

Fall Interview with: Michael (Mike) Morgan, Weaverville Town Manager
Conducted by: Robin Smathers & Heather Wolfe, L.A. Fall Interview Team
Date: December 20, 2007

Introduction:

On the afternoon of December 20, we interviewed Weaverville Town Manager, Mike Morgan, in the conference room of the Weaverville Town Hall. Our team selected Mike because Heather is a native of Weaverville and Robin has served the town schools as an elementary school music educator for 28 years. Heather is also one of Robin's former music students, so there was a natural affinity to Weaverville and its leadership.

Mike Morgan began his career directing WNC regional emergency medical services. He then traveled to Charlotte to spend 15 years building the same services in that area, eventually returning to serve Weaverville as town manager for 17 years. Mike began our congenial conversation expressing his pride in the town's fiscal accomplishments, consistently receiving highest awards from the U.S.-Canadian Government Finance Officers Association (GOFA) for its budgets and annual reports for the past ten years. Weaverville is the smallest municipality to receive this prestigious honor. Mike gave us copies of both the current, award-winning budget and annual report as reference materials for our interview summary.

How are decisions made in Weaverville?

Mike referred us to page 16 of the Annual Report, which displays an organizational flow chart of the "chain of command" on Weaverville. The town citizens elect a mayor and five town council members, which in turn appoint a town manager. Serving at the pleasure of the town council, the town manager then supervises the public works director, police chief, and fire chief, as well as the finance officer, tax collector, zoning officer, clerks and receptionists. In the reverse direction, specific citizen issues brought to the attention of the staff within various departments are then reported to the department head/chief who then conveys these issues and proposed resolutions to the town manager. Mike then communicates these issues to the town council for discussion during regularly scheduled planning workshops. The town council then votes "yea or nay" on such proposals at public town meetings.

What are the best examples of successful collaboration in town activities?

A basic example of town teamwork occurs every year on the third Sunday in May, when various town departments collaborate to hold the annual Weaverville Arbor Day Celebration at Lake Louise. Since 1991, Weaverville is proud to have been recognized as a Tree City. The Tree City USA® program, sponsored by The Arbor Day Foundation in cooperation with the USDA Forest Service and the National Association of State Foresters, provides direction, technical assistance, and national recognition for urban and community forestry programs.

In advance of the event, Mike and Mayor Bett Stroud cooperate with the Tree Board to coordinate a beautification contest between residential homeowners, as well as poster and poetry contests for local school children; they also ensure the acquisition of award plaques and award checks for the various contest winners. In addition, the mayor contacts the elementary school music teacher and the middle school band director requesting student musical performances at the event.

Interview conducted for use by Leadership Asheville. Do not reuse without permission.



On the day of the event, the town manager, with assistance from the fire and police departments, prepares the equipment and facilities at the lake for the celebration. Emergency medical services are on-hand, should they be needed. The mayor, with assistance from the town manager, acts as Master of Ceremony. A Forest Service representative awards a Tree City USA flag to the town... the efforts of the Tree Board are recognized...students perform and recite...awards are given...and approximately 200 or more Weaverville citizens enjoy this special, annual tradition by Lake Louise, a popular town recreation site.

What steps has Weaverville taken to institutionalize collaborative problem solving?

Mike felt that mutual aid between emergency services providers is probably one of the best examples of institutionalized problem solving. Formal agreements are intact for emergency services (fire, rescue, police, medical) to provide mutual aid between local municipalities, within the state, and even at the national level, should a large-scale disaster occur. Local fire & medical departments, such as Reems Creek, Woodfin, Barnardsville, and French Broad, train together to achieve a shared level of expertise. They provide reciprocal coverage during the funerals of department members as well as mutual aid during larger emergency situations. Mike was also one of the key players in enacting the Amber Alert program in our state.

Do the media help or hurt Weaverville's/greater Asheville's problem solving?

As expected, Mike chuckled at this question. At the time Heather and Robin selected Mike Morgan, he was very visible on television segments in a different public role: as media spokesperson for the Asheville Red Cross concerning a former employee's embezzlement charges. Mike said the Red Cross officials decided to take an aggressive, full-disclosure stance toward the local media by being very forthcoming of all details of the scandal and its subsequent handling by Red Cross officials.

In regards to town matters, the progress -or lack thereof- of the somewhat controversial Northridge Commons shopping plaza has more recently made the news. Mike said rampant rumors have questioned the participation of major retail chains (Wal-Mart & Lowe's) in the construction and even the definite completion of the plaza, due to a lack of any activity at the site in several weeks. Actually, Mike said, the true story is often less fascinating than the rumors and speculation! Due to our region's extended drought and lack of rain delays, grading for the project is two months ahead of schedule. However, Progress Energy, responsible for the next phase of construction, is unable to step-up their portion two months earlier... thus the seeming lack of progress when everything is actually right on target.

How does Weaverville develop future citizen leaders? Are young people engaged in the work of the community?

Succession planning is something Mike considers seriously as Weaverville faces the issue of replacing aging staff, to ensure a seamless transition and consistency of services. Future town council candidates and members are often groomed for future leadership through active service on various town boards. North Buncombe High School offers many leadership opportunities for young citizens. Most notably, Brad Hughes, an active member of the high school's FFA (Future Farmers of America), has served as state vice-president for this organization known for teaching public-speaking and leadership skills. [Brad has an even closer leadership mentor... his grandmother, Dottie Sherrill, has been a long-serving member of the

Interview conducted for use by Leadership Asheville. Do not reuse without permission.



town council.] Including youth in literary, artistic, and musical activities related to town celebrations/commemorations also assists in fostering that vital community connection that encourages both participation and potential leadership in town activities.

What are the major problems/issues facing Weaverville?

Mike acknowledged that, As with many western North Carolina municipalities, Weaverville faces issues of planning for, controlling, and regulating growth in this attractive mountain community... trying to maintain its special “Main Street, USA” flavor, while providing opportunities for its citizens. He also conceded that increased property values attributed to the demand/desirability of relocating/retiring in this region have placed somewhat of a tax burden on “native” residents. Tax revaluation only occurs every four years, with an average increase in property value of 10-11% per year. The “Catch 22” issue: that which makes our community so desirable to others and ourselves is also what makes it difficult to afford to remain here. Mike also commented that many “outsiders” occasionally have difficulty adjusting to Weaverville’s system of town government; many come from areas utilizing the “town meeting” form of decision-making as opposed to a representative system.

Another challenge facing Weaverville’s fire department is the issue of “rolling stock”... replacing aging fire equipment. A standard fire truck costs approximately \$600,000 while a ladder truck may cost \$1,100,000. With total *ad valorem* taxes amounting to only \$1,811,049 for the year ending in June 2006, it is easy to see what a burden one fire truck may be to a town.

Closing:

Closing remarks by Mike highlighted the many positive aspects of Weaverville life. Two local industries supply local jobs and nationally-recognized goods: *Sonopress* is a major manufacturer of country music discs and has even been (quietly) visited by Bill Gates; *AB Emblem* has a history of producing insignias and emblems for NASA uniforms. Due to two outstanding water sources, including a fairly new water plant constructed around 1997, Weaverville never needed to impose water restrictions during the recent drought. In the years since that water plant, town construction has included a new town hall, a new public works facility and a new fire station, all of which fit beautifully and architecturally in this priceless, Main-Street-USA town called Weaverville. (Heather and Robin might be a bit partial, though!)

Interview conducted for use by Leadership Asheville. Do not reuse without permission.

