

Continuing Education – an investment in yourself and in your profession

Clerk speaks out about summer Clerks Institute at Cornell

By Eric S. Denk

If you can spare three and a half days of the summer, attending the Cornell Municipal Clerks Institute is a great way to spend your time.

Every summer since 2003, City, Town, Village, and Legislative Clerks from around New York State and beyond have gathered at Cornell University in Ithaca (Tompkins County) for the Cornell Municipal Clerks Institute. (I am told that a similar program was conducted at Syracuse University for many years but stopped.) It is three and a half days packed full of information about local government in New York, the use of technology and other tools for effective management of information and people.

If you don't already know this, the campus of Cornell University is magnificent. Lodging for the Institute is single-occupancy (unless you choose double) in an air conditioned residence hall. Meals have plenty of healthy choices and, there is plenty of time for walks in the evening and other relaxing activities throughout the week. Getting to "classes" can be accomplished by walking or taking a bus. Somewhere amidst farm land on a hill overlooking Cayuga Lake, a wise man had a vision about a hundred and fifty years ago. Seeing Cornell is an experience in and of itself. And, when you've spent 3 ½ days there you actually feel smarter.

The program is accredited by the International Institute of Municipal Clerks (IIMC). And, if you complete the three-year curriculum, you have 100% of the education required to be designated "Certified Municipal Clerk" (CMC) by the IIMC. (The CMC application also has an experience requirement that is separate from the education requirement.) The three-year curriculum is designed to meet IIMC educational requirements and is consistently relevant to local government in New York.

I first heard about the affiliation with Cornell in 2004 while visiting the web site of the IIMC. At the time, I was a new City Clerk interested in obtaining some credentials. I started the program in 2005 and planned to "graduate" in 2007. In my "class" were three City Clerks, two Village Clerks, two Town Clerks, two Town Clerk/Tax Collectors, one Village Clerk/Treasurer, one Deputy Village Treasurer, one Clerk of a County Legislative Board (Virginia Amico) and me. (After three years as City Clerk of the City of Binghamton, I became the Clerk of the Broome County Legislature.) With all of those different job titles and combinations, one might think, "how can the curriculum be relevant to everyone?" Well, the answer is, we all agreed that we learned from the instructors and from one another. And, while every minute of every presentation may not be directly related to our day to day activities, it helped us to understand local government better and perhaps to understand the job that the person down the hall does, too.

Twelve of us who started together in 2005 completed the three year program in 2007. I told them at every chance that “I did not come here to make friends; I came here to study and learn.” However, the camaraderie that developed is unavoidable and unmistakable. I now have a group of twelve “friends” in the industry – twelve people who I spent a total of ten and a half days with, who I learn from, and with whom I consult on various issues that come up throughout the year. It can be anything from dealing with Board Members (or Legislators) to records management, to staffing suggestions.

For a long time, I have been an advocate for education – both for professional development and personal development. That is why, from time to time, I take for-credit or non-credit classes at my local community college, cooperative extension, chamber of commerce, etc. Education is one of those things that, once you acquire it, no one can take it away from you; that is why I call it an investment. And like many things in life you get more out of it if you put some effort into it.

The Clerks Institute is not effort-free; there is a home study requirement that is due on the first day of each institute. This consists of assigned reading and an open book “test” all of which are neatly packaged and mailed to you about four weeks before the institute, if you are registered. The Clerks Institute is not free of charge either. It is a financial investment of about \$750.00, which includes 4 nights of lodging, ten meals, parking, and a buss pass. Some Clerks have the fee paid for by their employers, and others pay for it themselves. Most do a combination of both. There is even scholarship money available from IIMC as well as other sources such as the NYS Association of Town Clerks, and the NYS Association of City and Village Clerks to name two. The experience culminates with a catered banquet, at which the Clerks who have completed three years in the program receive a certificate. Many past graduates of the program attend the banquet as do leaders in the various state Clerk associations. Spouses and other guests are also welcome to attend the banquet as well. The cost for guests to attend the banquet is about \$75 for guests, but this fee is included with the registration fee for Institute participants.

Registration begins in March of every year and may be done through the mail or over the internet. And the Institute is usually the last full week of July. Arrival is on Sunday late afternoon and the program ends at lunchtime on Thursday. I encourage you to seriously consider this opportunity. If it means going to your Board and asking for extra money, do it. If it means shifting some responsibility to other staff members, do it. I believe it is worth whatever personal and professional sacrifices you have to make to invest four days of your life (12 days if you complete all three years) in this worthwhile program. You will be a more valuable employee and you will enhance your professional and personal development.

To learn more about the Cornell Municipal Clerks Institute, visit www.clgp.aem.cornell.edu/clerks.htm

Denk has been the Clerk of the Broome County Legislature since January 2007. Prior to that, he was the City of Binghamton City Clerk for three years.