

Some Experiences as a City Manager

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The city manager profession and the council manager form of local government have been discussed at the Road School in past years. Therefore it seems unnecessary to repeat what has already been said.

In the council manager form of local government, the council is the legislative and the policy making body, whose members are elected by the people.

The council selects a full time manager to carry out the council's policies. Usually the manager is trained in public administration, either by special schooling or by years of experience. Theoretically, the manager is far removed from politics, especially at election time, however he must be prepared to defend the actions of the city though the defense may be construed as political activity.

The installation of the council-manager form of local government is a result of the recognition of the basic principal of local home rule. All but two states, Indiana and Arkansas, have concluded that the local citizenry are capable of deciding what form of local government is best for them.

The council-manager plan is not forced on a city. Only enabling acts are passed giving the cities a choice in the matter.

It seems strange that the local voter is considered smart at election time when the various politicians are elected but not smart enough to choose his own form of local government.

As of January 1, 1,376 local governments in the United States were of the council-manager form. Forty-eight percent of all cities over 25,000 population and thirty nine percent of all towns between 10,000 and 25,000 have this form of government.

Until recently, the engineering profession furnished more managers than any other profession. In recent years, however, since numerous schools are offering courses in public administration, the engineers have been losing ground.

This is probably due to the fact that our engineering schools must crowd so much engineering and related subjects into their four year course that little time is available to train men in overall administration of municipal affairs.

Actually the manager profession is a natural for engineers. Young engineers with training in administration would find positions as managers in the smaller cities where the job would be a combination manager and engineer. Many of the smaller cities, when advertising for managers, specify that the position requires a registered engineer. As the young engineer-manager progresses to larger cities, he would surrender his engineering duties to another engineer.

A city manager is directly involved in building sewer systems, water mains, streets, buildings, and building cities. It isn't difficult to see the advantage an engineer-manager would have over a non-engineer manager.

Engineers are prone to look at all city problems from the engineers' angle, and unless our schools recognize the need for trained managers, we as engineers are going to lose out in this rapidly growing profession.

My city has always considered only engineers for the manager's position, and it didn't take me long to learn the reasons why. I found our city in dire need of many public improvements, and I found an acute power shortage situation. I found a city in which some of the essentials of a rapidly growing industrial community were lacking, i. e.:

1. Power shortage
2. Streets unpaved
3. Unsewered sections
4. Water needs
5. Lack of equipment
6. City in financial difficulties
7. City planning

One of the chief essentials of a good manager is good publicity. I know because I recognize it as my chief weakness and I believe engineers are hesitant to keep the public informed.

As *Time* magazine put it, "Democratic government will survive in this unfriendly world if the electorate knows and cares what its public servants are doing." Dorothy Thompson said, "If democracy is ever to regain its virility it had only a generation ago, we have got to learn to sell it to our people, to dramatize it, to make it tangible and visible to the average citizen."

Only recently have governmental officials come to see the importance of using techniques to modernize their own statements of facts and figures, in order to make their constituents understand what is being done for them and how their money is being spent.

In February, our city published in the local newspaper an annual report for the inspection of the citizens. The wide response of interest proved that the public is eager not only to accept the new idea in municipal reports but also to demand it henceforth.

The rapidly growing list of towns and cities that are now issuing the new type of report means that before long any community which continues to put out only the old style annual statement will label itself as behind the times.

In closing I would like to repeat the Athenian Oath of 2,500 years ago.

“We will never bring disgrace to this our City, by any act of dishonesty or cowardice, nor ever desert our suffering comrades in the ranks; we will fight for the ideals and sacred things of the city, both alone and with many; we will revere and obey the city’s laws and do our best to incite a like respect in those above us who are prone to annul or set them at naught; we will strive unceasingly to quicken the public’s sense of Civic duty, thus in all these ways we will transmit this city not only not less, but greater, and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us.”