

## Accountants group honors town

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By Dan E. Way

dway@heraldsun.com; 419-6654



HILLSBOROUGH -- In an era when skeptical taxpayers and voters are demanding accountability and transparency from their elected and appointed representatives, Hillsborough Town Manager Eric Peterson is helping to spearhead a process in town government geared towards achieving those

goals.

The initiative is paying off. The Association of Government Accountants (AGA) has honored the Town of Hillsborough with a gold Certificate of Achievement in Performance Reporting for its exceptional Accountability Report. The distinction was conferred by a panel of government financial managers, and marks the second year that the town has received an award.

"In order to build credibility and trust with the public, governments have to be willing to report the bad news as well as the good news about their operations," Peterson said. "While I'm really proud of the excellent progress we've made in trying to connect performance measurement, goals, and publicly reporting our results, we have only used this system for a few years and, thus, still have a lot to learn and many areas for improvement."

The purpose of the reviews is to evaluate how well the government or other organization informs the public about its performance, according to AGA. The review is not intended to evaluate the quality of the government or its performance. Rather, the focus is entirely on the report's usefulness to the public and other decision-makers who have a stake in the effectiveness of the government's services and programs.

"A large portion of work in business and government is done through well thought out 'trial and error,' "said Peterson, who sometimes talks to other governments and teach classes at the UNC School of Government about transparency and accountability.

"The most critical part of that concept is understanding that we learn a great deal from our failures, mistakes, and areas where we are underachieving," Peterson said. "Hence, that information needs to be shared with everyone [public, media, elected officials, and staff] so deliberations can take place on how to change strategies to get better results. Using the balanced scorecard as a public 'report card' is a step in the right direction when it comes to managing and prioritizing services."

Because all the town employees work for the citizens of Hillsborough, Peterson said, it is hoped that the report is a good way, in addition to the budget, to share the results being produced from the public's tax

dollars.

AGA established this award program in conjunction with the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. The program offers in-depth evaluation of Service Efforts and Accomplishments (SEA) reports (also called performance reports), recommendations for improvements and recognition of excellent reports with a Certificate of Excellence.

The SEA Program encourages issuing regular high-quality service efforts and accomplishments reports and helps state and local governments effectively communicate performance to the public. The GOLD award is given to those entities that fully apply 13 of 16 criteria, based on the Governmental Accounting Standard Board's (GASB) 16 suggested criteria, and receive no scores of zero from more than one reviewer.

"This award for excellence should alert the taxpaying public, Congress, public interest groups and other financial management professionals that state and local government agencies are strenuously working to make the government more accountable," AGA Executive Director Relmond P. Van Daniker said in a statement. "Not only are they working hard, but they are also achieving these sought-after goals," he said.

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