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GOVERNING

CONNECTING AMERICA'S LEADERS

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ELEVATING CITIES

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By Elizabeth Daigneau

unpredictable ways via the roundabout vacancy route. Back in 2004, legislative fiscal officer Stephen Klein told us, "There's a huge issue in how we budget vacancy savings. We're working on it."

The solution they came up with? The state established a so-called "vacancy pool," so that open positions in all the agencies were fungible. If there were long-standing vacancies in an agency, they'd be placed in the statewide pool. When another agency had an unanticipated need for a new position, it could then tap that pool. This had the positive impact of ensuring that old vacancies didn't remain open while new



For greater transparency and efficiency, Vermont established a "vacancy pool," so that open positions in all agencies were fungible.

jobs were created. Unfortunately for Vermont, this clever approach has come to matter less lately, as the state's desperate fiscal situation has forced it to cut back on positions altogether.

Then there's Phoenix. For years, that city has discounted agency personnel budgets by 3 to 4 percent, on the assumption that there would inevitably be vacancies. The precise percentage change depends on outside factors. Andrea Tevlin used to be deputy city manager in Phoenix. She is now an independent budget analyst in San Diego and has helped bring the Phoenix approach to her new city. "I appreciate that departments want flexibility," Tevlin says, "but if you're cutting libraries and police academy classes, the departments can't have the luxury of a lot of flexibility anymore." Her bottom line: "If you need money, you should get it through a public process." **G**

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PLANNING FOR WILDFIRES

Drought-stricken parts of the country are under severe threat of wildfires this summer, and fire agencies are looking for ways to manage them in the least painful manner. In the past, overly aggressive fire suppression has led to serious ecosystem degradation. Two researchers at Colorado State University have come up with something promising: a plan called STARfire, which seeks to predict which fires are likely to threaten life and property and which ones will preserve the ecosystem and should be allowed to burn. STARfire can be used to monitor the potential consequences of a specific fire, but is primarily designed for long-term fire management and planning. By analyzing smoke levels, ignition-spread probability, ecosystem benefits and losses, historic weather data and real-estate development data, managers can use the system to develop fire-control plans specific to their regions.

The state of Victoria in Australia uses an online Flash map and an RSS feed to track dangerous bush fires. It shows the number of fires at a given location and the current containment status of each.

BUS INTELLIGENCE

Pittsburgh is testing a new service that sends bus schedules by text message. The free service, known as RouteShout, is being piloted at 22 bus stops across the city, most of them near areas with large numbers of college students. Here's how it works: Orange signs, each labeled with a unique code, are installed at each stop. A rider simply texts in the code and instantly receives arrival times for the next buses. Since the service began in December, it has received more than 5,000 schedule requests from nearly 2,200 first-time users. The Allegheny County Port Authority, which runs the system, hopes to expand the texting network and reduce the number of customer service calls from people wondering when the next bus will arrive.

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Hop on the bus, Gus—but text for the schedule first.