

Profile in Public Service: Webster City Secretary Pauline Small

By Rachael Pitts

TML Director of Member Services

Webster City Secretary Pauline Small is an example of the hundreds of hard-working, dedicated city officials serving small cities in Texas. We think it is important to profile these public servants from time to time.



Pauline Small has served a total of 31 years in municipal government. She currently serves as city secretary for the City of Webster and has held that position for 12 years.

Born and raised in Houston, Pauline earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Houston. She is a trustee on the board of the Texas Municipal Clerks

Association, where she has earned her Texas Registered Municipal Clerk designation and was awarded the 2007 Texas Municipal Clerk of the Year by her colleagues. She also has earned her Master Municipal Clerk designation through the International Institute of Municipal Clerks.

Pauline met her husband Rick on a blind date while attending the University of Houston. They have been married for 41 years and have two children, Aimee and Clay. Aimee is a high school drama teacher, and Clay works in the restaurant/catering industry. Admittedly a workaholic, Pauline enjoys gardening and is taking a more active interest in photography.

How did you get started in city government?

Before moving to Webster, we lived in Sealy for 27 years. I worked for the *Bellville Times* newspaper and then went to work for the City of Sealy. I started out in the utility department, and then I had the added duties of accounts payable and payroll until I was appointed city secretary.

Of course, being in a small city of 6,000, I was also responsible for personnel, risk management, tax collections, and if the council chambers needed vacuuming, I did that, too. I also had many volunteer roles in my church and the community.

What are your core responsibilities?

My responsibilities are to execute city council policies, programs, and directives; ensure the accuracy and integrity of all city records; conduct city operations in an efficient and effective manner; and respond promptly to citizen inquiries and requests. I am also secretary for the Webster Economic Development Corporation Board.

My position is a statutory position required by state law and city charter, and my duties include scheduling all city council agenda development and acting as chief administrator of municipal elections. I am responsible for legal notifications; taking minutes for the city council and the Webster Economic Development Corporation Board; public information requests; issuing various permits, including alcohol, video game, tow, and mobile home park permits; maintaining city vehicle registrations; and supervising all reception duties.

Walk us through a typical day.

City offices are open 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday and 7:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. on Fridays. I usually arrive at about 6:45 or 7:00 a.m. I like to go through my e-mails and organize my day before the day's activity begins. I also like to talk to my staff and see if there are any issues that need to be discussed or addressed that day.

I visit with the city manager and inquire if he has any requests from the city council; if he does, I log those for tracking purposes. The city manager reports to the council, and I report to the council, but we have a great working relationship and respect each others' positions. I am very fortunate to have a city manager who considers the city secretary as part of the management team.

I listen to my messages and always try to return calls promptly. I may not have an answer to their inquiry, but it is important to contact them and let them know you are working on their problem and will get back to them in a timely manner. If we have any activity that may end up on television or the newspaper, I call each councilmember to make them aware of any possible publicity. I guess this is the era of instant communication, and I spend a great deal of my day answering e-mails.

I guess I have to say that there is no typical day in the life of a city secretary. My day is one of constant interruption and multi-tasking. The only typical thing is the unexpected interruptions. You never know what to expect, as each ring of the telephone presents a new problem or situation.

What are your short-term and long-term goals for your office?

The short-term goal for my office is the implementation of a contract management program. Currently, the city has many service contracts that are not housed in one central file but in various departments. For efficiency and fiscal tracking, I am implementing a program that houses all city contracts in one central file. This will help us in tracking expiration dates as well. With the assistance of each city department, this central depository and tracking should prevent any duplication of services.

My long-term goal is city-wide records management. My staff, with the full cooperation of several departments, has worked diligently to have paperless agendas, and we are now in the process of scanning document files and putting them into an electronic format. Our council, economic development corporation board, planning and zoning commission, and animal control board packets are paperless.

My next task is assisting all departments with scanning their vital records and to dispose of the paper. This will save the city storage space and provide protection for our documents in case of disaster, especially in our hurricane-prone area. Records are the life of the city, and it is so important that they be preserved for day-to-day business and historical value.

What makes Webster unique?

I believe everything about Webster is unique. We have a census population of 9,084, but a daytime population of about 100,000. This daytime surge is due to our 100-plus fine restaurants, hospitals, major medical facilities, proximity to NASA, 17 hotels, more than 24 entertainment venues—all in a 6.7-square-mile area. This, coupled with our resident population, makes us unique. We have several apartment complexes, but only about 400 single-family homes.

Webster still has the small hometown touch and the feel of community. We are a diversified population but have so many long-time residents who take care of each other. The city council reflects that care and concern for its citizens and its employees in its actions. During the majority of my tenure, I have had the same councilmembers. This shows the stability and forward thinking of this dedicated group of individuals serving this community. It is this combination of factors that make me feel fortunate to serve this council and this community.

VACANCIES

on the Texas Municipal League (TML) Small Cities Advisory Council

The TML Small Cities Advisory Council (SCAC) advises the TML Board of Directors and staff on ways the League's services to small cities can be expanded or modified, consistent with TML's resources and the needs of the organization as a whole. The SCAC meets three times a year and is made up of a dedicated and diverse group of elected and appointed officials in cities with populations less than 15,000 from each of TML's 15 regions.

There are currently vacancies on the council that need to be filled by city officials in TML regions 2, 3, 6, 9, 10, 12, 13, 15, and 16. To find what TML region your city is in, visit the TML Web site, www.tml.org, or refer to the *Texas City Officials Directory*.

Contact Rachael Pitts with the League staff at rpitts@tml.org or 512-231-7472 for more information or if you would like to be considered for a position on the SCAC.

What do you see as the city's most pressing issues?

As with so many other cities across the state and nation, our city's pressing issue is to provide services to our citizens and maintain fiscal responsibility in these trying economic times. Webster is unique in that our budget revenues are almost entirely derived from sales tax. Our property tax is only \$.23/\$100.

As stated in this year's budget message, during this economic downturn, sales tax revenue has fallen to a level not seen since 2006, and the unknown effect of NASA's shift away from manned spaceflight—and its impact on the major employer in the area—adds instability to the local economy and the city's revenue stream.

The city council's priority is to take the necessary steps to meet these fiscal challenges. We, along with so many other cities, have initiated cost savings procedures in the areas of personnel benefits, recreational programs, and capital improvement projects.

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Small Cities' Corner

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The City of Webster is located close to NASA's Johnson Space Center and is midway between downtown Houston and Galveston. The city has a census population of 9,084 residents, but hosts a daytime population of about 100,000.

The City of Webster's Recent Accomplishments:

- Instituted expansion of fire department personnel to provide 24-hour coverage at one fire station.
- Successfully negotiated a Hurricane Ike Recovery Grant with the Texas Department of Rural Affairs.
- Received the GFOA Distinguished Budget Award

What advice can you offer a city secretary just starting off?

The most important advice I can give is to enter the Texas Municipal Clerks Certification Program. For city secretaries to serve their cities, it is essential that they have the tools and knowledge of the law and procedures of a municipal government, including election procedures. It is a sobering responsibility to know that something improperly posted, an election irregularity, a notification not timely given—could cost the city a great deal of money, void and delay council action, or cause the expense for another election.

The city secretary should know that he or she is the keeper of the records of that city. We protect these records that belong to the citizens. Our code of ethics says it best, in that our role is "to record that which is true and preserve that which is entrusted to us as if it were our own; to be ever mindful of our neutrality and impartiality; (and) to conduct our public and private life as to be an example to fellow citizens and co-workers."

Also, if you do not know an answer or have a question, call the Texas Municipal Clerks Association, the secretary of state, or the Texas Municipal League. They will help or direct you on where to find the solution to your questions. One more thing that is very important: Treat your council equally, and keep them informed on an equal basis.

The municipal clerk profession is not something that I said, "Hey, I want to be a city secretary when I grow up." It just sort of happened for me. I was working in one department and was asked if I wanted the job after the city

for the annual budget and the Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting.

- Implemented a comprehensive drainage program, including the creation of a drainage division within the Utility Fund.
- Achieved the Texas Police Chief's Association Recognition Program for Best Practices.
- Currently undertaking the construction of a new fire station to replace one built in 1975 that is incapable of housing the city's ladder truck and does not meet current windstorm specifications. Funding for the project came from a grant and bonds.

secretary at that time retired. I figured, "Why not?" and accepted the position. It is time consuming, intense, detailed, and it is a position I would not trade for the world. Service to your citizens and community is a great reward. ★



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