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THE COUNCIL-MANAGER FORM OF GOVERNMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

*Roger L. Kemp**

A Common Sense Approach

Businessmen have been convinced for many years that professional managers are essential to their organizations. Professional managers are trained for their jobs through formal education and experience. The professional manager uses analytical skills to solve business problems in the best long-term interests of the company, and is guided by a code of professional ethics that avoids conflicts-of-interest. These attributes apply to business managers as well as to the managers of local governments.¹

Business firms spend substantial amounts of money for training and educational programs to foster the development of their professional managers. Unfortunately, the need for professional managers and their continuing development and training is not always recognized in local governments.² Certainly, city governments are big businesses. Usually they are the largest employers in the city, have expenditure levels comparable to large private sector companies, and have borrowings of an equal scale.

We want our city governments to be run by our elected representatives. Because of this, we frequently have difficulty reconciling the need for professional management with the role of the elected officials. The council-manager form of government provides the best answer to effective leadership by the mayor and city council, and a professional approach to solving the city's problems. The record of American cities and their accomplishments attests to this form of government.³

This article will set forth the different forms of local government in the United States, outline the history of the council-manager form of municipi-

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¹ Justin, John S., "Professional Management and Responsive Government," *National Civic Review*, National Municipal League, Inc., New York, New York, June, 1978, page 267.

² *Ibid.*, page 267.

³ *Ibid.*

pal government, including its success and popularity, examine the duties of a typical city manager, and analyze the factors that should be taken into consideration before implementing a desirable plan to manage a city—regardless of what for it takes. Any plan of government, naturally, should be in keeping with the wishes of the people as expressed through their publically elected representatives.

Different Forms of Local Government

There are several workable forms of local government. They usually depend upon the role of the central government, and the degree of home-rule powers given to cities in running the affairs of communities. The typical types of local governments in the United States include—strong mayor, commission, mayor-council, and council-manager plans. The characteristics of each are highlighted below.

Strong Mayor — In many large cities in America, the mayor is elected to “lead” the city. This typically includes running the municipal organization through city employees, with the top management being selected by the mayor. This plan has its obvious advantages and disadvantages, depending upon the qualifications of the person elected as the mayor. A good political leader is sometimes not a good municipal administrator. Hiring trained administrators has served to overcome this shortcoming.⁴

Commission — This form of government, which usually employs non-partisan, at-large elections, includes a board of commissioners. Collectively they serve as the legislative body. Individually, each commissioner serves as the head of one or more administrative departments. The municipal reform movement in the United States has all but lead to the demise of this type of local government. Its weaknesses are obvious, since few elected leaders possess the necessary requirements to operate large portions of a municipal organization.⁵

Mayor-Council — This form has a legislative body that is elected either at-large, by ward or district, or by some combination of the two (e.g., some at-large and others by district). The distinguishing characteristics of this plan are two. One, the mayor is elected separately, and two, the official designation of the Office of the Mayor is the formal head of the city government. Depending upon local laws, the powers of the mayor may vary greatly, from limited ceremonial duties to full-scale authority to

⁴ Adrian, Charles, *Governing Urban America*, McGraw Hill Publishing Company, Inc., New York, 1977, page 214.

⁵ *Ibid.*, page 214.

appoint and remove department managers. The mayor sometimes has veto power over the city council.⁶

Council-Manager — This form of government has a legislative body elected by popular vote. They are responsible for policy-making, while the management of the organization is under the direction of a city manager. The council appoints and removes the manager by majority vote. The mayor is a member of the council, with no special veto or administrative powers. The mayor is, however, the community's recognized political leader and represents the city at official ceremonies, as well as civic and social functions.⁷

The strong mayor form is limited to some large cities in most states. It is seldom the form used in small and medium-sized communities. The commission plan, while still in existence in a few cities in selected states, is not in widespread use. Because of its inherent limitations, it is not perceived as a model of municipal organization. The mayor-council plan exists primarily in larger cities. The city manager, or chief administrative officer, is appointed by the entire city council. The duties of the administrator vary from city to city. This plan works well when implemented properly, but is not increasing in number among local governments.

The council-manager plan, the topic of this article, is the most successful and popular model of local government in most communities across America. Some facts about this plan are summarized below.⁸

- Nearly 2,500 cities in the United States operate under this plan.
- Almost 80 percent of cities recognized by the International City Management Association operate under this form of government.
- It is the single most popular form of government in cities over 10,000 in population.
- Dade County, Florida (pop. 1,625,979) is the largest council-manager jurisdiction in the United States.
- Larger council-manager cities in America include Dallas, Texas; San Diego, California; San Jose, California; and Rochester, New York.
- 77 counties in the United States operate under this plan.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ International City Management Association, *Facts on the Council-Manager Plan*, International City Management Association, Washington, D.C., September, 1982, page 1.

- This form of government represents over 100 million citizens in America.
- The council-manager plan is adopted more than once each week by a city or county, on the average, since 1945 (75 local governments adopt this plan each year).
- This form of government is growing faster than any other form of local government because of its popularity.

History & Growth of the Council-Manager Plan

The council-manager plan of local government has been called one of the few original American contributions to political theory. Half a century after the first city manager experiment in Staunton, Virginia, one out of four Americans live in a city organized under this plan, and nearly 2,500 in the United States are ran by city managers, with the political leadership and policy-making being provided by locally elected representatives. The council-manager plan was a product of the Progressive reform era in local politics and is now three-quarters of a century old. The various factors leading to the growth and popularity of this form of municipal government are examined in the following paragraphs.

While the plan developed slowly, it was the product of several ideas and forces that shaped political and management thought in America. Among those factors that affected its development most significantly were the growth of urbanization, the popularity of business and corporate ideals, the Progressive reform movement, and the professional public administration movement. These ideological and social roots of the council-manager plan are highlighted below.

Growth of Urbanization — Urbanization at the turn of the century dramatically changed the landscape of cities across the Nation. During this time, towns and cities experienced rapid growth. While the rural population doubled, the urban population grew seven times its previous size. Urbanization quickly converted villages to towns, towns to cities, and cities into metropolitan centers. The rise of cities during this era was attributable to numerous social and economic forces, including the decline of agricultural industry, the rise of modern industries, the expansion of the economy generally, positive governmental and financial incentives for industrial growth, and a massive influx of overseas immigrants. Urbanization placed unprecedented demands on local governments throughout the country for additional public facilities and services. These factors led to the

need for specialized expertise to manage the various facets of local governments.⁹

Popularity of Business and Corporate Ideals — Businessmen and the public concept of the corporation have been instrumental in determining public values. The success of corporations in the private sector had a significant influence on American political and administrative thought. Probably no political or administrative philosophy reflects business practices and corporate ideals more clearly than the growth of the council-manager plan. Many citizens still compare the operation of local government with that of the private corporation. The elected representatives are the board of directors, the city manager is the general manager, and the citizens of the community are the stockholders of the government.¹⁰ Economy and efficiency, two primary values of the business community, are foundations of the council-manager plan.¹¹

Progressive Reform Movement — Many of the effects of rapid urbanization, particularly the early political machines and large monopolistic corporations, met with disfavor among many citizens, who were known as Progressives. These individuals, who formed a significant movement because of their large numbers, felt that the best interests of the public were frequently not being served by the existing political processes and some large corporations that were perceived as being too strong and having too much power over common people. One of the most significant municipal reforms developed and supported by the Progressive political philosophy of the time—a competent professional manager and public policy established by nonpartisan elected representatives. The manager's apolitical qualities suited the Progressive values, which favored impartiality and looked down upon personality politics and favoritism. Two key Progressive ideals, equality of participation in the political process and centralized administrative authority, were well balanced in the council-manager plan.¹²

Public Administration Movement — The modern city management profession also fit with the emerging “modern” concepts of public management in the early 1900's. Many administrative scholars espoused a

⁹ Stillman, Richard J., *The Rise of the City Manager*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1974, pages 6 and 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, page 8.

¹¹ Several early books on city managers include a discussion on the business values of the council-manager plan, for example: Toulmin, Harry, *The City Manager*, D. Appleton and Company, New York, New York, 1915, and Rightor, Charles E., *et al.*, *The City Manager in Dayton*, National Municipal League, Inc., New York, New York, 1919.

¹² Stillman, Richard J., *Op. cit.*, pages 8 and 9.

sharp division between policy determination and policy implementation. Many scholars of the time drew a sharp distinction between “politics” and “administration”.¹³ The council-manager plan incorporated the ideals of the separation of policy-making and the implementation of public policy. The elected representatives are responsible for setting public policy; the city manager is concerned with its implementation. The separation of these two tasks formed the basis of the emerging council-manager form of local government.¹⁴

As the Progressive movement emerged and spread, the public administration thought of the time, together with the growth of urbanization, and the increasing popularity of business and corporate ideals, provided the positive background against which the council-manager plan blossomed into National popularity. All of these ideological and social forces provided the positive environment in which the council-manager plan spread from city to city across the landscape of America’s local governments.

The City Manager’s Role

The council-manager plan emphasizes the separation of the roles of policy-making and the administration of operating a city. The public officials, elected by the people, set the policy of the municipal organization. The city manager, appointed by the elected officials, is responsible for the implementation of the policy, as well as running the daily duties of the ongoing organization. The city manager is solely responsible to the elected representatives, and can normally be terminated at will if he or she does not perform their job properly. The typical duties of the city manager include, but are not limited to, the following tasks.¹⁵

- The administration of the management affairs of the city.
- Appointing and removing (for cause) all employees of the municipal organization.
- All employees, including the management staff, are hired based on their professional qualifications and experience in municipal affairs.

¹³ For example, see Goodnow, Frank J., *Politics and Administration*, MacMillan Company, New York, 1900, page 16.

¹⁴ Stillman, Richard J., *Op. cit.*, pages 10 and 11.

¹⁵ International City Management Association, *Ordinance for Establishing Council-Manager Plan*, International City Management Association, Washington, D.C., undated, pages 2 and 3.

- Preparation, along with the financial staff, of the annual budget. While the budget is approved by the elected officials, it is implemented by the management staff.
- Keeping the elected officials informed about the financial condition of the city, including revenue and expenditure projections.
- Recommends salary and pay schedules for each appointive position. While competitive salaries and wages are desirable, the ability to pay also enters into the picture.
- In addition to implementing policies, the city manager makes policy recommendations to the elected officials consistent with sound management practices.
- Recommends the organizational structure, all reorganizations and consolidations, for the efficient and effective operation of the municipal organization.
- Attends all meetings of the city council, except when excused in advance. The manager is also required to advertise and post public notices of all such meetings.
- Supervise the acquisition of all materials, supplies, and equipment that are in the approved budget. The manager also supervises the awarding of all contracts for services within the amounts specified by the elected officials.
- All contracts above a specified amount are subject to competitive bidding procedures, usually by receiving “sealed” bids by a specified date. Contracts are awarded to the lowest responsible bidder.
- When services or contracts are necessary, and not in the approved budget, an additional approval is needed from the elected officials prior to awarding the contract.
- Rules governing the purchase of goods and services, and the awarding of contracts, are normally recommended by the city manager and approved by the elected officials. All such policies must be consistent with applicable laws.
- The city manager ensures that all laws and policies approved by the elected officials are enforced equally throughout the city. Old and outdated laws are periodically revised or eliminated as appropriate.
- Investigates all citizen complaints, and problems in the administrative organization. The manager recommends changes, as necessary, to the elected officials for their approval.

- The city manager is required to devote his or her entire time to the discharge of all official duties. Any outside employment is usually approved in advance by the elected representatives to ensure that no conflict-of-interest exists.

The Future of the Council-Manager Plan

There are several different form of governmental structure that cities can adopt including, among others, the strong mayor form, the commission type, the mayor-council plan, as well as the council manager model. Each structure's strengths and weaknesses lie in the eyes of the constituent, the political office holder, the professional government manager, or the employees of the municipal organization. The particular form to select is not an easy decision to make. Certainly, elected leaders, above all, want to be responsive to their constituents. For many communities in America, the council-manager plan has a proven track record of success.

Nearly 2,500 cities in the United States operate under the traditional council-manager plan, with its separation between the policy-making role of elected officials and the implementation of the policy being left to the professional government manager. This is the most successful and popular form of government in cities over 10,000 in population. Some of the larger cities in America have also been successful in implementing the council-manager plan. The fact that this form of government has been adopted on the average of once each week by a city or county in the United States since 1945 attests to the desirability of this model of municipal government representation. Because of its popularity among citizens, it is the fastest growing form of local government in America.

The form of local government a city selects should best serve the needs of the people. Voters elect their representatives based on their confidence not only to set public policies, but also to see to it that policies are implemented into programs and services to serve the community. If the council-manager plan best serves this goals, it may be the most desirable form of local government. If another form of governmental structure is utilized, be it the strong mayor form, the commission type, the mayor-council model, or some other combination of these, it should embody the representational needs of citizens. The form of government best suited for a particular city should be determined through the electoral process. No system of government is perfect, nor can any single system represent the wishes of all of the people all of the time. When the form of local government selected represents the wishes of the majority of the people, this is the form that best serves the democratic process and the will of the people.

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