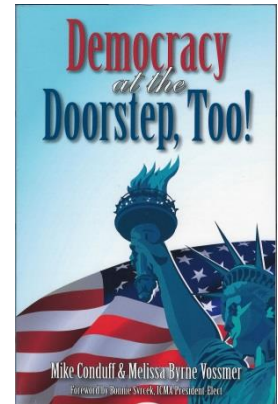


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### **Women Leading Government and How the Legacy of Women Supporting Women Began**

In June 2006, Sarona Vivanco, a bright, young Management Analyst from the City of Santa Clarita, California emailed me on behalf of Municipal Assistants of Southern California (MMASC), inviting me to serve on a panel to prepare emerging leaders for promotions. I remember my trip to Palm Desert just one month later for the conference because the temperature gauge on my car hit 126 degrees Fahrenheit. Even more memorable was the time in between sessions and after the panel when young, female managers pommelled me with questions about my career path, work/family balance, and tips for success. Their hunger for information on how a female can succeed in the profession astonished my sensibilities.

Just a year earlier Frank Benest recruited me to join Cal-ICMA's Preparing the Next Generation (PNG) team. Don Maruska and Frank poured their hearts into the effort and invited managers across California to answer the call of strengthening the pool of future leaders by developing the younger generation. Grim national statistics suggested that over 50 percent of all city jobs would be vacant within five years with few qualified candidates to fill the positions.

In late 2006, PNG met before the California Municipal League annual conference in Sacramento, California. Unable to attend the League conference, my calendar allowed me to attend the preconference session of the PNG meeting. That day, everything changed for women in our profession.

The two PNG co-chairs reviewed a list of activities underway that already revolutionized the preparation of future managers. These included Don Maruska's labor of love-coaching conference calls, pamphlets of career tips, workshops, mentoring, and publications. As the dialogue continued, several female city and county managers filled empty seats around the corner where I was perched. On a break, we talked about the success of the PNG efforts but lamented over the lack of focus on women. Reconvening, I took the bait when Frank asked, "Does anyone have other suggestions of how we can develop our future leaders?"

"Several of us," I began pointing to the small band of female managers, "feel there is a tremendous need to offer special assistance to young women. We want to help." I shared my experience from the recent MMASC conference. Several women spoke of similar experiences, emphasizing the need to engage this special population in our field.

Frank wasted no time. "You've got the lead, Penny. Tell us when you make progress." He asked for volunteers and appointed Robertta Burns, County Administrative Officer for Imperial County, to co-chair the effort. Robertta accepted the assignment eagerly along with several other women, who would become founding members of the effort later designated *Women Leading Government (WLG)*.

I do not remember much more that day other than wondering what I had gotten myself into. My work schedule already topped the ridiculous, *how much more could I ignore my family* range. My City Council had expressed concern that my adjunct teaching schedule at USC distracted from my 24-hour availability. Nonetheless, everyone involved agreed that helping women in our profession ranked high on the priority list.

Our impromptu committee met briefly after the PNG meeting. "Don't worry. We're all in this together," they said. I had no idea these women would become an immovable support base for the remainder of my career or that together we would build a national organization—the first to develop female city and county managers.

Women trail blazed the ranks of city and county management long before WLG. What astonished us was a report provided by founding member, Jan Perkins, that less than ten percent of all county managers and less than 21 percent of all local government managers were female at the time.

With women comprising over 50 percent of the US population, these statistics confirmed that substantial work needed to be done. Women needed to be ready to step in as leaders in our communities if the local government profession was going to fill the vacancies projected through the next five years. As well, representational democracy demanded that the abysmal statistics of female managers embrace and promote females to reflect the demographics of the communities we served.

The Disneyland Hotel offered our newly-appointed team free conference space, treats, and resources for our first meeting. To connect our geographically-challenged group, our host arranged for a lengthy conference call. Using complimentary notepads of mouse ears, we sketched out and recorded our first plans. Nine members became the founding membership to include: Robertta Burns, Penelope Culbreth-Graft, Jenny Haruyama, Irma Hernandez, Nancy Hetrick, Tamara Letourneau, Jan Perkins, Debra Rose, Cathy Standiford, and Sarona Vivanco.

Accessible, affordable, and inclusive. Those were the goals cited for our initial efforts. That afternoon, we agreed upon our name, identified our target membership, defined the population of women we wanted to serve, planned our first event, and created a mission statement: **To help women succeed in public service by enhancing career-building models that develop leadership skills and by networking professional women in government.**

In December 2006, the City of Huntington Beach, California approved funding of \$5,000 for the work of Women Leading Government. Within 30 days of our first meeting, our planning group included nine women with promises of more, committing to help at our first event. Energy from these outstanding women convinced me to learn to be a webmaster and launch a website. With my husband, William, standing with me, he plunked down the cash for a Go Daddy website under our [womenleadinggovernment.org](http://womenleadinggovernment.org) name. Within just 30 days, over 5,000 queries navigated the multi-page site that hosted stories of women managers, a calendar of events, and links to other websites to support young female managers in their careers.



Women gather in Rancho Cucamonga for the inaugural meeting of WLG

In March 2007, Pam Easter, Assistant City Manager of Rancho

Cucamonga, California hosted our Inaugural Round Table at her city's Victoria Gardens Community Center nestled in the foothills beneath Cucamonga Peak of the San Gabriel Mountains. Twenty-five women participated and set out a plan for meeting the needs of young women in local government. Wanting to take our support to local governments throughout the state of California, we planned our next round table for an Orange County location.

Jack and Susan Simpson had just begun their innovative, TRACKDOWN Management Services newswire, dedicating their second edition to WLG and California's Women City Managers. Providing detailed biographical sketches on 44 California female city managers, the newswire provided exposure throughout California to WLG's efforts. They lauded the commitment and contributions of WLG and female city managers to the profession. Other recognition of the work began to flow, bringing sponsorships for many of the activities to come.

Following our October 2007 Roundtable Luncheon at the Bower's Museum in Santa Ana, our membership list had grown to over 130 women. WLG joined with several other groups and events that supported women in management, including a Women's Leadership Summit sponsored by the Municipal Management Assistants of Northern California (MMANC). Women expressed excitement about the support they were now receiving and about how WLG and other efforts brought them together in a caring, professional way.

A small group of female students in my USC MPA class chose WLG for their class project. Using results from a survey created for our members, the students identified the needs of females in our profession, explored the potential for dues, and summarized a list of the most popular program ideas. Their findings encouraged us to push forward and expand the agenda to bring services to our future leaders. Development and networking remained our two priorities. As a bonus, two of the female students decided to pursue city management as a career, as a result of working with WLG City Managers.

The network continued to grow, as WLG formed its first official Board of Directors in November 2007. An oceanfront meeting at the newly-constructed junior lifeguard headquarters at the City of Huntington Beach became the backdrop for the first strategic planning session of WLG. Officers were named for 15 positions. I became the first Chair of the group with Tamara Letourneau, City Manager of Yorba Linda, California, agreeing to serve as Vice Chairman. Women from cities and counties all over California stepped into roles of support for the organization. In addition to formalizing our financial status as an organization, we named representatives for regions of the state and liaisons to various organizations such as the County Administrative Officers Association, California Association of Counties, the League of California Cities, and to Special Districts. WLG's first work plan included creating a national charter to support women in other states.

As the group's efforts reach new heights, I took the City Manager position in a large city in Colorado. Facing a \$90 million shortfall in my new city, my ability to continue leading the WLG effort waned. Tamara stepped up as Chair and continued leading the effort through a job change of her own. The group remained unified and committed to helping women. By the time I resigned, membership rolls topped 260 and new technology was needed to coordinate the growing group of professionals. ICMA pitched in by taking over responsibility for the website and integrating it into the national organization's database and website. Nationally



Jan Perkins presents a workshop for Colorado women as part of the national effort

recognized by ICMA, WLG has made it as one of America's top professional organizations for women in government.

Many of the original founding members are still involved in WLG today, as scores of women continue to join the effort. Adding a new goal, Jennifer Phillips, 2011-12 Chair, stated, "Our goal is to build not just a professional organization with a roster of quality individuals, but a network of active women that mentor and support each other in a purposeful way."

As I look back on my 32-year career in municipal management, I can attest that this group of amazing women had an impact on my life, helping and supporting me on my journey. Today in retirement, many of these women remain friends.

To the extraordinary women of local government leadership, I commend you and thank you for the contributions you make to our communities, our country, and our profession. To our future leaders, I encourage you to go boldly and share your new-found skills and strengths with the next generation.

*For more information about Women Leading Government, visit <http://icma.org/en/ca/programs/wlg>*