

Council-Manager Form of Government

This information furnished by the ICMA

Q: What is the council-manager form, which is used in so many local governments?

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 council or other governing body, with the strong managerial experience of an appointed local government manager. The 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, council members are the leaders and policy makers elected to represent various segments of the community and to concentrate on policy issues that are responsive to citizens' needs and wishes. The manager is appointed by council to carry out policy and ensure that the entire community is being served. If the manager is not responsive to the council's wishes, the council has authority to terminate the manager at any time. In that sense, a manager's responsiveness is tested daily.

Q: What is the council's function?

A: The council is the legislative body and 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: What is the manager's function?

A: The manager is hired to serve the council and the community and 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, pros and cons of alternatives, and long-term consequences.

Q: When did the City of Grant, Michigan, adopt this form of government?

A: The City adopted the council-manager form with the adoption of its current Charter in 1971.

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: Where does the mayor fit in?

A: Mayors in council-manager communities (or chairpersons in counties) are key political leaders and policy developers. In the case of the council, the mayor is responsible for soliciting citizen views in forming these policies and interpreting them to the public. The mayor 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 serves as a key representative in intergovernmental relations. The mayor, council, and manager constitute a policy-development and management team.

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

A: No. One of its 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. Some local governments have mayors who are elected by the voters at large; others are elected by their colleagues on the council.

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 counties too. Currently, 3,625 cities operate under this form. Additionally, 529 counties indicate that they operate under the county administrator form. They vary greatly in size and characteristics, including independent cities, center cities, suburbs, and counties.

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

A: More than 75.5 million.

Q: Is the form popular in large communities?

A: Yes. Out of 199 cities with greater than 100,000 citizens, 112 use this form of government. Some examples are Phoenix; San Diego; Dallas; Cincinnati; San Antonio; Kansas City, Missouri; and Mecklenburg County, North Carolina.

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 U.S. 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 turn-of-the-century progressive reform movement, 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, and Honduras, Chile, and Brazil. For more than 85 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 The Municipal Year Book at your local library.

Q: How is the manager selected?

A: The vacancy usually is announced in the ICMA Newsletter, and managers, assistants, and others who are interested apply directly to the council. The council conducts a search for candidates, often by inviting managers in other communities to apply if they are interested. ICMA makes no recommendations regarding candidates. Further information is available in the handbook Recruitment Guidelines for Selecting a Local Government Administrator, published by ICMA.

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 in the appointment of a manager. Managers are professionals who might serve several communities during their careers, bringing extensive experience coordinating public services and applying management techniques to a community. The City of Ypsilanti does require city residency following appointment to the position.

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 prior experience?

A: Nearly 73 percent of managers surveyed by ICMA have a master's or professional degree. Respondents indicated that they had spent an average of 10 years as a local government manager.

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 participation in the election of the members of the employing legislative body, and from all partisan political activities which would impair performance as a professional administrator."

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 citizens 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.

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 organization for appointed chief management executives in local government. The purposes of ICMA are to enhance the quality of local government through professional management and to support and assist professional local government administrators internationally. 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, contact ICMA's Office of Member Services, 202/962-3680.

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

A: Yes, the National Civic League is a nonpartisan citizens organization founded in 1894. 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.