

# Multiple Roles Please Brunswick County's Finance Officer

BY TERRY POPE

Lithia Hahn manages a \$40 million a year business with a watchful eye, for the money she invests and uses to pay the bills belongs to county taxpayers.

The Brunswick County finance director was recently picked as president of the N.C. Association of County Finance Officers. She was pleased to add to her growing list of roles, both on the job and outside of the office—accountant, associational leader and mother.

She will serve a one-year term, which has the Holden Beach resident plotting ways to let the public know more about the association.

At her alma mater, Wingate College, accounting and public administration students were often stereotyped by others as the "class nerds," she said, forever keeping their noses in stock market reports or ledgers.

But during association meetings these days, she jokes with colleagues about that "nerd" label and insists members are a well-rounded group of individuals. While serving as secretary of the association in 1989, Ms. Hahn convinced the group to hold its state fall conference in Brunswick County.

While here, they met Cathy Carlisle at a friendly oyster roast and sat amazed as the state oyster shucking champion demonstrated her unique skill. Members cruised along the waterway at Calabash and fell in love with the coastal community.

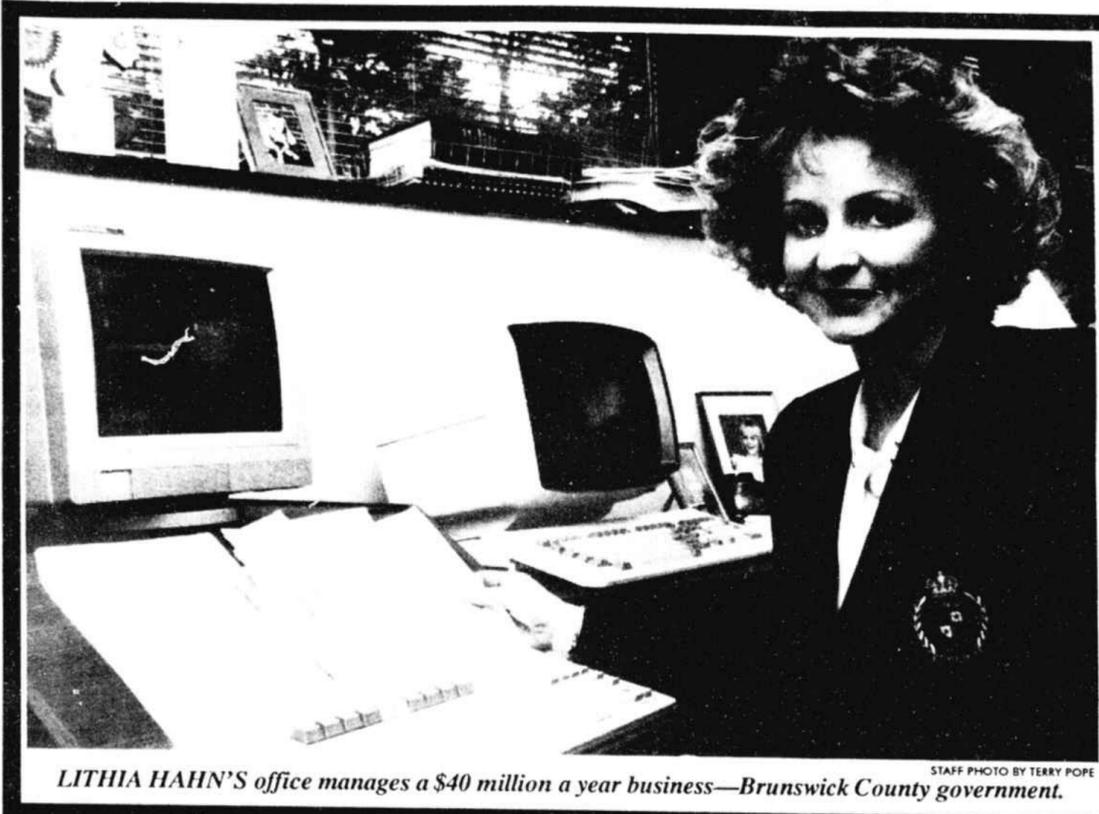
"They want to come back," said Ms. Hahn.

The "they" are the 100 North Carolina county finance officers, their assistants and Council of Governments finance officers who make up the association and its affiliate membership.

Though formed in 1942, Ms. Hahn believes the association needs to become a little more visible. She plans to appoint a newsletter committee that can spread the word about the group she joined in 1972.

The association has a certification program for finance officers and informs members of new financial laws through regular workshops. It also has a legislative committee to assist the N.C. Association of County Commissioners, which lobbies legislators on financial matters. Finance officers stay out of the actual lobbying game, she said.

Members also give an annual scholarship to a UNC-Chapel Hill master's degree student in public administration. It's named after UNC alumnus Howard Holly, a long-time Pender County finance officer who died in



LITHIA HAHN'S office manages a \$40 million a year business—Brunswick County government.

STAFF PHOTO BY TERRY POPE

"Basically, we're a rural county trying to provide urban services. It's not free. It can't be free."

—Finance Director Lithia Hahn

1986.

Before she was hired by Brunswick County in 1986, Ms. Hahn served four years as assistant finance officer of Stanley County. Today, she and her staff of six employees are responsible for Brunswick County's payroll, paying the bills for all of county government, assisting with an annual independent audit and compiling the county's yearly budget.

Ms. Hahn speaks with 20 years of experience in finance.

"It's a big business," she acknowledges.

"When I see the stacks of bills that come in to this office, I often wonder how we are able to do all of the paperwork."

If the financing of capital improvement projects for water expansion is added to the county budget, it comes close to being a \$60 million a year business.

"Basically, we're a rural county trying to provide urban services," she adds. "It's not free. It can't be free."

Because of state budget shortfalls and cutbacks this spring, it was a particularly tough budget preparation period for many

association members, including Ms. Hahn. Twenty counties had to adopt interim budgets because of the uncertainty of receiving state funds.

Ms. Hahn hopes that uncertainty is a thing of the past, that legislators will let counties know early in the game what funds are available to make the county finance officers' jobs easier around budget time in June.

"That's been our focus more than anything in the last six or seven years," she said. "This past year, it was particularly

troublesome."

Preparing a county budget, said Ms. Hahn, takes months.

"I love doing budgets," she said. "What people don't understand is that it's a very long process. Each budget ties in to the next budget. When there's so much uncertainty out there, you don't know where you're standing."

Those who work with figures often try to see the larger picture behind the data, what it might mean about the local or national economy, the banking industry or strength of the stock market.

"I love doing financial statements, analyzing financial data, doing graphs, to see what kind of impact they may have," said Ms. Hahn.

According to her advice, it is a perfect time to borrow money, although the economy is rather sluggish.

"I think next year is when we're going to see the changes," she added, "late next year to early spring. Hopefully, by the fall of next year, things are going to pick up to offset this downward trend."

For Brunswick County now, her worry now is projected revenues for the 1992-93 year.

"When you see the economy and the financial side of the economy slipping a little bit, you get tense," Ms. Hahn said.

Outside of the office, though, people rarely ask her about the county budget or finances, she said. It helps her leave the job behind and to concentrate instead on relaxing at her Holden Beach condominium, taking walks along the beach and rearing her teen-age daughter.

The two worlds aren't entirely separate. In her office are photographs of Leslie, 13, who will celebrate her 14th birthday Thanksgiving Day.

Already Leslie's talking about owning a car, says her mother. But Ms. Hahn views the situation as an opportunity to teach a teen-ager a lesson or two about financial responsibility.

Finance officer, mother, associational leader—multiple roles keep Lithia Hahn busy, with no regrets.

When her one-year term as association president expires next fall, a new president will be chosen, but as past president she will serve another year on the executive committee.

Meanwhile, during her tenure she hopes the public will gain a better understanding of the association and the difficult job faced by finance officers.

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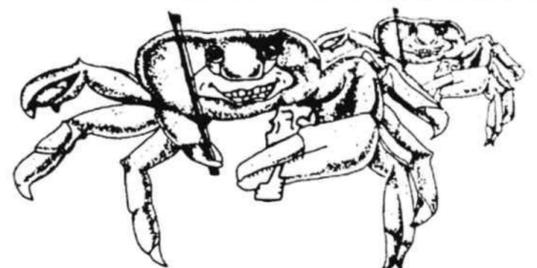
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