

Sidney Celebrates 50th Anniversary of City Manager Form of Government

By Mike Barhorst

Although the date passed with no fanfare, January 1, 2016, was the Fiftieth Anniversary of the effective date of Sidney's City Charter. That document, approved by the voters on November 2, 1954, adopted the City Manager Form of Government for the City of Sidney. In effect, the voters saw the wisdom of modernizing Sidney's governance structure.

There are three types of city government in Ohio and in nearly every other state. They include the mayor-council plan, the commission form, and the city-manager form.

The mayor-council plan is the governance structure still utilized by most of Ohio's cities. This governance structure can further be divided between strong and weak-mayor forms of government.

In the strong-mayor form, the elected mayor is given almost total administrative authority and a clear, wide range of political independence. That includes the power to appoint and dismiss department heads without council approval and little or no public input. In this system, the strong-mayor prepares and administers the city budget, although that budget often must be approved by the council. Abuses in this form led to the development of the council-manager form of local government and its wide adoption throughout the United States.

In the weak-mayor form, the mayor has no formal authority outside of the council. The mayor cannot appoint or remove officials, and lacks veto power over council votes. The mayor's influence is solely based on the power of public persuasion to accomplish desired goals.

The weak-mayor form of government may be found in small towns in the United States that do not use the more popular council-manager form. It is frequently found in small municipalities with few or no full-time municipal employees.

A second form of governance model is the commission form. In this form of government, voters elect a small governing commission, typically five or seven members, on an at-large basis. As a group the commissioners constitute the legislative body of the city responsible for taxation, appropriations, ordinances, and other general functions.

Individually, each commissioner is in charge of a specific aspect of municipal affairs, e.g., public works, finance, or public safety. One of the commissioners is designated chairman or mayor, but functions principally as one of the commissioners who presides at meetings and serves in ceremonial capacities. Thus the commission plan blends legislative and executive functions in the same body.

In the city manager form, the council appoints a professional manager to conduct nonpartisan governmental operations. Under the council-manager form, the elected governing body (commonly called a city council), is responsible for the legislative function of the municipality such as establishing policy, passing local ordinances, voting appropriations, and developing an overall vision.

The legislative body, voted into office in public elections, appoints a professional manager to oversee the administrative operations, implement its policies, and advise the council. The position of mayor in this type of legislative body is a largely ceremonial title, and may be selected by the council from among its members or elected as an at-large council member.

Generally, larger cities, such as Sidney, have adopted a home-rule charter. Such a charter permits them to select the form of government best suited to their requirements.

Prior to the successful effort in 1954, numerous attempts had been made to adopt the city-manager form of government in Sidney. The effort was led by local "movers and shakers", and took place over a period of at least two decades. As early as 1934, the Citizens and Taxpayers Non-Partisan League was promoting the city-manager form of government for Sidney.

The committee, chaired by Monarch Machine Tool Company President Wendell E. Whipp, vocally supported the sound reasoning for approving this form of local government. "Anybody can conduct city affairs with plenty of money. It is when budgets are contracted that wise, careful, expert management is necessary and vital," Whipp believed.

Whipp was supported in his effort by such local historical luminaries as Margaret (Peg) Amos, Kenneth Bogart, Urban Doorley, George Ehrhardt, Ruth Emmons, Harry Forsyth, Forest Friend, W.G. Fultz, James P. Humphrey, Robert F. Kaser, H.T. Knoop, Virginia Oldham, Olive Owens, Edwin Seving and Arthur Tremain. Although Whipp would meet an untimely death in a fishing accident in 1957, he lived long enough to see his dream come to fruition in 1954. The others mentioned were the City's Charter Commission. They wrote the City Charter which, with minor changes, remains the "constitution" of the City today.

The main advantage to having a home rule charter versus the other available forms of local government is simple. It permits citizens of the community to determine the form and administrative organization of their local government.

Council annually reviews the City's charter and determines if proposed changes to the charter are warranted. If changes are warranted, a Charter Review Commission comprised of 15-20 residents is appointed to review proposed amendments. If the Charter Review Commission finds the requests to be justified, Council then files the necessary paperwork authorizing the changes to be placed before the voters on the ballot.

Voters have, from time to time, been presented with ballot issues to amend the City's charter. I was privileged to chair the Charter Review Commission in 2002 when the most recent changes were submitted and approved by the voters.

Perhaps the best way to understand a council-manager form of government is to review the basic responsibilities of the City Manager, the Council and the Mayor. In the council-manager form of government, the City Manager functions much like the CEO of a major corporation. The manager is appointed, evaluated and dismissed by the City Council, who act much like the Board of Directors of a Corporation.

In the council-manager form of government, City Council members are, as noted above, elected to serve as the legislative branch of the local government. In Sidney, three members of Council are elected at-large or city-wide. The four remaining members are elected only by the voters in their respective wards.

In Sidney as in most council-manager communities, the mayor is a voting member of City Council. The mayor is not directly elected by voters, but rather is selected by a vote of the members of Council. Sidney's mayor does not possess veto power, but does represent the City and Council at local, state, national and international functions. The mayor can also issue proclamations celebrating events and milestones in the lives of individuals or organizations.

While the City has not formally celebrated this anniversary, the citizens of this community owe those who promoted the city-manager form of government a debt of gratitude. I've long had the opportunity to watch other communities that have chosen other forms of government experience tumult following elections as department heads are fired and replaced by those loyal to the new mayor. I am always grateful that Sidney was a progressive community that understood professional management was a far better governance model.

Citizens should also be grateful that the "founders" did not insert politics into the process. All candidates for Council run on a non-partisan ballot, leaving the bitter partisan politics that have hamstrung other communities out of the equation.

In the words of current City Manager Mark Cundiff, "The Council-Manager form of government combines the strong political leadership of elected officials with the strong managerial experience of an appointed manager. City Council establishes policies that affect the overall operation of the community and are responsive to residents' needs and wishes. To ensure that these policies are carried out, Council hires a trained, professional manager on the basis of the manager's education, experience, skills and abilities, not on the manager's political allegiances. If the Manager is not responsive to the governing body, it has the authority to terminate the Manager at any time."

The next time you are in a celebratory mood, drink a toast to those wise individuals who were able to see the future with clarity-clarity that to this day, continues to elude leaders in other communities.

I trust that you have found this information helpful to your understanding of City operations. As always, should you have any questions about City operations do not hesitate to contact your City Council representative or the appropriate member of the City's staff.