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Racking up non-billable miles

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It may come as no surprise that local government attorneys tend to put a lot of miles on their cars and holes in their shoes traveling from village to village to provide legal services.

Even in this modern age when much of the work can be done via telephone and e-mail, a municipal lawyer still routinely treks from place to place attending city council meetings, defending local governments in courthouses around the state and assisting with parliamentary procedures for town hall meetings, caucuses and other on-site events that require the lawyer to be present in person.

That is, quite simply, all in a day's work for an attorney who represents several different units of government. The travel time is usually billable, which helps keep the lawyers from complaining about the frequent oil changes and trips to the shoe store.

Lately, however, I've been logging a fair amount of miles that are not billable, providing pro bono educational services for groups of elected officials from as far north as Crystal Lake and all the way down to Rend Lake in the southern tip of Illinois.

Somehow, this unpaid and extensive travel time has been even more rewarding than many of the billable projects to which I've been assigned.

Having started my career in local government law by doing the "corporate" legal work for several municipalities, I've had the honor and — usually — the pleasure of getting to know mayors, clerks, trustees and other officials who comprise the nuts and bolts that allow a unit of government to run effectively, efficiently and in compliance with the law.

From time to time, I've wondered how these small-town laymen became so astute in their understanding of the statutes that dictate how a local government must operate and so adept at passing ordinances, approving budgets and enforcing state and local laws.

I mean, if it's taken me this long to study and comprehend those laws while being paid to do so as a lawyer, how on earth does a full-time farmer who's paid \$2,000 a year to be a part-time mayor find the time to learn these things?

The answer, in large part, comes from several under-appreciated organizations throughout the state that strive to educate and assist community leaders with their duties as elected officials.

Some of those organizations, like the Illinois Municipal League and Township Officials of Illinois, are large enough to have full-time staff members fielding questions, coordinating seminars and traveling the state to meet with local officials.

Other groups, like the Municipal Clerks of Illinois and the Central Illinois Municipal Clerks Organization, exist primarily from the volunteer efforts of elected officials who, amazingly, find time to assist with educating others despite the demands of their full-time jobs, their part-time service as local officials and their round-the-clock duties as parents.

In all such organizations, the mission is the same: Provide free or low-cost training and information so that people may properly and confidently perform their statutory duties as local elected officials.

Having seen these people donate their "free time" and leave their families on nights and weekends in order to host seminars for officials from other jurisdictions, and having interacted with the large crowds these events tend to attract, has given me faith that the majority of elected officials in Illinois are sincere in their desires to run efficient, transparent and honest local governments.

Given the dedication I have seen in those hard-working, underpaid public servants, I found it hard to say no when I was first asked to present an educational seminar — without getting paid to do so — for one of the several organizations that fills its calendar every year with educational events in many different parts of the state.

After having researched, prepared written materials and trimmed down the number of corny jokes in my loosely drafted speeches, I've now had the

pleasure of leading educational seminars with officials from numerous cities, villages, townships and other units of government from around the state. Much to my surprise, every event has been downright enjoyable for me, thanks to the intelligent interaction with the officials that has surfaced in every one of those seminars.

So far this year, I have driven almost 2,000 non-billable miles to and from these events, speaking on topics ranging from open meetings and freedom of information laws to video gaming statutes to governmental accounting and auditing requirements to the general rights and responsibilities of specific governmental offices.

Each and every time, the program participants arrive well-armed with questions, examples and anecdotes from their local communities. I never get more than a few minutes into my boiler-plate speech when hands start to go up and the lecture quickly evolves into a back-and-forth discussion.

The interaction, however, is always welcome. It allows us to breeze over the simpler topics, while giving more attention to issues of greater concern to the group of officials in the room. During breaks and following the presentation, even more questions arise from people who stick around for some one-on-one consultation.

Following a recent event, we determined that the corporate authorities from a particular midsize city that shall remain nameless were incorrect in their understanding of their statutory form of government. They thought they were a "strong-mayor" government, whereas the Illinois secretary of state's office maintains that no strong-mayor cities currently exist in the state, despite a statute allowing any municipality to adopt that form of government by referendum.

Did it really matter legally that it was an aldermanic-council government and not a strong-mayor government? Probably not, because the mayor was asserting only those powers properly conferred upon him by local ordinance. But it sure was an interesting history lesson for me, for the officials from that community and from other members of the group that hosted the series of seminars.

All of this unpaid time spent touring the state to educate officials would be tough to manage for a sole practitioner, which I used to be. Therefore, credit is due to my local-government law firm of Ancel, Glink, Diamond, Bush, DiCianni & Krafthefer, which not only encourages its attorneys to prepare and present for these organizations, but also writes the handbooks for elected officials published by the Illinois Municipal League, Township Officials

of Illinois, the Illinois Association of Park Districts and other groups.

Thanks to the firm's pro-education philosophy, I've been able to feel like I am truly "giving back" to communities all across the state, while at the same time getting to know some of the hidden gems of this great Land of Lincoln.

During some of those endless hours alone behind the wheel, I have daydreamed of Abraham Lincoln touring the judicial circuits of Illinois, practicing law everywhere and anywhere the need presented itself.

I would never dare compare my dedication or intelligence to that of Mr. Lincoln, although I might already be closing in on the number of miles he traveled by train and horseback in pursuit of justice in all corners of Illinois.