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Earl Harris

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## THE LOCAL OFFICIAL: CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE

We are living in uncertain times. Inflation, recession, and climbing unemployment are front-page news. Citizen concern mounts steadily over crime in the streets, racial unrest, inadequate housing, educational systems in turmoil, and the plight of the elderly and poor.

At the focal point of this economic and social uncertainty are our cities, where, battered on one side by these continuing crises and on the other by rising public expectations, local officials are caught in the middle. They wear many titles—such as city council member, city or county commissioner, or county supervisor—but their concerns are the same whatever they do.

What is the best way to cope with municipal problems? How can priorities be determined? Where can money be found to do the job? Does public confidence in government need to be restored?

To get answers to these and other critical questions, TEMPO talked with key officials from four US local governments of varying size, population mix, and location:

- **Edmund D. Edelman**, county supervisor, Los Angeles County, Pop. 7,000,000
- **Earl Harris**, president, Newark Municipal Council, Newark, N.J., Pop. 375,000
- **Robert Richter**, alderman, Sheboygan, Wisc., Pop. 50,000
- **Harold F. Hunter, Jr.**, chairman, city commission, Rome, Ga., Pop. 32,000

These public servants, some full time, some part time, share one common objective: to upgrade the quality of life in their cities and to provide the best possible service to the public at the lowest possible cost. How well are they meeting this goal? Their responses to the following questions reveal some interesting insights.

### What frustrations do local officials live with on a day-to-day basis?

Earl Harris, full-time city council president in the struggling city of Newark, may have the toughest job of all. "A major problem is the public's lack of understanding about the way a city government functions," he says. "We could operate much more effectively if we could confine our work to planning and legislation, as the charter defines our job. But people get on our backs about everything—from garbage and street paving to stray cats—and this eats into our precious time."

What is needed, Mr. Harris believes, is public education.

He wants to initiate a direct-mail campaign about how city governments operate. Newspaper ads will not work, he feels, because an influx of uneducated people in recent years—paralleled by a middleclass exodus—has resulted in too many citizens who can't or won't read the papers.

A rash of individuals and groups constantly camps on a councilman's doorstep, bearing an endless variety of causes, programs, and projects. This is as true in Georgia as in New Jersey. For Harold Hunter, the biggest frustration is also the lack of time—the impossibility of getting everything done that needs to be done.

"Much as you'd like to," he says, "you can't say yes to everything. Under Georgia law, for example, cities aren't permitted to contribute to charitable programs." He cites a middle- and low-income section of town which needs a recreational facility. The city could have bought property and made it available to a nonprofit organization on a free-lease basis. But investigation revealed this would be considered a charitable gift; and as a city commissioner, he would be held personally liable. What hurt most of all, he confides, is that he himself comes from that section of town.

Another aspect of city government distresses Sheboygan's Robert Richter: the undue pressure from self-interest groups. "The more powerful the group," he says, "the greater the pressure." He refers to a continuing conflict between impressive looking schools and better quality schooling. "On the one hand," he says, "I recall the caliber of education that existed in some of the old, rural, inexpensive schoolhouses. And I compare some of the big, costly, streamlined buildings of today. It makes you wonder at times. Are the youngsters really better off today?"

Whatever the answer, he says, it takes courage to make an honest, objective evaluation. And it takes even more fortitude for a public servant to stand firm under the flak that is almost sure to result, whatever decision he makes.

The fourth official, Edmund Edelman, is now a member of Los Angeles County's five-man board of supervisors, which covers 78 separate cities including the city of Los Angeles. This county is the nation's largest in both population and government expenditure. It is the foremost example of the fast-growing "urban counties" that increasingly administer functions associated with cities but do so on a metropolitan scale. Prior to joining the board, Mr. Edelman was a Los Angeles city councilman for nine and one-half years.

"What would get to me in that job," he confides, "were the limitations of the office. I just wasn't as free as I wanted to be to address such broad county issues as pollution, tax reform, and transportation." Now, three months later, it is difficult for him to make a judgment about his new job. "I haven't been here long enough to feel frustrated. I am just



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finding out what I can and cannot do. One of the first things I have noticed, however, is that I am in much closer contact with the governor's office and the state legislature than before. So I do feel I can accomplish things."

### What are the types of complaints you hear most often from your constituents?

Gripes vary according to a city's location and size. Not surprisingly, high taxes rank at the top of the list. Other issues are the quality and the cost of education, removal of refuse and waste, even road repairing. And in every community, pets seem to be a major cause of complaints.

Certain national concerns take on added significance in large cities: health care, social services, race relations, public transportation, manpower development, and law enforcement.

Mr. Edelman is a realist. "There are no easy answers to these problems," he says. "The rising juvenile crime rate represents a failure of our educational, economic, and family systems. Tougher laws are needed for the hardened criminal, but that's only part of the answer. Youngsters in trouble must be turned into constructive citizens. We need programs to prevent first-time and petty offenders from getting deeper into crime. As for youth gangs, if we can give them recognition in a socially acceptable way, they'll stop searching for outlets that are socially unacceptable."

Mr. Edelman likes to concentrate on what he calls youth diversion programs, but he sees no quick solutions in today's economy. "Poverty and unemployment breed crime among youth. It's a fact of life we must live with."

Newark's Mr. Harris agrees. "The increasing number of young people on the streets with time on their hands is one of the most serious problems facing local governments today. One way to avoid trouble, of course, is more police protection. But like all services, police protection costs money."

Beyond the question of young offenders, it's a time for serious reassessment of dollar expenditures for all police services, Mr. Harris believes. "The traditional solution seems to be to add more cops to the force."

But you don't find answers in numbers, a reality more and more social planners have been coming to grips with. "We must ask ourselves," says Mr. Harris, "what kind of performance we're getting for police dollars invested. Even if the money were available for additional policemen, we don't know how effective this would be. The key lies in increased productivity, more police protection for each dollar spent."

### But is it possible to provide services people need, on the one hand, and to ease the financial burden of your constituents, on the other?

Virtually every citizen is concerned about his pocketbook. But in urban centers with large ghettos, this problem takes on added dimension.

The statistics speak for themselves. In Newark, more than one-third of tax revenues goes for education. "We have 18 percent unemployment," states Mr. Harris. "Every third person is on some form of assistance. People are abandoning property. We simply don't have funds for the massive school construction that's needed, so we turn to patchwork solutions—a building extension here, a refurbishing there. We live with overcrowded conditions because we have no alternative."

A partial solution lies in upgrading productivity, a better yield for tax dollars spent. According to Mr. Edelman, some local officials see the possibility of reduced taxes if productivity gains can be made. "Los Angeles County," he says, "has never had a comprehensive long-range spending program. Priorities must be established on a cost-benefit basis. We must face the hard realities and determine if available dollars are being properly channeled."

If sufficient expertise is lacking to achieve this objective, many experts believe outside help should be sought.

Mr. Edelman points to community mental health care as a prime illustration. "Apart from the humane consideration," he says, "a greater investment in mental health today will save millions tomorrow. It will relieve institutional in-patient loads, reduce the incidence of crime, and help decrease the police burden."

One proven way to loosen strings on the financial strait jacket is to attract new business. In Sheboygan, an employment opportunity commission was set up a few years ago to develop a 172-acre industrial park. "It has brought in important new revenues and kept taxes from surging," reports Mr. Richter.

One of Newark's main challenges, notes Mr. Harris, is to spark corporate interest in the city. "We have to get the message across that we have a great reservoir of semi-skilled workers for manufacturing, an excellent seaport, an international airport, and good access to New York markets." He strongly favors tax incentives to industry, extended over a number of years.

Smaller cities also feel the economic pinch, but generally they are in better shape than their big city counterparts. "We're lucky," concedes Rome city commission chairman Hunter, "because our tax base has expanded as a result of new industry, shopping centers, federal revenue

sharing, and liquor revenues. Taxes have gone up very little in the past five years." That is a statement few city officials can make.

As Mr. Richter sees it, good city planning is the best way to stay out of the red. He cites the urban renewal crisis to underline the importance of modern management methods. "All over the country," he says, "you see expensive housing authority projects torn down or neglected because of poor planning, deterioration, or poor handling of funds." He is proud that Sheboygan boasts one of the most efficient housing programs that can be found in the nation.

"It's about the only one I know of that's in the black," he says. "And we pulled it off without federal subsidy."

The reason: it was planned with Sheboygan's resources, capabilities, and requirements in mind. Mr. Richter believes there should be two kinds of housing programs—one geared to metropolitan needs, the other to local needs. "Too many small community projects don't work because they are designed from the big city standpoint," he says.

### **Can you see the responsibilities of elected officials changing as a result of the shift from categorical grants to revenue sharing?**

When it comes to federal revenue sharing—making funds available to cities for use under broad flexible guidelines instead of for specific categories of use—most local board members are conceptually all for it.

"In Newark," says Mr. Harris, "revenue sharing has been highly beneficial in chopping the tax rate from over \$10 to \$8.60. This eased the financial burden for many hard-pressed property owners."

In Georgia, Mr. Hunter sees the idea as "excellent," because it cuts out the middleman. "Under the old system you had 20 different agencies, each with its own budget, each making a big pitch for funds."

It also helps to cure an old ill. Previously a sum of money was allocated to such departments as urban renewal, transportation, or health care, and sometimes more money was earmarked than could be wisely used by the department in a specified period. "It's simply not human nature to turn dollars away," concedes one official. "I've seen some pretty messed-up programs as a result."

Mr. Richter points out that many proud Midwesterners don't like accepting federal funds and then being told how to use them. "But since revenue sharing, we have undertaken an ambitious downtown renewal program, high-rise



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housing, and a project for the elderly; and so much has been accomplished, many people are beginning to accept the concept, although the need for close monitoring exists.”

The County of Los Angeles is getting \$90 million in revenue sharing funds for the current fiscal year. “With many groups competing for this money,” notes Mr. Edelman, “the problem is to split the pie equitably and in the best public interest. Ambitious new programs compete against programs already in force. Against these, in turn, must be weighed the advisability of applying some of the money to help reduce property taxes.” These are tough decisions to make.

“The chief responsibility under revenue sharing,” adds Mr. Edelman, “is to come up with better ways to serve the public.”

Never has the responsibility been greater. Under categorical grants, it was the federal government’s responsibility to evaluate program effectiveness and allocate funds. “Now it’s our responsibility,” says Mr. Edelman.

He is not complaining. But all officials agree a greater sophistication will be required. As Mr. Harris puts it, “We in Newark need more technical knowledge about how to assess needs, evaluate programs, and allocate funds. The better we do this, the more likely will every tax dollar be applied to its best possible advantage.”

Specialized education and training for city officials seems to be the order of the day. The problem is that, except for a few programs in the largest cities, little training is available.

### What are the chief problems facing American communities in the months ahead?

The chief concerns of Mr. Hunter are economic. The other officials agree. “We will need to find alternative revenue in the form of taxes, grants, sharing, and so on,” he adds. “Long-range plans require long-term commitments.”

Beset by both inflation and recession, cities like Newark have little hope, according to Mr. Harris, unless strong direction and leadership emerges from Washington. Apart from patchwork remedies, the officials agree, deficit-plagued local governments have little choice but to stand by and wait for something to happen.

The Newark council president injects a sober note of realism. “With municipal problems so acute and complex,” he says, “it takes extraordinary individuals to deal with extraordinary problems. Such outstanding people, however, must be reasonably compensated. The official may feel a strong responsibility to the community he serves, but he has a responsibility to his family as well.”

### How can public officials help restore faith and confidence in government?

“I was recently up for reelection,” says Mr. Hunter, “and I can tell you that the implications of Watergate and what is happening over this country have hurt every level of

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## A Gruelling, Thankless Job

If your aim in life is to get rich, stay away from city hall.

This is Bob Richter’s 13th year on Sheboygan’s 16-man common council. “I once figured it out,” he says. “In addition to my other duties, I attended 247 meetings in a year.” Divide this time into his annual stipend of \$1,800 and one thing becomes clear: he does not qualify as a tycoon.

Two of his four youngsters are in college, another will shortly apply. His most pressing problem? You guessed it—to scrape up enough cash to pay for his children’s education. It is the kind of plight that makes a pub-

lic servant responsive to the economic hardships of his constituents.

Mr. Richter offers fervent thanks to his full-time employer, *The Sheboygan Press*, where he serves as advertising manager. “What with phone calls, special meetings, and other interruptions, I could never fulfill my dual role without management’s understanding.”

Unlike Mr. Richter, Earl Harris is a full-time city official. As president of Newark’s nine-member council, he earns \$15,000 a year for a job that begins at 8:30, often winds up with a late-evening meeting.

A public servant in recession-

plagued Newark knows the meaning of words like “harassment” and “pressure.” And Mr. Harris admits that the flak sometimes gets to him. “Well, not so much the flak,” he says, “as the lack of understanding displayed by unreasonable people who make impossible demands, then raise hell because they weren’t met yesterday.” However, he shrugs this off. “As Willie Loman once said, I guess it goes with the territory.”

The men and women who serve in Rome, Georgia on the nine-man city commission have received no pay increase in the past 15 years. Harold Hunter gets \$1,500 annually for a job



politics. It has made me nervous, indeed, about public support."

His response is to be as open and candid as possible, whether conducting his campaign, discussing the issues, or replying to citizen inquiries and complaints. To him, this is the key.

"The day of the old-style politician is past," Mr. Edelman agrees. "The people of Los Angeles demand higher standards from us today. They want to know how we stand on the issues. If you try to hedge on integrity, they are quick to detect it."

He believes this is all to the good. Such responsiveness was spurred on by Watergate, but would have come about anyway, he believes. "Conscience and idealism are only part of it. On the strictly practical side, the increasing visibility of our public acts makes it good political strategy to make the system more open."

Mr. Richter would like to see more citizen involvement in government in Wisconsin, but suggests first more public enlightenment about how government works. "Most communities are loaded with talent, but people don't want to get involved." With a trace of cynicism, he adds, "You've heard the old saw that in a democracy the individual has one basic right—to pay taxes by cash, check, or money order. For an unfortunate number of people, that's about the only right they do exercise."

Mr. Hunter believes public confidence depends on an understanding of the tough performance and financial controls imposed by law on each city government. "It

would be a good idea," he says, "if statements produced as a result of quarterly audit reviews were publicized throughout the community." He plans to announce this policy himself over Rome radio networks and newspapers and get the message across to constituents that city hall is wide open for public inspection.

History testifies that one way to cure old ills is to set young minds to work on them. In Mr. Richter's view, this is one of the chief challenges facing government officials today.

"Young people," he says, "are well aware of their right to select the lifestyle or career of their choice, yet they feel no obligation to participate in a government that guarantees them that right."

But the involvement of youth is only one answer. "We need more companies," says Richter, "that will support their employees' commitment to local government. It would help cure some of society's ills; and when the community prospers, business as well as everyone shares in the results."

In the last analysis, it is often up to the citizens of each municipality. "If you feel strongly about what is happening in the nation and in your community," says Mr. Harris, "I know of no better way to help bring about change than getting involved yourself." ▲

*This article is based on interviews conducted with each of the participants by business writer Raymond Dreyfack.*

that requires two to three hours of work daily. He chuckles when reminded of it. "That's about 75 cents an hour if you figure it on that basis."

Like Mr. Harris, he feels a need to be at the heart of the action, where the dynamics of change take place. "If you're unwilling to serve or show no concern about government," he believes, "you have no right to gripe about the way that it's run." He is compiling a list of individuals who didn't vote at the last election; when they call up to complain, he'll call this matter to mind.

Mr. Hunter is married, has three children in school, and manages a

brokerage office in town. "That business isn't very exciting just now," he concedes. On the other hand, public service is always a challenge. "It's a way to keep recharging my batteries."

After nearly 6 years in office, Mr. Hunter decided one year not to run. "I got dozens of phone calls," he recalls, "expressing appreciation for the job I had done, urging me to change my mind." He pauses, "You can see it didn't take much urging."

As a member of Los Angeles County's five-man board of supervisors, which runs a \$3-billion budget, Ed Edelman has as much responsibil-

ity as many a top corporate executive. His full-time job pays \$40,000 a year. Considering after-hour meetings and homework, his hourly income is probably about the same as a good electrician's.

Spare time? He says, not very convincingly, "I like to whack a tennis ball around when I can get to it, but I don't get to it often."

He'd have it no other way. He feels driven to get done what's unfinished. "In government," he says, "you work to shape and restructure the future. Helping to bring about a meaningful change gives me the gratification I require."