
Council-Manager Government: Alive and Leading Today's Best-Managed Communities

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Despite the corruption and lack of responsiveness that characterized local entities at the dawn of the twentieth century, by the close of the 1900s local governments in the United States had become the most trusted level of American government. In recent surveys, citizens consistently ranked local government higher than state or national government as the level from which they felt they got the greatest value for their money.

This evolution has been accomplished through a series of radical changes that began in the early twentieth century as part of the Progressive reform movement. Of those changes, the development of the council-manager system—the most popular system of local government for communities with a population of five thousand or more—has proven to be the most significant step in improving the overall performance and credibility of local government.

The Value That Professional Management Brings to Local Governance

In 1935, the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) recognized 418 U.S. cities and seven counties as operating under the council-manager form. Today, 3,302 cities with populations of more than twenty-five hundred and 371 counties operate under this system.

Why such unprecedented growth? The council-manager form is founded on a series of values that are consistent with today's communities and with the goal of improving the quality of life in those communities. Under the council-manager form, day-to-day management of the local government is directed by an experienced professional who is selected by the governing body and who facilitates governing by operating “for the people” who live in the community.

Noted author James H. Svara, director of the Public Administration Program at North Carolina State University, has observed that in addition to scrupulous political neutrality, these management professionals add value to the system of governance in the communities they serve by:

- Establishing policy and service delivery strategies on the basis of need rather than demand
- Emphasizing the long-term interests of the community as a whole
- Promoting equity and fairness
- Recognizing the interconnection among policies
- Advancing broad and inclusive citizens' participation

ICMA's Code of Ethics, adopted in 1924, has also greatly strengthened council-manager government. The twelve tenets of the code, which are aggressively enforced, give elected officials and citizens in council-manager communities that employ an ICMA member a set of professional and personal standards that go well beyond those required by law.

With underlying values such as these, is it any wonder that the council-manager form continues to be adopted by sixty-three communities a year on average, while only two communities abandon it in a typical year?

A Proven Record of Successful Service Delivery

The Government Performance Project report, compiled earlier this year by *Governing* magazine and Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, graded the thirty-five U.S. cities with the largest gross revenues. The report substantiates the belief long held by supporters of the council-manager form that professional management combined with strong political leadership makes an important difference in the quality of life for the residents in the communities that use it. The report's two highest-ranked cities, Phoenix (graded A) and Austin (graded A-), both operate under council-manager government and employ highly trained, professional managers who are authorized by their elected bodies to oversee the key functions of their communities. None of the other cities earned average grades of higher than B+.

The Government Performance Project report's top ranking of these two cities also demonstrates that council-manager government is flexible enough to meet the needs of large, diverse communities. In addition to Phoenix (pop. 1,159,000) and Austin (568,000), Kansas City, Missouri (441,000); Dallas, Texas (1,053,000); San Jose (873,000) and San Diego (1,171,000), California; and Charlotte, North Carolina (420,000) have flourished under this highly adaptable form of government.

Roles, Responsibilities, and Elected Leadership

Council-manager government works so effectively in Austin, Phoenix, and many other well-managed communities because the appointed managers in

those cities are constantly aware that the powers of the local government *belong to the elected governing body*. Any authority or responsibility assigned to the manager by the council or by the citizens through a local charter can be removed at any time, for any reason. The illusion of power that may appear to rest with a manager must be accepted as a temporary acquisition on the basis of the manager's knowledge and expertise.

In most communities, citizens perceive their mayor as their most visible leader, and the elected leaders of council-manager communities are no exception. Mayors in council-manager communities fulfill two critical leadership functions. The first is that of consensus building: the mayor coalesces the community's disparate constituencies so they can work together successfully. The second role is to guide development and implementation of policies that improve community service delivery.

Over the past eighty-six years, the position of mayor in council-manager communities has evolved and been strengthened. In a 1996 study, for example, 62 percent of responding council-manager communities indicated that they elected their mayors directly by a vote of the citizens. Other communities have given the mayor additional veto, appointment, or reporting authorities, with some granting their mayors the power to initiate hiring or involuntary termination of the professional manager.

What is the key to the continued success of council-manager government in light of these major changes? The combination of a strong vision for the community and the professional management required to implement that vision underlie its success. In those communities where there is a successful partnership between the strong elected leaders and the professional manager, the elected leadership comes from the people via the election process. The citizens oversee the operations of the government through an open and transparent system guaranteeing that it continues to be by the people, while the appointed manager remains the chief executive officer with clear authority to oversee the daily operations of the local government organization.

Conclusion

For nearly ninety years, the council-manager form has successfully adapted to American community needs. Cities and counties are not static; the changes taking place in them involve the core of our values. Professional managers and the council-manager form continue to evolve such that today, as in the early twentieth century, this system offers government of the people, by the people, and for the people. In short, council-manager government is a system of reform that will continue to serve communities well in the twenty-first century.

