The League of Wisconsin Municipalities is an information clearinghouse, lobbying organization, and legal resource for 190 cities and 393 villages. Last week Mayor Sandy Decker, Alderpersons Mason Braunschweig, Diane Roberts, and Barb Jacobson, Public Works Director Dave Wartenweiler (who is also an officer for the League's Engineering & Public Works Section), and I attended the League's annual conference in Middleton.

The conference included an exhibition hall of consultants and vendors. There were several official and many informal opportunities to network with officials from other municipalities. And it featured a series of educational programs and workshops.

The programs ran concurrently with several breakout sessions to choose from; this allowed attendees to focus on the topics to meet their needs and interests. And in our case, with several attendees, it allowed us to split up and learn from several programs at the same time.

The first program I attended was entitled "Tough Times Require Creative Solutions: Investing in Capital Projects when Budgets are Tight," presented by Gino Galluzzo of Buckley Companies out of Rockford. The talk focused on layering or stacking several incentives to recruit development. This might include using tax increment financing, a business improvement district, and a long term lease agreement.

A panel of speakers from Baker Tilly and the Cities of Appleton and Beloit presented "Transforming Government." This was a presentation of the recent study "A Roadmap for Government Transformation," which recommends aligning local government services within a region to reduce costs while maintaining quality. It is about cooperation and collaboration among government jurisdictions: city, towns, school district, and county.

Any single collaboration will take lots of effort, and the savings won't solve the budget, and the results may need long-term patience. But the public's expectation is that we run everything as effective and efficient as we can. This means looking at the structure of our own service delivery. Are there duplicated efforts or overhead costs? What opportunities are there to contract? What opportunities are there to partner or collaborate? The report is available online at www.bakertilly.com/SL_GovServices.

"Ask a League Lawyer" was an interactive discussion with attorneys Claire Silverman and Dan Olson. A friend of mine had recently commented on a supposed change in the state statutes regarding contracts with automatic renewal provisions. I was caught surprised by her comment since I hadn't heard anything about a change in the law, and I later couldn't find anything about such a change online. So asked the attorneys (and later asked Curt Wytinski who coordinates the League's legislative efforts); none were aware of a change in state laws. Which I was pleased to hear since we're currently in the midst of renewing a number of contracts.

The other item we learned in this session was the result of a number of questions other municipalities had about the state's new smoking ban. The Village of Kimberly has adopted a local ordinance to regulate beer gardens. It allows restaurants and taverns to have an outdoor serving area which permits smoking and makes sure that there are consistent parameters for such

establishments. I asked Kimberly Village Administrator Rick Hermus to email a copy of their ordinance to me, so we could see if something similar would work for Evansville.

Mike Mooney and Mary Claire Lanser of Advisors LLC spoke on "Escaping the Abyss." They work with municipalities to develop and to implement economic development plans. And they work with professional developers to help negotiate projects. Their message was, "Don't wait for the economy to improve." Cities should be addressing economic development needs now: there are opportunities for growth and preparation will translate to a better position in a strengthened market.

In many ways their recommendations to assess and prioritize development goals, echoed comments made earlier in the "Tough Times" presentation about identifying opportunities and developing strategies.

Joe Gromacki, Madison Tax Increment Financing Coordinator, spoke about the "Proper Creation and Use of TIF Districts." This was a TIF 101 presentation. It is a complex and often misunderstood topic, and even after being here four years I learned a few details how the TIF laws in Wisconsin differ from Minnesota.

The last program I attended was "Economic and Stock Market Outlook 2010-2011" by William Delwiche, Associate Investment Strategist with Robert W. Baird & Co. This was something of a doom and gloom presentation about the recession, but it helped with perspective and context. And I found it very interesting to discuss the economy and the stock market as two distinct issues. Over time they do move together but should be considered and analyzed separately.

With the economy, he noted that we are moving away from the excesses of a consumption-based economy toward one more balanced with investment and savings. Although individual and government debt are much higher than historic norms, we do have the ability to grow out of our problems.

Overall, the conference did not present great, new ideas. But there were some ah-ha moments.

Evansville and the Town of Union have formed a couple committees to discuss shared services and coordination of our Smart Growth Plans. But the School District has not been involved in these committees. If we want to be serious about collaboration, then it should be.

For economic development, it is essential that we have all parties on one page with one message: city council, community leaders, Chamber of Commerce, and key staff. The goal should be the greater public good rather than any one entity's position.

Quality of life issues are vital in business site selection decisions. And expanding businesses learn about a community online prior to ever talking with the city.

There are examples of successful collaboration (and also redundant, misdirected, uncoordinated, and inefficient programs) we can learn from other municipalities and state agencies in Wisconsin and elsewhere.

Much of it may have seemed common sense, but, as we know, we must continually sift and winnow for truth.