

CONNECTING H E

June 24 – 26, 2026
La Crosse, WI

WCMA Summer Conference



Strategy and Trust Across
Your Local Government

Conference Schedule

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 24

11:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.
Golf Outing at Forest Hills Golf Club

1:30 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.
Event: Women's Leadership Committee (all welcome!)
Meet at La Crosse Queen Dock
sponsored by: 

11:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.
Registration **Riverside Pre-Function**

1:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m.
Exhibitor set-up **Riverside Ballroom A**

5:30 – 6:00 p.m.
First Time Attendee Meet and Greet
Riverside Ballroom B/C

6:00 – 7:00 p.m.
Dinner **Riverside Ballroom A/B/C**

7:00 – 10:00 p.m.
Welcome Reception
Riverside Ballroom A/B/C and Riverside Terrace

THURSDAY, JUNE 25

7:00 – 7:45 a.m.
5K Fun Run **Meet in Radisson Lobby**

8:00 – 8:50 a.m.
Breakfast
Riverside Ballroom B/C
sponsored by: 

8:50 – 9:00 a.m.
Welcome and Introductions
Riverside Ballroom B/C

9:00 – 10:00 a.m.
Opening Keynote: *You Management: Strategies to Avoid Burnout, Boost Resilience, and Accelerate Success* by Colette Carlson
Riverside Ballroom B/C
sponsored by: 



10:00 – 10:30 a.m.
Break in Exhibit Hall **Riverside A**

10:30 – 11:45 a.m.
Concurrent Sessions
Session 1: *Own the Narrative: Crisis Communication Strategies for Local Government Leaders*
Meeting Room A/B
Session 2: *Public-Private Partnerships that "Wow"*
Meeting Room C/D

11:45 – 1:15 p.m.
Lunch, Business Meeting, Awards, and ICMA Update
Riverside B/C

1:30 – 2:45 p.m.
Mid-Conference Keynote: *Thoughts Become Things: Unlock the Power of Leadership* by Melanie Santostefano
Riverside B/C

2:45 – 3:15 p.m.
Break in Exhibit Hall
Riverside A

3:15 – 4:30 p.m.
Concurrent Sessions
Session 1: *Do you REALLY need a Strategic Plan?* **Meeting Room A/B**
Session 2: *I Wish I Knew Then What I Know Now* **Meeting Room C/D**

5:30 – Game End
Social Activity: Take Me Out to the La Crosse Loggers Game!
(5:30 p.m. Gates Open; 6:35 p.m. First Pitch) **Bus to Pick-Up at the Front of La Crosse Center**
sponsored by: 



FRIDAY, JUNE 26

7:45 – 8:30 a.m.
Breakfast **Riverside B/C**

8:30 – 9:30 a.m.
Closing Keynote: *Venting to Value: Turning Complaints into Action Training* by Traci Austin
Riverside B/C
sponsored by: 

9:30 – 9:45 a.m.
Break **Riverside B/C**

9:45 – 10:45 a.m.
General Session *Purpose, Positivity, and the Power to Stay: Rethinking Leadership Retention* **Riverside B/C**

10:45 – 11:00 a.m.
Break **Riverside B/C**

11:00 – Noon
League of WI Municipalities Update with Jerry Deschane & WI Counties Association Update with Mark O'Connell **Riverside B/C**



Session Information

Thursday, June 25

8:50 – 9:00 a.m.

Welcome and Introductions

Riverside Ballroom B/C

9:00 – 10:00 a.m.

Opening Keynote:

YOU Management: Strategies to Avoid Burnout, Boost Resilience, and Accelerate Success

by Colette Carlson

Riverside Ballroom B/C

Regardless of your title and role, people experience everyday stressors while they are expected to stay agile through constant change. In today's world, people are required to exceed expectations, and produce more in less time with fewer resources, all while staying positive and engaged with colleagues and customers.

New challenges have collapsed the boundaries between work and home, leaving people juggling opposing demands for time, energy, and attention. It's no surprise, even with the best of intentions, leaders and teams feel

Join Colette in this laugh-out-loud program as she shares practical, yet powerful, science-based strategies to remain resilient and accelerate your success during the most challenging of circumstances by learning how to:

- Minimize worry, stress and angst by knowing when to let go or take control
- Manage devices, distractions, and demands to stay focused, present, and productive
- Lean in to change by mastering your mindset to increase mental toughness
- Build in daily self-care strategies to avoid burnout and create more joy -Maximize health and wellness through the power of connection

Addresses ICMA Practice Area

5 (Personal Resiliency and Development).

10:00 – 10:30 a.m.

Break in Exhibit Hall **Riverside A**

10:30 – 11:45 a.m.

Concurrent Sessions

Session 1: Own the Narrative: Crisis Communication Strategies for Local Government Leaders

Meeting Room A/B

A crisis can strike without warning, and municipal and county leaders must ensure their communications are clear, effective and swift. In many cases, these urgent messages are meant for local stakeholders, but in extreme situations, the news media and the public at large can come calling. This session shares real-world examples of five essential steps in crisis communications that help leaders shape and control the ever-important narrative – and position their organization as the trusted information source. Guided by the

Opening Keynote Sponsor



Pillars and Principles of crisis communications, attendees will gain tools to fortify the public trust while safeguarding their organization's image, reputation, and integrity. The overarching goal is to equip participants with knowledge, approaches, and actionable tools to effectively respond to a crisis or other challenging situation – to weather the storm.

Learning Objectives

1. How to shape, control and maintain control of the crisis narrative
2. How to establish your organization - immediately - as the epicenter of information for the duration of a crisis
3. Understand how to initiate strategic partnerships relationships and how they will leverage messages through a crisis
4. Understand the importance of a strong crisis communications plan that is not only on a shelf or in a folder on a computer, but to ensure it is one that is practiced and revisited on a regular basis

Presenter

Melanie Santostefano, Founder & President, St. Steven Public Relations & Vicarious Multimedia

Addresses ICMA Practice Area

2 (Community Engagement); 4 (Staff Effectiveness); 6 (Strategic Leadership); 14 (Communication & Information Sharing)

Session 2: Public-Private Partnerships that "Wow"
Meeting Room C/D

After 20+ years of local debate and indecisiveness, the City of New Richmond broke ground in September of 2024 on a \$30 million public-private partnership, the largest of its kind in the city's history and an innovative model for meeting multiple community needs in a single, complex project. Construction was completed in January of 2026. The project consists of a 30,000 square foot public library and community center, coffee shop, outdoor amenities, underground and surface parking, and a total of 78 market rate apartments - 69 above the library, and 9 in a stand-alone townhome building. The project is also unique in that it's found in a city with a population of only 11,359 people.

Learning Objectives

- Introduces innovative financing solutions and deal structures that can work for average-sized Wisconsin municipalities
- Addresses the use of tax increment financing combined with other approaches such as public-private partnerships to address current needs
- Identifies other considerations for downtown revitalization and addressing housing needs

Speakers

Noah Wiedenfeld, City Administrator & Utilities Manager, City of New Richmond

Rae Ann Ailts, Assistant City Administrator & Finance Director, City of New Richmond

Jeremy Novak, Vice President of Real Estate Development,
Three Sixty Real Estate
Will Kratt, Business Unit Leader, Transportation, ISG, Inc.

Addresses ICMA Practice Areas

2 (Community Engagement); 6 (Strategic Leadership); 7 (Strategic Planning); 9 (Community & Resident Service); 12 (Financial Management & Budgeting)

11:45 a.m. – 1:15 p.m.

**Lunch, WCMA Business Meeting, Awards and ICMA
Riverside B/C**

1:30 – 2:45 p.m.

Mid-Conference Keynote:

**Thoughts Become Things:
Unlock the Power of Leadership
by Melanie Santostefano**

Riverside B/C



sponsored by:



Great leaders know that lasting success comes from engaged teams, empowered individuals, and a culture with purpose. In the keynote, "Thoughts Become Things: Unlock the Power of Leadership," powerful life lessons and timeless values are shared from Melanie Santostefano's 2024 book, "Thoughts Become Things: Six Pillars to Guide You Through Life." Through storytelling and real-world applications, the Six Pillars—Honor, Humility, Gratitude, Grit, Faith, and Forgiveness—come to life and become practical tools to strengthen leadership strategies, build trust, and foster collaboration. This keynote equips participants by demonstrating how their thoughts and actions shape both personal outcomes and organizational culture. Leaders will learn gain strategies to align and inspire their teams, while individuals will discover how to contribute to the greater good of the organization with clarity, resilience, and connection. The result: a thriving, more empowered workplace where people grow, collaborate, and succeed – together.

Presenter

Melanie Santostefano, Founder & President, St. Steven Public Relations & Vicarious Multimedia

Addresses ICMA Practice Areas

1 (Personal & Professional Integrity); 3 (Equity & Inclusion); 5 (Personal Resiliency & Development); 6 (Strategic Leadership)

2:45 – 3:15 p.m.

Break in Exhibit Hall Riverside A

3:15 – 4:30 p.m.

Concurrent Sessions

**Session 1: Do You REALLY Need a Strategic Plan?
Meeting Room A/B**

Strategic planning is quickly shifting from a "nice-to-have" exercise to an essential leadership tool for local governments navigating growth, workforce challenges, and rising community expectations. But what actually makes a strategic plan effective, and is the investment of time and resources worth it?

Join Diana Dykstra, Village Administrator for Mukwonago, and Cory Poris Plasch of CP2 Consulting for a practical discussion on how local governments can develop meaningful strategic plans that drive results. Whether your community is embarking on its first strategic plan, refreshing an outdated plan, or seeking a more modern and actionable approach, this session will explore how to create a plan that guides decision-making, aligns staff and elected officials, and connects long-term vision to everyday operations.

Using Mukwonago's recent strategic planning process as a case study, the presenters will share lessons learned, common barriers, and practical techniques for engaging boards, staff, and the community in the process. Additionally, Cory will provide an industry update on emerging trends in the public sector and how to align your plan for department accreditation, GFOA Budget Award evaluation, and more.

Learning Objectives

1. Understand the purpose and value of strategic planning in local government
2. Recognize the key elements and barriers in developing a successful strategic plan
3. Apply insights from real-world examples and industry standards to improve planning efforts

Presenters

Cory Poris Plasch, President/CEO, CP2 Consulting
Diana Dykstra, Village Administrator, Village of Mukwonago

Addresses ICMA Practice Areas

2 (Community Engagement); 4 (Staff Effectiveness); 6 (Strategic Leadership); 7 (Strategic Planning)

**Session 2: I Wish I Knew Then What I Know Now
Meeting Room C/D**

Navigating the complexities of local government leadership often requires a resilience that can only be forged through experience and, occasionally, professional adversity. This panel brings together seasoned managers to share the "unwritten rules" and hard-earned lessons they wish they had grasped during their early career transitions. The discussion will feature candid reflections on managing the unique pressures of public service, including the challenges of working with difficult boards and the reality of involuntary departures. By pulling back the curtain on these pivotal moments, panelists will provide a roadmap for maintaining professional integrity and personal well-being through the highs and lows of local government management. It is an invitation to learn from the scars of others to better protect your own career longevity.

Learning Objectives

1. Identify early warning signs of shifting political tides and fracturing board or council dynamics before they reach a crisis point.
2. Develop strategies for professional resilience and recovery, including how to bounce back effectively after a public or involuntary termination.

3. Identify new techniques for boundary-setting and communication to manage unrealistic expectations from difficult or abrasive elected officials.
4. Implement proactive career protection measures, from negotiating strong employment agreements to building a supportive peer network outside of your organization.

Presenters

Mark Rohloff, McMahon Associates, Division Manager
 Lauren Freeman, Village of Waunakee, Deputy Administrator
 Nathan Thiel, Dir. of Finance & Administration, Dodge County

Addresses ICMA Practice Areas

1 (Personal and Professional Integrity); 5 (Personal Resiliency and Development); 6 (Strategic Leadership); 8 (Policy Facilitation and Implementation)

Friday, June 26

7:45 – 8:30 a.m.

Breakfast Riverside B/C

8:30 a.m. – 9:30 a.m.

Closing Keynote

Venting to Value: Turning Complaints into Action Training by Traci Austin

Riverside B/C

Closing Keynote Sponsor



Every complaint is just a poorly worded request. In this interactive session, professionals will learn how to transform frustration and venting into clear, actionable requests that create positive change. Using real-world scenarios, Traci Austin will guide participants through identifying the facts, clarifying the impact, and framing requests in ways that support accountability and results. You will discover how to prepare for "tough talks" with intention, lead with respect and openness, and follow up effectively to ensure commitments are met. Whether you are managing turnover challenges, performance concerns, or interpersonal conflicts, this framework provides a repeatable method for turning negativity into progress and strengthening workplace culture.

Learning Objectives

1. Recognize the mindset shift that turns complaints into actionable requests.
2. Apply the Facts-Impact-Request framework to real workplace issues.
3. Prepare and conduct productive conversations using the Six Steps for a Productive Conversation.
4. Create accountability through follow-up and documentation.

Addresses ICMA Practice Areas

1 (Personal & Professional Integrity); 3 (Equity & Inclusion); 5 (Personal Resiliency & Development); 6 (Strategic Leadership); 13 (Human Resources Management & Workforce Engagement)

9:45 – 9:45 a.m.

General Session

Purpose, Positivity, and the Power to Stay: Rethinking Leadership Retention

Riverside B/C

What really helps local government leaders thrive—and what drives them away? This session shares new research that goes beyond the usual answers, exploring how motivation and positive psychology shape whether leaders stay engaged in their roles or decide to move on. Our panel will break down the findings in clear, relatable terms and connect them to the everyday realities of public service. You'll leave with practical ideas and fresh perspectives to help your organization support and inspire its leaders to truly thrive. If you want to better understand—and strengthen—leadership in local government, this conversation is for you.

Speaker

Corrin Spiegel, ICMA-CM - Arete Strategic

Addresses ICMA Practice Areas

1 (Personal & Professional Integrity); 3 (Equity & Inclusion); 5 (Personal Resiliency & Development); 6 (Strategic Leadership); 13 (Human Resources Management & Workforce Engagement)

11:00 a.m. – Noon

League of Wisconsin Municipalities/Wisconsin Counties Association Legislative Update

Riverside B/C

Speakers

Jerry Deschane, Executive Director, League of Wisconsin Municipalities
 Mark O'Connell, CEO and President, Wisconsin Counties Association

Addresses ICMA Practice Areas

6 (Strategic Leadership); 8 (Policy Facilitation and Implementation)

WCMA Winter Conference

March 3-5, 2027

Green Bay Hyatt Regency

Save the Date

Women's Leadership Seminar

November 19-20, 2026

Blue Harbor Resort, Sheboygan

Social Events

Wednesday, June 24

Forest Hills Golf Course

600 Losey Blvd. N, La Crosse, WI, 54601

11:00 AM Shotgun Start

Women's Leadership Committee Social Event:

La Crosse Queen Sightseeing Cruise

Meet at La Crosse Queen Dock

1:15 Boarding

1:30 Takeoff from the dock!

405 Veterans Memorial Drive, La Crosse, WI

sponsored by:



Daytime alternative to golf – all are welcome. *(Even golfers if they opt for a quick 9-holes in the AM and a boat ride in the afternoon.)*

A beautiful afternoon of relaxing, catching up, and enjoying the views. Step aboard the authentic La Crosse Queen for a narrated journey through the Upper Mississippi River. This scenic excursion takes you along the main channel, where you'll learn fascinating facts about the river's ecology, history, and significance in modern times.

Admire the stunning views of steep bluffs and the Great River Road, celebrated by AAA as one of America's most picturesque drives. Watch for wildlife like bald eagles soaring over the water and enjoy the peaceful pace of the paddlewheeler.

A highlight of this cruise includes a close-up view of Lock & Dam No. 7 near Dresbach, Minnesota, with an explanation of how these vital structures help control river navigation.

5:30 – 6:00 p.m.

First Time Attendee Meet and Greet on La Crosse Center Patio

6:00 – 7:00 p.m.

Dinner at La Crosse Center

7:00 – 10:00 p.m.

Welcome Reception in Exhibit Hall / Patio Riverside Ballroom A/B/C and Riverside Terrace

Join colleagues for a fun evening interacting with sponsors (for extra beverage tickets), networking, and card games for those who wish to partake in a little added competitive fun!



Thursday, June 25

both sponsored by:



7:00 a.m.

5K Fun Run

Participants should meet in the lobby at 7 am.

5:30 – End of Game

Take Me Out to the La Crosse Loggers Game! Bus to Pick-Up at the Front of La Crosse Center

5:30 p.m. Gates Open; 6:35 p.m. First Pitch. Join us for an evening of baseball and fun as the La Crosse Loggers take on the Minnesota Mud Puppies. We've secured a private patio just for our group, so you can enjoy the game in comfort. Your ticket includes a full dinner and three drink vouchers to keep you refreshed through the final out.

Whether you want to catch our shuttle from the La Crosse Center or meet us at the gates, we can't wait to see you there.

Thank You Conference Committee!

**Chair - Travis Coenen, Village of Wrightstown,
Village Administrator**

Gabe Altenbernd, Village of Belleville, Village Administrator
Brandon Bledsoe, Village of Marshall, Village Administrator
Inga Cushman, Village of Cottage Grove, Assistant

Administrator/Human Resource Manager

Michael Duerkop, MSA Professional Services

David Erdman, Managing Director, Baker Tilly

Josh Finch, Village of Sherwood, Village Administrator

Lauren Freeman, Village of Waunakee, Deputy Administrator

Matt Heiser, Village Administrator, Village of Pewaukee

Brandon Hennes, Finance Director, Village of Deforest

Benjamin Krumenauer, Village of Bellevue,

Village Administrator

Rick Niemeier, City of Onalaska, City Administrator

Andy Pederson, Village of Bayside, Village Manager

Cory Poris Plasch, President, CP2 Consulting

Mark Rohloff, McMahon Associates, Division Manager

Public Safety & Municipal Management

Diane Rowe, MSA Professional Services

Adam Ruechel, Town Administrator/Economic Development
Director, Town of Freedom

Laura Stelzner, City of Chetek, City Administrator

Kayla Thorpe, Municipal Advisor, Ehlers

Staff : Rachel Gorsuch Sorensen, Executive Director, WCMA
Dawn S. Peters, Executive Director Emeritus, WCMA