



BOROUGH OF TARENTUM

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Memorandum

To: Tarentum Borough Council
From: Shane P. Brown, Municipal
Management Fellow
Date: May 11, 2026
RE: Municipal Management Fellowship

Municipal Management Fellow Review

1. What I Learned About Local Government

Prior to this fellowship, my understanding of local government was largely conceptual, focused on policy, budgeting, and organizational structure. What I have come to understand through direct experience is that local government is fundamentally an operational enterprise that requires constant coordination, responsiveness, and adaptability. Running a municipality is not a linear process guided solely by plans and policies, it is a dynamic environment where priorities shift daily based on resident needs, infrastructure issues, regulatory requirements, and unforeseen events. The most significant realization is how much of municipal management is reactive in nature. Emergencies, service interruptions, personnel matters, and public concerns do not operate on a predictable schedule, and leadership must continuously adjust while still advancing long-term goals.

I also learned that effective local government depends heavily on institutional knowledge and the ability of staff to navigate complex systems that are not always visible to the public. Processes such as procurement, permitting, code enforcement, and budgeting involve layers of regulation and coordination that require both technical understanding and practical experience. What appears straightforward from the outside, such as completing a public works project or hiring an employee, often involves multiple approvals, compliance requirements, and interdepartmental collaboration. The level of detail and documentation required to operate within legal and financial constraints is substantial.

What surprised me most is how much leadership at the local level requires balancing competing demands with limited resources. Unlike larger organizations, municipalities often operate with lean staffing and constrained budgets, yet they are expected to deliver essential services consistently and at a high standard. Decision-making frequently involves trade-offs, where improving one area may delay progress in another. This environment requires practical problem-solving, prioritization, and the ability to make informed decisions without having complete information. Overall, I now understand that local government is less about theoretical governance and more about disciplined execution, adaptability, and maintaining service delivery under constant pressure.

2. What I Learned About Tarentum Specifically

Tarentum Borough operates in a way that is structurally distinct from most municipalities of its size due to its ownership and management of both water and electric utilities. This significantly expands the scope and

complexity of its operations beyond what is typically expected of a small borough. Rather than functioning solely as a provider of basic municipal services such as police, public works, and administration, Tarentum must also manage utility infrastructure, regulatory compliance, billing systems, capital improvements, and long-term asset planning for two essential service systems. This creates an operational environment that more closely resembles a hybrid between a local government and a utility authority.

Through this experience, I observed that the Borough's responsibilities require a higher level of technical expertise and coordination across departments. Utility operations involve ongoing maintenance of critical infrastructure, rapid response to outages or system failures, and adherence to strict regulatory standards. These functions must be performed while also managing the day-to-day responsibilities of municipal governance. The scale of this responsibility is not immediately apparent from the outside, but it has a direct impact on staffing needs, budgeting priorities, and administrative workload. The Borough must simultaneously think in terms of short-term service delivery and long-term infrastructure sustainability, particularly as it relates to aging systems and capital investment.

Another important observation is how this structure shapes the Borough's identity and operational culture. Staff are not only municipal employees but also utility operators, problem-solvers, and frontline service providers in a very direct sense. The immediacy of utility services, particularly electricity, means that service disruptions have a significant and immediate impact on residents, which raises the expectations placed on the organization. As a result, there is a strong emphasis on responsiveness, technical capability, and reliability. Tarentum is not simply managing a town, it is managing essential systems that residents depend on daily, which elevates both the complexity and importance of its operations.

Overall, my time here has shown me that Tarentum Borough functions at a level of operational complexity that exceeds what most people associate with small local government. Its integrated utility model requires a blend of administrative leadership, technical expertise, and strategic planning that makes it uniquely positioned and uniquely challenged among municipalities of its size.

3. Whether the Fellowship Program Was Valuable and Why

The Municipal Manager Fellowship was a valuable and worthwhile investment for the Borough, particularly in its ability to provide meaningful support to daily operations while also developing future public sector professionals. From my experience, the structure of the program, specifically the part-time, 20-hour-per-week commitment was effective in allowing consistent engagement without creating redundancy or inefficiency. This level of involvement was sufficient to take ownership of discrete projects, contribute to ongoing initiatives, and remain integrated into the workflow of the Borough..

One of the strongest aspects of the program was the level of access provided. Being included in meetings, decision-making discussions, and cross-departmental coordination allowed for a realistic understanding of how the Borough operates. This was not a passive or observational role. The opportunity to engage directly with administrative processes, assist with projects, and contribute to problem-solving created a level of accountability that made the experience substantive. That level of access is what differentiates a meaningful fellowship from a temporary position or internship. It ensured that time spent was productive not only for my own development but also for the Borough's operational needs.

That said, there are areas where the program could be strengthened if the Borough intends to continue investing in it. The fellowship would benefit from a more defined structure at the outset, including clearer expectations, project benchmarks, and identified priority areas. While flexibility was a strength, the absence of a more formalized framework occasionally led to periods where projects felt random. Establishing a clearer onboarding process and outlining specific goals early on would improve efficiency and ensure that fellows can contribute at a higher level more quickly.

Overall, the fellowship program was a valuable investment. It provided tangible support to Borough operations while also serving as an effective pipeline for individuals interested in local government careers. With minor adjustments to structure and onboarding, the program has the potential to be even more impactful.

4. What Tarentum Is Doing Well and Where It Can Improve

Tarentum Borough is executing several aspects of its operations at a high level, particularly given its size and scope of responsibility. One of its strongest attributes is its ability to maintain and operate complex utility systems in-house. The consistent delivery of water and electric services reflects a high level of technical competence and institutional knowledge among staff. This is not a minor achievement, it requires ongoing maintenance, rapid response capabilities, and a strong understanding of infrastructure systems. The Borough's ability to manage these services reliably is a clear strength and a defining feature of its operation.

Another area where the Borough performs well is its responsiveness. There is a clear commitment to addressing issues as they arise, whether related to utilities, public works, or resident concerns. This responsiveness contributes to public trust and reflects a culture of accountability within the organization. That level of commitment is critical in a municipal environment and is consistently evident in day-to-day operations.

However, there are areas where improvements could increase efficiency and long-term sustainability. One of the most significant opportunities is in the standardization and documentation of processes. Much of the Borough's effectiveness relies on the experience and knowledge of individual staff members. While this is a strength in the short term, it creates risk over time. Developing more formalized procedures, documentation, and internal systems would improve continuity, reduce dependency on specific individuals, and make onboarding of future staff more efficient.

There is also an opportunity to further leverage the Borough's unique position as a utility provider. This includes exploring ways to maximize the value of its assets, whether through improved financial strategies, operational efficiencies, or long-term investment planning. The Borough already operates at a higher level of complexity than most municipalities its size, refining how those systems are managed strategically could strengthen its overall position.

In summary, Tarentum Borough is performing well in areas that require technical skill, responsiveness, and day-to-day execution. At the same time, there are opportunities to improve through increased standardization, stronger long-term planning, and more structured communication systems. Many of these suggestions are currently being addressed by the Borough Manager as new billing systems and structured digital communication is being implemented. Overall, I have observed Tarentum's improvement over my lifetime and with this experience as Municipal Management Fellow I am confident it will continue to strengthen as a community.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Council for approving and supporting this fellowship. The experience has been extremely valuable, providing a level of hands-on learning and professional growth that cannot be replicated in a classroom setting. I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the Borough while gaining a deeper understanding of local government operations. Based on my experience, I strongly believe this fellowship is worth continuing, as it benefits both the Borough and future professionals entering public service.