

Profiles in Management: Chris Mann

What inspired you to enter city management?

I got my start in local government early in life. At 23, I was elected to the city council in Westlake Village and served as mayor at 26. During that time, I took a great deal of inspiration from longtime Westlake city manager Ray Taylor, who ultimately served in that role for 25 years. To this day — more than two decades later — I still find myself asking, “What would Ray do in this situation?”

Later in my career, while working as an analyst and then deputy chief of staff for a member of the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors, I was often in awe of then-County CEO Greg Devereaux. I made a very conscious effort to observe and learn from his management style. It was during that period that I realized city management was where I wanted to land professionally. I find the tangible nature of local government, and the unrivaled opportunity to have a real, visible impact on people's daily lives, absolutely intoxicating.



How did you become a city manager?

My path was not a straight line and it certainly was not traditional, but in hindsight, it makes a lot of sense. Along the way, I served as a city council member and mayor, a water board director, worked in legislative and executive roles, ran a public affairs firm for many years and even spent a short time in real estate development. Those experiences gave me a deep appreciation for governance, politics, communications and organizational leadership.

Eventually, city management felt like the natural place where all of those skill sets came together. That said, with such a varied and unconventional background, landing my first city manager role was not easy. Once I made the decision to pursue that path, I applied broadly — city manager, assistant city manager, assistant to the city manager, management analyst roles in city manager's offices — anything that remotely made sense. It took several years to find the right opportunity with the right community and the right council.

That opportunity finally came in 2019 with the city of Canyon Lake. The city council was looking for someone willing to get creative in addressing a long-standing and serious budget deficit that had become an existential threat to cityhood. I had done my homework and came into the interview with proposed solutions. Those ideas resonated with the council, as did the mix of public and private sector experience I brought to the table.

The night I was appointed was one of the most exciting moments of my professional life. I will always be incredibly grateful to that council for giving me the first opportunity to prove myself in this profession.

What do you enjoy most about your role?

What I enjoy most is the opportunity to help shape a community in a meaningful way. There is something incredibly energizing about knowing that the decisions you help implement, the culture you help set and the teams you help lead can have a real, lasting impact on how a city functions and how people experience their community.

I especially value the moments when everything clicks — when the council is aligned on direction, staff feel supported and empowered and the organization is moving forward with clarity and purpose. Those moments do not happen by accident, and being part of creating that alignment is deeply rewarding.

I also thrive on the variety and intensity of the work. No two days are the same, and the challenges are rarely simple. That constant problem-solving, combined with the responsibility of stewarding an organization and a community, is what keeps the role both challenging and fulfilling.

Outside of my day-to-day work, that same passion is what led me to launch [Gov360](#), a podcast focused on leadership, governance and the realities of city management. It has become a way to reflect on the profession, share lessons learned and connect with other local government leaders across the country. At its core, it reinforces what I enjoy most about this role — thoughtful leadership, continuous learning and helping communities and organizations perform at their best.

What role does a city manager play in local government, and how does it differ from that of a council member or mayor?

The city manager serves as the professional chief executive of the organization, responsible for translating the city council's policy direction into day-to-day operations and long-term results. While council members and the mayor are elected to represent the community, set priorities and make policy decisions, the city manager's role is to ensure those decisions are implemented effectively, legally and in a way that reflects the council's collective intent.

Having served both as an elected official and as a city manager, I have a deep appreciation for how important this distinction is. In fact, I am passionate about the council-manager form of government. Elected officials are accountable to the voters and bring the community's values and priorities into the policy arena. The city manager, in turn, provides professional judgment, operational expertise and continuity, helping the council understand the practical implications of its decisions and ensuring the organization can actually deliver on them.

At its best, the council-manager relationship is a true partnership built on trust and clarity of roles. The city manager advises, executes and leads the organization, while the council governs and sets direction. When those boundaries are respected and communication is strong, the result is better decision-making, a healthier organization and a more effective and trustworthy local government.

What does your typical day look like?

There really is no such thing as a typical day, and that is one of the things I enjoy most about the role. Some days start with strategic conversations about long-term priorities, while others begin with an unexpected issue that needs immediate attention. The job requires being comfortable shifting quickly between big-picture thinking and very practical problem-solving.

Most days involve time with department directors and senior staff, working through policy questions, operational challenges or personnel matters. I also spend a significant amount of time coordinating with the city council, preparing for meetings, discussing agenda items and making sure there is clarity around direction and expectations. Just as important, though, is the time spent thinking ahead: identifying risks, anticipating challenges and positioning the organization to respond before issues become crises.

A large part of the role is relationship-based. Much of my day is spent listening — whether to staff, elected officials, residents or regional partners — and helping people navigate complex or sensitive situations. Some of the most important work happens in conversations that never make it onto an agenda, but that help build trust, align perspectives and keep the organization moving forward in a healthy way.

And like many city managers, I am also very intentional about balance. I do my best to structure my day so I can make it home in time to see my five-year-old son and two-year-old daughter before they head off to bed. That window may be short, but it matters. It is a daily reminder that while this work is important, so is being present for the people who matter most.

What city project are you most proud of?

I tend to be most proud of moments rather than individual projects. Leading organizations through periods of fiscal stress, organizational change or heightened public tension, and leaving them stronger, more stable and more resilient than when I arrived, is ultimately more meaningful to me than any single facility or initiative.

That said, I take great pride in having played a central role in turning around the finances of two cities that were facing staggering structural budget deficits when I stepped into the city manager role. In both cases, the challenges were not just financial but existential, requiring difficult conversations, creative solutions and sustained discipline over time.

Building a brand new fire department from the ground up also stands out as a career highlight. It required assembling a team, establishing culture and delivering a critical public safety service from scratch, work that had an immediate and lasting impact on the community. Similarly, helping lead the successful passage of a sales tax measure in a politically conservative city, with more than 60 percent voter approval, was especially rewarding. This was particularly meaningful given that a smaller tax measure had failed decisively just a few years earlier. It reinforced the importance of clear communication, transparency and credibility with the community.

More broadly, I take pride in being able to say that in each city I have served as city manager, I have accomplished every goal established for me by the city council. That alignment between council priorities and organizational execution is something I work hard to achieve, and it is ultimately how I measure success in this role.

What are the greatest challenges facing city managers in the state today?

City managers are operating in an environment that is more complex and demanding than ever. Fiscal pressures, workforce recruitment and retention challenges, heightened public scrutiny and increasing polarization all converge at the local level, often simultaneously.

Layered on top of those traditional challenges is a relatively new dynamic. Social media toxicity and the rise of online “keyboard warriors” have fundamentally changed how local government is perceived and discussed. Misinformation can spread quickly, facts can be distorted and context is often lost in favor of outrage. In some cases, this has given rise to a politics of personal destruction, where professional administrators become targets not for policy outcomes, but for simply doing their jobs.

There is also a growing tendency among some segments of the public to politicize the role of the city manager. The council-manager form of government is built on professional, nonpartisan administration, yet city managers are increasingly pulled into political conflicts that blur governance boundaries and undermine trust in the model itself.

Balancing transparency, responsiveness and professional standards in this environment is challenging, particularly while also protecting staff and maintaining organizational stability. It requires resilience, clarity of role, strong relationships with the city council and a steady commitment to professionalism, even when the external environment is anything but steady.

When and how do you interact with the residents of your city?

I interact with residents through council meetings, community events, civic groups and informal conversations throughout the city. While the city manager is not a political representative, being visible, approachable and willing to listen is essential. Those interactions help ground decisions in real community perspectives.

What is the role of a city manager in upholding the public's trust in local government?

Trust is not something that can be demanded. It is earned over time through consistency, integrity and professionalism, especially when decisions are difficult or unpopular. The city manager plays a critical role in setting the tone for the organization by modeling ethical behavior, ensuring policies are implemented fairly and communicating clearly and honestly with both elected officials and the public.

In my experience, trust is built in the small, everyday moments as much as in the big ones. It shows up in how staff are treated, how decisions are explained and how the organization responds when it makes a mistake. When residents see a city that operates predictably, follows through on its commitments and acts in good faith, confidence in local government grows. Even when people disagree with an outcome, they are more likely to trust the process, and that trust is essential to a healthy community and a functioning organization.

How are cities shaping the future of California?

Cities are where California's biggest challenges stop being abstract and start becoming real. Issues like housing, infrastructure, economic development, climate adaptation and community safety are not solved in theory at the local level. They are solved through practical decisions, trade-offs and day-to-day leadership in cities and towns across the state.

What inspires me is how much innovation happens quietly at the local level. With limited resources and often under intense scrutiny, cities are finding creative ways to deliver services, build partnerships and respond to change. The work may not always make headlines, but it shapes how people live, work and experience their communities.

Ultimately, the future of California will be determined less by broad policy statements and more by the cumulative impact of thousands of local decisions made thoughtfully and responsibly. City councils, managers and staff across the state play a critical role in that future; it is a responsibility I take very seriously and one that continues to energize and motivate me every day.

January 6th, 2026

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