

April 2011
Tulsa League of Women Voters
Unit Meeting Discussion Topic

City Manager Form of Municipal Government

Overview

On January 13, 2011 the City Council adopted a consensus directing the Interim City Attorney to draft a charter amendment establishing a council-manager form of government, using Oklahoma City's charter as a model.

It is anticipated that the draft charter amendment will be delivered to the City Council on or before April 28th. After substantial public input and revision of the draft, the Council will then consider sending the issue to the public for a vote in November. It is anticipated that the Council's decision on sending the issue to a vote will occur by July 7th. (From the Tulsa City Council website) The proposal originated with City Councilor Roscoe Turner.

Background

Born out of the United States progressive reform movement at the turn of the 20th century, the council-manager system was designed to combat corruption and unethical activity in local government by promoting effective management within a transparent, responsive and accountable structure.

Concerned with the excesses of political machines operating in many of the country's cities and dissatisfied with the poor quality of municipal services, government reformers of this period sought to improve city government by removing politics from administration and by introducing values of efficiency and professionalism borrowed from the model of successful business organizations.

With its emphasis on professional training and accountability, the council-manager form of government was first formally adopted in 1912 by Sumter, South Carolina (following the appointment of the first manager in 1908 in Staunton, Virginia) and was subsequently adopted by a number of cities in the 1920's and 1930's. In 1914 Dayton, Ohio became the first large city to adopt the form. In the 1930's, the first counties to adopt the form were Arlington County, Virginia and Durham and Robeson Counties in North Carolina.

In 2007, more than 3,500 (49%) of the 7,171 U. S. cities and towns with populations of 2,500 residents or more operated under the council-manager form. This structure is also used by more than 370 counties. More than 92 million people in the U. S. live in communities that operate under this form.

Of the 244 U. S. cities with populations greater than 100,000 residents, 144 (58%) use the council-manager form of government. Cities using the council-manager form of government include:

- Broward County, Florida (pop. 1,623,000)
- Charlotte, North Carolina (pop. 540,000)
- Dallas, Texas (pop. 1,188,000)
- Fairfax County, Virginia (pop. 969,000)
- Las Vegas, Nevada (pop. 535,000)
- Mecklenburg County, North Carolina (pop. 695,000)
- Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (pop. 506,000)
- Phoenix, Arizona (pop. 1,321,000)
- San Antonio, Texas (pop. 1,144,000)
- San Jose, California (pop. 894,000)
- Virginia Beach, Virginia (pop. 425,000)
- Wichita, Kansas (pop. 344,000)

(Source: ICMA (the International City/County Management Association website) and “Trends in Forms of Government in Washington Cities” by Byron Katsuyama and Lynn Nordby, Municipal Research and Services Center of Washington)

Arguments in favor of the City Manager form of Government are:

- The city manager brings professionalism and efficiency to city government. A city manager is professionally trained in running a city. Mayor may not be a professional administrator. Council-manager government diffuses the power of special interests.
- Continuity is ensured because city employment is based on ability and productivity rather than political affiliation.
- The council-manager form of government generally creates a more cooperative system.
- The council-manager form provides clear lines of authority and responsibility.
- Having a city manager allows the city council to focus on the big picture items and major policy. It facilitates policy formulation and implementation. Policy making resides with the elected officials while oversight of the day-to-day operations of the community resides with the manager. Elected officials are free to devote time to policy planning and development.
- If the manager is not responsive to the governing body (council) it has the authority to terminate the manager at any time. Managers have no guaranteed term of office or tenure.
- Because decision on policy and the future of the community are made by the entire governing body rather than a single individual, council-manager governments more often engage and involve their residents in decision making.
- Council-manager governments are flexible enough to adapt to local needs and demands.

- “The mayor/council form of government replicates state and federal templates with the mayor as the local version of the governor or president. Like state and federal prototypes, the mayor-council setup can create a legislative-executive power struggle.”
(John Nalbandian)

Arguments in opposition to the City Manager form of government include:

- Mayor/Council form of government most closely parallels the American federal government with an elected legislature and a separately elected executive.
- A City Manager is able to exercise extraordinary authority for a non-elected official and would not be held directly responsible or answerable to the citizens for administrative/operational functions. Question of checks and balances on a city manager.
- A City Manager form of government lacks the strong political leadership that is more often present with the Strong Mayor form of government. More mayoral power in the strong mayor form of government can expedite action
- Tendency for manager to usurp policy making functions. The City Manager controls the information and may not keep the Council informed.
- Manager may be a stranger to the city with no loyalty to or understanding of local culture.
- City managers are transient professionals who will move to a better job opportunity.
- Since the Council hires the City Manager, the lack of diversity on the council may lead to bias in hiring.
- The residents of the city cannot fire a bad city manager; only the council can and that isn't always as easy as it sounds.
- City Managers are expensive

Arguments that could be made to support either position:

The City Manager form of government dilutes the power of the mayor. (Depends on how much power you think the mayor should have)

Unit Discussion Questions:

1. What do you see as the most compelling argument in favor of adding a City Manager to the City of Tulsa form of government?
2. What do you see as the most compelling argument in opposition to adding a City Manager to the City of Tulsa form of government?
3. What are the potential impacts to the City of Tulsa (positive or negative) of changing to a Council/City Manager/Weak Mayor form of government?
4. Are there any arguments, pro or con, that need to be added to our analysis?