PRESIDENT'S LETTER

IMLA – A Part of Your Practice



G. Foster Mills, IMLA President

One of the principal attractions of the practice of municipal law is the breadth of issues that come our way. Depending on how your municipality is structured, you may come across problems in any number of areas, including land use, civil rights defense, economic development, procurement, election law, municipal finance, the never-ending examples of federal and state regulation of practically everything your municipality does, and the defense of your municipality in the federal and state courts. It seems we are constantly learning new areas of law all the time, in addition to keeping up with the changes in the law in those areas we are familiar with.

If the breadth of issues is a major attraction, it comes at a cost: the time it takes to learn a new practice area well enough to confidently advise our clients, or even have a mutually understandable conversation with outside counsel.

Probably the easiest way to shorten the time necessary to come up the learning curve is to have access to those who have come up the curve themselves, and who know not just law but how the law interacts with policy – all within the singular world of municipal law practice.

This is where IMLA comes in.

Nowhere else will you find as many colleagues dealing with the same issues as you are. I have been told time and again how important it is to have someone who has been through an issue tell you of problems and pitfalls to avoid, the little tips that will make life easier, or just reassurance that you are on the right track. It is especially helpful when that person has experience dealing with the issue while practicing in an environment that resembles yours.

IMLA helps with this process in a couple of ways. It presents continuing legal education courses on the hot topics of the day – many given by IMLA members themselves. This is an excellent way of getting a start on a new topic or coming back up to speed on an issue you haven't handled for a while. There are also groups that converse regularly on specific topics, such as civil rights defense, affirmative litigation, e-discovery, code enforcement and issues particular to university cities.

Through them you can take a deep dive into a subject and get to know municipal attorneys across the country who are dealing with the same problems.

But the best way to keep abreast of the subjects you need to know is to come to the IMLA annual meetings and the mid-year seminars and meet your colleagues from all across the United States and Canada personally. Not only will you develop irreplaceable professional friendships, but through both the formal and informal interactions among the other members you will learn about issues that are affecting you now or soon will. There is really no substitute for that.

This is why I believe that you should think of IMLA as an extension of your practice. Whenever something comes up that is unfamiliar, IMLA and its members – and the enormous amount of experience they have – are a resource that you shouldn't pass up. Make it a point to get to know other lawyers who you can go to for help. Make yourself available to others as well. We really do all need each other. IMLA is the forum.

Of course it takes some work to make IMLA as valuable to us as we need it to be. One of the easiest things we can do is to attend the IMLA events and participate in the various practice groups. This is how your experience and expertise can be made available to the other members. Recruiting your colleagues who are not IMLA members into the organization broadens our knowledge base and makes IMLA a healthier organization. Get involved in one or more of the many committees we have. Think about whether you are willing to take the time to help with the governance of IMLA. Vacancies in ranks of State Chairs, Regional Vice-Presidents and the Board of Directors come up from time to time and need to be filled. Also think about involving other members of your office in IMLA events. This can multiply the benefits of membership and bring yet more expertise to the organization.

But even if you can't put in the time to be an officer of IMLA, we still want to hear from you. We want to be part of your practice and that means providing the services that you need. If there is something we can do, or do better, let us know. If there is something we shouldn't be doing, let us know that too. Find your State Chair or Regional Vice-President and discuss any issues with them. The Board of Directors is in regular contact with them for just this purpose.

I have found IMLA to be a wonderful resource. It has become a part of the practice at the New York City Law Department. I have met many people I consider friends and have learned an awful lot from them.

I want every member to have that experience.

I hope to see you in Washington in April. ML

