Wise takes on meetings, changes

WINNER Government
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TAMPA -- Bonnie Wise oversees a $725 million budget, manages 140 workers and advises the mayor of Florida's third-largest city.

Five years into her job as Tampa's CFO, the 44-year-old University of Florida graduate is caught up in a trying time for local governments as coffers shrink and costs rise.

Wise and her assistants are figuring out how the city should deal with the effects of property tax cuts and dwindling sales tax. At the same time, costs for fuel, asphalt, tires, property insurance and other items are rising. Just the city's police department spends $3 million on gas annually.

"It is definitely a job that is far more exciting, challenging and rewarding than I anticipated," said Wise, who specialized in bond issues for 16 years prior to joining the city.

Oh, did she mention frustrating?

The wheels of government turn slowly. Meetings occupy much of Wise's workday that typically begins at 8 a.m.

"Today I only had five meetings," she said, looking at her calendar.

With no time to spare, she's forced to delegate.

Each Wednesday, she and seven other members of Mayor Pam Iorio's executive staff meet to discuss issues and possible solutions. They also regularly get together with the mayor and city council members.

"I'm giving advice to the mayor to help her make decisions that are going to make our community better for a long time," she said.

That's rewarding.

So is saving the city millions on bond refinancing and improving service to the city's 330,000 residents.

In 2003, the utility department did not accept credit cards when Wise joined the city. Staff members told Wise they'd considered it and decided it wasn't a good idea.
"Well, life changes," Wise told management. "Maybe your decision was a good one when you made it. But you have to look at making it easier for people to pay their bills."

The city now accepts credits cards, with no tacked on fees. And card usage has skyrocketed, she said. Plus, about 5,500 customers (including Wise, a south Tampa resident) have their monthly utility bill payment deducted from a credit or checking account.

Later this year, customers will be able to pay bills over the telephone 24 hours a day. That's important, Wise said, because not everyone has access to the Internet to pay.

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