

## **Transcript for The City Speak Podcast**

### **Season 4, Episode 10, “I Wish I Could Say I’ve Never Made That Mistake”**

[Podcast theme music begins]

**Luke Fischer:**

From the League of Minnesota Cities, this is The City Speak. I'm your host, Luke Fischer. Throughout all of season four we've been talking to leaders from across the state about the challenges that they've faced in their careers and the things that they've done to overcome whatever obstacle is in their way. [podcast theme music fades out] Our next guest is a great person that has a wonderful story to share with us. Her name is Anne Norris, and she's the city manager in Crystal.

**Luke Fischer:**

She's served in that role since 2000. But before being appointed the city manager there, she worked as a community development director and assistant city manager. Before joining Crystal, Anne also worked for the cities of New Brighton, Ramsey, and Hopkins. I've known Anne for quite a while through the Minnesota City Managers Association, and know her as a Barrett award winner, which is the top honor that that organization bestows on city managers in our state. So, Anne, welcome and thanks for being here.

**Anne Norris:**

I'm happy to be here. I hope I can do you proud.

**Luke Fischer:**

Oh, absolutely. We're not worried about that at all. So I'm curious, you've had a long career in city management. What drew you initially to public sector leadership?

**Anne Norris:**

The simple answer is I wanted to help people, and I wanted to make a difference in my community. The back story of that is my mother was on the local school board, and my father was on the local parks and rec commission. So I didn't have a choice, I think it was in my genes. And I love the local level of government because that's where things happen. I think you have the most ability to make the biggest impact. And so that's what brought me to public sector.

**Luke Fischer:**

So Anne, one of the things I'm sure you learned in city manager school was that communications is something that's super important and critical to keeping everyone in the public and on your team and with the council on the same page. And it seems like in the pandemic it's been something that's been a lot harder, but that there's a lot more emphasis on than maybe there ever has been before. I'm curious if there's ever been a time when you've learned kind of one of those crucial lessons around clear communications and the importance of good communications that have sort of buoyed you and carried you through the times that we're living in right now.

**Anne Norris:**

I wish I could say I've never made that mistake, but oh, mercy, I've had way too many communications snafus to admit. But a big one happened right before the pandemic as we were working on a budget. In Crystal, I try to make the budget process a team sport of senior staff and the city council, so that we are all

very clear about what it is we're asking for at the staff level, what the council thinks is acceptable to the community.

**Anne Norris:**

When we were working on the 2020 budget, the council made a commitment that they really wanted to increase the amount of the levy to go towards capital. And they were pretty okay with a hefty, I mean like two digit, levy increase. And so staff worked really hard to deliver what we thought they wanted.

**Anne Norris:**

However, we were not clear on how we got to be able to deliver that hefty increase. Rather than telling the council it was an overall 9% tax levy, we said the average home value would see a 9% tax levy, which sounded great. You know, the council thought, great. At preliminary levy, they approved it. And then when the Department of Revenue prints all the average levies, the mayor freaked out because he got a phone call from one of our local papers and said, "Hey, Crystal's levy increases 18%. What gives?"

**Luke Fischer:**

Wow! Uh oh.

**Anne Norris:**

So that was a little bit different than we'd led the council to believe. Shame on me. So of course the mayor was frantically calling everyone else on the council. Meanwhile, I'm off on vacation in Europe, and I have no idea that this is all blowing up in staff's face, and people are trying to call me and of course I'm not available. So I came back, listened to the work session when the mayor essentially said, "This is not acceptable. I don't care whose fault it is, but we gotta figure this out."

**Luke Fischer:**

Sure.

**Anne Norris:**

And then Monday morning, right after I got back, I sat down with the mayor and one of the council members. Walked through what I thought we heard, what they wanted to see. So trying to communicate, even though I clearly hadn't done a good communication this far. Then got together with the finance director, and came up with three alternatives for the council to consider the next night at their work session.

**Anne Norris:**

We obviously delayed the decision on the levy — you're not gonna do that when you've got an 18% increase. So at the truth in taxation hearing, I was very careful to make a public apology to all residents — most of whom were not in the room but on air — about, "I am so sorry. There was some miscommunication, and we didn't portray the levy increase very effectively." And I reassured the public and the council that the final levy would not be 18%. It would be closer to the 9% which the council had approved.

**Anne Norris:**

We clearly lost some trust between staff and the council and with the community. So, clearly lessons learned: A public apology is a big deal. Do what you said you were gonna do, which was, you know, fix the numbers, so it was right. And then after the whole dust settled, I went back to the council and I said, "Okay, this is what I heard during the whole budget snafu." And then "How do you want the budget presented in the future?"

**Anne Norris:**

And so we walked through a lot of things that the council wanted, and we changed how we do the presentations, how we present the information. But I think honesty, being forthright, owning the mistake is a huge deal. And if you can't do that, it's gonna be really hard to maintain trust of the public, of your peers, of the community.

**Luke Fischer:**

You said that trust was one of the things that was impacted through the communications snafu. And I'm curious what else you've done to regain trust with council and with the public along the way beyond just the initial and immediate response.

**Anne Norris:**

Oh, I think we tried to check in with the council more frequently about where we are with the budget or any major issue. And to try to communicate with the community, so people understand what the council is doing, particularly with the budget. As I always tell the council, the budget is the council's major policy document. So their priorities have gotta be reflected in the budget. And the community needs to understand what those priorities are and what is in the budget.

**Anne Norris:**

And so, I think over the last five years, we have really simplified, and in my mind improved, how we present the budget information to both the council and the community, so that it's much more understandable. And it's not just spreadsheets of numbers, it's more than that.

**Luke Fischer:**

I like the way that you called the budget the council's major or most significant policy document. Have you found that the council's been more willing to be engaged in the budget process, because sometimes it is just a spreadsheet with a bunch of numbers and people sort of look at the bottom line or they pick their thing that they wanna really keep an eye on? Or have things sort of settled back out?

**Anne Norris:**

I think there are still scabs that are not totally healed. So I think there is some apprehension. I have to give the council a lot of credit. They are pretty clear on what their expectations are when we talk early in the year, so that if we're delivering that by August, there shouldn't be any surprises. I mean, the big surprise is how is any levy impact gonna affect valuations? I mean, that's one thing we didn't have control over. I think that was such a painful experience, like I said, all the way around. I think we've all worked hard to get past that, and to improve the process, and improve communications.

**Luke Fischer:**

So Anne, through all of season four, we've been asking people about what they've been doing to stay resilient and to keep motivated because it's hard to work in the public sector right now. And I'm curious what you're doing to stay resilient and stay motivated.

**Anne Norris:**

I am fortunate. I have a ton of friends that I am close to. Even if I can't see them all in person, I talk to them. I am very close to my family. I read a ton of books, a lot of memoirs and biographies. And if you look at what other people go through, oh man. You know, it's not that bad.

**Luke Fischer:**

Anne Norris, thank you so much for joining us. And for the story that you shared about communication.

**Anne Norris:**

Thank you. I appreciate that.

**Luke Fischer:**

Listening to Anne's story, it was obvious that there are a lot of good lessons that we could all take away to be better communicators with our councils, with the staff that we work with, and with the public. But we can't emphasize the importance of communication enough. And I think Anne's tips around owning up when you make a mistake, doing everything you can do to ensure trust, and doing what you say you'll do are really important for all of us to take away. I know that those are things that I'll use in my own work.

**Luke Fischer:**

All right. I wanna say thank you to Anne Norris again for joining us today and for the 10 other guests that made time for us along the way this season. I also wanna send a special shout out to Adriana Temali for anchoring half of these episodes and hosting conversations with city officials.

**Luke Fischer:**

This season has been great, I think, because it's given us a chance to learn from some of the mistakes that people have made and from the lessons that they've learned along the way. That's taken vulnerability from our guests. And that's something that I think is really commendable and something that we ought learn from. That it's okay to do that. And it's okay to be honest and say, "I didn't get that quite right." Or, "I wanna do that over again." [Podcast theme music begins]

**Luke Fischer:**

So, listeners, think about that as you approach the upcoming year — who do you want to be and how do you wanna show up as a leader? So if you have any ideas for us on the next season, we'd love to hear them. You can email us anytime at [podcast@lmc.org](mailto:podcast@lmc.org). Have a happy holiday and a safe new year. And until we see you again, I hope you are well. [Podcast theme music ends]