

---

# The SFFO Council: Financial Community Now a Reality

*Kristina Davis*

Little more than one year ago, the Senior Full Time Financial Officers (SFFO) Council was an idea buoyed by the need for a common voice – the need for community. In fact, the very notion of community – oneness, co-operation and unity – resonates with the varied and diverse membership of the SFFO Council.

With its creation in October 2003, the possible became more probable. Designed, according to its Terms of Reference, as “... a significant voice in decision making, offering expertise and services on finance matters including fiduciary responsibilities, accountability and comptrollership”, Council members began the journey towards true community.

One year later, with nine meetings under its belt, an AGM and extraordinary meeting of the SFFO community and a conference slated for mid-October, the Council is becoming an integral component in the development of financial policy within the federal government. The numbers speak for themselves.

The first SFFO Council Annual General Meeting in May 2004 saw 60 SFFOs travel to the NAV Canada Training Institute in Cornwall, while 91 out of 96 community members attended the September 10<sup>th</sup> meeting on Corporate Administrative Shared Services (CASS).

As well, two new members joined the ranks – Kevin Lindsey from Industry Canada and Cal Hegge from Fisheries and Oceans. Departing and founding members – Bruce Manion was named ADM Planning and Corporate Affairs at Canadian Heritage while Alain Seguin was named Assistant Chief Statistician with Stats Canada.

In all, 12 voting members comprising three SFFOs from small departments and agencies (with less fewer than 500 employees) and nine SFFOs from medium and large government departments (organiza-

tions with more than 500 employees), excluding Crown Corporations, as well as one non-voting member from a central agency round out the council.

Just a few months into its inaugural year, the Council was tackling tough issues and there are more on the way. Despite the daunting nature of these challenges, SFFOs seem to have found their common voice – their community – which characterizes their need and that of government at large.

## **SFFO Community: The first year**

The first year of any new initiative can either make it or break it. Initial buy-in may be easy but continued commitment may be more difficult to achieve. For the SFFO community, communication has been key to its success, says Council Chair Terry Hearn.

Now the Comptroller with the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development (HRSD), Hearn says involvement from the SFFO community has been “incredible.”

“It’s a wonderful track record,” he says, pointing to attendance at recent meetings. “It indicates, in my view, the fact that the community needs to be together on significant issues. People knew we needed it; the difficulty was in creating and maintaining it.”

He adds that the SFFO Council offers the financial community a true voice with buy-in from the Comptroller General, Charles-Antoine St-Jean, who has even attended several meetings.

In addition, the Council is not about philosophical ideals or intangible notions. Instead, he says, it’s wrestling with topical and relevant issues. From the Expenditure Review Process to Program Activity Architecture and CASS, the Council is actively advising government on significant policies.

Moreover, the Council is also addressing its professional development and succes-



**Kristina Davis**

Kristina Davis is an Ottawa writer. She has a B.A. from McGill University in Political Science and History, a Journalism Diploma from Algonquin College and is completing her Civil Law degree at the University of Ottawa.

sion-planning mandate. After being approached by the new School of Public Service, Hearn says they’ve been asked to provide input on courses designed for the financial officers in government.

To say that the SFFO Council has a full agenda is an understatement. In fact, Hearn says, it’s often difficult to get through it in one day. The commitment of Council members, he says, coupled with the dedication of the SFFO Council Secretariat, ensures the smooth running of the community and its business.

And while the Council continues in its advisory capacity, Hearn says that role is changing. “We are becoming more and more operational,” he explains. “We are providing more than advice. We are providing guidance.” Specifically, he points to the CASS, where the Council was invited to be the body that would represent the financial community in determining whether the financial control framework could work in a shared setting.

## **Two new members: Two new perspectives**

For Kevin Lindsey, the Corporate Comptroller for Industry Canada, he saw the SFFO Council as an opportunity to return to the financial community, to share his experience and have access to financial managers in similar situations. He was elected to the Council at the AGM in May 2004.

“It’s also an opportunity to have an input on Council presentations to the Comptroller General and central agencies,” he explains.

For the SFFO community at large, he says it's a great networking opportunity, especially given the wide range of representation from government departments and agencies. From those with budgets in the billions to those in the millions, many issues cut across departmental lines.

He also points to another aspect of the SFFO Council – its meetings and Conferences. Key players in the finance community often attend, giving presentations on significant issues. This, he says, gives members the opportunity to not only gain knowledge in that area, but provide feedback, often in the policy planning process.

Timing, Lindsey adds, is key. "The timing is such that issues are being defined by us, in a way, in conjunction with the Comptroller General and the Treasury Board Secretariat."

For example, CASS and other crosscutting issues, all of which are recent and whose policy repercussions will be far-reaching and long lasting, have dominated recent meetings. Instead of being reactive, the Council is poised to proactively respond.



Members of the SFFO community listen to President of the Treasury Board Reg Alcock the opening address at the first SFFO AGM in May 2004.

"The SFFO Council has a significant role to play in representing the community. At the same time," he adds, "the Council has a responsibility to recognize that these are all government initiatives and when the day is done it's the people around that table

and those they represent who are going to have to implement them."

In fact, it's this balancing act, between the SFFO's advocacy role and their responsibility *vis a vis* the Comptroller General and the Treasury Board to actually imple-

## Government Performance

**Comprehensive, client-centric, end-to-end systems.**

- Financials
- Procurement and Assets
- Salaries
- Grants and Contributions
- Program Performance
- Project Management

*AMA business intelligence technologies allow flexible and fast response to management requirements and support the creation of web interfaces to any database through the GX dictionary and web services.*



ANTHONY MACAULEY ASSOCIATES

**www.gx.ca ama@gx.ca**

Ottawa: 613.230.3833  
Victoria: 250.995.3071

Web Enabled

Web Services

RMAF Support

Disciplined MetaData

XML

Schema-Driven

Robust Database

Available as stand alone, combined or fully integrated through Canadian Federal Government DISO E60ET-20002/002/ET



Seen with Terry Hearn at the 10 September meeting are Wayne Job of TBS (centre) and Claude Caron, vice chair of the SFFO Council. The Council has been working closely with Mr. Job to prepare recommendations regarding implementation of the CASS initiative.



Charles-Antoine St-Jean, Comptroller General of Canada, addresses a special meeting of the SFFO community on September 10, 2004. SFFO Chair Terry Hearn listens in foreground. Ninety-one of ninety-six SFFOs attended this meeting to address issues related to the TBS CASS initiative.



Claude Caron makes a point on 10 September. Reagan Roberts of the SFFO Secretariat is on the left.

ment these new initiatives, which must be preserved.

For Cal Hegge, the Director General of the Finance and Administration Directorate at Fisheries and Oceans Canada, who also was elected to the Council in May, timing is also key.

"It's very timely for the SFFOs to get together in a more formal network," he says. "It's an excellent forum for keeping everybody advised on key government initiatives."

He points to the Council's varied membership, financial officers with vast amounts of experience and differing inter-

pretations, as a real strength, resulting in sound position papers.

One of the biggest challenges facing the Council, he says, is to make a difference on key issues and to have an effective voice in the process. "Part of the challenge," explains Hegge, "is the time-frame. Many of these issues are very much in the fast track." He's quick to add, though, that any guidance that has been provided to date has been well received.

While the SFFO Council is still what he terms a "fledgling organization", it is being held together by very effective leadership and a solid supporting body. Down the road, he

says a process will be needed to ensure that the SFFO Council can be maintained.

"People come and go," he says. "We need to set up a process where we have some continuity and some full-time research staff." With schedules reaching into the early evening and often beginning in the wee hours, SFFOs themselves have time constraints. Often described as some of the busiest people in government, with research support, position papers could be produced much faster.

Hegge says he hopes the SFFO Council will become an even more influential body, further shaping how government policy is fashioned in both the financial and administrative arena. While he believes they are being consulted on key issues, he says, it's on an *ad hoc* basis. Ideally, he would like to see a more formal relationship where, Treasury Board, for example, might request that the Council send a specific issue to a committee for an opinion.

In fact, current Sub Committees on the Community, Resource Management and the Process, Practices and Tools were created to address specific issues and streamline communication. Hegge says they've been structured to tackle nearly any issue. And by using the Sub Committees, SFFO mem-

ber participation goes beyond just Council members, it actually broadens participation from the SFFO community.

"It's our fondest hope that we will become more influential in developing government finance policies and administrative practices that will actually work the way they were intended," he adds.

#### **The consultative process: From communication to acceptance**

Wayne Job, the Senior Projects Coordinator for the Strategic Systems Infrastructure Director of the Office of the Comptroller General, has attended numerous SFFO Council meetings, providing updates and seeking input on a variety of key issues.

He says the relationship between the SFFO Council and the Office of the Comptroller General has worked well. "We have a good mutual relationship," he says, adding that "they have recently begun working directly with the Council on some major issues."

"The council is a very good, representative cross-section of all the departments and agencies out there in terms of size, complexity and function," he explains. This means that advice, and even policy papers, are representative of the larger SFFO community, ideally making buy-in at the implementation stage easier.

Job says that the significant interest in and support for the Council does not surprise him. "The Council, by its very nature, encourages participation," he says. However, he sees some of the very same challenges facing the Council as face members themselves. Time, he says; SFFOs are very pressed for time.

As for specific issues, Job is currently seeking input on System Rationalization. He says there are four goals in the consultative process.

First, there's communication, with Job's office providing information to the Council, which it disseminates to its members. Next, there's consultation, followed by validation and acceptance. The last two, according to Job, are problematic, as it's not simply a matter of getting sign-off. Instead, Job's office wants to know – will this actually work?

"Do they maybe have better ideas? Or will it be a problem for them?" It's these types of questions, says Job, this give and take on policy creation and implementation, which facilitates the process.

"We want their involvement in it," he adds, "so that we can craft it [policy] to a mutually beneficial objective."

As for the SFFO Council, he'd like to see even more participation from the SFFO community to ensure that it maintains its representative nature. He suggests this

could be achieved through greater participation at the sub committee level, without making the Council itself unwieldy.

#### **The SFFO Council: Beyond the first year**

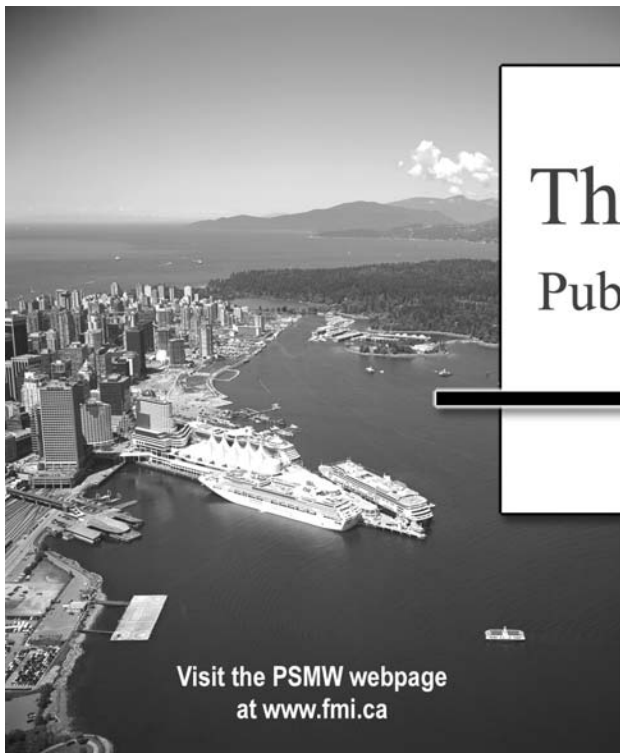
From an initial idea and interim Council in October 2003, the SFFO community has taken shape. There is significant participation and interest in the Council; increasingly, outside agencies and professional organizations are seeking input. The SFFO Council is now bridging the gap between the possible and the policy.

Members of the SFFO Council are answering the question: "Will this work?" They have become the voice – the community forum – for those who manage Canadian public resources.

Ultimately, the Council is relevant not only to its members, but also to policy-makers. Council Chair Terry Hearn sees the role evolving even further.

"Over the coming years, the SFFO Council may have a much greater connection to Treasury Board in terms of where it positions itself ... where it belongs." In fact, he sees the potential for the SFFO Council to actually become the Comptroller Council for government.

"That is my hope, my aspiration for it." ■



## Thinking Forward Public Sector Management Workshop 2005

Vancouver, British Columbia  
May 29 - 31, 2005

Visit the PSMW webpage  
at [www.fmi.ca](http://www.fmi.ca)

*Enhance your knowledge of the latest trends, issues, and best practices in financial management.*