

Californian Management Exchange

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My visit to California occurred in January and February 2016, following my exchange partner's visit to Queensland in September 2015. Kurt Wilson is the City Manager at the City of Stockton, about 45 minutes' drive south of the Californian capital, Sacramento. As it turned out, Kurt had been accepted into the exchange programme the previous year but had deferred his visit by twelve months due to the precarious financial situation of his council and the need for him to be available for the bankruptcy court hearings! Hearing that, allowed me to put some of our challenges into perspective.

My objectives for the exchange were broadly-based. From a professional perspective, I was keen to see how the city had dealt with bankruptcy and how it manages its core responsibilities and services. Of course, there should be more to an exchange than just personal learnings. The transfer of thoughts, ideas and practices into discussions back on home soil are important to ensure that we (my council in particular) can also benefit from this investment.



Kurt receives a formal welcome from outgoing President, Mark Crawley; gets involved in the team competition; and meets the incoming President too.

Stockton is a city with a population of 310,000 (roughly twice the population of my council, Redland City). The first thing of note is that cities such as Stockton have additional responsibilities to those that our councils have. For example, they have their own police and fire departments. So, a reasonable proportion of local government employees are armed and/or are in uniform.

My time there was spread amongst several departments. A visit to the Economic Development Department involved a visit to the Bob Hope (Fox) Theater (you'll forgive the American spelling I trust!), a beautifully restored theatre which is one of several venues operated on behalf of the City. During my visit, they were setting up for a major concert the following day, featuring the latest big-sensation boy band. You'll not be surprised that I have absolutely no recollection of who they are!

Attendance at Kurt's executive team meeting on my first day gave me an appreciation for the breadth of services. Time was spent with Finance learning about the challenges of clawing their way back up the financial ladder partly through enforced pay cuts across the board (including for councillors) as the council had fought to retain jobs. Sobering stuff!



Posing outside Stockton City Hall

Visits to the Public Works Department and the city's metropolitan airport were followed on my first day with an interview with the local reporter who was chasing comments on the controversial addition of chloramines to the domestic water supply. I won't go into the technical details (I am far from qualified to do so), but a decision by the City Manager (an operational decision) to add chloramines to the water supply had resulted in a pushback by some sections of the community with mayoral support.

Less than forty-eight hours after stepping off the plane from Brisbane, I was sat awaiting the council meeting. My two days in Stockton had given me much curiosity in how the meeting would play out, given the issues about the water supply. Information came through that legal clerk and environmental activist, Erin Brockovich, had become involved in the water debate and that she might make an appearance in Stockton later that week.

The council meeting went ahead much like any other, with one major exception. Shortly after the Mayor opened the meeting, there followed a period of about ninety minutes during which one community member after another approached the microphone to address council. Most, but not all, were vehemently opposed to the inclusion of chloramines into the water supply. Many criticised the city manager for the decision and referred to the fact that, as he did not live in the city, he and his family would not have to drink the water

Stockton has a mayor and six council members who are part-time and are expected to focus on strategic issues. The Mayor is paid US\$72,384 annually (down from \$104,790) and each council member is paid US\$16,529 p.a. (down from \$23,927). Terms are four years and are staggered so that not all positions become vacant at the same time. No council member or mayor may serve more than two terms. They do have a divisional structure and the mayor is elected separately, as in Queensland. Voting for the council members is undertaken in two parts. The primaries see voters in each division vote for their preferred candidate. This process is used to reduce the numbers of candidates. In the secondaries, voters from across the city vote for their preferred council member candidates in each division.

Travelling to Sacramento, one of things that particularly stood out for me was the work being undertaken on the city's new arena (entertainment and sports centre). Conceived partly to help retain the city as the home of the *Sacramento Kings* (basketball), the new centre will host a broad range of sporting and entertainment events. A multi-purpose site, it will include office space, retail

space, a 250-room hotel and 550 residential units. The *Kings* will lease the venue for 35 years with an option to purchase from the city at the end of that term.

What a different world! Coming from a city (Brisbane) that couldn't retain a top-flight presence in the sport of basketball, it is mind-boggling to see an American team have the finances to commit US\$391 million over 35 years to lease payments for its venue, no doubt with a strong income stream from it too.

I also travelled to Danville, a town of 43,000 people nestled in the picturesque San Ramon Valley in Contra Costa County. I was most impressed by what the town is doing to engage with its community. Using apps such as 'Periscope' for live-streaming from field-based locations was a revelation to someone like me who struggles to keep up with the social media revolution.

A final stop before the conference was at La Verne University. The university has a programme called 'city manager in residence'. This involves city managers visiting to engage with students studying government-related subjects. It serves multiple purposes, including assisting the students gain access to local government executives with current 'real-world' experience, as well as promoting careers within the sector.

Kurt and I ran an evening session with a group of students. The questions were insightful and broad in scope. While we continued late into the evening, the time flew by. After handing out some small Australiana gifts, and putting a few people right about koalas (not koala bears!), we headed for home and the students went off to try and make sense of that Australian guy!

And now, on to the conference itself... The change of scenery was marked as I drove to Indian Wells for the annual conference, which is actually described as a departmental meeting. Indian Wells is very up market and looks fantastic against a backdrop of mountains and desert.



The conference ran over three days, commencing at lunchtime on the first day and ending at a similar time on day three. The programme followed traditional conference lines with a variety of themes, alternating between the keynote speakers and break-out sessions.

The general spread of topics were little different to those you might find here in Australia, in the UK or other developed nations. A mix of internally-facing and community-facing issues were addressed. I will just mention a few that caught my interest.

Technological advances and thinking were prominent. After all, we weren't far from Silicon Valley! One session involved presentations and discussion about the perceived failure of the 'gas (petrol) tax' and the notion that 'freeways aren't free'. The discussions ranged from options to tax motorists per mile travelled, rather than using the gas tax; through to electronic driverless cars, and many ideas in between.

The title of the second session I attended sounded really thought provoking, 'If City Managers Ruled The World'. This session explored the role of city managers in keeping costs low whilst also maintaining services. A familiar challenge, but not exactly what I had anticipated from the session title! The session evolved into an exploration of why a couple of councils had found themselves in dire financial circumstances, including my host council. The lessons were clear – a continual reluctance to heed the warning signs and failure to develop and maintain a healthy organisational culture. Presenters described the reactions of councillors, employees and the communities through the stages of: careering into bankruptcy; acknowledging and planning to recover from the situation; and during the recovery process itself.

I attended sessions on: the 'sharing economy' where we discussed the underutilisation of spaces and resources; 'survival skills', which was particularly relevant to post-election challenges for city managers (sounds familiar?); transitioning to a sustainable future (such as how to cope with parts of the San Francisco Bay area that will be under water by 2050); 'ethical bombs and how can I learn from others' mistakes'; and 'bringing forth the best in your elected officials'.

In summary, I would say that the conference was very stimulating and covered much territory that was equally relevant to Australia, albeit occasionally with a different environmental angle. Attendance was on par with the LGMA National Congress, which given California's size was not surprising. The interest of the local delegates in their three Australian visitors was significant and their hospitality, legendary.

Finally, it was time to leave Indian Wells and make way for the international tennis tournament. I stayed in California for a couple of weeks, joined by my wife, Diane, to soak up more of this amazing part of the world. We can highly recommend the drive from San Diego to San Francisco. The wording on the San Diego City and County Administration Building puts it very nicely: "Good governance demands the intelligent interest of every citizen." Well said, but as I reflect on the recent local government elections here in Queensland, I think we have a long way to go to achieve that.

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And finally, to Kurt's family (wife Regina, daughters Kennedy and Reagan and son Carter) for making me so welcome at their family home; and to Kurt's mother, Yvonne, for inviting me to stay over in Rialto for a couple of nights.

POST-SCRIPT

If you have read this far, thank you. If you have heard of this exchange programme before, or not, it remains a best kept secret. Why? I just don't know. Maybe it's the name that deters members from applying. I guess it is not really an exchange in that I didn't have to do someone else's job while I was away. It is an exchange of ideas and knowledge though. It's also far more than that. It's a great opportunity to learn and develop as a leader in local government; to represent Australian local government overseas (in a low-key way); and to enjoy the social aspects of conversations with some really great people who strive day in, day out, to achieve the same that we do. Don't let this remain a secret with little interest each year. Have a go – I did – and it was one of the best experiences of my career.

Nick Clarke