

EVANSTON ROUNDTABLE

Letter to the editor: City manager vs. strong mayor

July 27th, 2022

I read your article entitled, “City Government 101: Pros and cons of council-manager government” by [Alex Harrison](#), and thought it was very good. I did want to pass a few additional insights along, based on my experience as a professional executive recruiter for local governments.

First, in the city manager form of government, the city manager takes their direction from the elected body. That works very well when the members of the body have common goals and interests.

When the elected officials are split, it creates a problem, because it is hard for the manager to get direction. Further, if the manager executes the policy of the majority and the majority shifts, they are often out of a job. If a city has a great manager, that is not an issue. They find ways to bring the council together on issues, and to heal splits.

Unfortunately, there are not enough great city managers to do that for every city that needs help. Even with a great city manager, implementation of policy can be delayed if the body does not come to consensus. As we all know, not everyone elected to office seeks solutions or is willing to compromise for the greater good.

Second, the benefit of the strong mayor form of government is someone is elected mayor who, ideally, has a vision and can move forward implementing that vision. They need less buy-in from the other elected officials and can make things happen.

The negative is not every elected official is a visionary (in fact, most are not), and without one, a city can wallow in mediocrity until the next election.

West Palm Beach, Fla., is a prime example. In the early 1990s, it changed from the city manager form to the strong mayor form. Nancy Graham was elected mayor and was a dynamo. She made things happen. After two terms, she retired and was replaced by a very nice gentleman who had trouble staying awake in meetings, and very little happened.

At the next election, he was replaced by a career politician who was termed out in the state legislature and elected mayor. She had never been a manager, so actually running a government was foreign to her, and very little was accomplished. The result was the city had great momentum in the 1990s and completely missed the opportunity to take advantage of the economic spurt that occurred from about 2000 until the great recession. I might add, it has been

20+ years since Ms. Graham departed and no one since has come close to accomplishing what she did.

The bottom line is good people will make any system, even a poor one, work. Poorly qualified people (in terms of abilities, aptitude or attitude) will never make even the best system work. In local government, based on my observation, the city manager system generally is better than the strong mayor. Yes, it has weaknesses, but there is much less chance of it going awry.

One final note is the commission form was also mentioned in the article, and it was once a dominant form. There is a reason it is rarely used today. It generally results in widespread inconsistencies within a government (each elected official has his/her own fiefdom) and lack of accountability. It also frequently results in legal issues. A government really needs someone who can be held accountable either by the voters as in the case of a mayor, or by their elected supervisors in the case of a city manager.

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