

Local Government

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Opening music

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WGVU's Jennifer Moss:

Your'e listening to Tilting the Earth's Praxis, a weekly discussion of important issues that impact civil society. With host Salvatore Alaimo.

Salvatore Alaimo

Hello and welcome to Tilting the Earth's axis. Our topic this week is local government. Our guests are Jason Grant. He's the director of advocacy for the International City/County Management Association, affectionately known as ICM. Welcome, Jason.

Jason Grant

Thanks for having me.

Salvatore Alaimo

We also have two Grand Valley State University alumni. Patrick Waterman is the Deputy County Administrator at Ottawa County, Michigan. Welcome, Patrick.

Patrick Waterman

Thank you. Good to be here.

Salvatore Alaimo

And we also have Katherine Beemer. She's the city administrator at the city of Fennville, Michigan. She also got her MPA with Grand Valley State University, as well as Patrick. Welcome, Katherine.

Katie Beemer

Thanks for having me.

Salvatore Alaimo

Do you prefer Katherine or Katie for this discussion?

Katie Beemer

I don't care.

Salvatore Alaimo

I'll go with Katie because I remember you as Katie when you were a student in my class. So. All right, I'll go with Katie. All right, so let's start with the two local government representatives we have here today. You know, all of our topics connect to civil society and how they can improve or detract from the human experience. So I'd like you to think

of an example of how your municipality did something, made a decision, took action that was a positive impact on the lives of the citizens in your in your area.

Patrick Waterman

Okay. You want me go first, Katie?

Katie Beemer

Sure.

Patrick Waterman

Okay. well, as I mentioned before we got going Sal I've only been in my role at the county here since November. And prior to that, I was the city manager in Hudsonville, which is a suburb of Grand Rapids. Now, I was there 12 years and Hudsonville was a small farming town that had a vision to basically redevelop its entire downtown into a more welcoming and, and inviting space. And my background as a community planner served me very well in that leadership role because I was able to have a hands-on role in attracting new development and getting placemaking type public projects underway that would really have generational changes for that community. And so we went through a series of community engagement processes where we really listened to what the community wanted to see there with their downtown. And that evolved into a number of ideas ranging from a splash pad to farmer's market to more restaurants and, and places and spaces that people like to be outside of their homes and places of work. And and so that was a long, ongoing project that I was very proud of, that we were able to get some monumental capital projects underway there. And that really led to an investment in the private sector of bringing in new businesses and development. And Hudsonville downtown looks completely different today than it did even 12 years ago. So that was something as a planner I was very passionate about and was very proud of in my tenure at Hudsonville.

Katie Beemer

Yeah. so I think for us it's really been, this sounds a little touchy feely, but it's been a mindset, mindset shift that we've seen over the last year that's happened that is starting to lead to actual physical changes. You know, when I started like, like Hudsonville festivals, a pretty small farming community. And when I started something that people said to me every day was they're like, Oh, well, it's just Fennville. So, it doesn't matter. Eh, It's just Fennville. Well, it's just Fennville. And I found that there was this mindset in our community that had touched everything that we did that. Oh, if it's just Fennville, then it doesn't matter if the contractor does shoddy work or does it matter if we don't get the scrap that we want? Or does it matter if any of this because eh, it's just Fennville? And so, one of the things that we've done is we've really started trying to change that mindset and work, you know, with our counsel and with our community members on a 1 to 1 basis and say like, don't say you're not just anything, you know, have pride in your small community. You have pride in the work that we're doing. And it's been really amazing to see. You know. Before. I don't know if they'll appreciate me saying like this, but like for I think my council members, they would just kind of like make decisions or they'd just be like a is what it is. And then now they're like really on the ball of like, I want

to find out, you know, why I'm making this decision and how do I make this decision, and is this the best path for this decision? And so, starting with them, I've just really seen it grow to the whole community where I've seen people demand more for what they're doing. And it's not just about accepting anymore. It's about, no, let's go ahead and make something because we are special.

Salvatore Alaimo

Thank you for these wonderful examples. So, I'm going to pivot to you now, Jason. We just heard two positive stories of how local government can impact the lives of citizens. What is ICMA's position on that and what is ICMA doing to maybe bring this more to light that local government always has and continues to impact the lives of citizens?

Jason Grant

Yeah. With ICMA, we've got over 13,000 members globally and obviously largely in the US, in cities, towns, counties, villages across the country. Local government is where people's quality of life is directly impacted. At the federal level. There are a lot bigger, broader issues. They're building a road in one state that I'll never drive on, right? We've got a national park somewhere I may or may not ever go camping in. But here in our community, we're all have our kids in the schools. We're all playing in the same parks. There are roads that affect my ability to get to work every single day, Right? The water that I drink. Those things matter. And they matter a lot to the people in the community because that's our quality of life. And so I see a major focus is on the local government, not at the federal and state issues, but how do we address these problems that are clearly local problems, right? That the states have deferred to local governments to manage and address. What are those issues? How do we better address them? Because all of us have the same types of issues or different flavors that, you know, anywhere we go. But we all need to try to make communities fit for the for where we are. And so with ICMA, our goal is to bring more people into local government. We value professional management administration. So having the knowledge, the education, the skills and the experience, the network, to be able to figure out how do we address these local issues and these local problems. That's the value that I see you may bring, bringing those professionals together, helping encourage people if you want to change your community, it starts here at home. Right. And so how do we get people engaged in that? So we provide thought leadership, we provide research, we provide information. We talk with communities to say, how is it that we can help better manage the administration, the daily operation of government? And that's our charge.

Salvatore Alaimo

It seems to me, Jason, that we're stuck in a climate in this country right now where if you were to use the word government as a trigger word to, you know, look for a response in someone, I bet nine out of ten would talk about the White House, Congress or the Supreme Court, particularly with what's going on, and particularly for how media covers government. Does that make this work challenging to try to get the citizens to understand all the wonderful points you just made that if you had a pie chart of what influences their lives, the largest slice is going to be local government.

Jason Grant

Yeah. You know, it's interesting when you look at, you know, you did research, and you look at and you talk about bringing theory and practice together through this issue of praxis. And we look at that theory there is at the federal and state levels versus local level. So those three levels of government in our federal system, there's only in the U.S. Constitution, there is only the federal government, the state government. There is no local government in the US Constitution. So any powers that local governments have are provided and granted by the state, whether they have control abilities follow simply are the golden rule. But at the end of the day, we still have those powers that are granted by the state. Trust in Government. So, when you look at the Pew Research, the closer that the smaller went further down you go, the more trust there is. There's greater trust in local government than state government, greater trust in state and federal government. And I think a lot of that goes back to what I said. It's stuff we can see every day. We trust them because we see the elected officials at the grocery store, right? We see the programs. The services are delivered directly to us so we know what they're doing, what's happening at the state level. We may or may not be engaging at the federal level. Often they're addressing, you know, issues of the economy. They're addressing issues of national security, things that we never really experience directly in our own communities. And I think that's where we see the challenge of being what is it that local governments can do? And it's different, right? So, the powers may be different. The form of government we operate in may change what we're able to do. So, I think those are a lot of the challenges. When we say local government, you know Patrick talked about moving into a county which is very different the way Katie is in the city, right? There are different functions, different responsibilities. And even within a state, one city may be under one form of government, one another form of government that changes how you're allowed to operate, right? So, there's no one way to do anything in a U.S. context. And I think that's the biggest challenge, is people to understand what is the rule. If I don't want to, I don't want to be a politician, I don't want to run for elected office, what role do I play? And that's where professional management professionals within areas of government are invaluable public servants, because they're the ones that are doing the work on a day-to-day basis. And so that's sort of where the challenge is to come in is not so much just federal versus local, but really the elected versus non-elected. What are the things that I can do? How do I bring my experience, knowledge and ability to help my community and local government is a great opportunity for a lot of people. They may not really understand what those could be for them.

Patrick Waterman

I would, I would agree with Jason on that. And, um, you know, I'm familiar with that Pew Research and they focus in on this trend of a growing distrust among Americans in government. And they kind of focus in on things like the elections. Um, there's a growing distrust of the media where in a polarization of news audiences to right where people are going to the news that they want to hear that they agree with. There's a growing distrust in science, you know, after COVID. And, all of these things have, I think, unfortunately, have started to trickle down into local government because it you know, local government is where elections are held and is where like at the county level, public health departments were in the position of having to make decisions on closing schools

and businesses. And in all of that distrust, I think is starting to trickle down into the local level, which makes our jobs more difficult because now we're having to defend positions that before there was trust. And that is a concern that I have. And I'm seeing that firsthand in a county that had a recent election change where very angry people came in out of COVID and ran for office and are implementing changes here based on that. So, I don't know where that's going, but it is a trend that we're definitely seeing.

Salvatore Alaimo

So, I want to stay on this thread of challenges because I think it's important for us to discuss them and, you know, think about maybe possible solutions to them. So, Katie, you and Patrick made a choice, right? You, you chose to work in local government for your career. You went and got that graduate degree, and you are the professionals, the very professionals that Jason is talking about. And I'm wondering, I know that enrollment in public admin programs is down across the country, So, I sometimes wonder if people even realize that this is a viable career choice and if they desire to make a difference in the lives of people, this is a great choice. So, what are your thoughts on that and what can we do about that?

Katie Beemer

I think that's a really interesting question because this is something I kind of faced when I was leaving undergrad and kind of trying to decide what to do next. And because I didn't know that this was a career path when I was an undergrad at just it, my undergrad program didn't have a public admin program and I was a political science major, and I was kind of a sad political science major because I didn't want to do federal politics anymore. I was 2016 and I didn't wanted to really do state politics either. And I think that this is still very despite declining enrollment feature enrollment numbers, this is still very much a viable career path for a lot of students. And, I think that there's a lot of students who are entering other fields, and this is actually ultimately what they want to do, but they don't know how to articulate that what they want to do, you know, so that they might be a political science major or an economics major or history major or an English major or any number of majors. And, because they haven't been yet exposed firsthand to the work that local government does, that they don't consider it as a potential career option. And so really what that comes out to is like that people like Patrick and I that, you know, to go out and help mentor younger kids and, you know, go visit the schools. You know, I had a local village manager, Chris Burns, from Spring Lake, who really, you know, I job chatted with her and I was about ready to just kind of leave politics behind and be a teacher. And but she kind of encouraged me in this role and like encouraged me to go on to do my MBA. And so, those mentorship roles become so important to encouraging people and just spreading the word about what we could do to each day. Because it's a lot of people's dream careers. They just don't know it yet.

Salvatore Alaimo

So, Jason, I keep reading that civics education in America is I don't know if you want it is threatened. Maybe the word threatened is a little too extreme, but apparently it seems to be challenging. It's being reduced. And it makes me, as a citizen, wonder if it's dangerous to not have young people fully educated in what government is, how it

operates, and what their role can be or arguably should be in it. So what can you say about that and what can we try to do about that?

Jason Grant

Yeah. I mean, understanding how our forms of government operate is key. Right. And so not just at the federal level, but certainly understanding that federal level. But then as we look at each state, what, what how does a state code operate? How does that govern? How does that operate under a federalist structure? And then what are the roles within each state that the local governments have? It's, it's not something that we really spend as much time on anyway. Right. Of making sure we have that understanding. Having understanding helps us understand how to engage the systems of government. Right? The government doesn't need to be the problem. Government can be a solution as well to many of the problems we face. And so, if we're going to have government as a solution, we need to understand how it operates and what the powers that we actually have. Sometimes there's misnomers what we can do or can't do, what authority one may have or not, what powers one may not have are. There are certain things that are solely at the discretion of the federal government. Some that are is solely the discretion of the state. And then at the local level, whatever the state authorizes those local governments to do it in that state. We need to understand those parameters so we understand what are the things that we can do to, to make the types of changes in the quality of life that we want. So certainly, there's a need to make sure we emphasize that, that we, we educate and inform the public on that. But I think the bigger issue as you look at the challenges we face and so we're talking about, you know, why are some MPA programs down. While they're less interested in wanting to serve in government, a lot of it comes to what Patrick talked about a little bit. There's a lot more extremism, hyper partisanship in ways we hadn't had it before, right? There's no we're a primarily a two party system in the United States at every level of government. We are seeing preemption happening from a lot of state governments to say what used to be allowed in a state for local governments to the side state saying, no, we need to step in because they disagree with directions that certain municipalities or counties may be moving. And so we're seeing this shift right now trying to sort of consolidate more powers as we become more hyper partisan when we move to extremes, whether that's a political left or political right, those extremes don't have enough of the votes out of the popular vote perspective. So, if they can change the systems of government to allow them to unilaterally make those decisions or take power away from the local level, then they have a ability to push initiatives that maybe not be popular enough and to do so quickly enough. And I think that's what makes some people hesitant. What we run into is, "I want to change this community, I want to make a difference, but good Lord, I don't know if I want to go and get attacked as a local government worker, and maybe I'll work for a nonprofit or volunteer or do something else to help the community." That certainly is something that we need to be more aware of our elected leaders and our public servants who are professional public servants. How do we help manage those issues and respect and understand the distinctions? Right. There's roles that elected officials have, and when we shouldn't step outside of our role as professionals in public servants. Right. We have a, we have a role and elected have a role, but really showing how government can work, how it can operate

and work with the elected officials, That I think is the key that sometimes is missed. It's, it's seen as sort of antagonistic that I think we need to show how we can collaborate, work together, the staff and the elected officials to provide solutions to the problems local community.

Salvatore Alaimo

So, one of our other episodes talked about local news. So not to keep piling on all these challenges, but I think we're obligated to address them to have a meaningful discussion here. So local news has been taking some hits in this country. The newspapers are going away. The local news outlets are going away. And that in the past served as an effective way of informing citizens about, you know, town council meetings, about the changes in strategic plans, about important things going on in local government. So, Patrick, what can. What are local governments doing and what can or should they be doing to try to counteract this diminishing local news issue?

Patrick Waterman

Well, Sal, you and I worked on this together in Hudsonville when we had a struggling (public access tv) peg channel that we were trying to save from, from going under. And that was a big part of our strategic discussion, was the fact that our local media does not attend our, our town meetings anymore. I mean, unless you're a, a community with a population of over 50,000 people, it's unlikely you're going to see a reporter at your city council meeting unless there's something controversial on the agenda. And so, there's been this tendency for the media to focus on the negative or the things that get the most attention. Business as usual doesn't get subscriptions. So that's been kind of a dying interest. And I think that, that has left. Back to Jason's point, our, our populous is becoming more and more uninformed about the role of government. You know, I just attended a session, a friend of mine put on a former city manager, and he was talking about, you know, the differences of the question of are we a democracy? Are we a republic? And the majority rules concept of a democracy thinks that if you fill enough the room with enough people that are angry at something, that the council should vote that way. But when in fact we are a republic and we're bound by the Constitution to do the things that we're in power to do. So that basic civics discussion that we had as well, I think that all of these things are culminating to a less informed populace and, and the media that is driving their message to a more polarized audience. And I don't know what the solution is. It's just another one of these challenges that we're all struggling with.

Salvatore Alaimo

Katie, what are your thoughts on this? Are these challenges that resonate with you? Do you face them in general? Are they things that are real to you?

Katie Beemer

Yes and no. We've been, I think. So, we've had a bit of controversy for the last year or so. So, we've actually, since I started, had lots of media presence at all of our meetings. So which is, you know, it's what it is. But so we have had a local reporter and then sometimes regional reporters pretty much at every single meeting. And so I do think, though, that the lack of information is something that definitely increased that to

Patrick's point. It definitely. Decreases public trust, right? People don't know what's happening. They don't understand. And so, you know, I found that one of the things that we've been trying to do is that in that gap, to put out information about what we're doing and why we're doing it, you know, to articulate our values statements, to make sure that all of these statements that we put out are readable to our whole population. So actually, about 30% of Fennville's population speaks Spanish only they don't speak English at all. And so, you know, making sure that our communications are bilingual and things like that. And so really trying to push out, you know, not not just. Here's how we're dealing with this problem, but also here's all the good things that we're doing behind it. So I'm sure, though, I'll get to a community still where we don't have a reporter at every meeting.

Patrick Waterman

Well, I think I think that's a rarity. Katie, I mean, we have that right now. And where I'm in Ottawa just because of the controversy with the new board. But, Hudsonville, we didn't have a reporter there for 10 of the 12 years I was there. And so, and that's good. I think local government should be boring. But on the same token, I want our people to be informed. And you're right, it's the role of our, our own communication team internally. Now I think we move more towards that. We're doing so much with social media. Hey, there's a water main break on. Grant Street's going to be closed. That's the type of information that's pertinent. And the big headlines, the big splash headlines, they're only there if there's something bad going on.

Katie Beemer

Yeah. At the first meeting our reporter missed. And a what for a lot after a long string was to go to your meeting.

Jason Grant

So. Yeah, I'd weigh in on this. One thing that, you know, and this is sort of the challenge as we look ahead, how do we address this? So to your question, you know, what sort of solutions? One of the things we found and prior to joining ICMA as a chief communications officer in Prince William County, Virginia for ten years, and one of the things that we did when local newspapers started to fold, but we still wanted to get our stories out there is we hired the reporter who used to cover local government. Their communications person. They know how to write AP style. They know how to cover government. They know who the people are. They could put the information out. And so when you look at there's, there's also opportunities that used to not exist and are used to put out a press release. Right. So before social media, you put out a press release, you'd have to hope people pick up the press release and then hope that they write an article that focuses on the positive and not the negative. Right? So, there was there was always frustration with the mass media when they were there covering it locally because they only covered it the way that they maybe wanted to. And you felt maybe wasn't fair to what the real situation was. And that was a different type of challenge. What we found now is much of the local is put on to web based news outlets, right? So, whether it's a conglomerate, whether it's a local paper that just shuttered the paper, but they kept an online presence. But there generally are websites where there's local news that people

do follow to get their local news information that also then share that through their social channels and be able to track down what those are. And what we found was we when we started writing articles in AP format, kept the word out where they want and focus not, not a spin, but to say, here's the reasons why I still keep in it more journalistic. Here's what's happening informative versus persuasive. All of those outlets, multiple outlets now started running our content. So, our earned media went three times what it used to be because they would take that content. They can't afford a reporter to cover it, but they need the content because the revenue generation is based on the number of clicks or views that they get into the content. So, you're providing them content in the format that they need that is informative. So, it's trustworthy of the people and there's no byline on it other than government and some kind of government provider, whoever it is. So, when they have that now what you do is you have all those different channels where people are getting information that they can actually read the article about what's happening and stay informed. So, there are opportunities in this structure, but we have to operate very differently. As Patrick said, getting your communication team involved to figure out how do we do this? And obviously the larger counties and cities have more opportunity to do that. But, you can do that in the small ones as well, saying not wishing something would be covered. If you think something needs to get out there, are you engaging with those online channels and your own social channels to make certain that the information is getting out there and disseminated. And we found a huge shift of people knowing what's happening through that virtual space as opposed to the print newspaper. But we started actually reaching more people than maybe we did through newspaper.

Katie Beemer

Think isn't really like your idea that you guys use there. I think one thing that I thought of when I was doing that was that the importance of also just making sure that all of your staff and all of your elected officials are kind of on the same page about, you know, what's going on and things like that. You know, so we started having some of these troubles very early on in my tenure there. You know, we kind of sat down and had a little bit of a we just had a meeting and we were like, okay, this is you know, we're going to speak with one voice on this issue. This is how we're handling this problem. This is what we're going to do. You can talk to the mayor, or you can talk to Katie. But, you know, we're going to speak with one voice on this issue and. It's when there start to be lots of lots of different voices that sometimes the message starts to get muddled. Right. And that's how especially in a small town like mine where rumors get started and then suddenly, you know, something's completely out of control based on a miscommunication from somebody. And so just really making sure that. Everyone who's going to be speaking publicly about an issue is on the same page about why we're doing what we're doing.

Salvatore Alaimo

How important are partnerships? So, here's where my head's going now. Neighborhood associations. Local businesses. Faith-based groups. I'm going to assume that and, local government for in spite of the great work it does, can't do everything by itself. So, can you guys comment on the importance of partnerships with these other entities?

Patrick Waterman

I think it's huge. Now I can look at it two perspectives from the county level. I think Ottawa sets the bar in terms of its number of partnerships and collaborations that it has with its local units. And we, we, we partner on providing law enforcement for a lot of cities that used to have police departments that don't do that anymore. We provide assessing services. We provide I.T. services, just a myriad of services that from an efficiency standpoint is very, very good and saves a lot of money. And it also helps relations build relations between the county and the local units or government. And then obviously, with all of the services, a county is essentially an extension of the state in the services that we provide. And you have so many partnerships with nonprofits in the community from grants and all of these things that counties are required to do through partnerships. It's just imperative, I think at the local level, at the city level and the township level. Relationships matter from building trust between cities and businesses. For example, you want to be known as a business-friendly community, not a standoffish local government that's hard to do business with from an economic development standpoint, that's, that's a disaster. So building relationships, getting out, meeting and greeting people and working with your local chambers and those types of organizations is really, really important. And again, that all goes back to building trust. I think trust is so, so important to, to strive for. And in this day and age when it seems to be eroding.

Katie Beemer

Yeah, speaking to that, I think, or the ways you build those partnerships We just actually launched, launched this week a business owner group chat. So, we have a group chat of all of our business owners from our downtown to kind of the outskirts of town. And again, we're really small, so we can do that. But in like just finding ways to make sure that you're connecting people, you know, somebody brings up an idea, say, you know what? Somebody else had this idea from this organization. You guys should talk. And just really being open to those partnerships as they come. There's a lot of partnerships that we've made in recent months that, you know, kind of just the opportunity came up because we said we were open to partnerships and then people kind of filled in those gaps. But if you close yourself right off right away to partnerships, then it's hard to open yourself back up because you're like, Oh, don't ask them. But if you're open from the beginning. Sometimes they fall into place.

Salvatore Alaimo

Jason. What is what is ACMA seeing out there in the landscape in terms of how advances in technology have impacted the professionalization of local government?

Jason Grant

Oh, that's broad. The technologies are very broad. So, we look at it and it certainly. The pandemic opened up a huge shift in our economy and public and private organizations. And right now, each of us are in our offices having conversations. And, you know, we look at this idea of being able to hop on Zoom at any point for a meeting. Used to be you had to fly, get everybody in the same room or in government. We had to walk from one building to another, drive across the county or the city to get to the other side of the

city for a meeting, and you had to be present in that space. That is not normal at all, right. The idea that one would say, we got to have a meeting, and everybody needs to show up and be at this office every Tuesday doesn't really happen. Right? So you look at technology drivers, the need to shift to allow virtual workspace just makes sense, right? The other thing is you look at most, most governments, their programs and services that are accessed online are done through a handheld device. It's no longer sitting down at a laptop computer. Well, that changes everything right now. Now I have to have not sure, sure my website is responsive. Make sure that it's loading way it needs to load in a handheld, which looks different than what it might look like on the laptop or the desktop computer. So, having that infrastructure, redesigning websites, having web applications, people expect to engage anytime, anywhere on any device that they have. Right. So does this look right in whatever browser, whether I got iPhone or Android or whatever, those structures that they may have CES and expect to engage? They also don't expect to go in and have to stand in line at a counter anymore. Right. So, when I started out, local government, that's where you pay your taxes. You knew what tax days were because it'd be a long line out the door for everyone to add in their tax that they didn't mail it in time. Right now, they better be able to pay it online. Right. And to do that quickly and easily at 11:59 if it's due that day. Right. 11:59 p.m. I need to be able to log in and get my bill, my tax bill back. So, when you look at technology, I think sort of this the Internet of Things has driven a lot of the technology investment. Governments used to have everything on prem, so on premises, their servers, all the technology was there. Investments had to be made to go into a cloud-based environment because they can do a better job securing the data that we can afford to do on an on prem structure. It's different set up. And so, you see a lot of governments had to invest in those infrastructures. So, I think that's the key driver is society has now changed to be able to do everything online and the pandemic accelerated that. Everything now can be purchased online. Everything can be accessed online by government. Ought to be able to do that, too, because every company out there can do it right. That's what I think is the biggest driver of technologies right now and probably the, the biggest headache and thing that might keep city and county managers up at night is how do we make sure this stuff is functioning and we can continue an investment that, let's face it is not a political win, right? Like, we got to put \$10 million into this technology infrastructure. That's not going to be something that someone campaigns on. Right. But it's something that needs to be done. So, I think that's a big driver of technology. And I think. Things spin from there. But I think the Internet of Things, the societal change to do everything in a space government has to keep up.

Patrick Waterman

Just building on what Jason said, another side effect of that we're looking at from a capital planning standpoint, you know, the county's got multiple buildings, hundreds of thousands of square feet. And, you know, we're having conversations about what is the future of the workforce look like with regard to space planning. You know, we've got several departments that are hybrid or working fully remote. And if that continues, that could have a dramatic impact on the future of, you know, public buildings being constructed and what those workspaces look like. So, that's just another side effect, I

think, of these technological changes Jason was alluding to. I just wanted to throw that in.

Salvatore Alaimo

So, I want to close with this question, and I want to give each of you a crack at it. We'll go Katie Patrick, and we'll let Jason have the final word. What do you want to say to our listeners who maybe are not aware to no fault of their own, about the importance local government has in their lives? And the and I would even argue and, and go to say the great work that local governments are doing. What do you want to say to them?

Katie Beemer

All right. Local government is the one institution that has a formal connection to every other institution. So, we are very much the spoke in the wheel. We have the ability to connect people and places and things that a lot of other institutions can't. Right. You know, we have a formal tied to the federal government. We have a formal tied to the state government, to the faith community, to businesses, to the schools, because we work with those organizations every single day. Right. And we provide services to those organizations every single day. And so ultimately, when it comes down to it, local government, is this really. Well thing that, you know, has the ability to impact great change in the world because we have these partnerships and these organizations that are kind of built in. Right. And so we have that ability to kind of go out and make really meaningful, impactful change.

Patrick Waterman

Yeah, I would say I would first challenge them as they think about government. You know, you immediately think of federal government, everyone. That's where their mind goes. And, and we talked about this today, but think about the touch points that you have with your federal government, your state government and your local government. And when you put it in that frame, you do realize what an impact it has on your daily life. I think our positions, as is local government administrators, is so unique because. I don't I don't really know anyone of my peers. That said, I've always wanted to be a city manager. County manager. You come into it by way of many different roads. And and that's what's so great about it is you can have several different backgrounds that will serve you extremely well in this field. And, and what's fun about it is finding the right community that has the right set of challenges that aligns with your expertise. For me, Hudsonville was perfect as a planner and they wanted economic development done. That was a great fit. Other communities may have economic challenges where having a background in musical finance would be a perfect fit. So that's what's really great about this career. If you're not interested in going into government and, and you want to be more engaged and more informed. One of my good friends asked this question. He says, Are you a citizen or do you just live here? And so I would engage, I would challenge people to get engaged, join a board, volunteer for a committee, just get involved in what's going on in your local community because it matters. And that's what we need. If you're not going to be in the role of serving directly, you can be indirectly serving through volunteerism.

Jason Grant

Yeah. And I echoed the sentiments that both Katie and Patrick offered. I mean this from a career perspective, there's no greater value than know that you're benefiting a community and often a community that you live in. Right. Many of the public servants that work in local government, they live there as well. And that's the thing I think I would point out to people to understand. We often think of government, you think of an elected official, but we think of government and just innocuous thing. It's people as people that are giving of their abilities to make your community better. Get to know who those people are. Right. They're going to families there. They're playing in a recreation softball league after work. They're hanging out with friends. Right. They got a life outside of that. But these are people who their career, their job is to help make the community better. That's what they're there to do. And we certainly can have disagreement and debates about what's the right policy that makes our community better. But the work that they do on the front line that that public servants every day engage is really to carry out what that elected body has said they want this community to be. And as a representative democracy. Right. Those are your representatives. Those are the people that are elected into office to make the decision to what it looks like. The people working in government, those staff are carrying those wishes out. That becomes really important. I think the more people start to understand the people of government, they start to realize the value of it and being engaged in whatever capacity you can, whether that's working for your local government as a Patterson serving on a committee, or just really understanding what the issues are and helping inform that community. But your local government is the one area that can affect your daily quality of life more than any other government entity in the United States. And really encourage people, be involved, be engaged, and be supportive of the public servants that are there for you every day.

Salvatore Alaimo

Jason Grant. Director of Advocacy, International City County Management Association, known as ICMA. Patrick Waterman, Deputy County Administrator, Ottawa County, Michigan. And Katie Beemer, City Administrator, City of Fennville, Michigan. I thank you all for what I feel was an absolutely wonderful discussion about the importance of local government and civil society. Thank you.

Closing music

WGVU's Jennifer Moss

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Closing music fades.