time the one person who "always handled it" leaves
- Communities that fall further behind their professionally managed neighbors in the competition for grants, staff, and services

THE OPPORTUNITY AHEAD

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The Path Forward — Nicole Beckett, Speaker

Beyond the Gray Wave

- Retirement is not the only driver. Nearly 70% of local government officials report that political division is actively harming their organization, and professionals are leaving the field, not just retiring from it, over public scrutiny that didn't come with the job a generation ago
- The pipeline has not caught up: applications for local government roles dropped nearly a third during the sharpest years of the recent workforce exodus, and experienced candidates remain in short supply

What's Already Working Elsewhere

- North Carolina funds a fellowship through the University of North Carolina's School of Government that places recent graduates directly into paid local government management roles
- Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute of Government does for that state largely what the Meyner Center does here including training, research, and executive search, backed by decades of university investment
- Pennsylvania already has the foundation this kind of model needs

Where the Legislature Could Help

- Continued investment in manager training and clearer career ladders into the profession
- Ongoing dialogue between the legislature and the managers doing this work
- Sustained education on the complexity of local government, for the public and for those considering the field

BRINGING IT BACK

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Closing/Q&A — Amy Farkas, Moderator

Roles & Responsibilities • Trust & Respect • Priorities • Vision & Goals • Communication • Expectations • Public Service

The throughline: managers as strategists and generalists, holding all of this at once, in service of one goal: leaving the community better than they found it

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QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION