

Clark County Board of Freeholders, 2013-14

Briefing: County Manager

Overview

- A county manager represents the executive branch of county government, but is appointed instead of elected. The county manager is appointed by, and works under the policy direction of, the legislative branch. The county manager functions the same as a city manager (local city manager examples are in Vancouver and Battle Ground). In this role, the county manager directs the organization much like the president or CEO of a private corporation.
- The manager's primary responsibility is to implement the policies of the legislative branch. As the top manager of the county, he or she organizes and directs department heads and staff to implement programs and deliver public services in accordance with policy. The county manager also prepares the annual budget, hires and fires personnel, and directs day-to-day operations. The county manager is empowered to manage the county without participation by the elected legislative branch, but that is also the body to which he or she answers and which can fire the county manager when it is unsatisfied with the manager's performance.
- One of the most important distinctions between a county manager and county executive is veto authority. The county manager does not have the power of veto over legislative actions as is typically granted to an elected county executive.
- When it comes to hiring and firing staff, the county manager is empowered to make the final decision, but the practical approach is for the county manager to work in consultation with the legislative body. In some county charters the county manager is given this authority exclusively and commissioners/councilmembers are specifically prohibited by the charter from participating in the hiring and firing of employees
- The concept of the council-manager form of government first developed in the late 19th Century as part of the Progressive Era reform movement. The concept was to have an elected council to legislate and set policies coupled with a strong, nonpolitical executive office to run the government and implement policies. The council-manager form was first adopted by cities, with the original adoption occurring in 1908 in the City of Staunton, Virginia.
- Council-manager government is now the most common form of city government. The legislative branch of city government is usually a council consisting of between five and seven members, one of whom is selected or elected as mayor. To implement its policies, the council hires a professional manager and thus combines the political leadership of an elected mayor and council with the managerial expertise of the manager.

Summary

A county manager position is analogous to that of a city manager. Unlike a county administrator, the county manager represents the executive branch of government. And unlike a county executive, he or she is appointed by the legislative branch, not elected. A county manager is given full responsibility for the total operation of all departments, including the hiring and firing of department heads. However, the county manager serves at the pleasure of the legislative authority of the county and implements its policies. Generally, the legislative body is prohibited by the charter from interfering with the manager's administrative direction.

- With the evidence of more than 100 years of largely successful experience in cities, the council-manager form of governance has been increasingly adopted by counties. In 1932, Arlington County became the first county to adopt the council-manager form of government. According to the International City-County Management Association (ICMA), the number of counties adopting the council-manager form of government more than doubled just between 2001 to 2009, from 371 counties to 821 (26% of the 3,141 counties in the country). During the same time span, the commission form of executive governance decreased from 2,196 to 1,728 counties.
- Minimum qualifications for a county manager will vary from county to county. Qualifications may be expressed in a charter, and common provisions include having a Master's Degree in Public or Business Administration, at least five years' experience, and a residency requirement.
- The charter can specify whether hiring a county manager requires a simple majority vote of the legislative body, or a supermajority (e.g., two-thirds). Likewise, termination could require a simple or supermajority vote of the legislative body, depending on the charter.
- The county manager is almost always hired contractually, usually for a one or two-year term, which can then be renewed. Contracts can, and typically do require that the manager hold no other political or public office (though positions on nonprofit boards are usually acceptable).
- The legislative body commonly conducts a performance review of the county manager on an annual basis, at which time salary and benefit adjustments may be considered.
- Salaries for city and county managers vary widely depending upon jurisdictional population, demographics, region of the country, and agency responsibilities. In 2012 (per ICMA), the national median salary of county managers was \$117,000. In Clark County, the current annual salary for the county administrator (not a county manager) is \$145,000. Comparatively, the 2013 salary for the Vancouver city manager is \$169,660 and Battle Ground's earns \$134,516.

Perspectives

- The council-manager form is familiar to Americans because it is essentially based on the business model where "stockholders" (voters) elect a "board of directors" (commission or council) who then choose a "CEO" (county manager) to run the "business" (county government).
- Critics of an elected commission (that combines the executive and legislative branches) feel that it increases the risk of disconnect between commissioners' policy skills and expertise, and the daily complexities of urban county government. The same concern exists with respect to an elected county executive. Instead, they favor the county manager form to ensure that appropriate skills and expertise run the executive branch.
- Critics also contend that in the absence of professional management of county affairs, key decisions are more apt to be politically driven.
- Opposition to establishing a county manager position is usually based in arguments that the position would be too powerful and would be accountable to a handful of commissioners or councilmembers, and not directly accountable to voters (as would a county executive).
- The county manager acts as the connecting point between elected officials and professional staff, in comparison to the direct administration of staff by a commission where the legislative and executive functions are combined. Proponents of a county manager position contend it reduces opportunities for political favoritism vis-à-vis county staff and increases professional management.