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A SHORT HISTORY OF THE STRONG MAYOR IN CALIFORNIA

Written by *JT Long*

September 3, 2009

As Sacramentans consider whether to modify the city charter on June 8, 2010 to give Mayor Kevin Johnson and all successive mayors in the River City the power of a CEO to hire and fire and propose a budget, PublicCEO thought a history of local level leadership would help focus the discussion.

The Original Move Away From a Strong Mayor

An executive system of local government similar to the way the federal and state government operate was the norm in the early formation of the country.

However, by the time California city and county charters were being written in the Progressive era of the early 1900s, corrupt mayor boss scandals led many to create a council form of government that spread power among elected officials who hired a professional city manager to run day-to-day government operations. This was the same movement that added recalls and referendums as options in the state constitution.

"That [moving away from a mayor-council form of governing] was a mistake," said Adrian S. Kwiatkowski, president of the San Diego-based Strong Mayor-Council Institute, a consulting firm. "Ethics rules would have been a better fix."

The organizational chart of a council-manager run city more closely resembles a corporation with a board and a hired CEO than the institutions established by the founding fathers, said Robert Huckfeldt, political science professor at UC Davis.

*The reformers wanted to take politics out of government, but the irony is that the framers of the constitution believed that everyone acts in their own interests they

established a system of checks and balances," Huckfeldt explained.

"It is a fallacy that the city manager is not a political position. They may be professionally trained," Kwiatkowski said. "But they still serve at the whim of a political body."

Kwiatkowski called the title of mayor a misnomer when his only power beyond that of any other city council member is to chair the meeting. "The public usually thinks the mayor has executive authority and don't know who the city manager is or what they do," Kwiatkowski said.

Pros and Cons

Huckfeldt said the benefit of the mayor-council system for citizens is accountability.

"When there are so many chefs in the kitchen, who do you blame when the soup comes out wrong?"

In the strong-mayor form of government, the top elected official can't point the finger at his colleagues on the council.

Anne Rudin, a former Sacramento Mayor, said in an interview that the idea of a strong mayor system has come up several times and was always turned down. She didn't feel the additional power was needed. "I never felt constrained; I worked closely with city manager to influence policy."

Rudin called the strong mayor idea "dangerous" because it mixes politics and administration. "The mayor's race can be a popularity contest that doesn't ensure the winner has public policy skills that a professional manager would learn by coming up through the ranks."

Dwight Stenbakken, League of California Cities deputy executive director, said the mayor-council-manager dynamic already varies from city to city.

"Many city managers have learned to be flexible, giving up more power than in the past," Stenbakken said.

Stenbakken acknowledged some elected officials want to spend more time and have more direct control without a city manager in the middle. He also hears the argument that a city manager brings more professional operation with more efficient delivery of services.

"I don't know if one is better than the other," Stenbakken said. "Ultimately, it is the community's choice. As long as the voters know, the streets won't be paved with gold the next morning, but the mayor may be more responsive to their call about a pothole."

Trend Lines

Some states preempt the power of cities to determine their organizational structure. Some even provide for old-fashioned town hall democracy-types of decision-making. Since California gives local government flexibility, a wide range of systems operate in city halls up and down the state.

So far, five cities have made the switch to mayor-council governance.

Many times the change is precipitated by a financial crisis and ushered in by a dynamic personality who can help sell the idea, observed the League's Stenbakken.

"There is no trend, but if there is a pattern, communities tend to consider when they reach a certain size – ½ million to a million population range," Stenbakken said.

Fresno, population 500,000, voted in the strong mayor form of government in 1993 and the change took effect in 1997. The change was predicated by a Little Hoover Commission recommendation to review government structure. The citywide elected mayor can hire and fire the city manager and has veto power over council actions.

Los Angeles' 9.8 million people are governed by a charter passed in 1999 that created a system of neighborhood advisory councils, gave local communities some control of planning and zoning and gave the mayor the power to fire department general managers. The moderate strong mayor measure was placed on the ballot after some areas of the city threatened to secede and start their own municipalities.

In 2004, Oakland voters made permanent the temporary strong-mayor system passed in 1998. The provision in the city of 420,000 people required that the city attorney be elected; an ethics committee set salaries and limited the mayor's service to two terms.

San Diego adopted a five-year strong-mayor trial period in 2006 after a corruption scandal. A vote in the city of 3 million to make the measure permanent could go on the ballot in 2010.

San Francisco's 808,000 people make up the population of the city and the county. The mayor is also the county executive and the board of supervisors is in charge of passing the budget with his approval.

Because of increased political activity and diverse populations, Kwiatkowski predicts more cities with populations of more than 100,000 will switch from council-manager operations to some type of mayor-council system.

Measure of Strength

Not all strong mayor systems are alike.

"The devil is in the details," said UC Davis' Huckfeldt.

In some cities, the city council goes full-time along with the mayor. Some strong mayors, like Oakland and Fresno, keep a city administrator in place.

Of the strong mayor systems in the state, the measure going to Sacramento voters would be one of the strongest. The mayor would have the power to hire and fire the city manager, treasurer, clerk, attorney and subordinate staff. In many cities these positions are elected posts.

City Council would have 30 days to reject an appointment, but couldn't stop the removal of an employee. The proposed ballot measure would give the mayor veto power and the ability to introduce a budget that would automatically become law unless the city council overrides.

Controversial details include the creation of a ninth city district to keep the number of council members odd and lack of an ethics commission or term limits.

Mayor Kevin Johnson, who included his plans for a strong mayor form of governance in his campaign platform, announced his intention to put the measure on the ballot within a month of taking office to fulfill what he considered his mandate "action, results and accountability."

In an interview on Capitol Public Radio's Insight, he said the checks and balances in his plan rest with the voters. "If a mayor is the chief executive officer, then the voters is able to hold that mayor accountable for the results."

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written by John E McCue, September 3, 2009

Perhaps, City Managers and City Councils can start making a change in the United States that can prevent or at least slow down the deterioration of the entire country. The failure of management must be the reason the infrastructure of the United States is deteriorating. And that must be attributed to their fear of the population and those that contribute to them.

As knowledgeable people have pointed out, the failure of great cultures happened after the infrastructure that made them great deteriorated. I want to say the start on our way to "Enron" and collapsing bridges and shouting attendees at "Town Hall" meetings began with the attitudes of the baby boomers just as the deterioration of the Roman Empire began with the attitude of the Roman citizens.

Trying to think who could start the process to save our country for our grand children and great grand children I could only come up with a grass roots group: City Managers and City Councils. It will take courage.

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written by Nathaniel Bates, September 3, 2009

I like Mayor Kevin Johnson because he brings fresh ideas of new leadership. However as an elected official for some thirty years, Kevin does not understand government and its make up. Regardless of how well intended a politician in which Kevin is, running a multi-million operation requires a professional person with education and training. People often talk about running government like a private business but they forget that government is more complicated and regulated in what you can and cannot do with personnel, expenditures of tax payers monies, etc. Simply being a strong mayor will not afford one the opportunity to fire and hire staff at their will. Regardless how incompetent a staff member may be, unless they are an at will employee, it will take an act of congress to replace them. Sacramento voters should think hard and clear before adopting a full time mayor position. Kevin may be a good choice today but what about the future mayors to follow who win election on popularity vote without experience.

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