

City of East Lansing One Pager Plus

Council-Manager Government

What is the council-manager form of government?

Council-manager government combines the strong political leadership of elected officials with the strong managerial experience of an appointed manager or administrator. All power and authority to set policy rests with an elected governing body, which includes a mayor or chairperson and members of the council, commission, or board. The governing body in turn hires a nonpartisan manager who has very broad authority to run the organization.

Born out of the U.S. progressive reform movement at the turn of the 20th century, the council-manager system was designed to combat corruption and unethical activity in local government by promoting effective management within a transparent, responsive, and accountable structure. Since its establishment, the council-manager form has become the most popular structure of local government in the United States. The form is also widely used throughout the world in countries such as Canada, Australia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom.

How does council-manager government work?

The elected council or board represent their community and develop a long-range vision for its future. They establish 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 and that the entire community is equitably served, the governing body appoints a highly trained professional manager on the basis of his/her education, experience, skills, and abilities (and not their political allegiances). If the manager is not responsive to the governing body, it has the authority to terminate the manager at any time.

How can council-manager government benefit my community?

A city, town, or county benefits from the council-manager form of government in a number of important ways:

- Political power is concentrated in the entire governing body. The mayor and council share legislative functions
- Policy making resides with elected officials, while oversight of the day-to-day operations of the community resides with the manager. In this way, the elected officials are free to devote time to policy planning and development
- The manager carries out the policies established by the elected governing body with an emphasis on effective, efficient, and equitable service delivery



Council-Manager Form of Government (Continued)

- Because decisions on policy and the future of the community are made by the entire governing body rather than a single individual, council-manager governments more often engage and involve their residents in decision making. Residents guide their community by serving on boards and commissions, participating in visioning and strategic planning, and designing community-oriented local government services
- The form is flexible enough to adapt to local needs and demands. For example, some communities elect their councils at large, while others elect them by district or by a combination of an at-large-and-by-district system. Also, the mayor can be directly elected by voters or selected by and from among the council.

What is the role of the manager under council-manager government?

The manager is hired to serve the council and the community and brings to the local government the benefits of his/her training and experience in administering municipal or county projects and programs. The manager prepares a budget for the council's consideration; recruits, hires, terminates, and supervises government staff; serves as the council's chief advisor; and carries out the council's policies.

Council members and residents count on the manager to provide complete and objective information about local operations, discuss the pros and cons of alternatives, and offer an assessment of the long-term consequences of their decisions. Appointed managers serve at the pleasure of the governing body. They can be fired by a majority of the council, consistent with local laws, or any employment agreements they may enter into with the council. The manager makes policy recommendations to the council for consideration and final decision. The manager is bound by whatever action the council takes, and control is always in the hands of the elected representatives of the people.

ICMA, Council Manager Form of Gov't 2-3.

