



## Charming Town Doesn't Seek a Manager



As part of our ongoing INSIGHTS series, we are launching a new three-part exploration focused on one of the most critical challenges facing local governments today: hiring, retaining, and managing transitions in leadership.

Building on last year's interviews with NWCCOG municipal and county managers, this series will delve into:

1. Hiring Challenges & Best Practices – What makes a successful recruitment process in today's competitive job market?
2. Retention Strategies – How do organizations keep top talent engaged and supported?
3. Interim Management & Leadership Transitions – What happens when a key leader leaves, and how can we ensure continuity?

This series will be shared over the next few weeks, including insights gathered from conversations with regional managers, industry trends, and real-world experiences from our communities. Enjoy the first installment, and as always, I welcome your thoughts and feedback!

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On September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2024 the Grand Lake (GL) Board appointed respected, long-time... *and then current* Mayor, Steve Kudron to be [Interim Manager until "a new manager is hired"](#). Five months later, on February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2025, GL announced Kudron as the sole finalist for the position. It was a one sentence Public Notice: The Board will convene February 24<sup>th</sup> for "possible approval of an employment

agreement.” This set in motion the two-week waiting period per state law.

The back story: September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2024, Grand Lake (pop. 405) “fell out” with a career manager [81 days](#) after starting. Going out, he drafted a scathing letter. The town wasn’t in turmoil just a couple of months before, so it was a surprise. Yet it wasn’t. Grand Lake is a challenging place to find a good fit for a Town Manager (TM). That short-lived manager replaced a well-liked 5-year TM who moved on for a unique opportunity to start a new town. I was there when both were hired.



For context, it means *something* about the town or the manager or both when a TM leaves after less than three months. *What* it means is rarely simple to discern. ICMA (International City Managers Association) [Code of Ethics with Guidelines](#) recommend a manager commit to a minimum of 24 months Length of Service and have an Appointment Commitment, that is, shouldn’t continually seek other work. Those commitments don’t always pan out. The record for a flash-in-the-pan tenure may be in Pennsylvania - [48 hrs.](#)

Rapid exits have a lot of implications that can make recruitment difficult. It also raises questions. Does a small town *need* a manager? Specifically, does such a place need someone educated or trained to be a TM?

Yes, a town needs a designated, non-elected manager. No, that person doesn’t need to be a professional manager. Eight times in my 8 years in this role in this region, I’ve facilitated or assisted with a Town Manager search for either Fraser (pop. 1,456, two managers, one interim) or Dillon (pop. 1,016); while the other four times involved the Town of Grand Lake including 2 interims. To not have a manager independent of the board running the town creates a thicket of chiggers. This is a bit of a contradiction given my history. I was a mayor, later hired to be manager in the same town. Local knowledge can be more impactful than someone on a career ladder. Some skills and temperaments, I believe, cross artificial career boundaries. There are guiding values, there is no general rule.

Across NWCCOG, four of the smallest towns (1-6 FTE) operate quite satisfactorily with a clerk/administrator -- Walden, Red Cliff, Montezuma and Hot Sulphur Springs. In fact, they operate exceptionally efficiently when paired with a very-involved Mayor who basically volunteers their time to the town where they reside, recent examples include [Jim Dustin](#) or [Robert McVay](#). I have trouble imagining an outside person who would have done better than either. A series of Mayors in Red Cliff spearheaded bringing broadband to town... for a decade before it happened. Why don’t we just hire the most successful, smartest, most respected local businessperson to be the manager?

The questions about hiring a local reverberate with gossip, opinions and questions about civic norms. Do we need people trained for public jobs? Shouldn’t any businessperson be able to run a town?

It was a deliberate process over time to turn against local governance that often fell into nepotism, corruption and fraud. Local Control was shorthand for Jim Crow for many years before being used for exclusionary zoning, and a spoils system where friends and family were rewarded with government jobs -- without any actual qualifications. The structure that included a professional manager, and a merit system for hiring public employees was designed to counter these issues. Local governance and professionalism have existed in tension for years. Following the Pendleton Act which brought the Civil Service reforms much like what I just described, the federal government thereafter demanded similar reforms (nearly 150 by some counts today) to qualify for federal dollars. After 1964, grantees also needed to adhere to anti-discrimination laws to be eligible. Given that history, it isn’t surprising that some people associate public professionals as elitist. This all may sound like ancient history to some except that today those professional and cultural “values” are being turned upside down by the federal government.

Locally in Western Colorado, some places are ‘on the bubble’ for needing a public manager -- Walden and Kremmling come to mind, both currently without Managers. The latter is a town with under 20 FTE (half of whom are police) with an open position. The budget and scale of these town operations make it difficult to recruit and retain professional TMs, not to mention their remote locations. What these places can afford to pay and what they need to attract talent “feels” like an obscene amount of money paid to an outside person in relation to the wages for most other jobs.

Many of the crosscurrents between a town manager who is trained for that work and someone who arises from the community is that one feels the moral tension when unfair local deals are proposed. At least in Grand Lake, unlike other nearby towns, the Manager’s exit did not follow turmoil from a lawsuit over the actions of a town employee or [police department](#) scandal, [fraud](#) in the clerk’s or finance office -- glaring conflicts of interest or other questionable actions by a board or Mayor. The entire concept of a professionally trained manager was to prevent these issues and steer around them. Not all lawsuits are about personnel issues or fraud, like this one over a [pothole in Walden](#). Professionally trained managers follow a code of ethics, have at least a college degree, usually a Masters, and are expected to be much more attuned to oversight.



As for commitments from board to manager, that is another thing altogether. TM separations occasionally occur the very evening new board members are sworn in after an election – [Hello, Kremmling](#). As an aside, if I had my way, a board wouldn't be able to separate a TM without cause within 3 or 6 months of a board election. Trustees gain considerable perspective on running a town in their first year. When I was a Trustee, I regularly spoke with newly elected peers who wanted to fire a longtime manager. I asked them to come back if they still thought so after 90 days. They rarely did.

For Grand Lake, is it probably “felt right” to appoint the most recent Mayor. He has experience in private management, running a local business as well as years of understanding how the town operates. I get it. If citizens in town are troubled with it - that is what this 14-day waiting period was for – get on the phone.

Writing this piece, I was surprised at how much turnover there has been. Only Klint in Snowmass, Jon in Pitkin, the Ryans in Silverthorne and Basalt, and Michelle in Blue River have been at their posts longer than my 8 years at NWCCOG, that's 5 of 22, and most of them were hired soon before I began. I love little Grand Lake and wish it the best, hopefully next time they invite me back for something less complex, like a board retreat.

Can Grand Lake appoint Kudron Manager without a competitive hiring process? Yes. No one in Grand Lake asked me, but I see the wisdom in this decision, unconventional as it is. This newsletter originated with a call from the Ski-Hi News requesting thoughts on the current Mayor becoming the Town Manager in Grand Lake. It was written before the town announced Steve Kudron as the new Town Manager. Congrats to Steve.

What do you think about the challenges of finding a TM? Email me at [stavnay@nwccog.org](mailto:stavnay@nwccog.org).

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