

This book describes the important role of cities in American life and the vital role City Managers play in helping cities function well. It further outlines the duties of a City Manager and how those duties can be best fulfilled.

## **HOW TO MANAGE A CITY: A Practitioner's Perspective**

By Ronald L. Olson

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# HOW TO MANAGE A CITY

A PRACTITIONER'S PERSPECTIVE

RONALD L. OLSON



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*Ronald L. Olson*

This book provides content related to the author's experience regarding city management and local government political topics. As such, use of this book implies your acceptance of this disclaimer.

# **Table of Contents**

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The City .....</b>	<b>9</b>
What are cities and where did they come from? .....	9
What is the Federal System of government? .....	10
Why are cities thought of as being the government closest to the people? .....	11
How does a City work?.....	12
What are the major differences between the National, State and Local Governments? .....	15
What are City Managers and what do they do? .....	18
<b>Leadership .....</b>	<b>21</b>
What is Leadership?.....	23
What is a “Good” Leader? .....	26
What are the Characteristics of a Good, Effective City Leader?.....	33
What do Leaders do? .....	48
In Summary, How to Lead a City.....	60
<b>Advising the City Council .....</b>	<b>65</b>
What is an advisor? .....	66
What do City Councils Actually do?.....	69
Why is serving on a City Council so difficult? .....	70
How to advise the City Council.....	74
Advising the City Council Regarding Their Leadership Responsibilities .....	79

Advising the City Council Regarding Goals and Change Targets ...	89
Advising the City Council Regarding Making Good Policy .....	91
Advising City Council Regarding their Oversight Responsibility .....	99
Advising the City Council Regarding Their Required Ministerial Tasks .....	105
It Is Simple, Not Easy .....	110
In Summary, How to Advise the City Council .....	111
<b>Managing City Operations .....</b>	<b>115</b>
What Cities do .....	115
The management process .....	134
The Nine Systems .....	163
Experienced Insights .....	169
In Summary, How to Advise the City Council .....	208
<b>Engaging People.....</b>	<b>213</b>
Engaging the Community .....	216
Engaging Other Governments .....	229
Engaging the Media.....	240
Engaging the Workforce .....	257
In Summary, How to Engage People.....	262
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>267</b>

# THE CITY





# **The City**

## *Background*

I was recently talking to my barber who was in Dublin, Ireland, when that city was celebrating its 1,000<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Being an American, it is hard for me to grasp the idea that a city could be over 1,000 years old, but many cities are ancient. Arguably, Damascus, Syria for example is one of the oldest cities; it has been continuously inhabited since the second millennium BC and may have been established as early as 10,000 BC. Other cities from around the globe and from all continents have been established or inhabited for thousands of years. A quick internet search will provide one with an idea of how old ancient cities really are and where the oldest ones are located. I'm not trying to be a historian, an archaeologist, or an anthropologist. There are people who know much more about this subject than I do. My point is simple: Cities have been around for a long time. Many of them predate the states or nations in which they are currently located. Many cities predate any accurate historical record, forcing us to speculate on their age, origin and purpose.

## **What are cities and where did they come from?**

People who know about these things theorize that cities came into existence when human beings began to successfully practice agriculture. When people no longer had to worry every day about their next meal, they could specialize in crafts and trades in addition to hunting and gathering. Cities became the gathering places where people could live close to their work, where they could interact with people to trade their goods. Anciently, cities were places where people and resources came together; they were the economic engines that drove their society. They still are today.

Over time, each city develops its own unique characteristics. Some cities specialize in certain kinds of commerce. Other cities focus

on their culture, their climate or their livability. Still others are plain and simply known for their hometown atmosphere. No matter their uniqueness, they are all places where people gather, live and trade.

Cities come in all sizes. Some are very large. New York City, for example, has a population more than 8.5 million. Other cities are villages with populations in the hundreds. When thinking about cities, it is common for people to envision the large cities with skyscrapers and very large populations. That is not the reality for most cities in America. Most American cities are relatively small, with populations much less than 20,000. They are governed locally; they are managed locally.

Much of the ancient history of cities is speculative; so really, it is more interesting than practical. From this pragmatic practitioner's point of view, what matters is, not the history and origin of cities, but the fact that they exist. We live in them. They need to be managed well for everyone's benefit.

## **What is the Federal System of government?**

To better understand today's American cities, one must understand the environment in which they exist. That environment is called the Federal System of government. What I mean by "federal system" is a system of layers of government. The United States Constitution recognizes two layers of government, the government of the United States and the governments of the various States. Sometimes we refer to the government of the United States as the Federal Government. That is not the same as the "federal system" of government and it can be confusing. Sometimes we refer to the government of the United States as the National Government, sometimes just The Government. The fact that there are two layers, the national government and the state government, makes it a federal system.

Inside of the state governments, there are also layers, often referred to as political subdivisions of the state. For example, the states are typically divided into counties. The counties receive their

authority and limitations from the state constitution and state laws. Within the counties, but separate from them, are cities. Cities are incorporated jurisdictions that also receive their authority and limitations from the state constitution and state laws. Some, but not all, states have variations that allow cities to become “home rule” cities by adopting a Charter, which gives them a level of independence from state law. Some states, but not all, have unincorporated jurisdictions like cities called townships, which are intended to serve a more rural population and have fewer powers than cities. Similarly, school districts are political subdivisions of the state as are other special purpose districts of various kinds. Each of these levels of government have elected officials who set policy and make decisions for their unit of government, including taxation and the raising of revenue to operate that government. Taken all together, they make up the Federal System of government.

### **Why are cities thought of as being the government closest to the people?**

Cities are often thought of as being lowest in the pecking order of the federal system, ranking below the Federal Government, State Government, and County Government. Another way of looking at it is, City Government is that which is closest to the people, the place where democracy is administered right where we live, right at our doorstep. Cities provide basic services which touch where and how we live every single day: providing reliable and clean water; collecting and disposing of our garbage; building and maintaining parks; installing and managing storm water facilities to keep flooding away from our homes; enforcing building codes for our safety; providing zoning and nuisance codes to ensure we are safe and to maintain our private property values; constructing and maintaining streets and sidewalks to promote freedom of movement and mobility; improving public health through health department programming; and providing for our public safety through police, fire, emergency medical service and disaster response.

Of significant importance is the fact that our cities are governed by the people who live in them. Mayors and Council Members are elected by their neighbors to make decisions about the services to be provided along with the taxation needed to pay for those services. It is not some unknown bureaucrat or political operator in a place far, far away imposing taxes and requirements on the people of our city. It is our neighbors; people who are as invested in the place in which we live as we are; and people who dislike taxation as much as we do. It is people we vote for and, therefore, people we can trust. It is people we can sit down with and talk with face to face. The decisions made by these select, elected representatives will more directly affect our quality of life than any other level of government. Note: If you believe that what I have just described does not exist in your city, it is your own fault and only you can fix it. Get informed. Get involved. Go vote. Every voice in city government makes a difference.

## **How does a City work?**

Cities are part of the federal system of government, and they are at the bottom of the political ladder. While Cities are subject to being regulated by the State, and somewhat by the National, governments, this ranking also places them as the unit of government easiest to access by the governed. To effectively access city government, people must know how it works. So, the next logical question is this: How does a city work?

That is not a simple question to answer because cities can be structured in many ways. Some cities are governed by City Councils, others by Commissions, and still others by Boards of Aldermen. Most cities have either a Strong Mayor or a Weak Mayor (referring to the form of government, not the personality of the Mayor). Some have no Mayor at all but do have Chairpersons of the elected body. Some cities have City Managers while others may have City Administrators or City Supervisors and still others may have none. I will attempt to explain this in a little more detail and with a little more clarity.

A traditional Commission form of government is one in which each elected official oversees an area of responsibility in the city. For example, one elected official might be the Commissioner of Public Safety and oversee the police and fire departments. Another might be the Commissioner of Streets and oversee the street department. Another might be the Commissioner of Utilities and oversee the water and sewer departments. A traditional Commission does not have a Mayor but, rather, a chairperson. The position of Chair is generally selected by the Commission itself, and not by a public election. The responsibilities of serving as Chair are often rotated between commissioners.

A Weak-Mayor city government is one in which the Mayor chairs the City Council, has no executive authority beyond membership on the Council, and generally does not vote.

A Strong-Mayor city government is one in which the Mayor has executive authority to appoint and remove personnel, exercise a veto, has power independent of the Council.

In a Council-Mayor form of government, the Mayor is the Chief Executive Officer of the city and is responsible for both chairing the Council and overseeing the operations of the city. The department heads are responsible to the Mayor. This form of government is most often a strong Mayor format. A variation of the Council-Mayor form is when the Mayor is required to have a professional City Administrator (like a Chief of Staff or a Chief Operating Officer) who reports to the Mayor and is responsible to the Mayor for the daily operations of the city. In this form of government, department heads report to the Mayor through the City Administrator.

In a Council-Manager form of government, the City Manager is the Chief Executive Officer of the city and is responsible to the City Council (of which the Mayor is a part) for the operations of the City. This form of government is almost always a weak Mayor format. The department heads are responsible to the City Manager. In this form of government, the Mayor is the chair and spokesperson for the City Council and is the Chief Ceremonial Officer of the city. This form of

government is like the business model where a CEO runs a company under the policy guidance of a Board of Directors. Although it is important to understand the various forms that a city government may function under, this book is focused on the Council-Manager system.

Under either the Council-Mayor or the Council-Manager forms of government, City Councils can be elected either at-large or by geographically defined districts (wards, precincts, etc.) or combinations thereof.

The responsibilities of all the positions mentioned above are very important to the efficient operation of cities. Without good policy, a City Manager will find it difficult to succeed. Without good management, the City Council will find it difficult to be successful. Because we have such open government, some people mistakenly believe that simply anyone can be successful in leading and managing a government jurisdiction. That perception is not accurate. In today's world, things are increasingly complex. Even since I was a teenager in the 1960's things have become more complicated, and the 60's were not exactly an easy time. For example, back then, I could service my own car. I could change the oil, replace spark plugs and set the timing. Today, not so much. Back then, young people experimented with alcohol; today they experiment with drugs. Back then, a 10-key adding machine was quite the technology; today there is more computing power in our cell phones than what they used to put a man on the moon. Back then, there was people drama; today people drama is multiplied exponentially by social media. Everything is more complex and complicated today, including government.

Let me give you a few examples from city government. Policing, for example, is more complex because of increasingly complex social challenges in our society such as drugs, domestic relationships, and political correctness. Policing is made even more complicated by our complex legal system, making it difficult to recruit candidates into law enforcement because of the social and legal complexities that make the personal liabilities so risky. Water and wastewater treatment are controlled by the Clean Water Act, making it very scientific and

complex. Open Meetings Laws and Freedom of Information requirements place heavy administrative requirements on local governments. Building Codes are extensive and constantly changing. I could go on and on. I'm not saying that these things are bad. In fact, they are all generally good for our society. They do make local government more complicated and more costly. Combine that with the fact that, for every issue, there seems to be some that want more of it and some that want less. These competing values and priorities make conflict in local government a constant reality as well.

My observation is that people are seeking simple solutions to local government problems that simply don't exist. The issues are complex and so are the solutions. This can be very frustrating.

## **What are the major differences between the National, State and Local Governments?**

As previously mentioned, cities are governments and fit within the federal system of government. In 1869, John Forrest Dillon, a judge on the Iowa Supreme Court, rendered an opinion that Municipal Corporations were entirely subject to the authority of their state; that they are institutions created by the state and, therefore, can be amended or eliminated at the will of the state. This is Dillon's Rule; it says that cities have only those powers granted to them by the state. Although challenged, it has been relied upon in many US Supreme Court rulings and still stands today. Cities are creatures of the states in which they are located, meaning they derive their power and authority from the state government and are subject to the limitations that the state legislature or the state constitution places upon them. As creatures of the state, cities are generally classified into one of two categories: General Law cities or Home Rule cities. General Law cities derive their power from the statutes of the state and have only those powers enumerated in the law. If the law is silent on a particular aspect of city government, cities cannot act in that area. A second approach to city government is Home Rule. Some states allow cities to adopt a unique charter, rather than relying solely upon the general



laws of the state, to govern themselves. In those municipalities and under the authority of the state, cities adopt, through an election process, a Home Rule Charter. The Charter performs like a constitution for that specific city and may vary from the general state law governing other cities in that state. Even then, many of the state laws governing cities may still apply to a Home Rule City. It can be confusing and must be interpreted on a case-by-case basis.

Politically, cities differ from national, state and county government in that most cities (except the very largest ones) are non-partisan, meaning that a person does not need to be affiliated with a political party to run for public office. That is not to say that individual municipal elected officials are not affiliated with a political party. In most cities, party politics is usually not involved in the campaign process nor are candidates identified by their party affiliation in the election. City Councils typically do not divide themselves into caucuses and do not vote along party lines as a standard practice.

Unlike the national government, state, county, and city governments are required to balance their budgets. Therefore, elected city leaders are continuously making very difficult choices about service priorities versus the city's ability to pay. There is never enough money to do all that is needed or wanted. City Councils and Staff are under constant pressure from their constituency, who seem to have the mistaken notion that they should get everything they want from city government yet not have to pay any more for it. It is impossible to count the number of times I have heard citizens say something like, if you can do A (something they don't particularly want), then you can also do B (something they do want). The truth is, in city government, there is a finite amount of money. If you spend it on A, you cannot spend it on B. The real issue becomes one of setting priorities. Sometimes constituent expectations can be unrealistic. I recall one time that a resident appeared before one of my City Councils and wanted emergency medical services extended to her pets. She said something like this: If you can spend money for a high-

priced consultant to study road conditions, you can also spend money to provide emergency medical services to our pets.

Unlike the national government, cities borrow money for major capital projects such as roads or buildings but do not borrow money for operating expenses (with the rare but possible exception of Tax Anticipation Notes, which is only stop-gap borrowing until property taxes are received within that same fiscal year.) Funding is a difficult and thankless responsibility. Under the US Constitution, only the national government can print and coin money. Cities only sometimes wish they could.

Because cities are at the beginning of the political ladder, it is relatively easy and routine for the national and state governments to establish regulations that require municipal compliance. A few quick examples include water and air quality, provision of public information, investment standards, various work rules and safety requirements, and accommodation for disabilities. There are many more. Worthy as these regulations may be, the cost of implementation is primarily borne by the city and not the higher government that created them. Occasionally, the higher governments will even exempt themselves from the very regulation that they pass on to cities. For example, Congress has exempted itself from parts or all of the Freedom of Information Act, various labor and employment regulations, and OSHA standards. For cities, this type of regulation is referred to as an “unfunded mandate.” From my experience, I estimate that most of the cost of city government is a result of unfunded mandates.

To the casual observer these differences between national, state and local governments may seem minor, but they are significant. My theory is that many people get frustrated with the National Government because of partisan politics, sharp differences about both social and financial policy and then they transfer that frustration to city government. Because city government is closest to the people and most easily accessible, it very often takes the brunt of that frustration in a manner and at a level that it does not deserve.

## **What are City Managers and what do they do?**

I cannot begin to estimate the number of times someone has asked me what I do for a living and then after I respond, they ask, what is a City Manager? Often, they will immediately follow that question with another: Is that the same as a City Planner or is it an Assistant to the Mayor? Each time that happens, I am surprised at how uninformed people are about how cities work. No, a City Manager is not the same as a City Planner. No, it is not an Assistant to the Mayor.

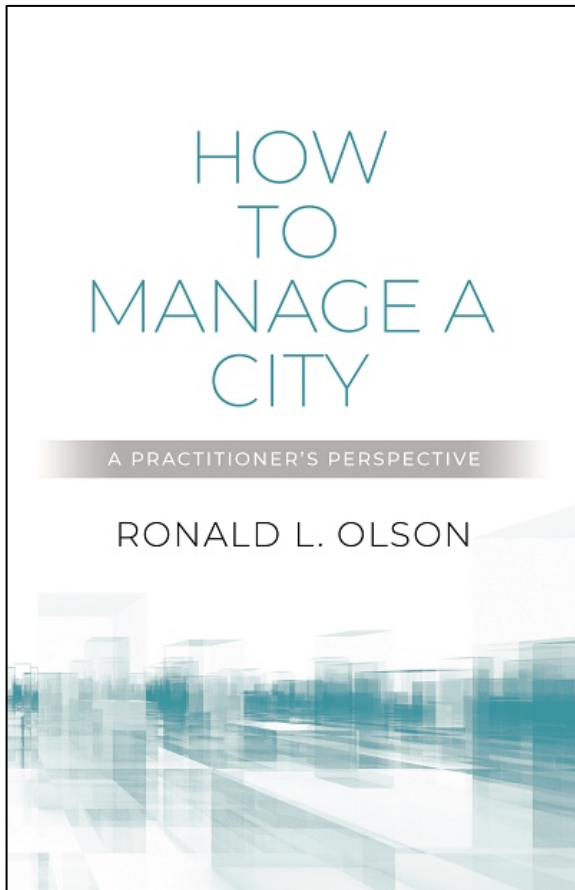
A City Manager is the Chief Executive Officer of the municipal corporation and is responsible to the governing body for the operational performance of the entire city.

The next question usually asked is this: What does a City Manager do? For a long time, I struggled to give a concise answer to that question. Typically, I would say, manage the operations of the city or carry out the policies of the City Council. These answers are, of course, correct but they are also incomplete.

Most City Charters (State laws or city ordinances) have a chapter outlining the duties of the City Manager. It is somewhat of a job description. The Charter basically outlines what must be done but it doesn't say anything about how it should be done. Charters do not give the necessary clarity for a full understanding of what it takes for someone to be good at the craft of city management. In addition to any language in a Charter, Law, Ordinance or job description, my experience teaches me that there are four primary duties that one must master to be good at city management. They are as follows:

1. Leadership,
2. Advising the City Council,
3. Managing City Operations, and
4. Engaging people.

The balance of this book will elaborate on each of these four duties and describe, in very practical ways, how each of them function.



This book describes the important role of cities in American life and the vital role City Managers play in helping cities function well. It further outlines the duties of a City Manager and how those duties can be best fulfilled.

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