

# The Council-Manager Plan

JAMES R. BURCH  
City Manager  
Manistee, Michigan

## HISTORY OF THE COUNCIL MANAGER PLAN

The manager plan originated in Staunton, Virginia. After contrasting the administration of a railroad for which he worked with the methods of the city, the chairman of the committee on streets originated the idea. In July, 1906, the committee on streets was given the job of investigating the advisability of employing a competent and practical city engineer to take charge of the streets and to perform other duties as might be assigned to him by the council. In August, 1906, the committee reported and advocated the council-manager plan.

The report recommended that an ordinance be prepared which created the office of Municipal Director. In spite of great opposition the committee's report was adopted. It was not until January, 1908, that the proposed ordinance was made a law. Charles E. Ashburner, division engineer of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway Company, was selected for the position.

Lockport, New York publicized the council-manager idea in its attempt to obtain a new form of city government. In 1910 the Board of Trade of that city was considering the adoption of the commission form of government. A member of the National Municipal League suggested to the Lockport Board of Trade that it should try to use the manager plan. An effort was made to secure state legislative approval of a bill which would have enabled the city to use the manager plan. The effort was unsuccessful but wide spread publicity was given to the city-manager idea.

In 1912 Sumter, South Carolina, adopted the small council and appointive manager idea by a charter amendment. It was first to use this method. The movement necessitated a constitutional amendment and legislative enactment.

Dayton, Ohio firmly established the council-manager idea. During the period 1903-1913, the city debt in Dayton increased from \$26 to \$46 per capita. Bonds were being issued for expenditures which represented current expenses and not permanent improvements. In 1912 the Chamber of Commerce sought to secure a new city charter under

the newly adopted home-rule amendment to the state constitution. A committee was appointed by the Chamber of Commerce and it reported in favor of the council-manager plan. A committee of one hundred persons was then set up to secure a new charter. After several meetings this committee agreed to support candidates for a charter commission who were pledged to the city-manager form of government. In March, 1913, just before the election of the charter commission, the Dayton flood occurred. The old government broke down under this impact and in May, 1913 the persons pledged to the manager plan were elected to the charter commission. The charter was completed in June, 1913. It was approved by the voters in August, 1913, and became effective on January 1, 1914. Henry M. Waite, city engineer of Cincinnati, was Dayton's first city-manager.

The action taken by Dayton marks the real beginning of the council-manager movement in the United States. As compared with the previous unsatisfactory government, the council-manager plan gave a good demonstration of efficient city administration. The new plan of government had been tried in a larger city and found capable of performing its functions. Other cities were now willing to follow Dayton's lead.

By 1920 this plan was in effect in 157 cities; by 1930, in 385; by 1940, in 525; and in 1954 there were 1,220 council-manager cities in the United States. The cities range in size from Bendix, New Jersey, with a population of 40, to Cincinnati with a population of 455,610. One out of every three cities of over 10,000 population was operating under council-manager government in 1954.

Many states now authorize cities to adopt the manager plan either by constitutional home-rule provisions or by general statute. The states having the greatest number of council-manager cities in 1954 were 118 in Maine, 93 in Michigan, 98 in Texas, 65 in Virginia, 67 in Florida, 113 in California, and 57 in Pennsylvania.

Only 45 cities have abandoned the council-manager plan by a vote of the people. Among the larger cities which have abandoned it after a trial are Cleveland, Akron, Trenton, and Tampa. Following are the chief reasons for abandonment: (1) defectively drawn charters; (2) voters during periods of economic depression showing their resentment against taxes by changing the form of government; and (3) strong organization and effective work by political interests to overthrow the plan while citizen groups relaxed. Also in some cities the making of the manager both administrative and political head has led to abandonment of the plan. On the basis of the number of cities

which have adopted the plan the number of abandonments is not large. As in all forms of city government this plan needs the firm support of the citizens.

### FUNCTIONING OF COUNCIL-MANAGER GOVERNMENT

The council-manager plan provides for an elective council which appoints and removes the manager. Councils in manager cities are generally smaller than those where the mayor and council plan is used. The council is the policy determining agency of the city. It passes ordinances, votes appropriations, and determines whether bonds shall be issued. After the policies have been made by the council, they are executed by the manager. The duties of the council are legislative; those of the manager are administrative.

The success of council-manager government depends in a large part upon the persons elected to the council. In selecting the manager, in determining policies, and in operating and working with the manager, the council holds the key to the success or failure of the manager plan. Usually a higher type of personnel has been elected to the council under the manager plan than under the other plans of city government. The council-manager plan frees the council of responsibility for administrative details and permits the members to give their attention to general policies and programs. Members feel that their time is being spent on fundamental questions and not on minor matters of a routine nature. Council-manager cities have thus tended to attract community leaders who are anxious to be of service to their city.

The mayor under this plan has little power. Usually he is selected by the council from their own number, but in some cities he is popularly elected. He is the presiding officer of the council and is the city's official head for ceremonial, judicial and military purposes. His salary is usually higher than the other members of the council.

Some cities have given added prestige to the mayor by increasing his powers. This is done by giving him power to appoint certain minor officials. In all cases the mayor's position is of secondary importance. It is the manager, rather than the mayor, who appoints and removes subordinates and has charge of the conduct of the administration. In a manager city the mayor is the titular head of the city government.

The manager is appointed by the council in a council-manager city. Appointments are usually not limited to residents of the city. The charters of some cities do provide that the manager be a resident of the city. The theory is that the council will consider ability, experience,

and previous training, and will select the person best qualified for the position.

About one-half of the council-manager city charters make no attempt to set forth the manager's qualifications. Several cities, however, try to define the qualification in general terms. The qualifications of a manager should be left to the judgment and discretion of the council. Times change and the council should be free, in selecting a manager, to consider the problems then facing the city. Experience in the general type of work which must be done by a manager has been an important factor in his selection. A large proportion of the managers have been engineers, since engineering problems have an important place in the government of a city. In recent years approximately two-thirds of the persons receiving city-manager appointments have had previous governmental experience.

City councils in selecting managers have tended to prefer local men. This is due in part to the feeling that home-town men should get home-town jobs and that tax money should not go to an out-sider. The first appointment to managership is usually made to a non-resident. After the first appointment there is a tendency to select a local man. The appointment of a non-resident does not necessarily mean the promotion of a manager from one city to another.

The preference of many councils for a local man has an important bearing on the type of personnel that can be attracted to the profession of city management. Young men can be encouraged to enter the profession as a career only if there is opportunity for promotion from one city to another. Now that this form of government has been in operation a sufficient length of time, promotions are becoming more general. As in all professions promotions are based on ability and previous record.

Suggestions have been made that city managers be licensed by state boards established for such a purpose. It is thought that licensing would not only raise the level of the profession of city management, but that councils would hesitate to discharge a manager for political reasons when they know that his successor must be chosen from a selected list of professionally qualified persons, anyone of whom might be less amenable to political control than the incumbent. One objection to licensing is that it would tend to give legal sanction to a standard of minimum fitness. Another objection is that the profession is not sufficiently specialized so that standards can be set.

City managers are selected for an indefinite tenure. They serve at the pleasure of the council. Some charters provide that the man-

ager may not be removed until he has served a specified minimum period. The purpose of such a provision is to give the manager sufficient time to demonstrate his ability. Some charters try to prevent removal for political reasons by providing for a public hearing based on written charges.

Managers may usually be removed by an ordinary majority of the council, but in some cities a special majority is required. If a manager does not have the support of an ordinary majority of the members of his council, his effectiveness as administrative head of the city will be greatly impaired. A manager should resign if he doesn't have the confidence of the council.

In only a few cities does the recall apply to the manager. Popular control over the manager should be limited to removal by the council. Making the manager subject to recall will tend to make the office political. The manager plan is based upon the principle that it is desirable to separate politics and administration. If the manager is made subject to recall, this principle is violated.

Uncertainty of tenure is a serious problem in attracting men to the profession and keeping them when attractive offers are made by private business. It was the hope that managerial terms would be longer than those of elective mayors, thus gaining the benefit of continuous service and experience. Average tenure for all city managers has been increasing.

Although not as large as the salaries paid in business for comparable positions, the salaries paid managers are liberal as compared with those of mayors and of other appointive city officials. More qualified men are available for manager positions than for mayor offices. The salaries paid managers are higher, and the managers have the advantage of not having to conduct costly political campaigns to secure their positions.

As stated in most charters, the manager is the administrative head of the city. Under such a grant of power the principal functions of a city manager are to organize, to plan, to direct, to coordinate, to control, and to represent the administration in contact with the council, with outside agencies, and with the public. Unless a manager is careful he may devote too much time to such routine tasks as receiving complaints, answering inquiries, and not enough time to the major problems of over-all administration. The city manager should have an assistant to handle routine matters to give himself time for major administrative activities.

## RELATIONS OF THE MANAGER AND THE COUNCIL

The manager appoints and removes the heads of departments and other subordinates, subject to limitations laid down in the charter or state law. Some councils have attempted to control the appointments made by the manager which are within his exclusive province. To avoid encroachment upon his authority some charters provide a penalty of forfeiture of office for councilmen who attempt to influence a manager in his appointments.

Several cases have arisen where managers have resigned rather than submit to dictation from the council in matters which were legally left to their discretion. The city manager should insist upon the exercise of his own judgment in accomplishing council policies. The application of this principle is essential to the success of the manager plan. If the council is unwilling to stay out of the field of administration, the council-manager plan will not be successful.

The manager attends council meetings and takes part in the discussion, especially answering questions and giving information on current problems. He reports to the council to keep it informed of the operations and finances of the city. Through these reports the council can determine whether its general policies and programs are being carried out. Some managers make written reports, and others present information orally. Financial reports are usually submitted monthly in writing.

The city budget is prepared by the manager and submitted to the council for consideration. He consults with his department heads and plans the city's activities for the following year; then he prepares a budget which will make it possible to carry out these plans. Larger cities have a budget officer to assist the manager in this work. The council has the power to make any changes it sees fit in the budget submitted by the manager. After the money has been appropriated by the council, budget execution becomes a primary responsibility of the administrative branch. It is the manager's responsibility to see that as much service is rendered as is possible with the money available.

Some managers have attempted to encroach upon the council's power to determine policies. They have not been content to advise the council but have sought to dictate in matters of policy. Some managers have gone so far as to take a rather active part in the formation of public policy. This is contrary to the principle of council-manager government. The responsibility of action on policy making rests upon the council. The manager's function is to carry out the mandate of the council.

## ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF COUNCIL-MANAGER GOVERNMENT

The objection is sometimes made that the manager plan is undemocratic in that great power is placed in the hands of one man who is appointed and not elected. There is no sound basis for this objection. The argument is based on the fallacious principle that to be democratic, a form of government must permit the electorate to select all officers, both elective and appointive. The citizen may have a controlled city government without the election of all such officers. Under the council-manager plan, the council, which is elected by the people, appoints the manager, holds him responsible for the administration of municipal affairs, and removes him when his services are no longer satisfactory. Important powers are placed in his hands, but they are administrative rather than legislative. Thus the political maxim, "For representation elect, for administration appoint," is applied. There is no basis for the statement that the manager plan is undemocratic.

Another criticism that has been made of the manager plan is that the duties of administering the affairs of an American city are so varied that it is impossible to secure a man who will be qualified for the position. A manager's job is not to do all the many tasks associated with a city's varied functions. He should delegate the work to others and then see that it is done. An elective mayor must do the same work as a manager and is definitely less qualified. At the same time a mayor must pay off political debts. A manager is not so obligated and is able to select a higher type of men to serve as heads of departments. Careful selection of subordinates will greatly reduce the manager's work and will give the city a more efficient government.

The selection of an outside man as manager is objected to on the grounds that he will not understand local problems. There is little need for the administrative head of the government to understand the local situation if the council is competent and provides proper policies to care for the local situation. An out-of-town manager will soon learn as much about local conditions as he needs to know and he will have the advantage of not having local connections which may embarrass him. The experience he has had from other cities will be a great help to his present position. Other corporations pay no attention to residence in going after their officials. The real weakness of council-manager government is not the selection of an outsider as manager, but the tendency of councils, to prefer a local man.

Another weakness of the manager plan is the lack of men who are qualified by training and experience to serve as managers. Calling a man a manager and giving him a high salary will not qualify him to be administrative head of a city. However, men of general execu-

tive and administrative ability are attracted to the job since tenure of office is not dependent upon the political whims of the public. Experienced engineers and businessmen have been willing to accept positions as managers. Their past experiences have permitted them to become efficient managers. In general, it can be said that a higher type of man has been attracted as city manager than as mayor. Obviously there are exceptions to this generalization.

The statement that there are not enough properly trained men to accept positions as managers is gradually becoming less valid. A profession of public management has developed in this country. A professional organization, the International City Managers' Association was formed in 1914. It has become a strong organization and publishes a yearbook (*The Municipal Year Book*) and a monthly journal (*Public Management*). To meet the need for trained men in public service, several universities offer courses in public administration.

A weakness that may develop in the council-manager plan is the indirect election of the manager. Sometimes the removal of a manager or the appointment of a certain person as manager have become political campaign issues. When this occurs, the city becomes a manager city in name only.

The absence of adequate provision for political leadership has been generally accepted as the most serious weakness of council-manager government. Political leadership is supplied by the mayor under the mayor and council plan. The council-manager plan is based on the assumption that the manager will be the head of the administration, with the mayor the prominent figure in municipal affairs. It assumes that the mayor will take an active part in initiating city policy, in presenting it to the voters, and in defending it against attack. Unfortunately, most mayors in manager cities have fallen down in this respect. Since they have no position of power, they do not feel responsible for going before the people to lead public opinion and to defend the policies of the council.

The council-manager plan of municipal government is probably the best plan yet conceived. It has been called "the one political invention of America in the past one hundred years" and the "greatest advance by American cities since the Revolution." On the basis of the record it has achieved, it is worthy of praise. It does not guarantee "good government"; no plan or form of government can do this. However, experience demonstrates that the possibility and the probability of efficient administration of public affairs are much greater under the council-manager plan than under any other form of municipal government yet devised.