



Erin Coggins with Madison Mayor Paul Finley.

# My experience in the Madison Civic Awareness Academy and why it was just what I needed

By Erin Coggins

**E** Having lived in Madison for 25 years, I have voted in municipal elections, utilized the services of the city's public works, attended a game at Palmer Park, and of course, witnessed the City's population explosion.

I have always been civic-minded. My cousin and I had a hot debate on the 1984 presidential election at the ripe old age of 10. I have written numerous letters to state representatives regarding various issues. And I can talk for hours on the importance of the freedom of the press and speech as it relates to teaching high school journalism. I declare myself an informed citizen.

Yet, I have never given too much thought to how city government works. Well, that was until I scrolled upon a Facebook post advertising the call for applicants to participate in the Madison Civic Awareness Academy.

All of sudden, I realized I needed to know more about the city where I reside and clicked the application button to apply. Along with 30 other Madison residents, I was accepted to the Fall 2024 cohort. Some of us were long timers, having lived in Madison for years, decades even, some have lived in the city less than 10 years and others were recent newcomers. We were en-



Madison City Council member Connie Spears listens to members of the Academy.

gineers, business owners, educators, librarians, retired professionals and more. But we all had one thing in common—the desire to serve our city and to learn more about how it operates.

In addition to the orientation session, the Academy spans six weeks. Mayor Paul Finley kicked off the orientation session, making us feel comfortable that he welcomed questions and feedback as it “reinforces the importance of transparency and collaboration to build a strong community.” It was refreshing to see the mayor on a more personal level and enthusiastic on actually fielding questions.

Each week my classmates and I were introduced to a different City department, including city finances and budget, the Madison Police Department and Madison Fire and Rescue, public works, engineering and IT, Parks and Recreation, the City Clerk’s office, Court and Law Department and Planning, Building, Human Resources and the Madison Chamber of Commerce.

Mayor Finley and city council members participated in various sessions, adding perspective to the topics covered. My favorite part was the roundtable discussions held at the end of every class. These breakouts allowed us to ask questions in a smaller setting, providing more of a one-on-one interaction.

I must admit that I was not up to par on my knowledge when it came to what these departments provide or how they operate. I mean, unless you are an IT guru, do you wonder where all the city data is stored? Now I know and to be honest, it is quite interesting. I didn’t realize our Public Works employees battle copperhead snakes when digging ditches for road work and other repairs, nor did I understand why car washes and storage facilities are built where they are. But I do now. These little tidbits were absorbed along with more important issues like how municipal elections operate, how the city’s budget is established, how traffic monitoring works, and most importantly how our city’s leaders are



Graduates from the Fall 2024 Madison Civic Awareness Academy

dedicated to providing the best for Madison.

At the end of our six weeks, my classmates and I graduated at the December City Council Meeting. We left with a certificate of completion and the desire to serve our city in various roles.

The Academy is a culmination of conversations that the Mayor had with Economic and External Affairs Officer, Traci Gillespie. The two looked at similar programs across the country, ultimately creating the Civic Awareness Academy to grow engagement and transparency with the residents of Madison.

Gillespie, who runs the Academy, has six personal goals for each cohort. She wants to promote an understanding of how our city operates, encourage residents to get involved in our community, showcase city departments and directors in order to build trust, develop future city leaders, highlight city projects, and clarify any misunderstandings that people have about our city.

As a graduate of the Academy, I can attest to the fact that Gillespie's goals are achieved. I am not fully equipped to discuss municipal matters with my husband because I understand what cog each of the departments are within the wheel of city government, I know what projects are being undertaken and I am willing to serve in a leadership capacity. I now feel like a true resident of Madison.

My advice to the residents of Madison is to apply to participate in the next Community Civic Awareness Academy cohort. Applications can be found on the city's website at [www.madisonal.gov](http://www.madisonal.gov) and social media channels.

The focus may always be on the federal or state government but understanding our city's government hits closer to home. Thank you Traci Gillespie and Mayor Finley. The Academy was just what I needed.

For more information, visit [madisonal.gov/1245/Civic-Awareness-Academy](http://madisonal.gov/1245/Civic-Awareness-Academy).