

# MODELS OF CITY GOVERNMENT

In the development or revision of a City Charter, perhaps no decision is more fundamental than the *selection of a structure of city government*. This decision establishes the basic framework of the government, from the elected positions that will govern it, to the power relationships and responsibilities that will define city operations.

Structures for city governments generally fall into *three main categories*: the mayor-council form, the council-manager form, and the commission form. These three broad categories have evolved since the U.S. first established its local government roots. Initially, a “weak” mayor-council form was popular as a backlash to England’s monarchy and the desire to share power among the people was the dominant theme. However, certain weaknesses of that system were revealed over time and there was a gradual shift to a stronger mayor-council form. The council-manager form gained popularity in the late 19th and early 20th century as people recognized the increasing technical nature of running local government and desired more professionalized training and strong leadership to manage its daily operations. Today, the strong mayor-council form and the council-manager form are the two most common and recommended structures for local governments.

The sections that follow explain some of the high points for each structure and review the generally-accepted merits and drawbacks associated with each. Information in these sections was drawn from two separate resources, both listed on the last page in the bibliography.

## Mayor-Council Form

The mayor-council form has several variations on the primary theme. This form of government has, as the name implies, an elected mayor and an elected city council. The variations are associated with what power is given to the mayor or the council to lead the local government. Mayors can have very little power; substantial power; or have separate, but relatively shared power with the council. The mayor-council form is most common with the largest cities *or* those with fewer than 5,000 people (Ross & Levine, 2001).

### *Weak Mayor-Council Form*

There are many structural elements that can weaken a mayor’s power to administer a local government. Some of the more recognizable elements that weaken a mayor’s role include:

- A lack of power to appoint and dismiss personnel;
- A lack of veto power;

- Equal/shared power with other elected executive officials, council appointees, and/or commissions; and
- Lack of control over budget and the budget process.

As time evolved, this form of government developed a perception of inadequacy for the task of governing increasingly technical cities.

### *Merits*

The most commonly recognized benefit to this form of government is its attempt to safeguard against potential abuses of power and political patronage. As stated in the introduction, this form of government was a direct response to the earliest experiences of those who emigrated from England and wanted to leave the “monarchy” behind.

### *Drawbacks*

Over time, the weaknesses of this system became more apparent. Some of the weaknesses are:

- The mayor lacks any real power to run the city;
- There are multiple heads of the organization and this creates multiple lines of authority and problems in coordination of services;
- Elected executive officials or commission members (many are volunteers) often lack professional expertise to administer the needs of local government;
- A weak mayor creates blurred accountability, with too many people “in-charge” creating confusion over who is responsible;
- Constituents still blame the Mayor for things not in his/her control; and
- This form of government is viewed as a source of “machine politics” as systems emerge “behind the scenes” in the absence of clear authority.

## ***Strong Mayor-Council Form***

Contrary to the weak mayor model, a city structure that empowers the mayor means that the individual has substantial control over the operations of the local government. In direct contrast to the weak mayor model, the strong mayor can:

- Appoint and dismiss key personnel;
- Veto council actions; and
- Initiate the budget process and maintain substantial control over the budget.

City councils can balance a strong mayor by retaining power over appropriations, the purchasing process and contracting procedures, and may also request audits and investigations of the executive department.

Additionally, some strong mayors are limited by a council that retains the power to confirm appointments and/or limit the mayor's ability to dismiss personnel without approval. There are also examples of city councils that retain the right to override executive vetoes. These exceptions are defined more explicitly in the next section (Standard Mayor-Council).

### *Merits*

Proponents of the strong mayor form suggest the following as significant reasons to support the model:

- The structure provides sufficient power to the mayor to run the operations of the city;
- The structure provides a single point of accountability; and
- The structure offers opportunity to build professionalism through mayoral appointment of qualified personnel.

### *Drawbacks*

Opponents and students of the structure of local government also point out that a strong mayor is not a panacea. A strong mayor may:

- Exacerbate partisanship;
- Undermine professionalism by (depending on the individual)
  - Encouraging political patronage, and
  - Making political appointments and dismissals if partisan wishes are not followed.

There is also no assurance that the elected mayor has administrative talents, which can also be a detriment to managing the daily operations of a city.

## **Standard Mayor-Council Form**

A hybrid of the weak/strong mayor variants, this form involves more checks and balances while still promoting the strong leadership inherent in the strong mayor form. It is the most common form of mayor-council government among communities that choose a mayoral form of government. Generally, this model is known for separated and shared powers between the mayor and council. For example, in this form a mayor may initiate the budget process, but the council would have significant input into the final version. A mayor in this form may have veto power, but the city council could override the veto. A mayor may have responsibility for appointing and dismissing personnel, but the city council may retain power to approve those decisions for key personnel. Thus, while the mayor would largely be the administrative leader of the city, the city council balances that role through oversight and accountability in certain areas.

### *Merits*

The benefits of this form of government are that it can take the best of the strong and weak mayor forms of government and blend them while simultaneously limiting the worst elements of each. It is generally recognized as a good alternative and when the charter is developed creatively, it offers healthy checks and balances between policy making and administrative leadership.

### *Drawbacks*

Whenever there are elected leaders, there is a potential for conflict. It is difficult to entirely root out of any system the potential for elected leaders to clash over issues and have ongoing power struggles. Thus, even in this model, there are potential political pitfalls. In addition, this model does not ensure that an elected mayor has the requisite training or professional skill to lead an organization and hire or fire the right personnel.

## **Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) Model**

The National Civic League has recognized that one solution to a lack of professional training on the part of any potential mayor is to require the mayor to appoint a professionally trained administrative officer. Similar to an appointed council manager, a Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) serves as a professionally-trained staff person to oversee daily operations. The position typically serves at the pleasure of the Mayor rather than the council. However, there are examples of CAOs that serve at the pleasure of the council, and other examples of CAOs that serve at the pleasure of the mayor with council approval. In either case, the CAO carries out the administrative duties on behalf of the Mayor.

### *Merits*

The significant benefits of adding a CAO are that it professionalizes a strong mayor model, and can provide continuity and institutional memory for elected officials when the CAO is retained through election cycles.

### *Drawbacks*

Similar to any other position that is appointed, there is potential for abuse if the position is filled as political patronage. In addition, it is not uncommon for there to be a high turnover rate for CAOs as people in these roles often are looking to advance their careers by moving to bigger cities.

## **Council-Manager Form (current City of Batavia)**

The council-manager form is the most popular structure in the United States among mid-sized cities (populations of 25,000 to 250,000). Under this form, the city council appoints a professionally-trained manager who

is then given responsibility to run the city. The position essentially becomes a non-elected CEO for the community. The division of labor between the council and the manager is largely between “policy” and “administration,” with the manager being almost exclusively responsible for administration. A city manager typically appoints and dismisses department heads and usually has responsibility for initiating the budget process. While some cities with a council-manager form also have a mayor, it is not required and in many cases the mayor is nothing more than a ceremonial position (i.e. Weak Mayor). This form is familiar to the Batavia community already, with the City currently operating under the council-manager structure.

There is some debate about whether city managers can fully divest themselves from a policy making role. While they must administer, they also help initiate and/or shape policy debates simply by helping to manage what issues the council deals with and what information the council has during the debate. The modern council-manager form usually encourages the council to set the mission of the city, while policy formation is a function of both the council and the manager. Administration of the city is almost exclusively the role of the manager, although the lines can blur at times.

Under this structure, the city council can be chosen through a variety of methods. The typical process involves mixing at-large and ward-based voting in order to assure adequate representation.

### ***Merits***

The oft-stated benefits of this structure are that it provides:

- Administrative expertise;
- Clear lines of authority and accountability;
- Professional standards that tend to trump partisan/parochial concerns; and
- Cooperation and partnerships rather than conflict.

Since a majority of the council must approve of the manager’s appointment, there is a better chance that the council will work better with the manager rather than an elected official. The combination of cooperation and professional expertise makes for a time-tested structure for city government.

### ***Drawbacks***

As with each of the models, there are some potential concerns.

- City councils may not always choose the most qualified applicants.
  - A variation of this is that councils may not get the most qualified applicants depending on the size and/or reputation of the community.

- Sometimes a manager cannot be dismissed as easily as the model assumes.
- There is always potential for high turnover for city managers.
  - Similarly, the city council turns over at regular intervals and this results in potential changes to the manager position.
- Important to our democracy, some object to this structure by saying that city managers are not as accountable/responsive to citizens as it is not an elected position. Some contend that elected positions hold members of government accountable to the needs of citizens and foster better public engagement.

## Commission Form

The commission form is rare. Today, only two-to-three percent of cities nationwide use this structure of government. Only three cities in NYS still operate with a commission form of government; the cities of Mechanicville (pop. 5,196), Saratoga Springs (pop. 26,586), and Sherrill (pop. 3,071). Mechanicville recently initiated a study to change their charter citing problems with oversight/accountability and a lack of general effectiveness with their current commission form of government.

In this form, the city council is actually a “commission” and the members serve as administrative heads to each of the city departments. Usually commission members are chosen at-large rather than from wards, and in a non-partisan fashion. One commissioner is usually given the title of mayor, but it is mostly symbolic.

### *Merits*

Those who favor this structure for government contend that because power is concentrated in one set of individuals, decisions can be made quicker without all the “checks and balances” that typically delay action in the other structures.

### *Drawbacks*

Unfortunately, time has often proven this form of government does not live up to its stated benefits. Rather than quicker decisions, there is more often deadlock and inaction with department heads acting in the narrower interest of their own department rather than the city government as a whole. The model has limitations in other areas as well.

- It often lacks effective leadership since leadership is shared at a departmental level.

- It encourages departmental parochialism – Budgets are often not scrutinized between department head commissioners because that only leads to retaliation among members.
- In encouraging departmental parochialism, general administrative reorganization is extremely difficult to achieve.
- Voters rarely take administrative skills and background into account when electing the commissioners.

## SUMMARY

Based upon the experience of many cities over the last 100 years, the commission form and weak mayor-council form of government have not been widely used in the development of most modern cities. The technical and professional needs of most cities require strong leadership, clear lines of authority and accountability, and administrative expertise, none of which are traits in these forms of government.

The Model City Charter has endorsed the council-manager form of government since its first edition in 1915 (National Civic League, 2003). However, in more recent editions, communities that did not want that form have also been encouraged to adopt a strong-mayor form with clearly delineated shared authority between the mayor and the council. The most recent edition of the Model City Charter also suggests that the position of Chief Administrative Officer be created for the community that chooses a mayoral form of government.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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