

## Local Government 101

By Mike Barhorst

There is an increasing body of evidence that in general, Americans know very little about our history, government or politics on either the national, state or local levels. Unfortunately, studies have revealed that our colleges and universities are doing little to address the widening knowledge gap.

The 2015 study of recent college grads undertaken by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) was published earlier this year. The executive summary begins: “There is a crisis in American civic education. Survey after survey shows that recent college graduates are alarmingly ignorant of America’s history and heritage. They cannot identify the term lengths of members of Congress, the substance of the First Amendment, or the origin of the separation of powers. They do not know the Father of the Constitution, and nearly 10% say that Judith Sheindlin—“Judge Judy”—is on the Supreme Court. “

The ACTA study is but one of many similar studies that have revealed the same disturbing results. With this in mind, I plan to write a series of columns dedicated to educating readers about municipal government in Sidney, and how it differs from the local governmental units in surrounding communities.

In Ohio, communities are either governed by statutory guidelines created by the Ohio General Assembly or by a locally enacted municipal charter. Generally these communities are known either as statutory or as charter communities.

A 1912 amendment to Ohio’s Constitution granted cities the ability to frame and adopt a charter for their community. The first charters in Ohio were adopted in 1913 by the cities of Cleveland, Dayton, Lakewood, Middletown and Springfield.

Sidney adopted the charter form of government in 1954. The charter became effective on January 1, 1956. Sidney has the only charter form of government in Shelby County. The villages all have the statutory form of government.

According to information available from the Ohio Municipal League, 188 cities and 74 villages have adopted the charter form of government. A city, as defined by the Ohio Revised Code, is a municipality with 5,000 or more residents; incorporated areas with less than 5,000 residents are referred to as villages.

Sidney (21,229) is the only city in Shelby County. Villages within Shelby County include Anna (1,567), Botkins (1,155), Fort Loramie (1,478), Jackson Center (1,462), Lockington (141), Port Jefferson (371), and Russia (640).

A municipal charter can be considered the municipality’s constitution. Just as the United State of America and the State of Ohio have constitutions, so too does the City of Sidney.

Sidney’s City Charter spells out the details of how the government operates. It includes the general powers of Council, the length of terms, requirements for special meetings, how legislation is introduced and adopted, and even the procedures to be followed covering purchases made by the City.

Sidney's City Charter also contains parameters for the Sidney Planning Commission. These parameters typically allow the city additional flexibility compared to those communities that are bound by statutory requirements.

The charter will spell out in detail the form of government the municipality has adopted. These can include the strong mayor, weak mayor, city-manager or some other form of government. Sidney voters wisely adopted the city-manager form of government. Additional details concerning the city-manager form of government will be included in a future article.

Charters may be drafted to strengthen democratic processes and to provide for a more efficient government than is available under the statutory form of government. For example, the Sidney Charter requires that all candidates for Council run on a non-partisan ballot. This has eliminated the bitter partisan party politics from City Hall. As you may have observed, elected officials expected to vote along party lines have hamstrung other communities – something that is fortunately left out of the equation here.

Charters are not carved in stone. They are living documents that can be amended or changed over time. Residents or the legislative authority of a municipality can amend the charter in much the same way the document was created.

Two-thirds of the legislative authority or a petition signed by 10 percent of the voters in the municipality can propose an amendment to the charter. The amendment then goes before voters for approval. In Sidney, the City Council reviews the Charter annually. Our Charter was last amended by the voters in 2002.

Look for additional articles in the Local Government 101 series. We'll next look at the differences between strong mayor, weak mayor, city manager, and commission forms of government.