

The Council-Manager Form of Government: Answers to Your Questions

Q: What is the council-manager form of government, which is used in so many cities, towns, and counties?

A: The council-manager form is the system of local government that combines the strong *political leadership* of elected officials in the form of a governing body, with the strong *managerial experience* of an appointed local government manager. The governing body, commonly known as the *council*, may also be referred to as the *commission* or the *board*. The council-manager form establishes a representative system where all power is concentrated in the elected council and where the council hires a professionally trained manager to oversee the delivery of public services.

Q: Is it a responsive form of government?

A: In council-manager government, the *mayor* or *chairperson of the governing body* and *council members* are the leaders and policy makers elected to represent the community and to concentrate on policy issues that are responsive to citizens' needs and wishes. The *manager* is appointed by the governing body to carry out policy and ensure that the entire community is being served. If the manager is not responsive to the governing body's wishes, the governing body has the authority to terminate the manager at any time. In that sense, a manager's responsiveness is tested daily.

Q: Are all council-manager governments structured the same way?

A: No. One of the most attractive features is that the council-manager form is adaptable to local conditions and preferences. For example, some communities have councils that are elected at large while other councils are elected by district or by a combination of an at-large and by-district structure. In some local governments the mayor or chairperson is elected at large by the voters; others are elected by their colleagues on the governing body.

Q: What is the council's function?

A: The council is the legislative body; its members are the community's decision makers. Power is centralized in the elected council, which approves the budget and determines the tax rate, for example. The council also focuses on the community's goals, major projects, and such long-term considerations as community growth, land use development, capital improvement plans, capital financing, and strategic planning. The council hires a professional manager to carry out the administrative responsibilities and supervises the manager's performance.

Q: Where does the mayor or chairperson of the governing body fit in?

A: Mayors or chairpersons in council-manager communities are key political leaders and policy developers and their duties, responsibilities, and authorities depend on the organization's charter. In council-manager communities, typically the mayor or chairperson presides at council meetings, serves as a spokesperson for the community, facilitates communication and understanding between elected and appointed officials, assists the council in setting goals and advocating policy decisions, and serves as a promoter and defender of the community. In addition, the mayor or chairperson serves as a key representative in intergovernmental relations. The mayor or chairperson, council, and manager constitute a policy-development and management team.

Q: What is the manager's function?

A: The manager is hired to serve the council and the community and to bring to the local government the benefits of training and experience in administering local government projects and programs on behalf of the governing body. The manager prepares a budget for the council's consideration; recruits, hires, and supervises the government's staff; serves as the council's chief adviser; and carries out the council's policies. Council members and citizens count on the manager to provide complete and objective information, the pros and cons of alternatives, and long-term consequences.

Q: What is the cost to the local government of appointing a professional manager?

A: Local governments have found that overall costs actually have been reduced with competent management. Savings come in the form of reduced operating costs, increased efficiency and productivity, improved revenue collection, or effective use of technology.

Q: Does the manager participate in policy determination?

A: The manager makes policy recommendations to the council, but the council may or may not adopt them and may modify the recommendations. The manager is bound by whatever action the council takes.

Q: Is this form of government used only in certain kinds of cities?

A: No. In fact, it is not restricted to cities. It is used by towns and counties too. More than 3,400 cities operate under this form, and more than 371 counties operate under the council-administrator form. They vary greatly in size and characteristics.

Q: How many Americans live in communities that operate under council-manager government?

A: More than 89 million.

Q: Is the form popular in large communities?

A: Yes. Out of 237 cities with greater than 100,000 residents, 141 use this form of government. Some examples are Charlotte, North Carolina; Dallas, Texas; Las Vegas, Nevada; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Phoenix, Arizona; San Antonio, Texas; San Diego and San Jose, California; Virginia Beach, Virginia; and Wichita, Kansas. Large counties that use the structure include: Broward County, Florida; Clark County, Nevada; Fairfax County, Virginia; Hamilton County, Ohio; Mecklenburg County, North Carolina; and Santa Clara County, California.

Q: How much citizen participation is possible under council-manager government?

A: Successful examples of citizen participation in the local government service delivery decision-making process are widespread among professionally managed communities. Because professional local government management offers government of the people, by the people, and for the people, it sets the stage for citizen activism by encouraging open communication between citizens and their government. Examples range from visioning, in which citizens play a major role in determining the future of their community, to neighborhood service delivery, which involves residents through the development of citizen/government partnerships, to community-oriented local government services.

Because political power is concentrated in the entire governing body rather than one elected official, more citizens have an opportunity to be elected to a position in which they have significant influence over the future of their community.

Q: What is the history of the council-manager form?

A: Born out of the progressive reform movement at the beginning of the 20th century, the council-manager system of local government is one of the few original American contributions to political theory. In 1908, Staunton, Virginia, instituted the first position legally defining, by ordinance, the broad authority and responsibility associated with today's professional local government manager. Sumter, South Carolina, was the first city to adopt a charter incorporating the basic principles of council-manager government in 1912. Westmount, Quebec, introduced the form to Canada in 1913. The first large city to adopt the plan was Dayton, Ohio, in 1914. The first counties to adopt it in the 1930s were Arlington County, Virginia, and Durham County and Robeson County, North Carolina.

Since its establishment, the council-manager form has become the most popular form of government in the United States in communities with populations of 5,000 or greater. The form also is popular in Canada, Australia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Honduras, Chile, and Brazil. For more than 94 years, council-manager government has responded to the changing needs of citizens and their communities.

Q: How can a community adopt this form of government?

A: Methods vary, but most communities can adopt council-manager government through a charter, a local ordinance, or a state enabling law. In many cases, adoption must be by vote of the local governing body. For information on how your community can adopt council-manager government, contact your state municipal league or association of counties. You can find the addresses of these organizations in ICMA's *Municipal Year Book* at your local library, or on the Internet.

Q: How is the manager selected?

A: The vacancy usually is announced in the *ICMA Newsletter*, and managers in other communities are invited to apply if they are interested. Managers, assistants, and others apply directly to the council, which reviews the applications and interviews qualified candidates. ICMA makes no recommendations regarding candidates. Further information is available in the handbook *Recruitment Guidelines for Selecting a Local Government Administrator*, published by ICMA and available at <http://jobs.icma.org>.

Q: Does the manager have to be a local resident at the time the appointment is made?

A: No. Local residence should not be required of applicants at the time the appointment is made. Managers are professionals who might serve several communities during their careers, bringing extensive experience coordinating public services and applying management techniques to a community.

Q: What salary does the manager receive?

A: Earnings of managers depend on their educational background and experience, the size and complexity of the local governments employing them, and the economic conditions of the regions where communities are located. The council sets the manager's salary. Detailed information on salaries is compiled annually by ICMA and is available on request.

Q: Can the manager be fired?

A: Managers serve at the pleasure of the council or governing body. They can be fired by a majority of the council, consistent with local laws, ordinances, or employment agreements they may have with the council. Control is always in the hands of the elected representatives of the people.

Q: Where do managers get their experience?

A: Nearly 73 percent of managers surveyed by ICMA have a master's or a professional degree. Respondents indicated that they had spent an average of 17 years in the local government management profession.

Q: Do managers participate in local politics?

A: All managers who belong to ICMA are bound by its Code of Ethics, which states that every member of the Association shall refrain from all political activities that undermine public confidence in professional administrators and refrain from participation in the election of members of the employing legislative body.

Q: What else does ICMA's Code of Ethics cover?

A: The Code specifies 12 ethical principles of personal and professional conduct, including dedication to the cause of good government. ICMA members believe in the effectiveness of representative democracy and the value of government services provided equitably to residents within a community. ICMA members also are committed to standards of honesty and integrity more vigorous than those required by the law. Contact ICMA for a copy of the Code of Ethics or go to <http://icma.org/ethics>.

Q: What is ICMA?

A: In 1914, a group of appointed managers formed a professional association, eventually known as the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), to share their expertise and experiences in local government management.

Since that time, ICMA has been the professional and educational organization for administrators and assistant administrators serving cities, towns, counties, other local governments, and regional entities around the world. ICMA's membership also includes directors of state associations of local governments, other local government employees, academics, and concerned citizens who share the goal of improving local government. The purpose of ICMA is to create excellence in local governance by developing and fostering professional local government management worldwide. To that end, the Association provides technical assistance and publications for local government professionals to help them improve their skills and increase their knowledge. ICMA also serves as a clearinghouse for the collection, analysis, and dissemination of information and data about local government.

For further information on items referenced in this brochure, visit ICMA's form-of-government Web site at <http://icma.org/formofgovt> or see the contact information listed on the back panel of this brochure.

Q: Is there another organization that supports council-manager government?

A: Yes, the National Civic League is a nonpartisan citizens organization founded in 1895. Its purpose is to serve as a clearinghouse for information on methods of improving state and local government; to encourage citizen participation in state and local government; and to provide guides, model charters, and laws on specific subjects. The League's *Model City Charter*, now in its seventh edition, has endorsed council-manager government since 1915.

For further information:

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