

Summer Internship Programs

It's a winning proposition, with communities getting assistance and students being exposed to the breadth of possibilities that await them in local government service.

By Stephanie Bouchard

Municipalities everywhere are struggling to fill open positions today and are concerned about the pipeline of future municipal employees. A Maine government internship program established by the State Legislature in 1967 continues to be a dependable workforce resource for state agencies and, in more recent years, towns and cities across the state.

The Maine Government Summer Internship Program of the University of Maine's Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center, at its core, provides students with hands-on experience, but internships are really a triple-whammy win, said Peggy McKee, the internship program's director.

Students get valuable experience, yes, but the state agencies and the municipalities get important work done that they don't have staff time to devote to, and, maybe most crucially given the workforce situation, it introduces students to opportunities in state and local government that the students didn't know existed.

"Most of the students that we place in municipal internships really don't know what municipal government does," said McKee. "Most students don't think of municipal government as a career path just because they don't know about it." Given that, the program encourages municipal supervisors to introduce their interns to all aspects of municipal government, not just whatever role they're filling in the internship.

"We ask the students at the end of the summer after they've finished their internship, 'Would you now consider government as a career path?' and most of them say yes," she said. "Most of the students come into their municipal positions really not knowing what's involved, and that's where there's a huge amount of learning."

Last winter, Evan Ma, now a senior at Bates College in Lewiston, went looking for a summer internship he could do in Maine. As an environmental studies major, he thought he may end up working for a land trust or an organization like



Peggy McKee



Intern picnic (Submitted photo)

that, but then he came across the Maine Government Summer Internship Program and was intrigued. "I really wasn't sure what to expect from it," he said.

He had no experience with municipal government, and when he considered his future career path, he thought if he worked in government at all, it would be for a national agency, such as the Environmental Protection Agency. But his summer internship for the city of Auburn as a planning and rezoning assistant expanded his thinking.

"I think that the internship over the summer kind of showed me that it might not be possible to always make the huge impact on that national scale, but the things that I was doing in the office were impacting, like, a whole community. It was about a public water supply for two cities. So, it felt really important," he said. "It felt like important stuff that I was doing."

Ma's internship centered around controversial and complicated zoning and ordinance changes that the city is still pondering, but not all internships need to be so high profile. Internship projects span a spectrum of jobs, from running a municipality's social media platforms to assisting the town manager to helping a community wrap their heads around potential climate impacts on vulnerable infrastructure, so municipal leaders shouldn't think that they can't request an intern because they don't have a "big" project to offer, said McKee. The program team is happy to help towns and cities flesh out internship ideas and to put people in touch with other municipalities who can share their own intern experiences, she said.

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(Submitted photo)

To get you started, here are the basics about the program:

Go here for all program information: <https://mcspolicycenter.umaine.edu/for-students/maine-government-summer-internship-program/>.

Students and municipal/state supervisors apply to the program at the same time, beginning on February 1. The application for the 2023 program will be posted online before the application period begins, McKee said.

To be eligible for the program, students must be enrolled in an undergraduate or graduate program at a college in Maine or be a Maine resident attending college out-of-state. At the start of the internship,

the students must have completed a minimum of two years of college.

Interns work full-time for 12 weeks from mid- to late-May until mid-August. Municipalities are responsible for paying the interns a salary. The minimum rate is based on what the state pays entry-level employees, which in 2022 was \$15 an hour. The minimum rate for 2023 won't be determined until January. Interns can be paid more than the minimum rate, said McKee.

Municipalities pay a \$250 administrative fee that is billed to them during the summer and is only billed if the municipality actually gets an intern.



Interns in Senate (Submitted photo)

Interns making a big difference in communities

Last year, the Maine Government Summer Internship Program placed interns in 52 jobs. Sixteen of those interns worked for municipalities from all over the state, from Houlton to Bridgton. Here's a look at what three of those interns did for the communities of Auburn, China and New Gloucester.

Auburn

Intern: **Evan Ma**, Environmental Studies Major at Bates College
Internship Role: City Planning and Rezoning Assistant

As the city of Auburn worked toward making some zoning changes and some complicated septic system ordinance changes that would impact the Lake Auburn watershed, many questions and concerns came from the planning board and residents. The planning and permitting department used Ma to answer those questions. He dug through property files, used GIS technology to build maps to illustrate various scenarios, compiled and analyzed data, and created a presentation of his findings and conclusions. It was incredibly valuable work for the city said two employees who worked closely with Ma, Eric Cousens, the city's director of planning and permitting, and John Blais, the deputy director of planning and permitting. The work Ma did brought clarity to many of the questions people had, they said, and has brought about amendments to some of the proposals. "Once he started wrapping his arms around the idea and getting information out to the community, he really took a real leap forward in terms of his engagement," said Blais. "I think he worked beyond what we expected in terms of abilities."



Evan Ma



Savannah Clark

China

Intern: **Savannah Clark**, History Major at the University of Maine
Internship Role: Cemetery Project Coordinator

As the interest in genealogy has grown, the town office staff have fielded more and more cemetery records requests, said Julie Finley, China's deputy clerk. Since the town of China's cemetery records were all paper, it took staff considerable time to dig through maps, records, and books to find information. They really wanted to put all those records online and make them easily accessible to themselves and to the public. The town used Clark to build a cemetery records database that's now live on the town's website. Because the front desk can get so busy, Finley

needed someone who could work independently, and Clark, who had done the same thing for Vassalboro when she interned there the prior summer, was just what Finley needed. "I was really, really pleased with the match (the program team) made for us because it was perfect," she said. Clark entered the information from the paper records, went to the town's cemeteries and got photos of gravestones, researched obituaries and added those to individual records, and even created a list of broken gravestones so that the town knows which ones need to be fixed. "She did a fabulous job," said Finley. "I can't say enough good about that girl. She was just incredible."

New Gloucester

Intern: **Hung Nguyen**, Mechanical Engineering Major at the University of Southern Maine
Internship role: Public Works Road Analyzer

The town of New Gloucester needed to have someone spend a few weeks analyzing, classifying, and entering road condition data into a program that the town can use to understand the condition of its roads and to plan road maintenance and upgrades, said Christine Landes,



Hung Nguyen with Christine Landes

now the town manager of Chelsea, but who was New Gloucester's town manager last summer when Nguyen interned in the public works department. It was the sort of project that was important but that got put off because staff time was taken up with other things, she said.

Within days of starting, Nguyen fit into the whole team, Landes said. The guys in the public works garage particularly took Nguyen under their wing - including teaching Nguyen how to fix a flat tire. "I think (the internship) definitely helped me with education," Nguyen said. And it provided a wide range of experiences. Besides being on the road inspecting road conditions, Nguyen also spent time with each department, from finance to the public library. By the end of the internship, the town had a valuable roads data set and a solid understanding of the conditions of its roads, said Landes, which will allow the town to better prioritize and budget. And if the town keeps the data up-to-date, it's a tool it'll be able to use well into the future.