Event Recap — Start Local, Go Big: Policy Jobs in City Government

Panelists:
- Mario Maciel, Division Manager, Mayor’s Gang Prevention Task Force, San Jose Parks, Recreation and Neighborhood Services
- Nick Almeida ‘02, Chief Service Officer, San Jose Mayor’s Office
- Roxanne Grillo ‘10, Sanitary Engineer, San Jose Environmental Services

What opportunities for work are there at the city level? What is different about San Jose?

Mario
- Our Gang Prevention Task Force program is known for its longevity. On top of our direct services, we are modeling best practices for other cities and teaching other cities how to catch up.
- We’re also always in the spirit of continuous improvement. Gangs look different and so our work has to look different and change to keep improving.

Nick
- I worked for a lot of cities as a consultant but when I joined City of San Jose, I saw it’s a super innovative city. Everyone is passionate about work and wants to deliver the best for our communities. And there’s high engagement within our communities. San Jose is a nimble and large city which means we can lead the way on initiatives on the national scene.
- In terms of opportunities, fellowships have been really rewarding for me and they allow for a lot of exploration of what’s available. And on the other side, we’re trying to tap into students to allow them a space for their ideas, experience, passion, and growth.

Roxanne
• What I’ve learned working in city government is if you can justify your ideas, people will listen. Not all city agencies are like that, but San Jose is different. City of San Jose is open, they want new ideas, they want to be better and there’s a lot of room for exposure to high executives and exploring so you can create things you care about.

**How did you know that your current position was your end point?**

*Roxanne*

• I thought I would stay with the Army Corps of Engineers all my life. I was working with all men and all of them were older than me. But I learned so much from them and I did my best to take advantage of my resources, despite the intimidation.

• I was committed to learning about others’ paths and what they do and even what they want to do in the future. A lot of how I figured out and got to where I am now is by talking to people and learning as much as I can at every job. As I kept working, I realized I wanted a bigger impact and I worked to find positions that would give me that.

• It all comes down to networking and meeting and learning from others. It takes time to get there, though. It’s a lifelong learning experience, so be okay with uncertainty.

*Mario*

• You have to have a plan but you have to live, too.

• Take time to diversify yourself and your skills as much as possible. You have to learn as much at every opportunity and not just hard skills. You need soft skills and people skills. Soft skills are the most essential in this work. So have a plan but you have to live, too. You find your calling and it stops being a job and becomes a career.

**What are some differences between nonprofit work and work at local government?**

*Nick*

• Resource constraint is a big difference. Nonprofits can be more volatile because they don’t always have secure funding year to year. Meanwhile, local government will always have tax revenue.

• Nonprofits also tend to be more grassroots whereas local government is a combination of direct services and being strategic.

*Mario*
- A big difference is also the scale of impact. Nonprofits are often more narrow focused, but with local government you can impact the entire community.

**How do you view success in your work at San Jose?**

*Nick*
- Success is not being on the first page of the newspaper.
- For me, success is creating opportunity for all San Jose residents. It’s making sure we’re responsive to all residents, especially to things that come with city development, like gentrification.
- Success is working with community partners and listening all while doing our best to make sure the integrity of San Jose remains.

*Mario*
- For me, success is reducing youth violence and having services for the ones that feel hopeless.

*Roxanne*
- Success is using taxpayer dollars on the best possible solutions. We’re funded by property taxes, so we want to make sure we’re using money in the best possible way for the best possible solutions for our city.

**What opportunities are there for internships with San Jose?**

*Roxanne*
- We always have students in our office during school year and summer. Our internship program recruits on rolling basis. Interns are matched with a department of their interest, depending on availability.

*Nick*
- I know the mayor’s office has an internship program that’s open to anyone. Our HR also have a system for internships. If you are interested in a specific department, there can be direct placements for internships so contact that department directly.

**Fellowships to look up:** Community Impact Fellowship (placements at Offices of the City Manager, Energy, Public Works, Tech and Innovation, and Parks and Recreation)