

COUNCIL-MANAGER OR “STRONG MAYOR”

The Choice is Clear

Learn the Facts About Council-Manager Government

Everyone wants strong political leadership—neighborhoods, civic leaders, and the business community included. And today’s complex communities cannot succeed without the guidance of effective mayors who provide a sense of direction and contribute to the smooth functioning of a local government.

But communities also need thoughtful, dedicated council members, who work with the mayor to establish appropriate policy, and competent, professional managers to carry out those policies. None of the three are mutually exclusive; they can and do work together today in many of the country’s successful council-manager communities.

Today council-manager government is the fastest growing form of government in the United States; it frees up the elected body to establish policy, which is carried out by an appointed manager and an administrative staff. The manager is accountable to the entire council for the satisfactory implementation of council policy and the day-to-day administration of municipal affairs.

There are compelling reasons why many of the nation’s most successful cities and towns have adopted council-manager government rather than the “strong-mayor” form. Council-manager government encourages neighborhood input into the political process, diffuses the power of special interests, and eliminates partisan politics from municipal hiring, firing, and contracting decisions.

People who take time to learn the facts about council-manager government are likely to join the ranks of those who favor this popular form. Consider the following when deciding which form of government is best for your community:

Neighborhoods Strengthen Their Voice

The council-manager form encourages open communication between citizens and their government. Under this form, each member of the governing body has an equal voice in policy development and administrative oversight. This gives neighborhoods and diverse groups a greater opportunity to influence policy.

Under the “strong mayor” form, political power is concentrated in the mayor, which means that other members of the elected body relinquish at least some of their policy-making power and influence. This loss of decision-making power among council members can have a chilling effect on the voices of neighborhoods and city residents.

The Power of Special Interests is Diffused

Under the council-manager form of government, involvement of the entire elected body ensures a more balanced approach to community decision making, so that all interests can be expressed and heard—not just those that are well funded. Under the “strong mayor” form, however, it’s easier for special interests to use money and political power to influence a single elected official, rather than having to secure a majority of the city council’s support for their agenda.

Merit-Based Decision Making Vs. Partisan Politics

Under council-manager government, qualifications and performance—and not skillful navigation of the political election process—are the criteria the elected body uses to select a professional manager. The professional manager, in turn, uses his or her education, experience, and training to select department heads and other key managers to oversee the efficient delivery of services. In this way, council-manager government maintains critical checks and balances to ensure accountability at city hall.

Functioning much like a business organization's chief executive officer, the appointed professional manager administers the daily operations of the community. Through a professional staff, the manager ensures the effective provision of services and enforces the policies adopted by the elected body. He or she, in turn, uses merit as the leading criterion for making all hiring and personnel decisions.

Appointed local government managers have no guaranteed term of office or tenure. They can be dismissed by the council at any time, for any reason. As a result, they constantly must respond to citizens and be dedicated to the highest ideals of honesty, integrity, and excellence in the management and delivery of public services.

Under the “strong mayor” form of government, the day-to-day management of community operations shifts to the mayor, who often lacks the appropriate training, education, and experience in municipal administration and finance to oversee the delivery of essential community services. Also, under the “strong mayor” form, the temptation is strong to make decisions regarding the hiring and firing of key department head positions—such as the police chief, public works director, and finance director—based on the applicant’s political support rather than his or her professional qualifications.

Many Successful Cities Use Council-Manager Government

Council-manager government works! It balances diverse interests, responds quickly to challenges, and brings the community together to resolve even the toughest issues.

Currently, more than 92 million Americans live in council-manager communities, and the system continues to flourish. This form of government is used by thousands of small, medium, and large jurisdictions, including Charlotte, N.C.; Dallas, El Paso, Fort Worth, and San Antonio, Texas; Las Vegas, Nev.; Oklahoma City, Okla.; Phoenix and Tucson, Ariz.; Sacramento, San Jose, and Anaheim, Calif.; Wichita, Kans.; and Colorado Springs, Colo. Consider these examples:

History Argues for the Council-Manager Form of Government

Nearly 100 years old, the council-manager form of government has proven its adaptability; today it is the most popular choice of structure among U.S. communities with populations of 2,500 or greater.

Council-manager government, however, was not always an option. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there was widespread corruption, graft, and nepotism among U.S. cities. The stories of New York City's Tammany Hall and Kansas City's Pendergrast machine are only two examples of the misuse of local government power during this time.

By the early 20th century, reformers were looking for ways to return control of municipal government to citizens. Those reformers advocated the council-manager structure of government to eliminate the corruption found in many cities. With its emphasis on professional training and accountability, the council-manager form of government was first formally adopted in 1912 (following appointment of the first manager in 1908), and was subsequently adopted by a number of cities in the 1920s and 1930s.

It took years to diffuse the power entrenched in turn-of-the-century city political machines and special interests. Today, however, citizens throughout the U.S. have resumed control by adopting or retaining council-manager government in their community and enjoying representative democracy at its best.

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San Jose, California (pop. 894,000)

Long viewed as the "capital" of Silicon Valley, San Jose uses the council-manager form of government to successfully manage diverse interests in an environment of rapid residential and commercial growth.

Phoenix, Arizona (pop. 1,321,000)

In 1993, Phoenix captured the international Bartelsmann Award for being one of the two best managed cities in the world. Today, the city continues to maintain its reputation as a model U.S. community.

Boulder, Colorado (pop. 94,000)

One of the nation's most beautiful and environmentally conscious communities, the city of Boulder successfully balances environmental quality with a vibrant business climate.

Dayton, Ohio (166,000)

Dayton enhanced the process of involving citizens in community decision making by creating neighborhood-based priority boards to deal with key funding, service, and neighborhood issues.