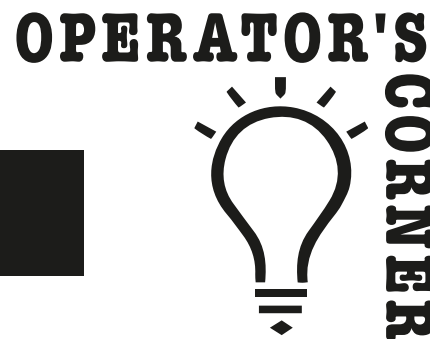


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## SUCCESSION PLANNING AND WHY YOUR COMMUNITY NEEDS A PLAN

Florence Braunius

It comes as no surprise or at least I hope it doesn't, that communities are finding it more and more difficult to find replacements for retiring certified water and wastewater operations specialists. I retired June 29, 2014, from the very small Village of Speculator. I had notified the Village Board, in writing, a year in advance that I would be retiring sometime in the upcoming year. The response was, "Just let us know when you have a date." Early in 2014, I submitted my retirement date. My position was advertised in local papers and on the New York Rural Water Association's website. By the end of April, the Village was ready to interview five candidates. One of the five held a current NYS DEC Certification. Two candidates were selected and were offered a starting position of \$20.00 per hour and neither of them was certified. Both candidates rejected the offer. One person resided locally but works a considerable distance away. He had hoped to be able to become employed locally at a salary that would support a family of five. The other candidate was looking for a job that would allow him to relocate back to the southern Adirondacks. By the first of May the village had no one in line to replace my position as Chief Operations Specialist.

The Village of Speculator is located in Hamilton County and the demographics for this county are not trending toward residential growth for various reasons. This area of New York is your classic outdoor tourist destination with camping, kayaking, skiing, hiking, fishing, snowmobiling as some of the activities that you can enjoy here. Tourism is the only true industry remaining here.

While talking with a NYRWA staff member, I mentioned that the village had been unsuccessful in finding a candidate. I was given the name of a young man, just graduating from college with a 4 year degree, who had worked summers at a wastewater treatment plant. He was also "local" residing in the Town of Arietta. Once again New York Rural Water Association had saved the day for the Village of Speculator. The candidate arrived for the interview and was offered the job with a starting rate of pay at \$20.00 per hour. He was able to complete his certification requirements by December of 2014, at the 2 A level.

This is where this success story starts to generate some heat. It was difficult for people in our rural area to understand why the Village Board was offering this rate of pay to someone who was not certified and was just starting out. It was especially hard for county, town and village employees who were working at a lower rate of pay, but had been employed in public service for more than ten years.

What can rural communities learn from this example? First of all, NYS DEC raised the expectations for professionalism when Sub Part 650 changes took place in the mid 1990's. Now the original operations specialist who were here when the Clean Water Act was written are retiring and the expectations for the new operations specialist are very different. Communities need to understand that they are no longer hiring the person with basic skills. Today's operations specialist comes with an education and the ability to utilize the newest technologies.

What do we expect from a municipal employee? Municipal employment is not a career path that is popular with the younger generation. The level of responsibility, coupled with the low starting salaries, fluctuating employee benefits, and policies based on the elected officials of the day, all contribute to the low value placed on these job titles.

Can there be more of a public/private sector effort to enhance municipal work? Some private sector employers have taken the time to research local venues and obtained opportunities for their employees to enjoy an event or a venue at a reduced rate, or in some instances at no cost. At the beginning of the year each employee is given a letter listing the benefits and upon presentation of the letter and identification, the employee can participate in a variety of opportunities. In our area, examples might include passes to the Wild Center, rafting on the Hudson River, Skiing at Oak Mountain, the Great Escape, etc. The tax cap issue makes it even more difficult for communities to find ways to adequately compensate their employees. I think there is room for this type of public/private partnership. Basically communities and the private sector will need to get out of the box and create opportunities outside the workplace. Everyone likes to have that dollar in their pocket, but with municipal budgets stretched to the limit, the dollar may have to look a little different.

Who wants to work for municipal government? The next generation (which is now) comes with a different outlook for their career. Does anyone today look for a job where they can launch a career and stay there through inward and upward mobility for the next twenty years? Not really. Applicants are looking for jobs that will allow them to repay their student loans and still have the time and the means to pursue activities outside the workplace. At the end of the work day, the young person today wants to head out the door to go and do whatever they enjoy. No board meeting to attend, no alarm to respond to, no calls to have water turned off on a Saturday or after hours. Changes in the NYS Retirement System, fewer resources, all of these things make the municipal job >>>

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less appealing today.

How do we make these jobs more attractive? One option might be to start early. Take advantage of career days offered at the Jr./Sr. high schools. The private sector people are there and so should the public sector. Develop a relationship with the local high schools, offer opportunities for summer employment. Remember these young people are facing their own set of financial dilemmas, with the cost of college and they are looking for summer jobs that will help them achieve their goals. Communities will have to be prepared to pay them an adequate rate of pay and perhaps offset that with the private sector enticements mentioned previously. The Hamilton County Soil and Water Conservation District holds a conservation field day each September for children in grades 5 and 6 from the schools in the county. There has been a wastewater station at each of these field days for the last ten years. Get to know your schools and the students. Why not partner with a local high school or college and guarantee summer employment for the student who wants to continue his education and work in the water industry after graduation? Two to three months of work over a four year college career will assist in meeting the certification requirements. Similar to a public/private cooperative a municipal/academic cooperative effort could be equally beneficial. A guarantee of summer employment in his or her chosen field of study, accompanied by some private sector benefits just may sway a young person to consider your community.

Whatever position your community finds itself in with regard to replacing retiring employees, some things are obvious. To sum

things up:

1. Communities can no longer be complacent. The replacement person will not be walking through the door at exactly the right time. I am convinced there was Divine Intervention in Speculator. Elected officials need to develop a succession plan for all of their employment positions.

2. It will take concerted effort to identify, collect, refine and utilize resources available in each community.

3. A succession plan needs to be completed with the cooperation of the existing employees to prevent hard feelings down the road.

4. Communities will need to establish a connection with the local schools and colleges. Whether you need a clerk, a lifeguard or a water and wastewater operations specialist, students will connect with the people who have made an effort to personally reach out the them, or what is commonly referred to today as "facetime".

The need is immediate. With millions of dollars of public money invested in water and wastewater systems, it will take people who recognize the serious work of protecting people's drinking water and the protecting of our environment to be dedicated to this career.

*Florence Braun us retired in 2014 after 26 years as a Grade 2B Water Operations Specialist and 3A Wastewater Operations Specialist. She currently serves as the Water Operations Specialist for a seasonal mobile home park and remains active as a member of the NYRWA Board of Directors. 💧💧💧*