

# Municipal Research News

LOCAL GOVERNMENT  
SUCCESS



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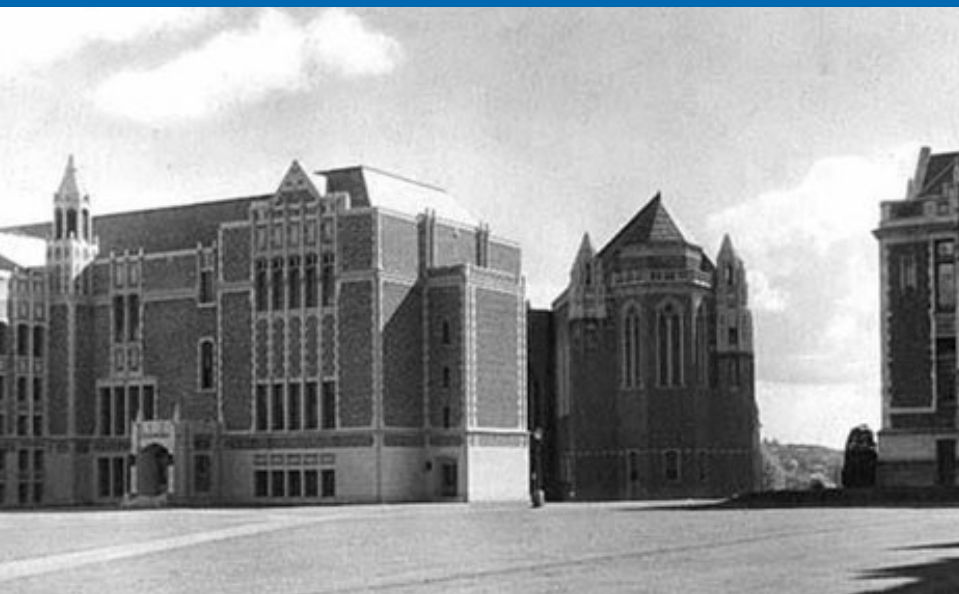
You Asked,  
We Answered  
Nine Decades  
of Inquiries

## About MRSC

Municipal Research and Services Center (MRSC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to proactively supporting the success of local governments through one-on-one consultation, research tools, online and in-person training, and timely, unbiased information on issues impacting all aspects of local governments.

For 90 years, local governments in Washington State have turned to MRSC for assistance. Our trusted staff attorneys, policy consultants, and finance experts have decades of experience and provide personalized guidance through Ask MRSC and our extensive online resources. Every year we help thousands of staff and elected officials research policies, comply with state and federal laws, and improve day-to-day operations through best practices.

Municipal Research News is published biannually to inform, engage, and educate readers about ongoing and emerging issues. In print and online at the MRSC Insight blog, we cover such major topics as the Growth Management Act and the ever-evolving complexities of the Public Records Act, to name a few. When the legal landscape changes, we are here to clarify the issues and help local government leaders access the information they need to better serve their communities.



### MRSC Trivia Question

Who led the Bureau of Governmental Research beginning in 1939?

Answer on page 10

Your ideas and comments are appreciated. If you have news you would like to share, please contact the editor, Leah LaCivita, at [llacivita@mrsc.org](mailto:llacivita@mrsc.org)

# Municipal Research News

LOCAL GOVERNMENT SUCCESS

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# MRSC HIGHLIGHTS

## Mission Driven: 90 Years of MRSC



Since its inception, local governments have turned to MRSC for independent and reliable guidance on every topic imaginable, and, as the years passed, over multiple mediums. Below are some highlights from our history.

### 1934-1949

MRSC began as Bureau of Governmental Research (Bureau) at the University of Washington, acting as the research arm of its advocacy-oriented partner organization, the Association of Washington Cities (AWC). It received 293 inquiries in 1935, growing to 475 by 1949. The Bureau also organized the annual Institute of Government, a multi-day “in-service training school” for public officials consisting of intensive training on municipal law, taxation, budget preparation, accounting, and personnel administration. The event morphed into a general conference on emerging municipal issues and attracted thousands of attendees annually over its 34-year history.

### 1950-1969

During this time period, the number of inquiries grew from 517 in 1950 to over 1,000 annually by the 1960s. In 1969, the Bureau was dissolved, and MRSC was incorporated as an independent nonprofit. MRSC used the Bureau’s library, publications, and inquiry materials, while also continuing to develop field studies and publications, hold educational conferences, and offer legal and technical advice to municipalities.

### 1970-1989

The number of inquiries significantly increased again, from 1,102 in 1970 to 4,785 in 1989. During this period, MRSC began experimenting with computers and word processors to achieve greater productivity using spreadsheets, databases, and computerized searches. MRSC automated its inquiry records and library classification system, which allowed consultants to gain instant access to previous inquiry records through simple keyword searches and the ability to apply prior guidance to new documents.

### 1990-2005

MRSC continued to experiment with promising new technologies, including a print newsletter (1990), the Washington Information Cities Partnership database (1992), an electronic bulletin board system (1993), a website (1996), and a bi-weekly, subscription-based email service (2003). MRSC also started assisting local governments with the transition to electronic services for many applications, including payment and billing, purchasing, permitting, and public records management. Inquiries during this period stayed in the area of 7-8,000/year while website visits rose exponentially — from 163,448 visits in 1997 to over 3 million by 2005.

### 2006-PRESENT

MRSC broadened its use of electronic communications to disseminate knowledge, best practices, and resources, unveiling an e-newsletter subscription service in 2007 and the online MRSC Insight blog in 2012. Today, over 10,000 people subscribe to our e-newsletters, which feature MRSC blogs, training information, sample inquiries, and selected external news and articles. Additionally, MRSC steadily expanded website content to address all aspects of local government, from governance to contracting, budgeting, public records, and much more. MRSC also brought on the small works rosters program (2007), began offering online in-person training (2014), unveiled an electronic bidding program (2023), and became the statewide small works roster (2024).

Today, MRSC provides services to all 281 cities and towns in Washington, all 39 counties, and hundreds of special purpose districts, state agencies, and other government partners. When new challenges arise, we are here to clarify the issues and help local governments access the information they need to better serve their communities.



# How Local Governments, Partners Helped MRSC Through Challenging Times

In 2017, just seven years into her tenure as the Executive Director for Municipal Research and Services Center (MRSC), Tracy Burrows had a nasty surprise when the Washington State Senate supplemental budget proposed zeroing out MRSC's funding.

"I really had to start making a plan A and a plan B," said Tracy, noting that, at the time, 80% of the budget came from a single state contract. "If we get no money from the legislature, what will MRSC look like? And it wasn't very pretty."

It might come as a surprise to some that MRSC has, several times, weathered severe threats to its very existence. This article looks at the funding crisis that have hit MRSC, how local governments and institutional partners stepped up to help when called, and how we are in a strong position as we move forward.



BY LEAH LACIVITA, COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR

## MRSC FUNDING CUT THROUGH TAX ABOLISHMENT

Twice, MRSC's funding source has been collateral damage, caught up in the sweeping change of citizens' initiatives. But, to understand how that happened, it helps to know how it has been historically funded.

In 1969, MRSC (formerly the University of Washington Bureau of Governmental Services) became an independent non-profit, tasked with providing research and services to cities and towns and funded via city/town motor vehicle excise tax (MVET) proceeds.

This era of steady funding continued until 1999, when the voters passed Initiative 695 (I-695), abolishing the MVET tax and the revenue stream that went along with it. Although I-695 was later found unconstitutional, the legislature repealed the tax and replaced it with a \$30 license fee.



Overnight, MRSC's budget was in tatters.

"There were some very difficult days. I was very concerned [about having a job to come to]," says Paul Sullivan, who worked as a legal consultant from 1999 to 2019.

MRSC used every channel it could to encourage its advocates to lobby their state legislators in support of a joint MRSC/Washington City-County Management Association proposal that would replace lost MVET funding with a portion of the distribution of liquor sales profits to cities/towns. Many organizations formally supported such an effort, including the state chapter of The American Public Works Association, the Washington State Association of Municipal Attorneys, and the Association of Washington Cities, to name a few.

Rich Yukubousky, executive director from 1991 to 2011, remembers the pivotal role local governments played in this effort. He recalls one meeting with a legislator who had a reputation for being tough on organizations and agencies that were facing budget cuts. As he headed for Olympia, he was dreading the meeting.

"I went into her office, and I started to give my spiel, and she said, 'Stop. I've got 16 cities and towns in my district, and every one of them contacted me. You got my vote,'" Rich said with a laugh.

With the help of supporters, SB 6357 passed in 2000, which diverted a small share of liquor profits distributed annually to cities, towns, and counties to fund MRSC's services. Liquor sales profits "may seem to be an odd way to fund [MRSC], but it was chosen because it was considered to be a local source of revenue," notes Rich.

## MRSC FUNDING INDIRECTLY IMPACTED A SECOND TIME

For the first decade of the new millennium, MRSC moved forward with this funding source while also making serious investments in a digital future. The organization moved library resources and the inquiry database online and built an ambitious website devoted to covering all aspects of Washington local government.

However, a new shadow passed over MRSC in 2010 when two initiatives tied to liquor privatization were introduced but ultimately failed at the ballot box. A short article in the 2010 Fall/Winter issue of Municipal Research News breathes this sigh of relief:

We received many calls and emails expressing concerns about the future of MRSC and its staff if one or both of

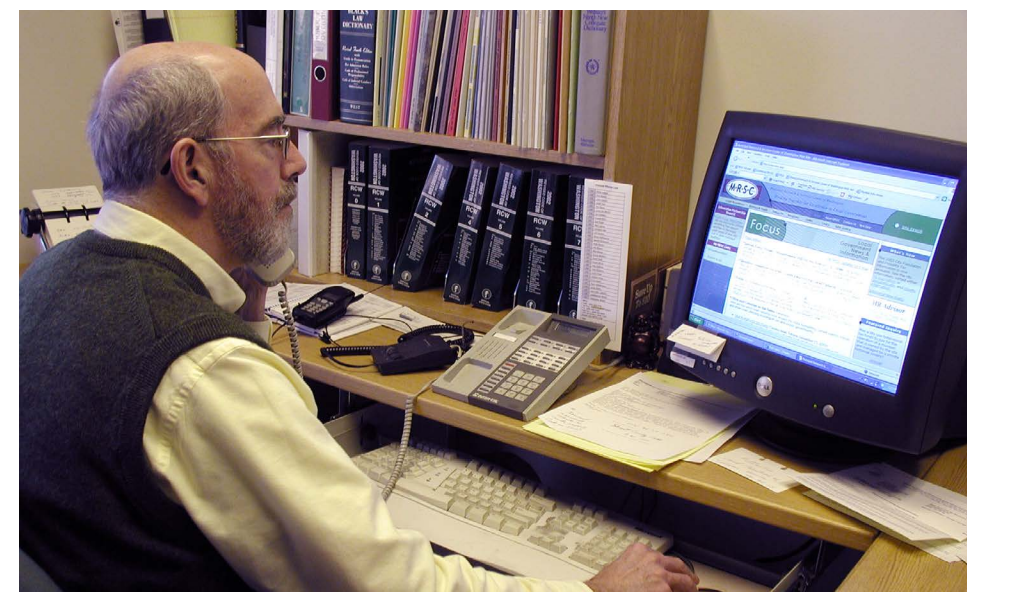
these initiatives passed. It seems clear that the programs and services we offer are valued by local government officials and staffs.

But liquor privatization reappeared in 2011 with I-1183, and this time the initiative passed. The state's liquor taxation and revenue structures changed as a result, but ultimately MRSC's portion of liquor funding was preserved.



Still there was an unseen benefit to be found; namely, that when faced with a crisis, MRSC can muster supporters from across the state. Lynn Nordby, a management consultant who worked at MRSC from 2008 to 2018, shared the story of a state legislator with no local government experience and who didn't know what MRSC was, propose that it be defunded.

"Of course," says Lynn, "municipalities around the state rose up in support, and that particular legislator was given kind of a schooling on the benefit that [MRSC] provided."



Former staff member Jim Doherty using MRSC's website in 2000

# How Technology Shaped MRSC's Organizational Efficiency from the 1970s to the Present

When legal consultant Bob Meinig started at MRSC in 1989, the organization had a physical library that included city and county codes, copies of ordinances, studies, inquiry responses, and more. Consultants answered questions using Dictaphones, handheld recording devices, to record their answers, which were later typed up and mailed out. Publications were printed, and, occasionally, staff had to add inserts with revisions necessitated by new legislation when sending them out.

"Technology changed all that. The Web completely changed how we were able to provide our services," Bob, who retired from MRSC in 2017, told us.

Technology has changed tremendously in the 35 years since Bob's first day, increasing the pace, expectations, and comprehensiveness of MRSC's work. This article discusses the most significant tech adoptions from the 1970s to the present.



MRSC starts serving special purpose districts in 2006

## LEARNING FROM ADVERSITY

After decades of depending on a sole source of funding, it became clear that MRSC needed to diversify its income stream. In 2007, a small appropriation from the state legislature opened up MRSC's research program to special purpose districts (SPDs), but funding to support this effort was cut in 2009. Rather than not serve SPDs at all, MRSC contracted directly with SPD affinity groups, developing small but reliable funding streams.

MRSC also investigated ways to earn money. In 2007, it took over a small works rosters program from the city of Lynnwood and slowly built it over time. Today, MRSC Rosters is used by 743 Washington public agencies, includes 6,646 registered businesses, and has become the new official statewide small works roster.

MRSC began building a training program as early as 2010. At first, the focus was on in-person training, primarily directed at specific public works or legal topics, but it began to branch out into webinars as early as 2013.

"We were on the cutting edge in the webinar field, doing maybe two or three a year. And then, within three years we had a webinar training program going," said Tracy. Webinar content was considered valuable enough that when MRSC began to charge a nominal fee for attendance, "most were happy to pay," she continued.

Our training program has since become a huge success, attracting over 7,800 attendees and generating \$232,095 in fiscal year 2023-24.

## ANOTHER THREAT, BUT MRSC WAS READY...

While MRSC was steadily diversifying its revenue sources and rolling out new services, the final scare came in 2016, when the Washington State Senate's supplemental budget proposed eliminating MRSC's funding. As with 2007 and 2011, MRSC's supporters got busy.

"As soon as people heard that this [funding cut] was potentially happening, the legislators really got inundated with calls, visits, and so on," said Tracy.

MRSC called for testimonials to present to

the legislature, collecting more than 2,000 heartfelt responses. This one, from Tom Trulove, formerly the Mayor of Cheney, sums up much of what other respondents said:

Without MRSC, our legal bill would probably triple. Our success in dealing with state rules would greatly diminish, we would be unable to forecast next year's budget features, like state shared revenues, and we would not be kept up to date on changes in laws and what we need to do to comply.

## ON SOLID FOOTING

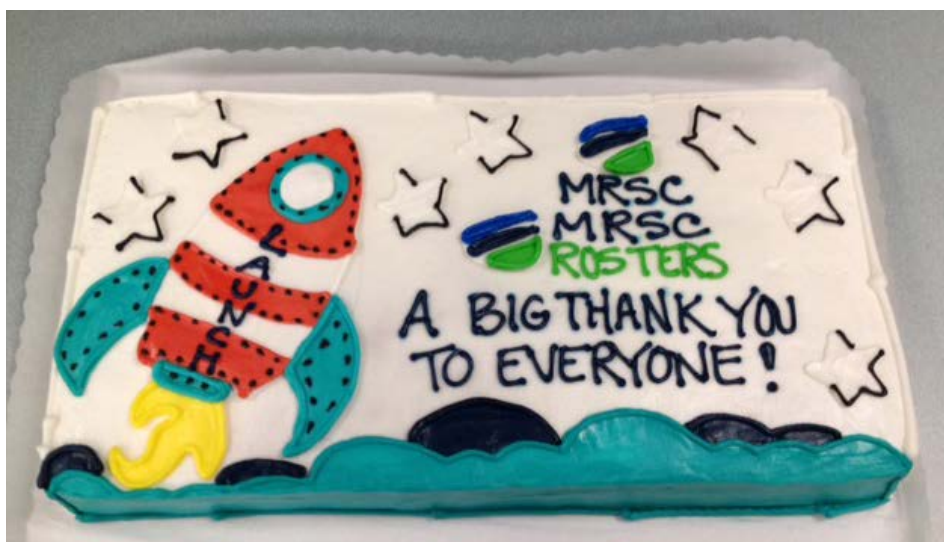
Today, MRSC employs 30 full-time staff from across the state and offers a suite of services, including Ask MRSC; our 'government Google' website; robust online, in-person, and on-demand trainings; the small works rosters, and administrative support services. By introducing new services that help local government be more efficient — such as the electronic bidding program — we've further diversified our revenue stream, making us far less reliant on a single source of income.

As MRSC gears up to help local governments tackle today's challenges, like artificial intelligence, or long-time concerns, like homelessness, we are heartened to receive testimonials like the one from Mike Rizzitiello, City Administrator of College Place, which lets us know we are still meeting the goal set out way back in 1934:

"MRSC provides great bang for the tax dollar from the state and is critical for small jurisdictions that don't have the staff to do research. ... As far as I am concerned, the state should pass a constitutional amendment to never stop funding MRSC," he said.



Leah LaCivita, Communications Coordinator, writes about a variety of issues and profiles innovative local government programs and projects in Washington State. [llacivita@mrsc.org](mailto:llacivita@mrsc.org)



MRSC Rosters begins in 2007



## WORK BEFORE THE INTERNET

Legal consultant Pat Mason never intended to work at a single organization for his whole career. But after he finished law school in 1976, he started at MRSC — and stayed on for 39 years, until his retirement.

Pat remembers how inquiries were handled in the 1970s and '80s. After an official submitted a question, consultants shuffled through note cards that included descriptions of each inquiry listed by subject, such as the Open Public Meetings Act (OPMA).



MRSC staff during an office move, 1988

“If I found one that I thought would be helpful, I would note the inquiry number and then go to a larger file cabinet in the library where we kept hard copies of all prior inquiries,” Pat said.

A later breakthrough was the microfiche reader, which allowed consultants to scroll through inquiries as old as 30 years. When an official wanted a type of sample ordinance, MRSC staff would mail or fax a compilation of related documents culled from its library.

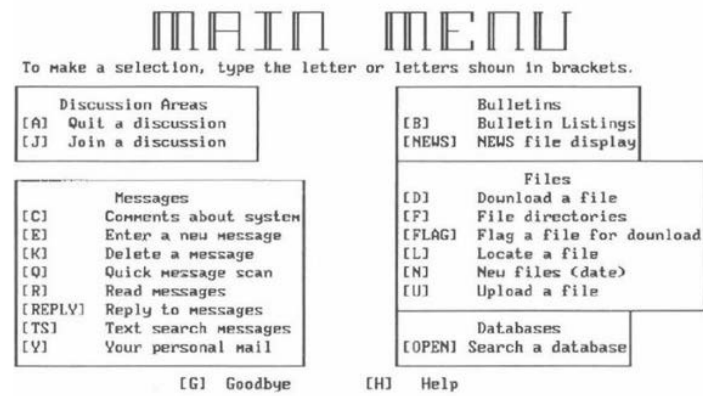
“Things didn’t happen as quickly as they obviously do now. But at the end of the day, some people got compulsive about wanting to clear their desk each day. We did provide as prompt service as we could,” Jim Doherty, legal consultant for 25 years, told us.

## PROVIDING RESOURCES FOR THE PUBLIC

Throughout the 1990s, MRSC increasingly became an aggregator of information, helping local officials sort through information available virtually.

In 1992, MRSC introduced an electronic database called the Washington Information Cities Partnership, which functioned as a municipal clearinghouse of ordinances, resolutions, reports, brochures, and forms.

In 1993, MRSC rolled out its first website iteration, the MRSC Electronic Bulletin Board. The platform gave the public access to WAC and RCW databases, 1990 census data, discussion boards, and downloadable library files.



The MRSC Electronic Bulletin Board, 1993

“There would be millions of visitors per year to our website who would access that database. It got to the point where almost anybody who had any kind of important staff position had MRSC bookmarked,” said Rich Yukubousky, executive director from 1991 to 2011.

MRSC was also the first place to put the Washington State Appellate Court decisions from the state’s court of appeals and supreme court online so that the public could access them.

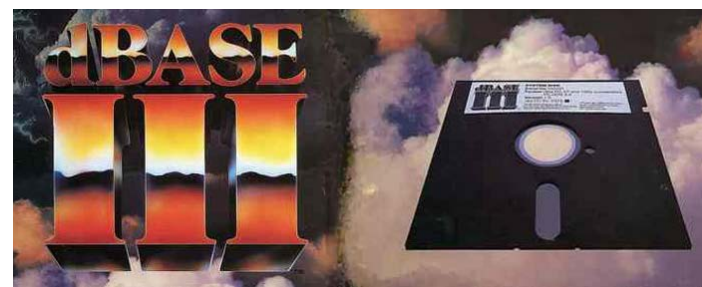
MRSC was also the first place to put the Washington State Appellate Court decisions from the state’s court of appeals and supreme court online.

At conferences and by mail in the 1990s, consultants also started distributing MRSC on CD, a searchable database of MRSC’s legal opinions, Ask MRSC inquiries, publications, and policy research responses.

“They first put out a CD-ROM of Frequently Asked Questions. If you had a question about something, you could pop that in your desk drive and get a quick answer,” said Lynn Nordby, a management consultant who worked at MRSC from 2008 to 2018.

## COMPUTERS AND DATABASES

In 1985, MRSC started using computers and word processing software, along with dBase, a database program that offered access to previous inquiries through keyword searches. By the early 1990s, the software program Folio Views 2.1 allowed staffers to search and retrieve more than 10,000 previously submitted inquiries.



The dBase database, 1985

Jim Doherty, whose tenure at MRSC coincided with what he dubbed the “computer revolution,” said with a laugh, “I remember a memo going around that we were going to have email. Some of us thought, why email? Why don’t you just walk down the hall to talk to somebody?”

The Internet is so ubiquitous today, it’s hard to remember that some organizations and municipalities were hesitant to give it a try. But not MRSC.

“We didn’t resist it. We might have a lot of tough conversations about it to really figure out how to do it in a way that worked, but the necessity became pretty obvious pretty early on. That it was going to be helpful for the people that we serve,” said Rich.

In 1996, MRSC published its first non-bulletin-board-style website, [www.MRSC.org](http://www.MRSC.org). The website featured weekly news, sample documents, state statutes and administrative rules, articles, publications, court decisions, and inquiry responses.

The library staff was primarily in charge of moving physical materials online. Naturally, the virtual transition took away some of the drudgery of mailing out materials, shuffling materials, and taking calls from officials asking when sample documents would arrive.

“The pace picked up, and it was fun because you deal with many more issues each day. But it was also challenging. You’d have to keep track of the expectations of people so that you get back to them with what they needed,” said Jim.

In the first year of operation, the website received only a little over 30,000 visits. Two years later, in 1998, the website recorded more than 382,000 visits.

Lynn described the pace this way: “When we got a question, if it wasn’t something we could answer off the top of our head or with our own experience, we could search previous inquiries back years and years and years.”

## REMOTE WORK AND VIRTUAL TRAINING

In the early 2000s, MRSC also started experimenting with remote work. With the Internet and other digital services that were available, consultants could work at home pretty seamlessly. Many started working at home two days a week.

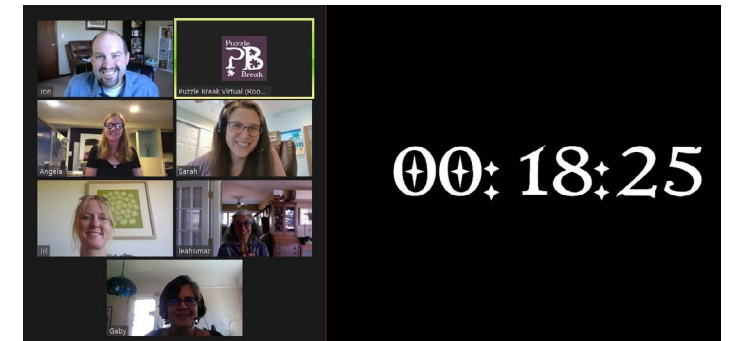
This early move to remote work meant MRSC was uniquely positioned for the COVID-19 pandemic. From 2020 to 2023, MRSC developed web material, free training, and blogs, as well as collecting sample documents related to the pandemic. Topics covered included furloughs, financing, the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, community support, human resource (HR) issues, operational issues (electronic signatures, meetings, OPMA, vaccines, facemasks), and post-pandemic reopening.

The Internet is so ubiquitous today, it's hard to remember that some organizations and municipalities were hesitant to give it a try. But not MRSC.

As the years went on, MRSC also expanded its virtual training.

“Local government, especially smaller entities, had difficulties being able to get away from their offices to attend training. The use of the internet via Zoom and other resources provided local government with the ability to obtain trainings that they previously were unable to attend,” said Toni Nelson, a finance consultant from 2014 to 2021.

As the world emerged from the pandemic, MRSC staff decided in 2021 to continue working remotely, aside from quarterly in-person meet-ups for staff meetings, holiday parties, and other gatherings.



MRSC staff participating in a virtual escape room during the pandemic, 2021

## DECADES OF STAYING UP TO DATE

Though technology adoption can be stressful, MRSC has always reaped benefits from keeping up to date.

“When we got our computers, we computerized all of the tech, all of the questions that we had, the letters, and phone conversations, and that was a great source of knowledge. That we didn’t have to always reinvent the wheel, and we [could just] cut and paste and look really smart,” long-time legal consultant Paul Sullivan, who started at MRSC in the 1980s, said.

Technology has advanced considerably since Paul’s first day. MRSC’s website receives over 1.2 million visitors from within the state each year, and consultants answer over 4,000 inquiries annually. As we look to the future, we can only wonder, what technologies will MRSC use to serve local governments over the next 90 years?



Alicia Bones, Research Analyst and Writer, writes about a variety of issues that impact local governments in Washington State. She holds graduate degrees in English, creative writing, and higher education administration. [abones@mrsc.org](mailto:abones@mrsc.org)

# YOU ASKED, WE ANSWERED

## Nine Decades of Inquiries

In recognition of MRSC's 90th Anniversary and in deference to the profound impact of current events on local governments, let's look at some questions we have received over the years.

**1936**

Will you kindly furnish this office with what information you may have regarding voting machines, including different types, costs, efficiency, and economy as compared with clerk's salaries, and upkeep?

**1986**

May a local government enact an ordinance making it a crime for a minor to appear in public places after having consumed intoxicating liquor?

**1943**

Due to the war emergency, everyone is overburdened with war work and attending their own businesses. It is difficult at times to secure a quorum for council meetings. Is it legal to pay the mayor and councilmembers for services rendered in attending council meetings even though we have no funds specifically dedicated to mayor or councilmember pay in our current budget?

**1992**

Is our local government prohibited from regulating the placement of satellite dishes on residential property?

**1955**

Do you have any information or a booklet on duties and powers of a councilman of a fourth-class town?

**1997**

Are communities not fully planning under the Growth Management Act required to submit critical area regulations to the state for review?

**1969**

Our police department has had a complaint about individuals advertising hypnosis. We have been asked if there are any laws or regulations concerning hypnosis but could find none in our city code or in the RCWs. Do you know if any other cities have enacted ordinances to control hypnotic lessons, treatment, etc?

**2002**

Are the names of finalists for a city manager position open to disclosure as part of a public records request?

**2006**

Do you know of any public agencies that are selling surplus property on eBay?

**2017**

With the change in minimum wage rates and new statewide requirement to provide paid sick leave to eligible employees under I-1433, how do we address sick leave for seasonal employees?

**2020**

How does the new federal Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) apply to local governments?

**2024**

I am interested in learning more about the effectiveness of stay out of drug areas (SODA) zones. Can you point me to recent, data-centered studies/ research that examine the use and outcomes associated with SODA zones, including the impacts on the restricted area (e.g., evidence of declining drug use) and those with SODA orders (e.g., lack of access to services in restricted areas)?

**Have a Question? Ask MRSC.** Call us at (206) 625-1300 or (800) 933-6772 or submit your question online at [mrsc.org](http://mrsc.org)

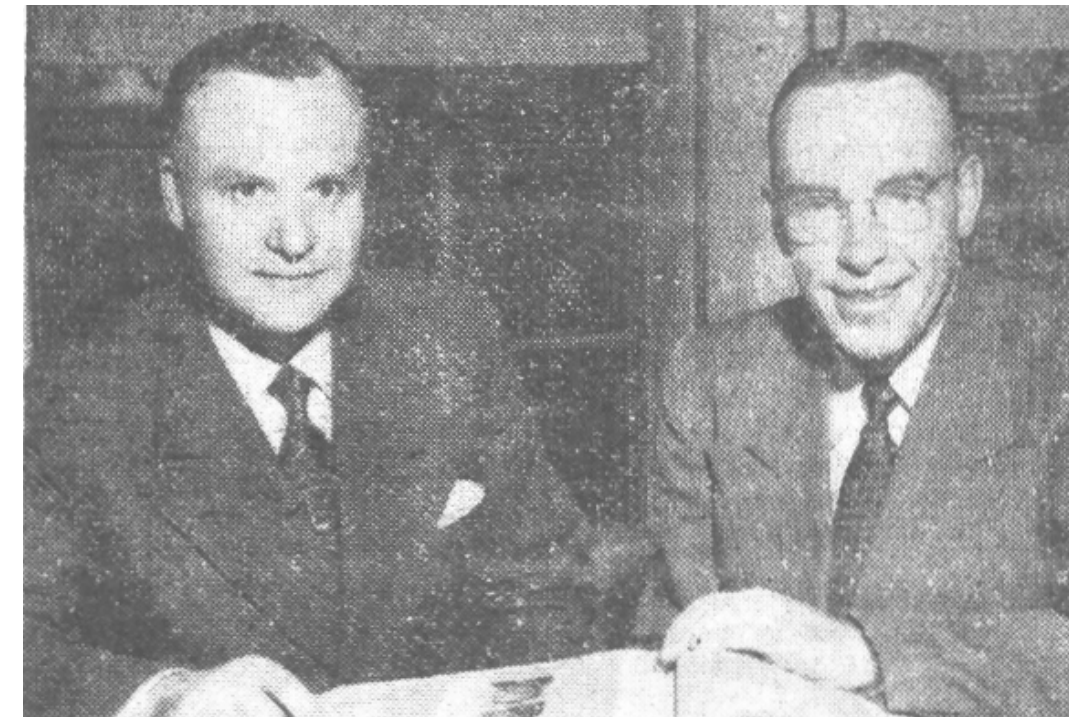
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### MRSC Trivia Answer

Dr. Donald H. Webster (right) led the organization from 1939-1967, just two years before it dissolved and incorporated as MRSC in 1969.



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MRSC offers convenient online and in-person training across a variety of broad topics including finance and budgeting, government performance, management, public works contracting, public records act compliance, and land use case law.

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Thursday, November 7 | 9 AM - 4 PM | Online

Credits: CLE, WAPRO, Open Government Training Act requirements

**Lessons Learned from GMA Housing Element Update**

Thursday, November 14 | 11 AM - 12:30 PM | Online

Credits: CM (Pending Approval)

**(FREE) Digging into Public Works Fundamentals: Bellingham**

Thursday, November 14 | 8 AM - 4:30 PM | Bellingham, WA

Credits: Contact Hours or APWA-CAEC

**(FREE) Small Works Direct Contracting**

Tuesday, November 19 | 11 AM - 12:30 PM | Online

**LEARN MORE AND REGISTER AT [mrsc.org/training](https://mrsc.org/training)**