



By Lisa Donovan

“We are more alike,
my friends, than we
are unlike.”

– Maya Angelou

Just like people, local governments are often more similar than they are different. Their leaders face comparable challenges on a daily basis. They all need to keep their communities safe and inviting, attract businesses, plow streets, and provide a variety of other services. But that doesn't mean they handle those challenges in the same way. That's where Mayors' Exchange Day comes into the mix. This annual event offers mayors and other community officials an opportunity to get together for frank, engaging conversations where they can share ideas and feel connected to a broader network of colleagues.

“When you get to know mayors throughout the state, they become almost like a board of directors,” said Lee Kilbourn, mayor of Auburn and president of the Michigan Association of Mayors. “You start to feel comfortable with them and you can call them up and ask for advice. These relationships lay the foundation for helping us be better at our jobs.”

At last year's MAM Summer Workshop, Kilbourn and Ithaca Mayor Tim Palmer decided to team up for a Mayors' Exchange event. To make it easy on their budgets and busy calendars, they planned a one-day event.

“Probably the most beneficial thing is that I have a long-time friend in Lee Kilbourn now,” said Palmer. “It's nice to have someone who has ‘chewed the same dirt’ as you and been down the same road.”

The day began at Auburn City Hall, where Palmer and his team had an opportunity to meet Auburn staff and tour a variety of facilities including the DPW, fire station, and library. Next up was lunch, where both cities talked about some of the common problems they face. Then it was time for Palmer to play host in Ithaca for the afternoon. The itinerary included City Hall, the library, and some manufacturing companies as well as a few of Ithaca's community jewels—like the playscape and football stadium. After dinner and more conversation, the Auburn delegation was on their way home by 6:00 p.m.

“As mayor and council, we're often putting out fires,” said Palmer. “It's nice to have a day when you're talking about your issues and brainstorming and having a good time.”

Long-Standing Tradition

About 29 years ago, MAM created Mayors' Exchange Day in celebration of Michigan Week, which occurs in mid-May. The event was designed as an opportunity for members to explore and celebrate other Michigan communities. The success of the exchanges can be seen in the fact that some communities have participated almost every year since its inception.

Utica is one such place. Former Mayor Jacqueline Noonan and her staff exchanged with other cities virtually every year since she took office in 1988. In every community, they learned new things. In Muskegon Heights, they got the idea for a bike patrol. Grand Blanc's senior housing inspired Utica to build a \$3 million senior housing center. And in Monroe and Lapeer, they gathered lots of ideas on DDA activities, façade improvement, farmers markets, and working out issues with the media.

As the event's name implies, the exchange is meant to be a two-way street. Noonan was always mindful of putting her city's best foot forward and providing a rewarding experience for the visiting community.

“As a teacher, I felt strongly that when you test, you essentially learn twice. Mayors' Exchange was similar,” said Noonan. “Me and my department heads and council had to look at what we do right, what we wanted to show off, and how we could involve the community. Getting ready for Mayors' Exchange was a self-evaluation.”

Finding the Perfect Match

Blissfield has also been an eager participant in the program. The village generally uses MAM's match service to find their exchange city. Members who register for the service specify the distance they're willing to travel and the types of programs and projects they'd like to learn about. Then they're paired with a community with similar interests. Over the years, the Blissfield delegation has been matched with cities from Constantine and Mottville to Brooklyn and Dundee.

The first year Blissfield participated, they did a one-day exchange. In subsequent years, they've planned two-day exchanges so that everyone who wants to join in can do so. In addition to the mayor, the list often includes councilmembers, administrator, clerk, police chief, DDA director, and library director.

“We really enjoy doing Mayors' Exchange,” said Blissfield Village Administrator James Wonacott. “We learn how someone else sees things and make new contacts. At municipal functions, we look for those people and talk and pal around with them.”

And Blissfield is a good host on the flip side. “We have a go-to group of locations that we show off, tailored somewhat



1. Local officials from Middleville and Fremont visit Tom Otto's Turkey Farm 2. A city tour is part of Mayors' Exchange Day in Utica 3. Middleville and Hastings officials check out unique transportation 4. Middleville President Charlie Pullen and former Hastings Mayor Frank Campbell 5. Former Utica Mayor Jacqueline Noonan was always pleased to host fellow officials

to what the visiting community is interested in," said Wonacott. They're especially proud of the award-winning Blissfield Environmental Life Lab at the elementary school.

Side Benefits

In today's cash-strapped environment, cities may hesitate to get involved in Mayors' Exchange Day because of the potential cost. There are ways around that. In Hastings, they call on their service clubs for help. Often the Exchange Club or Rotary Club will sponsor the luncheon. In return, they have a chance to promote their club's activities to a broader audience.

The Village of Middleville gets another aspect of the community involved: the schools. Several years ago on an exchange with Mattawan, the Middleville team was invited to a high school government class, where students were encouraged to ask questions. During last year's exchange with Hastings, Middleville Village President Charlie Pullen introduced that idea into his own community. The school was thrilled with the opportunity, and so was former Hastings Mayor Frank Campbell. In fact, he was invited back to speak at the school on Veterans Day. Middleville officials now go into the high school twice a year to work with the government class.

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"The ideas that come out of Mayors' Exchange are phenomenal," said Pullen. "It's a great tool to have as a village president."

Campbell couldn't agree more. "The whole state gets together twice a year at the League's Capital Conference and Convention, but people really remember you if you've done a Mayors' Exchange with them," said Campbell. "I think the exchange is one of the greatest things local government can do."

To learn more about Mayors' Exchange Day, visit michiganmayors.org.

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