CCMF
CALIFORNIA
City Management Foundation

RETIRED & INSPIRED



Gary Millinan

Former city manager of South Gate

Retired & Inspired: Gary Milliman

A FULFILLING CAREER MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Gary Milliman is an ICMA Life Member and 2019 recipient of the ICMA Award for Excellence in Honor of Mark Keane. He served for 50 years in California and Oregon cities.

During my senior year in high school where my focus was architectural drafting while serving on the student newspaper, our drafting teacher came back from a workshop at Hewlett Packard and told us "If you have a talent or passion for another profession, switch now because design drafting will be automated within the next few years and you won't have a job."

So, I switched to journalism as my focus in college and, unknowingly, it was great preparation for a career in public service.

First, I was fortunate to have two experienced newspaper practitioners as primary instructors. As a newspaper reporter, I could no longer be an introvert. I was forced to ask questions and accurately record the answers...to do the research and understand the full story...and to both interpret and communicate the information into writing that could be understood by a ninth grader.

During undergraduate school I served as editor of the student newspaper. I also worked part time as a copyboy at a daily newspaper and the graveyard shift "deskman" at a regional wire service in Los Angeles. Part of my job at "the desk" was to call every police department in LA County overnight to check on criminal activity or anything else that might be of interest. And I worked field assignments covering a major civil disturbance in East Los Angeles and the Chatsworth-Malibu wildfire in 1970.

College graduation was soon followed by securing part and full-time jobs at community newspapers as a reporter and editor. My work was covering local news...which included attending and reporting on City Council meetings and community events. I came to know several City Managers, Police Chiefs and numerous Mayors and Councilmembers in southeast Los Angeles County, including the cities of Maywood, Bell, Bell Gardens, Cudahy, Huntington Park, Commerce, Lynwood, South Gate and Vernon.

Some of the stories I wrote resulted in positive change, including a story about a wheelchair-bound man who took the bus to a social security appointment several miles from his home, but who was stranded when the bus drivers on his planned return trip refused to take his wheelchair on board. This story generated widespread attention to how the need for disability accommodation and Bell City Councilor Jay Price, who served on the transit district board, picked up the cause that resulted in a sea change in how nation's largest bus system accommodated the disabled.

I had contributed to making a difference. It felt good.

After serving about 18 months as Editor of the Bell Gardens Review, the City announced that it was forming a redevelopment agency and was going to enact its first-ever property tax. They created a public information assistant position and the Mayor and City Manager encouraged me to apply. The job paid $100 more a month that I was earning at the newspaper and included health insurance. My wife was pregnant. I made the change.

Over the course of the next six years my job duties became varied and responsibilities grew. That feeling of making a difference in people's lives also became more frequent. I said "yes" to every new assignment. In addition to implementing a public information program, my duties were expanded to writing the prospectus for the City's first-ever bond sale and travelling to New York City to meet with the bond rating agencies.

Department managers frequented my door with staff reports they had written containing recommendations to the City Council...reports that had been reviewed by the City Manager, who had told them to "take that down to Gary, he will re-write it for you to make it more understandable and effective."

The assignments kept coming. Managing the federally-funded job training program which added over 100 new employees. Grant writing for parks, transit, public safety and senior services. Managing construction and a major redevelopment project. Serving as an acting department manager during vacancies...and as acting City Manager twice. Managing financial services, code enforcement, purchasing and emergency services. I enjoyed my job and the sense of accomplishment it brought.

Along the way I went back to school during evenings, weekends and vacations to secure my MPA from USC. My focus was in emergency management, which came in very handy in the years ahead.

When I was "passed over" for the City Manager position the second time, I decided it was time to move on. I was interviewed by several LA and Orange County cities, but the offers didn't come. What became obvious to me is that the southern California cities were only hiring people who had already been a City Manager somewhere else. So that became my career advancement strategy...get "the top job" somewhere else in California, and come back in a few years.

So I interviewed and was offered jobs across rural California, eventually accepting the position of City Manager in Cotati, a small town in Sonoma County adjacent to Sonoma State University...and highly influenced by the counterculture movement of the mid-70's. Home of several small club entertainment venues like The Inn of the Beginning that drew internationally recognized performers. Too many unique Cotati stories to share here, but it was overall was a

great learning experience. I served there for 18 months...the longest-tenured City Manager in the City's history at the time.

A liability insurance cost and availability crisis affecting cities nationwide occurred during my Cotati tenure. Sonoma City Manager Frank James organized a regional group of city managers and, after completing our research, we made presentations to the City Council's of six cities resulting in the formation of the Redwood Empire Municipal Insurance Fund...the first municipal insurance self-funding/pooling venture in the world. We received the ICMA Management Innovation Award for this effort in 1979. Working intergovernmentally became a major part of my playbook for solving problems going forward.

It was while serving in Cotati that I became aware of FEMA and its individual assistance program for disaster victims. I joined the cadre of itinerate FEMA employees who travelled to disaster areas to evaluate the needs of disaster victims and get them registered for assistance. This became an 18-year side occupation that took me to locations across the country and Puerto Rico. I managed disaster assistance centers at the Presidio following the Loma Prieta earthquake and other events including the Oakland Hills Fire, Northridge and Cape Mendocino Earthquakes. It was all about serving people in need and meeting the challenge of putting a multi-agency response together in a very short amount of time.

Once again, I fell back on my experience of working under the pressure of a newspaper deadline to succeed in this effort.

At age 29 with a wife and two young kids I found home for the next 20 years in the California coastal town of Fort Bragg. During my tenure there the community transitioned from a resource-based to a tourism-based economy. There were many challenges with the eventual collapse of the timber and fishing industries, but plenty of opportunities as well...with being innovative being chief among those opportunities.

Working closely with the City Council, hosting community strategic planning meetings, becoming engaged in regional affairs and establishing partnerships with other units of government and the private/non-profit sectors we together went on a journey to exercise the functions of government in creative ways to achieve community goals. It was an opportunity to be opportunistic, and we took full advantage of it.

The City Council in Fort Bragg wanted me to be the face of City leadership...the guy carrying the ball and tenaciously pursuing an aggressive agenda. One such move was the annexation of some 800 acres of land along the shorefront and the extension of infrastructure that led to the construction of 1,000 new motel units, a community college satellite campus, a shopping center and coastal access amenities.

My weekly report to the City Council became a weekly report to the community, published in the local newspaper as "Inside City Hall" coupled with weekly appearances on two radio call-in shows. I participated in numerous public events, from serving as a cook at the annual Salmon BBQ to leading community cleanup campaigns. I took every opportunity to interact with community members to promote the City's agenda and hear their concerns.

My management style included engaging employees in discussing what the City Council's strategic plan was and how they were an important part in helping the City achieve its goals. I went on police ridealongs, visited public works job sites, rode along with the street sweeper and conducted briefings/listening sessions at department meetings and lunch breaks. I personally funded an annual employee recognition lunch. Every employee and every volunteer received a "THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE" memento at Christmas time, which I personally purchased for them.

After a few years in Fort Bragg, thoughts of returning to So Cal dimmed to zero.

It was a good 17-year run when an urgent matter came upon the community that compelled my attention. A major player in the tourism economy in Fort Bragg and in Willits was and is the California Western Railroad (CWR), aka "The Skunk Train." In 1996 CWR was operating daily passenger and mail service, and weekly freight service, along a 40-mile route through the Redwood forest between Willits and Fort Bragg. CWR was among several shortline railroads owned by Kyle Railways and was the pride and joy of its principal owner, Willis Kyle. I worked closely with CWR as their main depot was in downtown Fort Bragg.

Upon Kyle's death, the new majority owners decided to pursue abandonment of the railroad as maintenance costs were high and revenue was flat. Abandonment meant selling off all of the railroad assets and closing the line. Operating vintage rolling stock on 100-year-old track through mountainous terrain was not making the desired return on investment.

After my proposal for an inrtergovernmental agreement between the cities of Fort Bragg and Willits, and Mendocino County to acquire the railroad did not gain favor, I approached the CWR owners about organizing a local private or non-profit group to purchase the line. They gave me 90 days to come up with the cash and secure all state and federal regulatory approvals to consummate the sale.

I and 12 other local investors...primarily business owners and railroad employees...each contributed $25-100,000 and we worked our way through the process to acquire the railroad and secure all operating licenses within the prescribed time. In August 1996, I became the uncompensated President of CWR, and a month later I resigned from serving as City Manager to become the CWR Chief Executive Officer.

The story is long, but we sold the railroad three years later. With satisfaction, the Skunk is still operating today.

Legislative advocacy and pursuing project funding through the legislative process was always an essential part of my role as a City Manager. While serving as President of CWR, I joined the Board of Directors of the California Shortline Railroad Association, where I served as Chair of the Legislative Committee. I enjoyed the work. So when it can time to return to public service, I looked for opportunities in legislative affairs.

I joined the staff of the League of California Cities as their Southern California Director in 2000. The position had been vacant for almost two years and a new League Executive Director wanted to reenergize the Leagues presence in southern California. The job was part legislative analysis/advocacy and part member service. Over a period of three years, I visited and attended at least one City Council meeting of every city in the 13-county southern California region. While "showing the League flag" during these visits, I also listened to local officials to gain an understanding of their legislative priority issues and their needs for training, and facilitated their more active involvement in League affairs.

After six months on the job I met with League management with my recommendations. As a result, three Sacramento-based League legislative analyst positions were reallocated to So Cal and membership service/development was added to their assignments. About a year later, the League's Grassroots Network program emerged where the League added another 15 or so "Regional Representatives" who were posted around the state and whose job assignments included analysis, advocacy, elected official training, partnership development and promoting participation in the League. Another opportunity to launch a "never been done before" venture which put to use all of the knowledge and skills I had now acquired through my work in city management and business. Communication, ethics, leadership, tenacity, transparency and focus on achieving the goal.

Serving with the League also provided me the continuing opportunity to serve with FEMA. And, to serve as a Governor's appointee to the California Emergency Council, and as Chair of the Emergency Preparedness Commission for the Cities and County of Los Angeles. Building more partnerships; guiding more funding to local government.

Continuously increasing my resource base was a valuable outcome of expanding my involvement to regional and statewide affairs. It would come in handy in the next phase of my career.

And then, there was South Gate.

When I was growing up in southeast Los Angeles, South Gate was perhaps the most fiscally, economically and politically stable communities in the region. Once home to large

manufacturing plants like General Motors, Firestone Tire and US Steel, filled with tidy working-class housing, good schools, excellent city services and sporting conservative state/federal legislative representatives...it is now 25 years later. In 2003 South Gate had become a largely second-generation immigrant community, whose population had become dense, whose 50's vintage shopping district was in decline, major employers gone and with a City government that was suffering from mismanagement and corruption.

As Executive Director of the L.A. County Division of the League, I attended several packed-house City Council meetings during the lead-up of the 2003 recall election that swept a new Council majority into office.

The day after the recall, I received a call from the presumptive new Mayor, Hector de la Toree. "Help us find an interim City Manager" was his request; starting...tomorrow. The reform Council was unified. They were getting ready to "clean house" as soon as the election results were certified.

I had helped cities find interim managers before. So I called all of the "usual suspects." When I reported back to the Mayor that there were no takers, he asked me to fill in for "a few days" until they "got on their feet." League Executive Director Chris McKenzie agreed to "lend" me to the City for four weeks...which became six weeks.

During that time I worked with the City Council and the new City Attorney to develop an immediate course of action, which I documented later in Western City Magazine. We were within three weeks of not making payroll.

The Council met almost daily for 5-8 hours, taking actions to reverse and terminate lucrative contracts improperly entered into by the previous administration and initiating litigation to recover some $39 million in mis-spent funds. I terminated five of the seven department managers and reinstated their predecessors or experienced professionals. I terminated the operation of an entire off-budget department with 160 employees and rooted-out other employees who were identified as a part of the corrupt scheme.

We finally found a retired City Manager who was willing to take on the assignment for six months, and I returned to the League staff, but stayed in touch with South Gate as an advisor. As the City Council was preparing to recruit for a new permanent City Manager, I received another call from Mayor de la Toree...inviting me to come back for the permanent assignment. And I did.

This was the most challenging and rewarding experience of my life. I became emersed in all things South Gate. I was a part of a nine-member litigation team pursuing misappropriated funds recovery, conducting forensic audits, terminating "no cut contracts" granted to

department managers, working with prosecutors to bring former employees and contractors to justice.

We developed short and long-term fiscal recovery plans; renegotiated union contracts, refinanced debt; and conducted General Plan workshops adopting the theme "The NEW City of South Gate" meshing organizational change, community pride and land use planning. We secured passage of a one-cent Sales Tax to fund police services. I went on ride alongs, lunched with employees, attended dozens of neighborhood gatherings.

My theme was "ethics first." I promoted an ethical Counjcil-Manager system at every possible venue. My action plan was to promote the City to its citizens; tell them what we are doing and how we will make people proud to be South Gate residents again. Promoite the City to employees, to other regional political players, insurance companies, investors.

We developed and implemented a plan to acquire (via purchase option), assemble and clear a 30 acre industrial site for a new shopping center. Through an RFP process, we selected a development partner and entered an ROI share agreement. We closed the purchase of the property for $30 million and sold it to the developer for $33 million on the same day..

Communicate. Promote. Advocate for ethical government and ethical personal conduct. Be professional. Lead by example. Celebrate accomplishments. Be tenacious. Be innovative. Be transparent.

Space limits telling the whole story of South Gate here. In the end, we were successful.

A fulfilling professional experience. But had my wife been anyone but Carolyn, I am sure our marriage would not have survived. I was rarely home, often having weekend community commitments. Carolyn provided extraordinary support, and encouraged me to "keep going, home is OK."

An exhausted City Manager retired in 2007, and Carolyn and I went looking for the next chapter. We thought about relocating back to Fort Bragg, or to Scottsdale. Our oldest daughter was in So Cal, while our youngest daughter and grandkids were on the Oregon coast. Family had finally become the priority.

Yet, within me I felt that I was not ready to retire at age 58. And Carolyn sensed this feeling. She knew I had to be active, working at something where I could make a difference. So, I decided that I would be open to working for a few more years in a smaller, less intense city.

Brookings is on the southern Oregon coast. I applied and was hired as City Manager, giving the City Council a maximum three-year commitment. I retired again 11 years later from an experience very similar to that in Fort Bragg; the two communities are almost identical. Throughout the years I had an excellent working relationship with the City Council and staff, and

both Carolyn and I enjoyed participating in the affairs of the community. After a few years, our oldest daughter also moved to Brookings, so family was in relatively close proximity for the first time in more than a decade.

In 2018 I was named Grand Marshall of the annual Azalea Festival Parade in Brookings. The highest honor you can ever receive is to be recognized by the people you serve..

While serving as City Manager in Brookings, I was tasked with expanding the scope of the Municipal Court from just handling the occasional Municipal Code violation to handling traffic violations. These cases were being adjudicated at the Circuit Court, which was about a 40-minute drive for defendants and police officers. Our long-time Judge was a retired California Highway Patrolman. Municipal Court judges in Oregon are required to be attorneys by local option, and Brookings does not require their judge to be a member of the bar.

I sat-in on every court session and decided that serving as a judge was something I would enjoy doing...so I put this on my post-retirement list. It is a very part-time role, one court session monthly in rural Oregon cities. I completed the mandatory training at the National Judicial College and was appointed as Judge for the City of Port Orford in 2017.

After retiring as Brookings City Manager in 2018 I experimented with a number of post-retirement paid and unpaid roles. I secured my real estate license...the training is something I could have really used during my time as City Manager...but sales and learning an entirely new administrative system failed to keep my interest. I did some private consulting, worked as an executive recruiter, served as a fellow at Portland State University and a Senior Advisor (Range Rider) with ICMA...which I thoroughly enjoyed. As a retired member of the Oregon City County Management Association (OCCMA), I served on the Ethics Committee and led several fact-finding missions.

Currently, I am serving on the Eagle Scout Board of Review for the local Boy Scout Council and contribute to the OCCMA listserve. But my real retirement "job" is serving as an English teacher, driving instructor and immigration case manager for my Chinese wife, Liangfeng. She works as a postpartum nurse/nanny and, as I write this, she is feeding our current guest, Baby Heather.

About Carolyn. The mother two, child care and development was her life's mission, perhaps equal to supporting her husband. We basically served the communities together. When the City Council and School Board declined to fund a summer children's program, Carolyn organized a non-profit, secured volunteer teachers and did fundraising. By the third year, fundraising had reached a point where the program was serving over 100 kids with paid teachers and was expanded to include an after-school program.

Carolyn did not attend Council meetings, but she watched them on TV. When she saw someone verbally "mistreating" her husband, she would write their name on a piece of paper, slip the paper into a bottle and throw the bottle into the ocean. She said it just felt good to think that the offender was "out there in the ocean floating around."

And she loved attending LOC and ICMA conferences where she would collect vendor giveaways and bring them back to "her kids" at the summer program.

A post-retirement role I hope no one has to play is serving as caregiver for your cancer-ridden spouse. Carolyn was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer shortly before I retired from Brookings. She did quite well with treatment in the early years, although the three-hour trip from our home in Brookings to the nearest treatment center in Medford was increasingly agonizing. She experienced a steep downward slide in the last 12 months of her life, and declined to continue treatment. She passed three months short of our 50th anniversary. There is no training to prepare you for this, or managing a grieving family, but the responsibility will be yours.

In 2023 my current wife and I relocated from Brookings to Medford. I recently served as City Manager for 18 months with the City of Talent with my primary focus being post-fire recovery; the City was decimated by a wildfire in 2020.

I have served as interim City Manager in three Oregon cities (Ashland, Port Orford and Brookings) and am still available for short-term assignments in Oregon and California.

My judicial work with cities expanded and I now serve as Judge in five rural Oregon cities. I am a member of the Oregon Judges Association, where I serve on the Legislative Committee.

Backing up a bit, I was fortunate to be a part of the Senior Executives in State and Local Government cohort at Harvard Kennedy School in 2013. I wish I had had the opportunity years earlier. I learned a great deal about leadership, the grounding of our profession and "expanding the envelope" for the betterment of your community. A major theme of the experience was "If something needs to be done, why don't you do it?"

It is important to mention that my service in city management opened doors for a number of other rewarding experiences, like serving on regional airport, railroad and economic development boards, the Oregon Seismic Safety Policy Committee and others. I also served on the National Advisory Council for the Boy Scouts of America; in South Gate, I was able to couple my service as City Manager with facilitating the revitalization of the "Scout Area" at South Gate Park where I learned camping skills as a boy.

Here is some advice to those who are contemplating city management as a career. Public policy education is great, but city management is also a very practical world. Beef up you education in law, finance, business, project management and managing people...managing the workplace.

Recognize that we work in a political environment...and in that environment you can do everything right and still be wrong. Answers are not black and white; and not every problem has a solution. Public service is work you need to enjoy.

For those already in city management my advice is to be aware of the effects of your job on your family and find ways to incorporate family time into your daily, weekly, monthly routine. Take real vacations; don't use vacation time for training or to pursue an avocation. Prepare financially for retirement by doing more than contributing to PERS. Pay attention to your health, and the health of your spouse...are you managing your personal life and family as well as you are managing your City? Be guided by ethics.

It has truly been a rewarding life experience. I made a difference. It feels good.