



Meet AGA's Next National President

James R. "Jim" Arnette, Jr., CGFM, CISA AGA National President-Elect

AGA's National President-Elect, Jim Arnette is the director of local government audit for the Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury. He is responsible for the annual financial and compliance audits of all 95 Tennessee counties, and monitors the annual audits of more than 1,600 municipalities, nonprofits, and related local government entities. Jim assists local governments in implementing new auditing and accounting standards, and works with the Tennessee General Assembly on legislation impacting local governments.

Jim has worked with the Comptroller's Office for more than 30 years. He established County Audit's Information Technology Audit function, which is responsible for general and application control reviews in

county governments across the state. Jim is a graduate of Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro. He is a Certified Financial Manager and Certified Information Systems Auditor.

Currently vice chair of AGA's National Executive Committee, he has previously served the local and regional levels as the Nashville Chapter President and as the Southeastern Region Regional Vice President, respectively.

Please tell us how your AGA membership has affected your professional life.

Public service and an interest in government accountability is in my professional DNA. I have spent my entire career in Tennessee's Office of the Comptroller of the Treasury. While that may not sound very exciting, I had the opportunity to work for two previous AGA national presidents, Charles Harrison and Richard Norment. I also worked with Frank Greathouse, for whom AGA's Frank Greathouse Distinguished Leadership Award is named, who was instrumental in the formation of AGA's Nashville

Chapter and whom David Bean from GASB refers to as the "Father of GASB."

For several years, I served under the leadership of longtime Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury William R. Snodgrass, who also has a national leadership award named in his honor. He was a strong supporter of AGA and government accountability, as is our current comptroller, Justin P. Wilson.

I am a member of the Nashville Chapter, which is large, very active and successful. It is expected that members of the Nashville Chapter be leaders at

the local, regional and national levels. So, you see I did not have an alternative; I was destined to be involved within AGA. In fact, while working for Harrison, he strongly suggested all of his staff join AGA. At the time, I was a young man, I was not an accountant, and I saw no need to join AGA other than I thought it might be a career-limiting move if I did not. So, I joined — and what a wonderful decision that was.

Full disclosure, I am not an accountant. I am an old IT guy who somehow ended up leading a division full of auditors and CPAs. But, once I joined AGA, I learned

very quickly that AGA was much more than an association for accountants. It is an organization geared toward preparing government accountability professionals to make government work better. And all of us — accountants, IT folks, auditors, as well as budget, procurement and finance staff — are government accountability professionals. No other association boasts such a diverse membership representing federal, state and local governments.

AGA has been a very important part of my professional career, and I am confident I am where I am today, in great part, because of my involvement in AGA. The leadership, networking and mentoring opportunities AGA has provided, as well as my CGFM certification, have made me a better leader in the workplace and an attractive candidate as advancement opportunities have presented themselves over the years. AGA has allowed me to rub elbows with leaders from all levels of government, and I am so proud of the professionalism that exudes from everything AGA does and for which it stands.

What do you see as AGA's greatest challenge; and where do you think AGA can and should have an impact?

AGA is a successful organization. Ann Ebberts is a wonderful CEO, we have an outstanding national office staff and approximately 14,000 members affiliated with 100 local chapters. The CGFM certification continues to gain prominence as, in my opinion, the premier government professional certification. The national training events provide a plethora of training and networking opportunities. Our professional publications and research reports

are thorough and remain outstanding sources of reference. And, finally, AGA continues to receive clean audit opinions, year after year, on its financial statements. AGA doesn't need "fixing."

However, AGA faces some challenges, which I prefer to call opportunities. Every professional organization, regardless of how successful, has room for improvement. AGA must be willing to take a hard look at our practices, and be open to new ways of accomplishing our goals and objectives. Staying passionate about improvement and innovation will help move AGA forward. If we simply maintain the status quo, and fail to look at ways to add value for our members, AGA will be unable to maintain success.

I would like to see more involvement from our state and local government members. They make up 42 percent of our membership; but, when I attend the national training events such as the Professional Development Training (PDT), National Leadership Training and the Internal Control and Fraud Prevention Training, the majority of attendees are from the federal government. Why is that? Is it simply a budgetary issue that keeps state and local government attendees away, or is it something else?

How many of our 14,000 members are baby boomers like me? How many will retire within five years? AGA must have an aggressive plan to reinforce our membership.

And, finally, how do we convince young, bright college students and early-career employees it is OK to pursue a career in public service. How many colleges offer government accounting classes? How

many college professors encourage students to look at public service as a viable career path? My daughters have several friends studying accounting or who recently graduated with an accounting degree. Those young adults are concerned about internships or job offers from the big accounting firms or major corporations. Not one said they were considering any of the many wonderful and challenging job opportunities available in the public sector. That is very troubling.

AGA cannot be complacent. As AGA leaders, we must continue to be passionate about our organization, the CGFM certification and public service. If we are not, there will be opportunities elsewhere for our membership. But, by sharing our passion with our members and potential members, we will grow and improve AGA. I believe we must all respond to this call to action — within our workplace and our communities.

On what do you plan to put the most emphasis in the coming year?

Every AGA national president has a theme. I wanted mine to be meaningful yet straightforward. So, I came up with "Accountants and Accountability Professionals Working Together to Make Government Work Better." Making government work better is what we should each strive to do as government financial management professionals. By making government work better, we ultimately improve the lives of all citizens who receive the services provided by our various organizations. I also wanted my theme to reflect that though we are not all accountants, we can all work toward accountability.

I have four goals for the coming year:

- 1 Convert AGA's new strategic plan into effective programs for members.
- 2 Make AGA membership a "must" for government financial management professionals — by being inclusive of those working in such areas as accounting, auditing, IT, budget, finance and procurement.
- 3 Increase interest in careers in public service and encourage more educational institutions to offer courses in governmental accounting.
- 4 Expand state and local government members' presence at AGA events, and awareness of resources developed through AGA's Intergovernmental Partnership program.

What are you most looking forward to as national president?

To say becoming AGA's national president is taking me a bit out of my comfort zone is an understatement. With that said, it is an honor and a privilege to have the opportunity to give back to an organization that has given so much to me. As national president-elect, I have already visited several chapters and met many wonderful people who unselfishly give of their time to volunteer as chapter leaders. In my opinion, the chapters are what makes AGA. I look forward to further travels and opportunities to share my enthusiasm for AGA. I also look forward to working with the national office staff and interacting with fellow members of the National Executive Committee. As national president, I suppose I will be expected to sing karaoke at the PDT in Boston; I am not looking forward to that.

Tell us about your professional career and your AGA career.

I began my professional career as a systems analyst. I was responsible for mainframe application design and support. While I was running jobs from a deck of punch cards, personal computers were beginning to find their way into the office environment. In fact, I wrote the bid specifications for the first five microcomputers purchased by the comptroller's office. I moved into a management position within our division of county audit as its information systems audit manager, with the task of establishing an information systems audit function from scratch. I was eventually promoted to assistant director and then director.

In my current role, I am responsible for the annual financial and compliance audits of all 95 counties in the state, as well as monitoring and approving the annual audits of more than 1,600 municipalities, non-profits and other related local government entities. Our office has made tremendous contributions to government accountability — by sponsoring legislation intended to make local governments work better, and by establishing a county uniform chart of accounts that provides a standardized means of maintaining county financial records and making the annual audit process much easier. We also ensure local governments comply with GASB standards.

During most of this, I was also an AGA member. I served as the chapter's newsletter editor. I was a member of the chapter executive committee and served as chapter president in 2003–2004, when we received platinum status. In 2005–2006, I served as the

southeast regional vice-president, when we also received platinum recognition. I chaired the host committee for a very successful regional PDT in Nashville in 2006. Over the years, I have served on numerous chapter committees, participated in chapter events and taken advantage of several community service opportunities. I also helped prepare various local, regional and national events, including the PDTs held in Nashville in 1990 and 2007, and assisted with the host committee's hospitality and volunteer plans for PDT 2015 in Nashville. I have also been a regular attendee at AGA national training events.

Tell us about your personal background, including any information you wish to share about your family.

A lifelong Tennessee resident — and proud graduate of Middle Tennessee State University, known for their recent first round upsets of Michigan State and Minnesota in the NCAA basketball tournament — I currently live in Franklin with my wife, Carla. We have been together nearly 40 years, during which she has been very supportive, especially along this national presidency journey. We have two wonderful, caring, smart and active daughters. My oldest is a nurse at Vanderbilt Hospital. My youngest, a recent textile and fashion design graduate of North Carolina State University, has put her fashion career on hold and is headed to Morocco for a tour of duty in the Peace Corps. I cherish my family time, and enjoy our vacations and trips to the beach, doing yard work, hitting the golf ball and watching sports.

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