

Lansing and East Lansing operate city governments in fundamentally different ways. In Lansing, the directly elected mayor is the city's chief executive. In East Lansing, an appointed city manager directs administration under the oversight of an elected City Council. Each system has its advocates, and critics. Which way is best in ...

Running city hall

Professional manager is best-equipped

Local governments are struggling to deal with declining resources and rising costs. During the course of many of the discussions about these issues, the ongoing debate over form of government has been thrust front and center as an option for addressing the particular needs of several Michigan communities.

In Detroit, for example, voters have impaneled a city charter review commission to examine, among other things, whether to maintain the city's current strong-mayor system or to consider adopting the council-manager form of government.

Under the council-manager form of government, city council members and often the mayor are elected directly by the voters. If not directly elected, the mayor is selected by and from among the council. Together, these individuals hire a professionally trained, experienced city manager to oversee the day-to-day management activities of the city.

As in the private sector model, the city manager is the chief executive officer of the city and reports directly to the entire governing body, which serves as a policy-making board of directors.

Under the strong-mayor form, a popularly elected mayor becomes the chief executive officer, and that individual personally chooses key administration officials. This would all be well and good if the mayor consistently selected qualified and proven administrators to direct essential city operations. Too often, however, we watch as the chief elected official has filled key management positions with political allies and associates who often bring only a blind political loyalty to the arduous task of running a city.

When the city of Flint emerged from Act 72 emergency financial management in 2004, for example, the mayor at the time appointed his campaign manager in the position of city administrator. That person had neither the management training, experience, nor educational background required to qualify for the single most important position in any unit of local government.

The strong-mayor form also encourages well-documented contention between the mayor and the city council, as under this form, the chief elected official has veto authority over budgetary matters and council actions.

Now, lest I risk alienating some of my mayoral acquaintances, this is not to say that all mayors are ineffective administrators. It is highly unlikely, however, that they were elected for their education and management skills, or for their experience in administering budgets, managing people, and assessing organizational service-delivery efficiencies. A mayor's effectiveness generally depends upon the ability of the people working in the mayor's office to carry out those functions, and more



Mayor/CEOs have direct link to voters

Any statement claiming a particular city has the best model for representing its citizens would be naive.

The governance of each community (township, village or city) is determined by its charter. A charter must conform to the laws provided for within the U.S. Constitution and the state of Michigan. Each municipality within this state has its own modified form of governance.

It becomes difficult to determine if a strong mayoral form of government is more effective or appropriate than a city manager-council format.

What I can share with you is, a city with a strong mayor is not necessarily void of traditionally trained public administrators. In the Executive Department here in Kentwood, I have a well-educated and experienced deputy administrator to assist in vetting policy and sorting out daily routine items. All of the city's department heads are degreed within their specialties, as well.

What I feel the full-time mayor/CEO brings to this environment is an ability to bolt the practice of public administration to the political climate of the community early in the process of design, delivery of service and policy. When a mayor is not a part of policy from its inception, the city manager becomes more politically entrenched, as the manager has to "sell" the policy to the council.

This process can be counterproductive, as time can be spent crafting policy that substantially deviates from the political will of the community. A mayor is typically more vested in the community as a resident (a manager may or may not reside in the community he serves) and is directly employed by his constituents.

Managers serve at the will of the council and, as an employee of the council, must submit to the majority will of this body.

It is important to understand that as the author of these comments and holder of a full-time mayor position I, (along with the past two mayors here) have had serious concerns regarding who will one day fill this leadership role.

Our citizens have had several opportunities to vote on a new charter that would have installed a manager form of government. On both occasions, the proposed charter was overwhelming defeated.

I do fear that, one day in the future, someone with ample resources and a narrow agenda (the one-trick pony) may be successful in selling himself into this very complex environment. The choice of "who" will be the next leader in this city is up to the voters. If they get it wrong, the cost to a well-run community can be extraordinary.

RICHARD L. ROOT

is mayor of Kentwood, a city of approximately 48,000 residents located just south of Grand Rapids.

often than not, political appointees (rather than trained management professionals) fail to get it right.

When compared with strong-mayor cities, those that use the council-manager form are more likely to demonstrate greater efficiencies, stronger financial administration and reporting, and healthier organizational development. In my professional opinion, the communities in Michigan (and elsewhere) that operate under this form are more likely not only to survive the current economic crisis, but to emerge stronger and more efficient than those that do not.

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Talk about it

This week's question:

Do you think Greater Lansing would benefit if Lansing had the city manager form of government?

Manager switch could be good

A city manager may provide a more stable sense of management and organizational leadership rather than simply political skill; but it would depend on how the manager is selected or hired. If a city council that is also elected decides, then politics still inevitably play a role. Mayors are politicians first, maybe good managers or leaders as well; a city manager would simply be fulfilling the management role. Could be a good move for Lansing.

— Nancy Davis, East Lansing

Manager would be less political

The town I grew up in (Tecumseh) had a city manager — and a mayor. I think it's a smart idea. The mayor was selected by the city council from among their own members and served as a sort of figurehead who presided at council meetings. The city manager form of government tends to be less politicized and also permits recruitment of management talent from an unlimited geographic field.

— John Hayden, Mason

City benefits from mayor

I support the current strong mayor system we have. Our city council and mayor hold valuable checks and balances on each other, and I think the



Davis



Hayden



Kavanagh



Rose



Jackson



Waun



Gardin



Pallottini



Krug



Sanger

city benefits. If we had a council, weak mayor, plus a city manager ... well, too many cooks spoil the broth. Three entities pulling in three directions would bring us to a standstill.

— Michael Kavanagh, Lansing

Cost is first factor to weigh

If it costs more to operate this arrangement, then, at this point, I couldn't agree with it. If it doesn't cost more, then I would have to know what the advantages would be prior to approving it.

— Donna Rose, East Lansing

Large enough for a mayor

It would depend upon the type of city manager government. If the city council would have legislative and executive powers, then no. The council would become larger and full-time, which would increase cost and bureaucracy. A strong city

manager form is best suited for small communities. Lansing is large enough to have an elected mayor chief executive and a unicameral city council to provide checks and balances, as we have now.

— James Jackson, Lansing

Let managers manage

Lansing would be better off if it had a council-manager form of city government. Mayors are political figures who vary in their ability as managers and to work with city commissions. City managers would be service-minded career administrators who would maintain stable governments to advance the public good.

— Jim Waun, East Lansing

Change needs a lot of thought

I would need more information on this type of government. I would also like the pros and cons

with what we currently have. I want a local government that represents all the citizens and wouldn't support one that was selective. I would want to make sure that we wouldn't elevate an individual to have too much power. This would have to be a well thought out decision for me.

— Diane Gardin, Lansing

Managers not accountable

No, with a city manager there is less accountability and little input from its citizens. There are already too many layers of bureaucrats, with too little accountability. A good balance of power between the mayor and council makes for a stronger, more effective form of government.

— June Pallottini, Leslie

Switch would be beneficial

I feel that a professional city manager is a good choice for the city of Lansing as it seems that the job is just a stepping stone to other opportunities.

— Tom Krug, Holt

One fewer politician

We would benefit from almost any form of government that got us rid of our mayor. One fewer politician on the payroll.

— Joe Sanger, Lansing

"Talk about it" features comments from the LSI Community Panel. Their views appear weekly. See more comments online at www.lsj.com.