

What I Learned: An Insider's Guide to Improving Local Government

by James G. Kostaras AIA, AICP



Local government in America is in trouble, and I have some modest proposals to fix it. I also have a few scars and bruises to show for a 20-year career in municipal government as an architect and urban planner with the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) and later as executive director of the Somerville (Massachusetts) Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development. When government works efficiently to meet the aspirations of the citizens, it's an inspiring enterprise. But the coming fiscal crisis will break local government.

Writing in *Forbes*, Joel Kotkin says, "In the next two years, America's large cities will face the greatest existential crisis in a generation." Wall Street investors are in a panic. What happens when nervous investors in the \$3 trillion municipal-bond market decide that lending to cash-strapped local government is a risky bet? Smaller cities in Massachusetts are in triage mode as they struggle mightily to provide services in the face of budget cuts, staff reductions, and cuts in state aid—reducing the core functions of municipal government to police, fire, schools, and streets. More daunting are the unfunded pension obligations of municipal workers, exploding health-insurance costs, and the diminishing property-tax revenue due to a battered real-estate market.

Local government faces another critical crisis: most Americans don't trust government. "Politics have poisoned the well in terms of trust in government," according to Andrew Kohut, director of the nonpartisan Pew Research Center. Americans trust politicians about as much as they esteem Goldman Sachs bankers. The pathetically low voter turnout in local elections reflects the sentiments of cynical, disillusioned citizens.

To improve local government, we must see it for what it really is and how it actually functions. I started my career in local government at the BRA not long after returning from Morocco, where I had served as a Peace Corps architect building rudimentary health clinics and community buildings. In the Peace Corps, I was a pragmatic idealist; after 20 years in municipal government, I turned into a somewhat idealistic pragmatist. Machiavelli, in *The Prince*, justified duplicity as a means to power; nevertheless, he told truth to power as he saw it, emphasizing realism—or *realpolitik*—over idealism. A realist sees local government as a collection of competing interests. Government, like other organizations, is made up of individuals striving to pursue their own conflicting self-interests.

Solving local government's most critical fiscal problems is beyond my pay grade. What follows, however, are some modest "fixes" to local government.

Don't trust government.

In my experience, local government runs better and is more efficient in delivering services when it's not trusted—provided that politicians and their operatives understand and appreciate that they are not trusted. So don't trust government, and let politicians and public-sector managers know this. Keep them on their toes. You will actually be empowering the best-intentioned people in government to do the right thing and putting less-than-well-intentioned people on notice that they are being scrutinized. I confess that, even when I was *in* government, I often didn't trust government—or have full confidence that elected officials and political operatives would use the apparatus of government to serve the interests of average citizens rather than those of politically connected interests. I felt like an embedded insurgent waging guerrilla war to advance the public interest. I learned early in my career that you can't serve the public interest unless you're willing and prepared to be fired from your government job. A skeptical citizenry can give aid and comfort to the insurgents.

Reconfigure local government around a strategic mission.

Political geographer and urban planner Edward Soja argues that: "Of all the sectors of contemporary life, government and forms of governance have probably changed least. This has made it increasingly difficult to respond democratically and effectively to the many problems arising from the enormous concentration of population, wealth, and power in a small number of megacity regions." Local government needs to be reconceptualized from time to time. The organizational chart of departments within municipal government should reflect a strategic mission. From my insider's point of view, municipal government can become calcified with departments and staff organized to solve yesterday's problems. A critical fix is to engender a bias for rethinking and rearranging the organizational structure of government around clear missions.

When I was the executive director of Somerville's Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development, I believed our mission required a different kind of org chart. Somerville typifies, in microcosm, the

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OPPOSITE
Photo: Darin Mickey

A realist sees local government as a collection of competing interests.

problems and challenges of big cities: new gentrification resulting in displacement of low-income families, a large low-income population, a community of immigrants that constitutes almost half the city's population, large swaths of environmentally degraded former industrial properties, and decades of economic disinvestment. With the support and encouragement of Somerville mayor Joe Curtatone, I organized a 65-person, multi-operational development agency by merging several unlikely city departments—zoning, the building department, historic preservation, parks, economic development, and housing—into an integrated development agency and gave it a new name, the Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development (with an emphasis on “strategic”). We structured the agency around the execution of a clear mission: to attract investment into the city and plan for the redevelopment of a large area of vacant and underused industrial land. Consolidating city functions into one department—not unlike the 1960s Boston

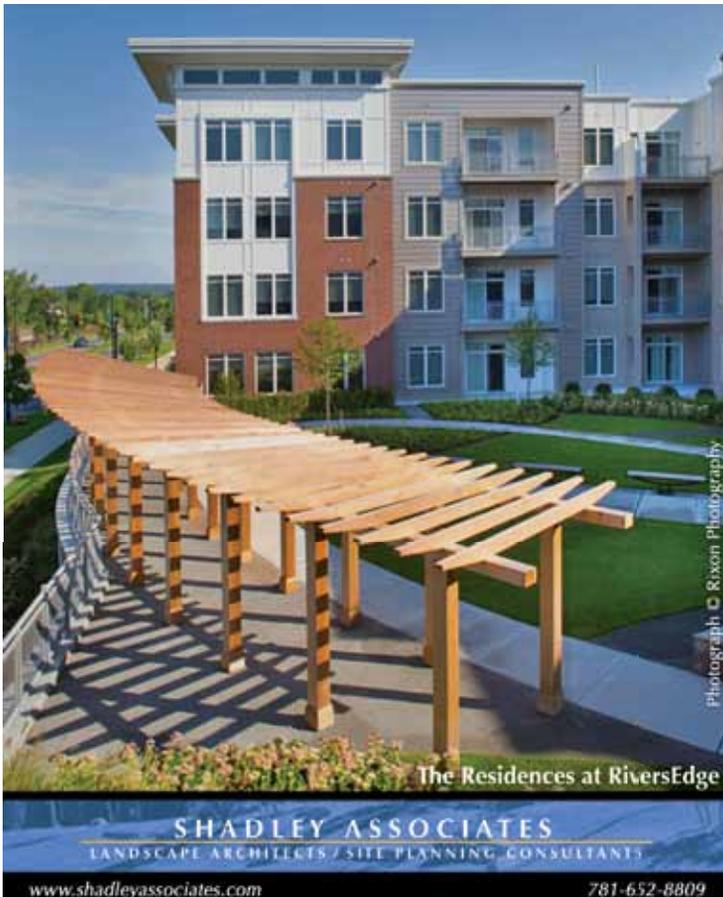
Redevelopment Authority—has proven to be a good platform from which to revitalize Somerville's economy.

Let people in local government be more entrepreneurial.

Create a culture in government that will attract creative, committed, and idealistic people. Value and encourage a bias for entrepreneurship and experimentation in government workers to counter the political pressures, entrenched parochial interests, and other disincentives.

Leadership sets the tone. My former boss, Mayor Curtatone, urged us to “be abnormal,” signaling that he valued people with provocative ideas that challenged convention. In 2005, Somerville was our laboratory for innovation and experimentation in urban policy.

I took a page from the cutting edge of the private sector and ran the Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development like a design firm or an Internet start-up—a radical departure in ossified municipal government. I recruited talented, young professionals to join me in planning and launching a bold strategy to transform and “reinvent” the city. I gave them room to be creative and take initiative and the flexibility to make their own schedules—another departure from the 9-to-5 (and not a minute more)



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punch-the-clock culture in local government. We got results. In less than three years, my staff launched a major economic-development strategy, attracted more than \$900 million in anticipated public and private investment, and secured the state's commitment to build the Green Line transit extension and transit-oriented development (TOD) corridor through Somerville. In the process, we positioned Somerville in metropolitan Boston's globalizing economy as a place for innovation and creative industries by advancing provocative architecture and urban design. My staff re-envisioned Somerville and advanced the idea that architecture and urban design could be leveraged as a means of attracting new investment and dynamic development.

Architects should be mayors.

This is not ego-stroking for design professionals. It is a clarion call. Architects (as well as landscape architects, urban designers, and planners) should be mayors of cities, elected members of city councils and boards of aldermen, and chairs of elected planning boards. In light of the coming crisis, local government will require the precise competencies that architects offer. The electorate, worn down by the current nasty, divisive political gamesmanship, is yearning for positive inspiration

and will demand it in the future. Architects know how to inspire people. There are precedents for architects serving as successful and transformative mayors. Jaime Lerner, an architect and former mayor of Curitiba, Brazil, launched a revolution in city building. Today, Curitiba is a model of sustainable 21st-century urban planning recognized by UN-HABITAT and UNESCO.

Imagine if members of the Boston Society of Architects (BSA) were mayors of cities in Massachusetts. With the resources and the political power afforded by government, BSA architects could advance the impressive civic-minded BSA initiatives over the years, such as *The Civic Initiative for Smart Growth*. My recommendation to architects and associated professionals: fundraise, form PACs, press the flesh on a campaign trail, and run for local office.

Even in crisis, local government is where democracy is most direct and tangible in the average person's everyday life: educating kids, making the streets safe and clean, approving new zoning, issuing building permits. Crisis brings out creativity and builds resilience—provided creative government workers are allowed to be entrepreneurial and are not stymied by narrow political interests. Therein lies the problem—but also the opportunity—in local government. ■

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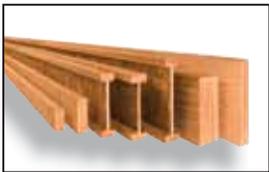
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