



John Taylor

Retired Clerk of the Board of Supervisors
San Francisco City and County

John Taylor has been a regular at the CSAC Annual Meeting for nearly 20 years. Conference attendees know him best as the creator of the annual computerized educational quiz about California and its counties, which is sponsored by the California Clerk of the Board of Supervisors Association (CCBSA). Attendees test their knowledge and luck at the quiz and are scored to determine prizes. Questions cover California geography, landmarks, county seats, CSAC and more.

John is also a past president of the CCBSA, and worked as clerk of the Board of Supervisors in the City and County of San Francisco for 16 years, from 1982 to 1998. Prior to that, he worked for SRI International (formerly Stanford Research Institute) for five years in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia, with his last position being director of its International Development Center. Born in New York County (Manhattan Island) and raised in Queens and Manhasset, New York, he has a degree in political science from Middlebury College in Vermont and a master's degree in state and local government from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

From the mid-1950s to 1976, John served as city manager for five cities across the U.S. (in chronological order): Narberth, Pennsylvania; Lakewood, New Jersey; Fresno, California; Kansas City, Missouri; and Berkeley, California. He currently resides in Berkeley with his wife of 55 years, Barbara. They have four children and 12 grandchildren, all of whom live in nearby California counties.

Q: WHAT CHANGES DID YOU OBSERVE OVER THE YEARS AS SAN FRANCISCO'S CLERK OF THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS?

A: On my last day at San Francisco's City Hall (and county administration building), I looked around me and realized NOTHING had stayed the same. The layout of the room with its cubicles, the telephones, computers and individual assignments all had changed since the day I first started there.

Q: HOW DID THE CLERKS' ANNUAL EDUCATIONAL QUIZ GET ITS START?

A: The first year of the quiz was 1989, and it has, for the most part, been an annual feature at the CSAC conference since its inception.

I had taken a programming course at Cal Berkeley and learned enough to develop the quiz on my own. I became aware of a situation where a written test for firefighters had somehow gotten released ahead of time. I thought that if you could have a computer randomly choose questions and the order of answers, it would avoid this problem.

Simultaneously, I was involved with CCBSA, and the group was discussing ideas on how they could raise awareness of the skills of clerks of the board. So I suggested the idea of a computerized county quiz.

The first quiz in 1989 had 116 questions, mostly about county seats. Today, there are 1,279 questions, although a very fast user will see only about 75 questions in their allowed five minutes.

Q: HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO DEVELOP THE QUIZ EACH YEAR?

A: It's been an ongoing process over these last 18 years. I have a library of questions, but I add fresh ones each year. As participants know, I now use photographs, maps, color and sound to make the quiz more interesting. The quiz attempts to be non-political and neutral, and to treat each county equally.

Q: DO YOU HAVE ANY TIPS FOR QUIZ TAKERS?

A: Sure. The biggest factor is quick answers. Answering a question every four seconds results in much higher scores than pondering each answer for eight or ten seconds. Speed is the most important factor in winning.

Q: IS THERE ANY WAY TO STUDY FOR THE QUIZ?

A: It would be helpful to study a map of California and become familiar with its geography, well-known landmarks and county seats, and to know the names and looks of elected state officers. ❖