

Loran M. Posey, Jr.

Eric S. Zeemering, Ph.D.

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Public Manager Career Biography: Jim Dove

On March 4th, I sat down with Jim Dove to see how his work in public administration could help me better understand the challenges of leadership and management in a public organization. Jim is the long-time Executive Director of the Northeast Georgia Regional Commission (NEGRC) and an alumnus of the University of Georgia's MPA program. I had met Jim previously at the MPA Visitation Day in April 2018, making him a great person to reconnect with, but I still did not understand much about his work with a regional commission. That, however, added more value to the meeting, as it was not a networking affair as much as it was supplemental to my knowledge about career opportunities in public administration.

Jim was born in Macon but felt an affinity for Northeast Georgia since childhood, when his family would drive north through Athens on their way to visit Jim's grandparents. He moved to Athens to attend UGA and earned a bachelor's degree in Education. He decided not to be a teacher and started working at what was then called the Northeast Georgia Area Planning and Development Commission in 1975. According to Jim, the first Area Planning and Development Commission (APDC) in the state was in Rome. The Northeast Georgia APDC was created in 1963. By 1971, there were 18 APDCs around the state. These commissions received federal money from the Economic Development Administration, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the Appalachian Regional Commission.

The original focus areas of APDCs were economic development and regional planning. The Northeast Georgia APDC started out with 10 counties and 47 municipalities. Jim has been around this organization for so long that he could tell me about a planning document he worked on from 1976 that laid out possible locations for Lake Russell, Lake Oconee, and State Route 316. Admittedly, I did not find regional commissions to be the flashiest or most exciting entities, but the forward-thinking planning work that they do can have an incredibly long lasting impact on a region. I cannot envision Northeast Georgia without 316, but Jim remembers when it was just a hypothetical project on a planning map. Jim also told me that currently booming counties like Oconee and Jackson are benefitting from the APDC's land use assistance in the late 1960's. Those sorts of possibilities began to draw me in to Jim's story.

Jim actually got his start with the APDC as a volunteer before becoming a staff member. He did a little bit of everything, from working in the Planning Department writing grants and the first subdivision regulations for Oglethorpe County to working in the Economic Development Department. Jim worked nine or ten different jobs on his way to becoming Deputy Director. By this time, legislation at the federal and state levels had broadened the scope of work carried out by APDCs. The Older Americans Act in the mid-1960s designated APDCs as area agencies on aging that would receive pass-through dollars to fund senior center programs. In the early 1980s, the Job Training Partnership passed and from that came the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act, which added customized job training, GED assistance, and other workforce development responsibilities to APDCs.

Jim completed his Master of Public Administration degree at UGA in 1982. His decision to pursue the MPA was fueled by his belief that the degree would help further the process of getting ahead in his career. He was not wrong. In 1984, he was offered the job of Planning

Director for Cherokee County. His ascent reached its peak just three years later in 1987 when the position of Executive Director of the Northeast Georgia APDC became available. Jim could not resist the urge to return to Northeast Georgia, a place he had rarely left since moving there as an undergraduate student, and to an organization he was a part of from 1975 to 1984.

Jim was hired as Executive Director in 1987, a job he would not relinquish over the next three decades. Though Jim's job title would not change, the organization would. In 1989, the Growth Strategies Act and the Georgia Planning Act reduced the number of APDCs in the state from 18 to 16. Twenty years later, in 2009, Governor Sonny Perdue appointed Jim to the Commission for a New Georgia's Service Delivery Planning Committee. The work of the committee led to the further reorganization of the 16 APDCs into 12 Regional Commissions (RCs), each with a metropolitan area to provide an economic center. The NEGRC is funded by local dues (\$1 per capita), which equal \$600,000. That amount is matched by state grants and federal grants, so a lot of the money is pass-through money for specific purposes.

Today, Jim oversees an annual budget of \$13 to \$14 million, 40 full-time employees, and 12 counties in the commission's jurisdiction. The Executive Director is the only position that is hired and fired by the Governing Council of NEGRC. So Jim is accountable to the Governing Council, but is also responsible for the entire commission staff. Jim's management philosophy is that one individual can only effectively supervise 5-6 people. As a result, he leans heavily on his department heads. It was apparent in our conversation that Jim had carefully thought about his role as a manager in relation to the overall structure of his organization. This demonstrated to me that Jim viewed public administration through at least one of David Rosenblum's lenses, this one being the managerial lens, (Rosenblum 1983). Jim serves as a conduit between the Governing Council and the staff and holds a monthly council meeting where reports on financials and the

program of work are delivered. He also handles the monthly newsletter communication to all municipalities in the region.

His day-to-day includes visiting member counties and meeting with local governments to see what their greatest needs are and how NEGRC can be of assistance. He also facilitates retreats for local governments. In the last five years, NEGRC has organized 150 retreats, which give Jim a chance to spend time with local officials in an informal setting that allows for vision casting and planning. In general, Jim's job is to make sure everything runs smoothly as the commission seeks to carry out the program of work, which is approved annually by the Governing Council. He must pay attention to the small day-to-day details, like the finances of the organization, but also serve as a visionary, looking over horizon enough to see the next opportunity to bring about regional cooperation.

Jim has also represented NEGRC on several national bodies. He served on the Board of Directors for the National Association of Development Organizations for 10 years, was President of the Development District Association of Appalachia, and President of the Georgia Association of Regional Commissions for six years. According to Jim, those sorts of positions produce opportunities to be in the right place at the right time. When he was leading the Development District Association of Appalachia, which includes areas in 13 different states, the federal co-chair—who is appointed by the President of the United States—visited the region twice. This sort of exposure helps get projects funded and helps you make connections that are beneficial later on.

Among the projects that Jim has completed during his time at NEGRC, the one he is most proud of is the Bear Creek Reservoir project, which was a major success in regional cooperation. The idea of conducting a water supply study in the region was hatched in 1979. North Georgia

does not have aquifers like South Georgia, Jim explained, so even though North Georgia has a lot of rainfall most years, once that water flows downstream, it is gone. The solution was to find a way to impound the water before it left the region. The study found that four counties in the region lacked an adequate water supply: Clarke, Barrow, Jackson, and Oconee. The state legislature formed the Upper Oconee Basin Water Authority in 1994 and the planning process led to the creation of a reservoir. Jim was instrumental in the entire process and had to muster and sustain support for the project from several parties with revolving members: the state legislature and four county governments.

Today, at a spot near where the four counties all come together, we now have the Bear Creek Reservoir. Jim is especially proud of the fact that the project was completed ahead of schedule and under budget. The estimated project cost was \$75 million, but the project came in at \$67.5 million. Jim helped refinance the bonds to save another \$2.5 million. Later, they refinanced again to save an additional \$2.5 million. The reservoir began operation in 2002 at the height of one of the worst droughts in the region's history. Water is pumped from the Middle Oconee River and the reservoir holds five billion gallons of water. If not for the reservoir, Jim says, UGA would have shut down on several occasions and industry would have suffered badly due to drought. However, the reservoir provides a backup for the region in times of drought that allows us to operate at nearly the same level.

Seeing a project like the Bear Creek Reservoir through to fruition is what gives Jim a sense that he is a part of something successful and impactful. Being able to show your kids and your grandkids a project you helped accomplish is something that Jim—and I—both look forward to. In my current work at the UGA College of Pharmacy, I work the regular 8-5 day and am largely confined to my office, albeit a very nice office. I enjoy the work that I do, but often

feel the itch to get outside the walls of my office more to connect with people in other settings. I approached Dr. Eric Zeemering, the MPA Director, to see what insight he may have regarding careers in public administration that allowed for that flexibility. He and Aaron Redman, the MPA Career Services Coordinator, put me in touch with Jim as a good match for this assignment given my preferences.

I also am planning on specializing in Local Government Administration over the next two years. While Jim is not a local government employee, his work is directly related to supporting and improving local government administration throughout Northeast Georgia. My desire to work with people, get out of the office, and further meaningful ideas at a local level made Jim a great selection for this assignment. During our conversation, Jim told me that the job of Executive Director is flexible to be whatever the incumbent wants it to be and requires someone who communicates well. I felt like Jim was describing a job that would be an ideal fit for me.

However, if there is one thing I learned from Jim's career pathway, it is that I am not going to complete my MPA and then immediately move into my dream position as a manager or director. That is the type of role that someone must work up to. While it only took Jim five years to become the Executive Director after earning his MPA, it had been 12 years since he started building relevant experience. Furthermore, once I do attain the pinnacle role that I may strive for, I want to practice the same sort of contentment that Jim has during his time as Executive Director of NEGRC. Already in my work experience, I have felt the insatiable thirst for more. Most people want more money and greater significance and, as a result, are always looking forward to that next opportunity to climb the ladder or gain a new title. I do not want to fall into that trap. Jim has been the Executive Director of NEGRC for 32 years. While I may not stay in

one place for three decades, I am drawn to the possibility of committing to an organization like Jim has. Without that time commitment, it is impossible to carry the largest, most impactful projects through to the finish line.

Another important lesson Jim relayed was this: take on as many different responsibilities as your supervisor will allow you. This allows you to gain knowledge and become invaluable because you know how to do everything, according to Jim. That rang true as it described a recent professional achievement of mine. In February 2018, I was hired in a role at the College of Pharmacy that primarily included administrative assistance with some event coordination. By November 2018, my position was reclassified and my job description was revised to also include communications, website design, assessment support, and procurement. This was a direct result of my intentional efforts to take on additional duties that were not in my job description to gain skills and prove my value as an employee. This work was rewarded when I was reclassified. I now have a full plate professionally, but I will not forget Jim's encouragement to maintain my openness to new projects and opportunities.

Something else that Jim said stuck with me. He recommended I get to know my classmates better. That is something I have not been intentional about. Given that I am married and a full-time employee, I feel like I am treading water just to make it to class each week and complete my assignments. I often feel like I do not have the time or energy to connect with my MPA peers, especially since I do not feel I can relate to most of them. Jim, however, says that to this day, he still deals regularly with his former classmates. That has given me an awareness that networking opportunities exist in class each week and can grow into mutually beneficial and productive working relationships decades into the future.

As the head of such a large organization with a wide jurisdiction of responsibility, Jim has become an expert in delegation. Given his philosophy on effective supervision, Jim cannot become wrapped up in micromanaging each project and person at NEGRC. Instead, he delegates responsibility to and trusts his department heads to carry out the program of work so that Jim can focus on the long-term vision of the organization, relationship between the organization and the Governing Council, and meeting with local governments to assess their needs.

In order to ensure his organization is successful, Jim needs high-quality employees. This is not the challenge, Jim says. Athens and UGA give Jim an incredible pool from which to pull employees from. This contrasts with some other regional commissions in the state that may not have a major university in their “metro” area. The challenge for Jim, then, is retaining those employees. He told me one of the most challenging parts of his job is managing in a way that keeps the majority of the staff happy. In Jim’s view, employee values and motivations are shifting. Several decades ago, employees wanted to get hired and have a long career at NEGRC. Now, Jim says employees are not as interested in retirement and benefits. Instead, they are hired and want to work three to four years before moving on to somewhere else. In order to combat this, all Jim says he can do is approach NEGRC like Kirby Smart approaches the football program: bring as much good talent in as he can and hope they work out.

Hearing Jim speak about the younger generation’s professional habits, I could not help but feel a pang of guilt. I was hired at UGA in 2018 with the goal of using the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) to earn an MPA. Employees are not eligible for TAP until they reach six months so I was not able to begin the MPA program until January 2019. I am projected to graduate sometime in 2021. Born and raised in Athens, I have a desire to move away once I am done with school. Depending on what my wife and I decide, we will move away from Athens in 2021 or

2022, which puts me right at three or four years working for UGA. Jim assured me that he does not hold this against his employees; it just makes things more challenging as a manager because he has to deal with the challenges of turnover and retraining new employees.

Another obstacle Jim identified regarding his role as a manager in a public organization is the challenge of communication with all stakeholders. In managing a project like the Bear Creek Reservoir, Jim had to bring multiple parties together through the process of taking an idea and turning it into a reality. That project involved government officials from four counties cooperating over time. Each time elected officials left office, the process more or less restarted as the incoming officials had to be briefed and oriented in a way that would ensure their support and cooperation. In this situation, Jim is more-or-less acting politically. He knows he wants to achieve a goal so he must work to make sure he can rally the support and resources necessary to accomplish it. In a way, it seems as if Jim is sometimes forced to view public administration through a second of Rosenblum's lenses—the political lens, (Rosenblum 1983). This sort of work requires tact, communication, persuasion and perseverance. On top of the government officials Jim works with on any given project, the NEGRC staff and Governing Council also are involved in the communication loop, as are the staff members of the participating governments. The number of stakeholders Jim must hold together can grow large very quickly.

Jim has been able to overcome that challenge very successfully over the years and I believe it has to do with his ability to listen to and work with all sorts of people. Jim emphasized the importance of being balanced in his approach to different local government leaders. Jim claims a large part of his approach is listening effectively and not drawing conclusions before meeting with people, despite the personalities or issues involved. In contrast to the Bear Creek Reservoir example, in which Jim was working toward a concrete goal, these types of interactions

require neutral competency from Jim, or at least an outward appearance of it, where Jim is viewed as an unbiased administrator, (Kaufman 1969). Jim assigns a lot of value to the ideas of local government leaders and is determined to be open-minded when listening to the needs and desires of local leaders. Because Jim is sometimes a middle man between two or more local governments, Jim does not want to be in a situation where he is caught in the middle of feuding leaders. He ensures his position on a level playing field by not speaking negatively or in a biased manner in front of those he is working with. Jim wants to make decisions on the facts of a decision as opposed to any other factors. This is very important, Jim says, when you consider how the governments in the region vary. You have contiguous counties that are completely different politically, like liberal Clarke County and conservative Oglethorpe County. Then, there is Newton County which is experiencing demographic changes that are shifting the county to the left. These are the sorts of situations Jim has learned to navigate effectively as a moderate and effective ambassador for the greater good of the region.

I was surprised to find out Jim will retire on June 1st. However, I took the opportunity to ask him which challenges were emerging that the next Executive Director would have to tackle. Jim mentioned new trends in public transparency were a great thing, but represented a challenge as organizations needed to be more vigilant and responsive. This part of our conversation took me back to some content we discussed in my Public Administration and Democracy course. In Light's four paths to reform, the "Watchful Eye" path focuses on making government more visible through disclosure and open access, (Light 1997). But even that is not enough anymore. Jim brought up a real example of a city that decided they wanted to build an airport. In the middle of the night, they condemned some fields and started building on the property the very next day. Nowadays, Jim said, you have public hearings, advertisements, meetings, and open

records. The discussion of transparency today is no longer just about after-the-fact open records; the climate today requires a government to be proactive in facilitating the public hearings and advertisements that Jim mentioned. Jim said that he wants more transparency in government going forward wherever it is possible. It will be interesting to see how governments are able to respond to an ever-changing public administration field that requires the capacity for quick change in policies and processes, (Waldo 1948).

Jim also raised a question of equity when I asked him about future challenges. The Northeast Georgia region is growing and that growth needs to be managed well. Jim also said that much of the growth in Georgia is north of the Fall Line, meaning that a lot of the decisions on a state level are going to be made by people in North Georgia. This is sure to lead to some tension between local governments and state legislatures as South Georgia may be on the losing end of some major decisions over the next few decades. I agree with the views expressed in public administration literature that the public manager should be concerned with equity among people and jurisdictions, (Frederickson 1971). Jim seemed to agree and said that decisions are going to need to be made to get a handle on that growth and manage it in a way that is responsible.

Specifically, Jim says it comes down to decisions that are made at the local level, like running your transportation routes, sewer and water lines to places where you want to facilitate growth. He also said school districts and local governments need to begin coordinating better. He brought up an example in which a school district chose to buy land for a new school outside of the city because it was cheaper there. But by the time the local government ran lines and utilities out to that location and the district had to bus students out to that location daily, it ended up being more costly than an alternative that could have been reached with increased coordination

between the two entities. Those are the types of impactful decisions that can be made by managers at a local and regional level to address the emerging challenges in public management for people like Jim, and Jim's successor.

My meeting with Jim was a very enjoyable and natural conversation. This may be because we both have the "gift of gab," as my wife's Aunt Donna would say. Both Jim and I enjoy connecting with others. We are also both people who are aware of the differences that may exist between ourselves and those we are with. Despite that awareness, we are skilled at navigating the interactions in a way that allows us to get along with those individuals. Those two characteristics were key to Jim's career development. Someone in his position must be excited about connecting with people but also skilled at getting along with a variety of people, given the wide array of individuals Jim has dealt with on a regular basis over the last 32 years.

As I move forward with my studies and dream of what my career will look like after the MPA program, I will remember the importance of being a balanced representative among parties who listens first. I also admire Jim's commitment to an organization he believes in. I have never envisioned myself working one place for 30 years and then retiring. While I may never have that sort of longevity with an organization, I do want to demonstrate the same sense of commitment to an organization that I believe in. I hope I am fortunate enough to find one as Jim did.

Ultimately, wherever my career takes me, I will always bear in mind the words of wisdom Jim left me with: "Leadership is not a position; it is action taken." Jim certainly did not sit in his office, satisfied with his lofty title. He got out and made sure things were accomplished in this region, and those accomplishments will continue to benefit the people of Northeast Georgia for generations to come. That is the impact of a dedicated public servant.

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