

MMA, Margaret Chase Smith Center pair up for internships

The center's internship program recently expanded to include municipal internship opportunities. In 2018, Maine Municipal Association steps forward to help.

By Eric Conrad, Editor

The Summer Internship Program run by the University of Maine's Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center expanded its offerings a few years ago to include municipal government. Since then, several municipalities have participated in the center's program, teaching Maine college students about the workings of local government and helping to build a municipal work force of tomorrow.

This year, Maine Municipal Association will play a role as well.

Executive Director Stephen Gove announced last month that MMA will offer three \$1,500 awards – two to members with fewer than 7,500 residents and one to a member with more than 7,500 residents – as a way to encourage municipalities to consider hiring interns, through the Margaret Chase Smith Center's time-honored program.

Like many of us, Gove, a University of Maine alumnus, recalls his days as an intern more than a few years ago, when he was attending graduate school at Boston University. That internship experience opened Gove's eyes to public policy and government, and set him on a career path leading to his current position at MMA.

He described municipal internship opportunities available through the Margaret Chase Smith center as win-win.

"The (MMA) Executive Committee has identified the importance of municipal government internships as a way to introduce students to city and town careers, make professional connections and engage in meaningful work experiences," Gove said. "Municipalities gain from the opportunity to hire students with fresh perspectives who can contribute to the community."

The deadline to apply to both the

Margaret Chase Smith Center internship program and to MMA for a chance at winning a \$1,500 award is coming right up – March 1. Details are available at both organization's websites (www.MCSpolicycenter.umaine.edu and www.memun.org). MMA will literally draw names from a bowl to select its award recipients.

There is no secret that towns and cities need new blood.

Like virtually every other employment sector in the state, municipal government is seeing employees approach retirement and – actually retire. Our state, one of the oldest in the nation, is graying. Employers are competing for the young adults who live in Maine and those who will consider moving here.

Internship workshop

On Jan. 25, MMA hosted a workshop on the Margaret Chase Smith Center's internship program and MMA's new financial incentive. Peggy McKee, who oversees the center's program, outlined its goals, outcomes and value.

The internship program dates to 1967, she said, and was primarily aimed at helping state agencies. The Margaret Chase Smith Center took it over in 1990. In recent years, municipal internship opportunities were added.

Upon learning that municipal in-

ternships may be available, McKee said, many students say they had "no idea this many careers in city and town management existed." The feedback from students has been very positive, she said.

"And I have to say, hiring interns is a really inexpensive way to get a certain job done" for a municipality, she said.

"The students who apply to this program are passionate about staying in Maine," said McKee. "They care about their communities and they take ownership of their projects."

Union Town Manager Jay Feyler, who serves on the center's internship selection committee and who has guided several interns in his community, said the key to hiring a municipal intern is making the opportunity mutually valuable. Feyler offered a list of things for towns and cities not to do when an intern is brought on board:

- Don't run out of work (internships run from May 29 to Aug. 17).
- Don't have them do all "menial" work.
- Don't put them in a job all summer that mismatches their skill set.
- Don't ignore them. (No desk with a laptop stuck in the way back utility room.)
- Don't smother them.

Laurie Smith, town manager in Kennebunkport and immediate past

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president of MMA, said a key trait for interns to possess is flexibility.

"The No. 1 thing you need in an intern is someone who's flexible and adaptable," she said. "Their roles might change after they start."

Augusta City Manager William Bridgeo, who also serves on the MMA Executive Committee, and who teaches classes at Thomas College and the University of Maine at Augusta, said: "Interns aren't cheap labor. And they shouldn't be cheap labor."

The experience must be valuable to the student, he said. "I think that's really the key."

Bridgeo noted that the municipal government work force is aging pretty much across the board. "We have a demographic tsunami that's going to hit us as municipal people," he said. "It's already started. It's only going to get worse."

Stephen Gove, MMA's executive director, said that's why MMA's support for the Margaret Chase Smith Center's internship program represents just one part of a multi-pronged effort to make Mainers of all ages more aware of municipal careers.


MMA in late January launched an extensive video and social media campaign called "HoMEtown Careers," which aims to educate citizens that many opportunities, offering solid

employment prospects, exist here in Maine, working for towns and cities.


Maine Town & City magazine will report more fully on that effort next month, in its March issue. ■

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