

Beware the Lure of The “Strong” Mayor

Americans love the quick fix. We want to take a pill and lose 20 pounds. We would like to buy one lottery ticket and become millionaires overnight. And we would like to change city hall into an organization that instantly can reduce crime, create jobs, and enable us to live happily ever after.

Unfortunately, life is not that simple. No magic diet pill can take off 20 pounds. Only one lottery ticket in 16 zillion ever wins. And switching to the strong mayor system of government will not solve all of our local governments' problems. In fact, it may make things worse.

Form-of-Government Debate

Rob Gurwitt's article in the July 1993 issue of *Governing* magazine, entitled "The Lure of the Strong Mayor," examines some of the discussions taking place on the subject of U.S. local government structure. Gurwitt suggests that "boosting the powers of the mayor" through a change to the strong mayor system can help larger communities to deal more effectively with their complex problems. He writes:

It may not be possible to end poverty, house the homeless, disband gangs, replace corroding streets, find the money to revive a withering economy, or put an end to civic squabbling. But one thing citizens clearly can do is refashion local government with the hope that someone—a mayor, an elected county executive—someone—can assemble the political authority to grapple better with those problems.

.....
There Are

.....
Two Sides

.....
To the

.....
Debate

.....
Terrell Blodgett

What is the "strong mayor" form of government that proponents feel gives a local government the political leadership necessary to make things happen? Under this type of charter, the mayor has the authority to hire and fire department heads, prepare the budget for council consideration, administer it after adoption, and veto acts of the council, which can override that veto only by an extraordinary majority. That is concentrating a tremendous amount of power in one person! And it can go even further. In the consolidated city/county of Denver, Colorado, the mayor can:

- Award any contract up to \$500,000 without reference to the city council.
- Remit any fines or penalties levied under any ordinance passed by the city council. The only requirement is that the mayor must notify the council of the remittance and the rationale behind it.
- Submit an annual budget to the city council, in which not one line item can be changed without a two-thirds vote of the council.
- Appoint the heads of all administrative departments (some 50 in number), the county judges, and all boards and commissions under his or her jurisdiction. No city council advice or confirmation is provided for any of these appointments.

Gurwitt argues that to exercise political leadership, a mayor has to have administrative authority similar to that described above. In contrast to the council-manager form of government, the strong mayor form relies on a single, powerful leader who often forges coalitions by exchanging benefits for support and uses his or her power to gain leverage over opponents.

This approach has built-in limitations. There are too many actors whom a mayor can not control and too little power and too few resources to compel or buy support predictably. Leadership that uses

A number of highly

regarded American

mayors have

demonstrated that

mayors can

achieve political

clout without being

granted

administrative

responsibility.

power to forge coalitions is not necessarily responsive, particularly to those outside the ruling coalition.

On the contrary, a number of highly regarded American mayors have demonstrated that mayors can achieve political clout *without* being granted administrative responsibility. Two outstanding examples from large council-manager communities come immediately to mind: former San Antonio Mayor Henry Cisneros, who possessed the strong leadership skills necessary to become Secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development; and former Charlotte Mayor Harvey Gantt, who continues to reside in that city and runs his own architectural firm.

Two Case Histories

When Cisneros took office as mayor of San Antonio in 1981, he inherited a sleepy, lower-income city with major problems in its educational system. Cisneros envisioned San Antonio as an international economic and tourist attraction, however, and he worked tirelessly to achieve that dream.

Although he had no responsibility over the city's public or higher educational system (in Texas, school boards are elected separately and are responsible for their own budgets), Cisneros recognized that education was the key to the realization of his vision. He unceasingly lobbied the University of Texas System and the State College Coordinating Board to locate an engineering school at the University of Texas at San Antonio, and he pushed the Texas legislature for more money for public education. He then went on the road to sell San Antonio as a biomedical headquarters.

His efforts to attract tourism also succeeded: San Antonio became only the fourth site in the country to boast a Sea World. His mayorship culminated in a drive to build the domed sports stadium that opened this summer to capacity crowds for the U.S. Summer Olympic Festival.

Cisneros also possessed the leadership skills to build consensus among highly divergent city factions. He used a series of bond elections and other strategies to bring together the city's business community and Hispanic neighborhoods.

Strong leaders such as Henry Cisneros realize that they are most effective when they are supported by an effective professional manager. Cisneros has said that San Antonio's greatest successes "can be attributed directly to our council-manager form of government, characterized by top-flight professionals with a corruption-free, fiscally sound administration."

Harvey Gantt's record in Charlotte as the city's mayor from 1983 to 1987 is no less impressive. He was instru-

mental in the construction of the 24,000-seat Charlotte Coliseum and helped the team owner win an NBA franchise for the new facility. He also spearheaded the construction of a performing arts center in downtown Charlotte in partnership with Nations-Bank's construction of its new 60-story corporate headquarters.

Through the city's neighborhood, small area, and district land planning processes, Gantt provided citizens with a voice; he also led the creation of a public-private housing partnership that leveraged private-sector funds to increase Charlotte's supply of affordable housing and promote home ownership.

Gantt is clear about his views on the different forms of government:

The council-manager form of government is absolutely the best form... particularly because it leaves the mayor and council free to focus on the big policy issues. The day-to-day operations of the city do not distract the mayor from this focus; they are left to a professional city manager and professional staff. Therefore, the council-manager form is a better and cleaner form because roles are clearly defined.

Other Erroneous Assumptions

Rob Gurwitt makes a second assumption, namely, that the council-manager form of government is outdated because it can not respond to the new demands of highly diverse communities. In speaking with citizens in Dallas, Texas, however, a different story emerges—that what ethnic minorities really want is more participation in the process, *not* politics as usual. Gurwitt assumes that political clout and responsiveness can and should come from only one individual, rather than from the entire city council or county commission.

Reformers always intended that the council-manager form would

strengthen the quality and responsiveness of service delivery and would address basic citizen needs. The council-manager form is not less responsive; indeed, the strongest examples of citizen participation can be found in council-manager communities. The city of Dayton, for example, was the first large city to adopt the council-manager form, and it remains a strong advocate of professional local government management. For years, Dayton's neighborhood boards have been cited as models of citizen involvement. Similarly, the city of Cincinnati has a long, distinguished history of neighborhood activism.

And remember the David and Goliath story about how the city of Alexandria, Virginia, went up against Virginia Governor Doug Wilder and Washington Redskins owner Jack Kent Cooke? The city had other plans for the land that Cooke and the governor wanted to use for a football stadium. Mayor Pat Ticer successfully worked with the city staff and citizens to fight the plan to move the stadium to Alexandria.

Gurwitt goes on to suggest that the council-manager form means "leaderless" government, that "the more hands on the tiller, the harder it is to steer." He discusses the perceived lack of tools that a mayor in a council-manager community possesses to bring people together toward a common purpose—particularly people of widely diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Gurwitt argues that council-manager mayors have only "facilitative" leadership to fall back on, and that this type of leadership is insufficient to deal with today's heterogeneous communities.

But do we really want a mayor's leadership tools to comprise trading votes for services? Political leadership should not be confused with reactive, demand-responsive leadership. Too often, the political leadership in strong mayor governments encourages conflict among elected officials, which, in

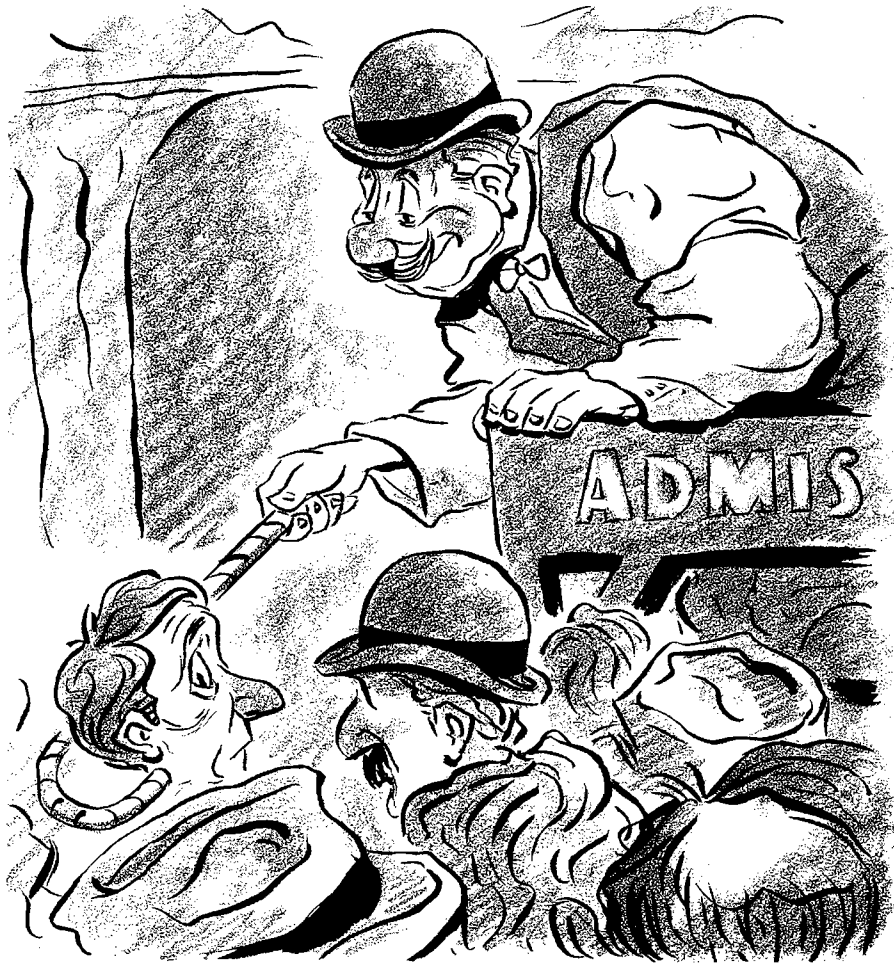
turn, produces political gridlock and a reliance on short-term coalition building. As a result, officials in mayor-council cities are more likely to avoid making hard choices. An article recently published in the *Toledo Blade*, for example, assesses the current condition of Rochester, New York:

[S]ince Rochester adopted the strong mayor form of government in the mid-1980s, council allocated to itself a growing amount of resources to place a check on the power of the mayor. That figure has loomed as high as \$500,000, or about .002 percent of its annual budget.

The council-manager form, on the other hand, uniquely blends political and professional leadership. Although political supremacy of the mayor and council are assured, the elected officials empower the manager with the independence needed to make sound recommendations to council, and to manage the local government organization using the highest professional standards.

In closing, Gurwitt implies that communities can switch to a strong mayor form of government and still retain the level of professional management that citizens have come to expect in council-manager cities. One of the big differences in the two forms, however, is the fact that in council-manager communities, the manager is appointed by and responsible to the entire governing body. Under the strong mayor form, any chief administrative officer who may be appointed responds solely to the mayor. The council has little input in that individual's selection or supervision. Although some CAOs may have served previously as managers in council-manager communities, the average tenure of a CAO in a strong mayor city is much shorter in comparison and may undermine the city's continuity.

To be sure, council-manager communities also experience turnover.



But in most cases, these communities hire experienced managers to replace experienced managers. Marvin Andrews, for example, retired from Phoenix, Arizona, after serving as the city's manager for 14 years. Rich Helwig recently finished his ninth year as Dayton's city manager. And in Charlotte, North Carolina, Wendell White has served an even dozen years in that capacity. This kind of continuity is less likely to occur in strong mayor-council communities, where a single individual frequently chooses a CAO based on political loyalties rather than professional management abilities.

Professional managers not only have the capacity to serve different types of governments; they also attract other top executives to administer their governments' functions and activities. Today, the complexity of

service delivery calls for individuals with superb organizational skills, a good sense of strategic management, and the ability to communicate effectively with disparate city factions—not inexperienced political loyalists.

In a 1992 issue of *Public Administration Review*, author Irene Rubin examined the adoption of new and innovative budget techniques in six major U.S. cities over the past 20 years. Of the six cities—Dayton, Phoenix, Rochester, Tampa, Boston, and St. Louis—the more politically reformed were likelier to adopt budget reforms quickly and were more receptive to trying new approaches. The less reformed cities, on the other hand, incorporated budget reforms that “enhanced central control over departmental operations.” For the purpose of her article, Rubin defined politically reformed communi-

ties as those that operated under the council-manager form, held at-large council elections, and had a weak history of employee patronage.

It is no accident that for the past two years, most winners of the National Civic League's All-American Cities competition have been council-manager communities. This year, seven of the 10 honorees were council-manager communities. It also is worth noting that of *Financial World's* nine best-managed communities, three of the top five, including Dallas at No. 1 and Phoenix at No. 2, operate under the council-manager form.

A Closer Look at Dallas

Because Gurwitt showcased Dallas as a long-time council-manager city that has considered a change in its form of government, it seems appropriate to take a closer look at that city's political situation. Lori Palmer, a former Dallas councilmember who represented an inner-city district, describes the impact such change would have on the city:

If a strong mayor form of government were instituted, the real loser would be all 14 of Dallas's councilmembers. First, councilmembers necessarily would lose their power and see it transferred to the mayor. Second, councilmembers would lose their access to the city administrators and department heads, who would be responsible and beholden only to the mayor, who would have the sole authority to hire and fire them.

The bottom line [would be] that Dallas's councilmembers, by having to give up both power and staff access, would become less rather than more effective in representing and serving their diverse constituencies. In the end, the citizens would be the final losers.

In many council-manager communities, Hispanic and African American activists have realized that for the

first time they are being represented on the council in numbers that reflect their communities' diversity. As Gurwitt reported in his article, "The talk of moving to a strong mayor looks a lot like a ploy by the Old Guard to shift power away from the newly diverse council."

Al Lipscomb is an African American businessman and long-time civil rights leader who also was, until June 1993, mayor pro-tem of the Dallas city council. Both he and Lori Palmer "retired" from the Dallas council this spring after serving the maximum number of consecutive terms allowed by the city charter. Lipscomb opposes changing the Dallas form of government and observed that "every time minorities get into the loop, the rules are changed under some pretext or

through some slick scheme."

At one time, Dallas's current mayor pro-tem, Domingo Garcia, thought he could support a move toward a strong-mayor government. Today, however, he states that "North Dallas has the economic and political clout to continue to elect a mayor, and under a strong mayor system, we would be left out. We finally are getting on the city council, and I want to increase the power and authority of the council, not decrease it as [a move to] a strong-mayor system would do."

Some Concluding Thoughts

To summarize, then, the stressful challenges facing today's urban communities definitely call for strong political leadership. As National Civic League President John Parr says,

however, "Looking for political leadership does not need to mean getting rid of the council-manager plan or decreasing the role of the professional manager. This is not only a time of new partnerships across old political and geographical boundaries, but a time of new partnerships within local governments as well."

But what of the challenge of providing leadership within a metropolitan or regional framework in which units of government may number in the hundreds and special districts also abound? In such situations as these, is it not true that communities need a really strong mayor, who not only has a vision and can build consensus but who also has the authority to fix things, to make and enforce decisions, and to "twist tails" if necessary?

In his new book *Citistates*, Neal

J.O.B.

The Job Opportunities Bulletin
for Minorities and Women
in Local Government

Local Government Job Opportunities

■ **Subscribe** to the biweekly bulletin that gives you the latest job information and news for only \$12 a year.

■ **Advertise** to reach the largest pool of minority and women local government decision makers and job seekers.



Effective and Fast — Delivered via first class on a nationwide basis!

J.O.B. is a service of the International City/County Management Association and 22 other local government public interest groups.

J.O.B., ICMA, 777 North Capitol St. N.E., Suite 500,
Washington, DC 20002-4201
Phone: 202/962-3662 Fax: 202/962-3500



Peirce notes that "in some cities, there's still a nostalgia for the brand of decisive leadership exerted by a few exalted power brokers." He cites the work of banker Richard King Mellon and Mayor David Lawrence in Pittsburgh, who together spearheaded a renaissance in that city in the 1940s. Peirce notes that:

Today, the Mellon-Lawrence Act can be seen as heavily elitist, a relic of the time when small power cliques controlled each American city and brooked little opposition. The old titans, the small bunch of senior white males that met in exclusive clubs to make decisions that swayed cities' whole futures, are a virtually extinct species. Power in American communities seems to have been atomized by the rise of fresh power groups: upstart industries and businesses, powerful developers, ethnic alliances, organized blacks and Hispanics and Asians, environmental and women's and social service groups, and many more.

Today's city or citistate leadership can not be one of power but rather one of consensus building and facilitation. Gurwitt fittingly quotes Dr. James Svava of North Carolina State University, who has studied the roles of mayors in both forms of government extensively over the past decade. Svava argues that the pressures of civic diversity will produce facilitative mayors who "lead by empowering others—in particular the council and the manager—rather than seeing power for himself or herself."

Under the council-manager form, the effective mayor is a leader who not only contributes to the smooth functioning of government but also provides a general sense of direction. These individuals enhance the influence of elected officials by unifying the council, filling the policy vacuum that can exist on the council, and guiding policy toward goals that meet the needs of the community.

They are actively involved in monitoring and adjusting relations within local government to maintain balance, cooperation, and high standards. Contrary to the view of some that strong mayors are harmful to the manager, effective mayors enhance the performance both of the manager and of the council.

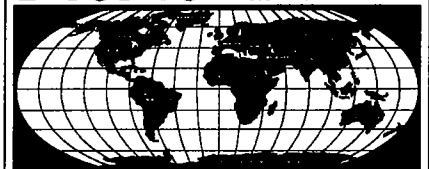
In the final analysis, what really is needed in today's urban communities are Strong mayors, Strong councils, and Strong managers. No two of the three concepts are mutually exclusive; they can and do work together today in many of the country's successful council-manager local governments. **PM**

Terrell Blodgett is Mike Hogg Professor in Urban Management, Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, the University of Texas at Austin.

DON'T MISS IT!

**THE 1994 INTERNATIONAL
DISASTER MANAGEMENT
CONFERENCE
PHONE 407.281.7396 or
800.766.6335
FAX 407.281.4407**

DISASTER '94



**ORLANDO, FLORIDA
FEBRUARY 24 - 27, 1994**