



## 5 Questions About AI with Frank Martz City Manager, Altamonte Springs

*The perspectives shared below reflect the experience and approach of an individual Florida city in implementing and managing the use of artificial intelligence tools. This Q&A is intended to highlight local innovation and considerations for peer discussion and does not represent official guidance or a formal position of the Florida League of Cities.*

Altamonte Springs has earned a reputation as one of Florida's most inventive cities. Under City Manager Frank Martz, the city of 47,000 residents in Central Florida deployed the first city-operated Uber transit partnership in the world, runs the longest-running permanent autonomous vehicle program by a city in the United States, and recently established the Altamonte Global Innovation Lab (AGILE) to advance real-world AI deployment and STEM education.

We sat down with Frank to ask what's driving the city's approach to AI, and what he'd tell other city leaders who are ready to take the leap.

### **What's one of the most exciting AI projects happening in Altamonte Springs right now?**

We're co-developing a tool with Google that could change how development gets approved in cities. The problem it solves is one every city knows: developers blame local government for delays, and sometimes that's fair, but equally and more often, the delays come from the developer side. They've failed to do the right analysis, or they've designed a building that is bigger than the lot, or they haven't followed state and local regulations. Both sides end up stuck in weeks of back-and-forth.

Google approached us and asked us to help co-develop a tool. We upload our land development code, comprehensive plan, and design regulations into a large language model. The developer uploads what they'd like to build, say, a medical office of a certain size on a specific parcel with a specific zoning classification. Then an AI engine goes through hundreds of iterations based on what the developer wants and what the city's rules are, and gets to a handful of doable concepts.

Instead of spending \$30,000 to \$50,000 on an architect to develop several design concepts and going through weeks of review cycles, we're all at the same table getting to concepts that meet code. The next phase generates draft cost estimates and a preliminary pro forma based on current local construction costs. We hope this tool can cut that process down to the first meeting.

## Many city leaders want to start using AI but don't know where to begin. What was your starting point?

We started with workplace culture. Before we ever got into the technology, we focused on building a team with what I call *enthusiastic curiosity*. We try to recruit and retain people who have that same quality, who are willing to try things that haven't been tried before. That mindset is the foundation everything else is built on.

Then we built a group called the Internal Innovation Group. They're all hand-selected. We found people with charismatic personalities, or those with great ideas who maybe weren't sure how to communicate them, and we put them together. They review AI proposals, evaluate new software, and rally the troops. I can't be everywhere, but this group can. They're the ones reaching out to their colleagues and saying, "Hey, this isn't a big deal, let me show you how it works."

A great example is Herman Resources (yes, that's what we named it). Our director of human resources developed a chatbot built on GPT where any of our employees can ask questions about our personnel manual in any language, at any time. If you're most comfortable in Portuguese and it's two in the morning, you can log on, ask a question, and get the answer in Portuguese and in English. That gave us back about 40% of an FTE. About 40% of our staff time during an entire year was going to answering questions that people could look up.

*"The most difficult thing people say about AI is gaining adoption. I disagree. Adoption is an email from me that says, 'You will use this.' It's the adaptation part we focus on: how do we help our workforce adapt to using it?"*

**- Frank Martz, City Manager, Altamonte Springs**

## How do you address employees' concerns that AI might take their jobs?

No one in our community wants fewer services. So the challenge is this: how do we get more out of the tax dollars that we're given, understanding that no one wants their stuff to go away?

We don't tell employees, "We're replacing you with AI." We tell them, "The broader you can use technology, the more time you will have to do things we're not currently doing." There's a covenant between taxpayers and their government: not to cut things indiscriminately, but to find ways to do more with what we have.

There was a time when there were no power mowers. It was all push mowers. Now that's changed, and you can do more than you could ever do before. We talk to our team about making an impact, doing something of significance. Making an impact

is figuring out how to get some of your time back so you can do something more, something that might help you grow and have a more significant role in the organization.

## **How have you built support among your elected officials for such an ambitious innovation agenda?**

Innovation isn't new here. Back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Altamonte Springs started working on reclaimed water when it wasn't even a utility most people knew about. We built the first dual water-wastewater system in the Southeast United States. Along the way, our residents got used to it. That's what Altamonte Springs does. When I became city manager, I was joining a team already at third base. My predecessor and past commissioners had been thinking about today 30 years ago. Our job now is to think about 30 years from now.

Communication is really important. Before we launched AGILE, I sat down with each commissioner. We went through it, and we talked about the direction we were going.

Vision isn't a destination; it's a direction. When your elected officials understand and share that direction, they become your strongest advocates.

I also think city managers need to remember that we're the CEO of a multimillion-dollar organization running 24/7. Part of that responsibility is being an advocate for what you think is the right thing to do. I see what happens in communities where someone said, "This is going to cost too much money," or "Something bad is going to happen." The whole world passed them by.

## **What's your advice for city managers who want to do more with AI but aren't sure how to lead the way?**

You cannot be an invisible leader. You can't ask your staff to try something new unless you're willing to try it yourself. I've become a student of this technology. I mess with it during the weekends. I think about it at night. I read lots of articles about it. And my staff sees that. It's the same as walking down the sidewalk and seeing a weed. If you just walk past it, everyone notices. I stop and pull the weed.

I'm old enough to remember what it was like to get a calculator for Christmas as a special gift, and people thought it would be the end of doing math. But very few people do multiplication tables anymore. What they're doing is advanced trigonometry. AI is the same leap.

A lot of cities are creating AI Bills of Rights, and I think that's missing the mark. We've written an AI governance policy that's integrated into our employee standards. Misuse has real consequences. But I don't believe in a separate set of "AI ethics."

To me, "ethical use of AI" is a misnomer. You either have an organization that is guided by ethics, or you don't.

What I hope our residents and businesses say about us 30 years from now is that we jumped in the pool, figured out how to swim, then figured out how to swim in the right direction, and then figured out how to swim together in the right direction.

My message to other city and county managers is this: your staff is watching what you do. You can't ask them to be brave and courageous and inventive unless you are too. You either model the expectation, or you undercut it. Be a student of what you're asking your people to learn.

### City Tips

- **Start with culture, not technology.** Altamonte Springs built a workforce culture of "enthusiastic curiosity" before deploying its first AI tool. Consider forming a small, cross-functional innovation group to evaluate tools and rally support.
- **Frame AI around service delivery, not replacement.** Residents expect services to stay and improve. Position AI as a way to do more with the same resources, not as a way to cut staff.
- **Communicate early and often with elected officials.** Before launching major initiatives, sit down individually with elected officials to talk through the direction and vision. Shared understanding builds trust.
- **Integrate AI governance into existing ethics standards.** Rather than creating separate "AI ethics" policies, embed AI expectations into your employee standards where misuse has clear consequences.
- **Lead by doing.** City managers who personally engage with AI set the tone for their entire organization. You can't ask people to be brave if you aren't willing to be brave yourself.

### Want to learn more?

Visit the FLC AI Content Hub at [flcities.com/ai](https://flcities.com/ai) for guides, spotlights, and practical resources to help your city explore AI responsibly.