

Summary Views of Professional Management in Local Government

The major forms of local government professional management are well described. Data on the prevalence of the Council-Manager form and the "Strong Mayor" form, and the distribution among Washington Cities is also available. The trends tend toward the Council-Manager form in middle-sized communities, as well as in cities which incorporated in Washington state in the last three decades.

My personal experience includes seven years as City Manager in a small Oregon City (Independence) and twenty-four years as first City Administrator in dynamically developing Camas, Washington. My views are also informed by observations of local governments, in the Pacific Northwest, and overseas. I benefit from a Masters in Public Administration (MPA) and currently serve as a Senior Advisor, appointed by the Washington City Management Association (WCMA) and the International City Management Association (ICMA)

Here are a few summary conclusions in the matter:

1. Leadership matters. The quality and character of elected officials is of paramount importance for effective, democratic local government. Likewise, the skills, character, training, experience and drive of local government professional managers/administrators is also critical to success. ***Either form can work well.*** Communities with either form can and do flounder, drift, and fail.
2. A most critical community choice is to obtain professional, full-time management talent. Cities all have their individual character, history, conditions, etc., and their paths to professional management are varied. Choosing to employ a non-political administrator is a most important step, especially for communities/organizations which experience rapid growth and change. The hiring of a professional can also greatly assist a city in recovering from major difficulties.
In Clark County, Vancouver was the only city with a professional manager prior to 1989. Now, all cities in the county with populations over 3,500 have full-time staff leaders. Some nearby smaller communities, (Kalama, Stevenson, and North Bonneville) also have administrators.
3. As to the question of Council-Manager or "Strong-Mayor", my considered opinion is that in the long run, the likelihood of sustained community success is better with the Council Manager form. This leads us back to the first point: ***"Leadership matters, and either form can work well."*** It is also vital to note in our democratic system that elected leaders are voted into office, representing their constituency. And in the nuanced words of another observer: ***"People often get the government they deserve"***.

Respectfully submitted,

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March 31,2018