

Can We Afford to Cut Back on CLE?

By DeWitt F. McCarley, IMLA President

The economy is down, budgets are tight, and the city manager asks you to cut some more. You're already stretching every dollar and dropping anything that isn't critical. You're looking at the price of everything before you sign the purchase order or submit the request memo. But in your efforts to cut back, remember that some investments are necessary to maintain and improve the most valuable asset we have—the ability to render accurate advice.

Monies for staff training and travel are frequently the first items cut when local government budgets get tight. But short-term savings can be expensive if we aren't current on the hot topics of the day, or haven't thought through the impact of the latest cases or legislation on our clients. Cutting back on training may save a few dollars today, but cost thousands later.

The solution? Be wise and cost-conscious in your selection of training options. Three of the best opportunities to learn at a cost-effective rate are the IMLA Mid-Year Seminar in Washington, D.C.; the regular teleconferences on hot topics; and the Annual IMLA Conference this fall.

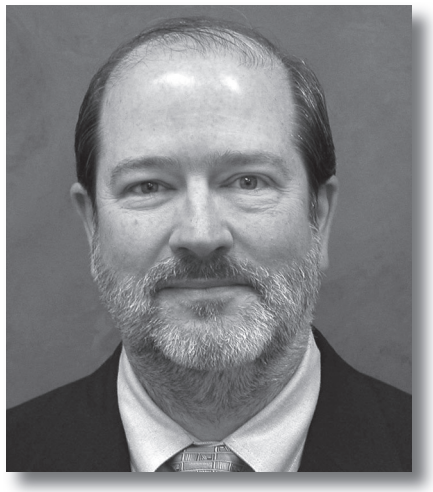
There are many good reasons for coming to the IMLA Mid-Year Seminar held in Washington this April, but here are my Top Five reasons to attend:

- Richard Ruda will do a Supreme Court update. He's brilliant and funny at the same time—a rare combination.
- Hear an update on stimulus funds and auditing accounting / accounting requirements for the money.
- There will be a session on Fair Housing Act litigation.
- For the first time, we're planning to have a Personnel Roundtable, where you can ask the experts about your employment law issues and concerns.
- Murphy's tavern is just across the street from the Seminar hotel, the Omni Shoreham.

Here are the Top Five reasons take advantage of the IMLA teleconferences:

- They are the best bargain in the market—generally only $99 per conference if you are an IMLA member.
- The speakers are the leading national experts in their fields.
- The topics are focused, directly relevant to what local government attorneys do every day, and are up to-the-minute current.
- You don't have to leave your office to get the best information available.
- They are the best bargain in the market. (I know I listed that twice, but it's so true and so important that it's worth mentioning twice!)

The IMLA Mid-Year Seminar, teleconferences, and the Annual Conference are high-value and cost-effective training investments. Don't take my word for it, though: I can give you some real-life examples.



Susan McGannon (City Attorney, Murfreesboro, Tennessee) advises that her state has a law requiring planning staff to get eight hours of training annually, and members of planning commissions and boards of zoning appeals to get four hours' training a year. Her Planning Director joins her office staff for the IMLA land use teleconferences "as a low-cost and convenient way" to get their required training. She adds that they are planning on doing the same thing this year and again sharing the registration costs. Since her jurisdiction's planning commission includes two members of the city council, she advises that this also worked to spotlight the benefits that IMLA membership affords the City—"always useful in these difficult budget times." Moreover, she hopes to invite her city's personnel staff to attend the employment law teleconferences, to get the public information officers to listen to the social networking teleconferences, and have the cable TV department head join them for the FCC teleconference.

Another member, Rhonda Fehlen Westover (Deputy Municipal Attorney, Anchorage, Alaska) gives an even more persuasive account. Although her municipality supported local and national CLE training for its attorneys over the years, it had a limited budget last year, and no training budget at all this year. Since the office really wanted to register for the 2010 Land Use series, they solved the dilemma by asking those who attended the series last year to make a small contribution towards the total fee. In less than two days, they had "enough small

contributions from everyone to cover the $495 registration fee for the series! No impact on the office budget and we still get to participate in a great IMLA CLE series." She adds, "All the feedback from attorneys and municipal employees indicates each teleconference has been spot-on with current issues; IMLA has been an incredible asset for the whole Municipality, not just the Legal Department."

We thank these members for their gratifying e-mails, and ask that you let us know if you have any similar stories you'd like to share.

Reporters sometimes jump on staff travel expenses (especially those of high-profile local officials like municipal lawyers), writing in detail about how much travel to a particular meeting costs in taxpayer funds and listing the price of every meal. Often implied in such articles (if not actually stated outright) is the assumption that out-of-town conferences are merely fun junkets for the municipal staff, and, accordingly, a waste of public funds. Clearly, the value of IMLA conferences exceeds the cost. To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, those who deride quality conferences may know the cost of everything, but nothing of their value. The loyal following of our members and other conference attendees attests to the continuing value of IMLA educational offerings.

We know that many communities face particularly challenging economic conditions. We know one conference can't solve all the problems. However, neglecting continuing education and professional development can't be a lasting solution. Supporting the value of learning, and finding new and better ways to do what needs to be done, is "mission critical" for us as local government lawyers. Current information is as central to our jobs as the garbage trucks are to our trash collectors. Investing in our future surely beats short-sighted and ill-advised cuts to a necessary element of doing a good job.

I hope you'll make the case to your manager and elected officials that CLE training is critical to your ability to continue to provide good advice and service, and that you'll choose IMLA as your provider of choice for that training. **M**

Coming in the Next Issue!

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