

Leadership & management

What's my role?

It's an honor to be an elected leader of a community. It means your fellow community members respect you and your good judgment and trust you to be a wise steward of their tax dollars and their city. Community leadership and the ability to proactively address the needs of a city are key elements of successful governance.

Serving as staff for a city is also something special: It is an opportunity to participate in shaping the future and serving the public good. But staff and elected officials can only contribute fully when each person is clear about their duties and respects the roles and responsibilities of others.

Forms of city government

To achieve the goals of city leaders or staff, and to understand each position's unique role, it's important to understand the city's form of government and the specific role of elected officials.

Washington cities operate under two principal forms of government, and the duties of elected and appointed officials are determined by these two types of organization:

1. Mayor-council
2. Council-manager

The biggest difference between these two forms of city government is the role of elected officials, particularly the mayor.

Mayor-council form of government

In the mayor-council form of government (also known as 'strong mayor'), an elected mayor (elected at-large, by the city's voters) serves as the city's chief administrative officer. A city council (elected either at-large or from districts within the city) serves as the city's legislative body. The council has the authority to create and adopt city policies, and the mayor is responsible for carrying them out. The mayor attends and presides over council meetings, but does not vote, except to break a tie.

Veto authority of the mayor is specified in the state laws relating to each city classification or is determined by local charter. In first class cities, the mayor's veto authority is in the city charter. In second class cities, the mayor may veto an ordinance, but the mayor's veto can be overridden by five members of the council. In code cities, the mayor may veto ordinances, but the mayor's veto can be overridden by a majority plus one of the entire council. Town mayors do not have veto power.

Many larger mayor-council cities have a professional city administrator to serve under the mayor and help with administrative and policy-related duties. These cities get the benefits of professional management, allowing the mayor to focus greater attention on policy development and political leadership. Read more about hiring a professional city administrator later in this chapter.

Council-manager form of government

In the council-manager government, the city council is responsible for policymaking, and a professional city manager (appointed by the council) is responsible for administration. The city manager provides policy advice, directs the daily operations of city government, handles personnel functions (including the power to hire and fire employees), and is responsible for preparing the city budget.

Under the council-manager statutes, the city council hires the city manager and can fire the city manager. However, the council is not allowed to interfere with the city manager's administrative duties. There is a difference between making policy (the council's job) and implementing policy (the city manager's job). To be effective, a city manager must have the council's support.

The mayor in council-manager cities is usually chosen by their fellow city councilmembers. In code cities or first class cities, the mayor may be directly elected by the people. The mayor presides at council meetings and is recognized as the head of the city for ceremonial purposes but has no veto power or regular administrative duties.

Roles & responsibilities

Many of the conflicts at city hall and in council chambers are the result of confusion about roles and responsibilities. Conflict tends to arise when someone oversteps boundaries. As unclear as those boundaries may sometimes seem, there is a basic structure to city government, and respecting it can prevent a lot of problems.

Because the city council is the "legislative body," it has the power to make laws and policy. The council also makes rules that govern its procedures, including public meetings and hearings. If the city uses the council-manager form of government, the mayor has essentially the same role as other councilmembers.

For example, the council will:

- Vote to enact the city budget;
- Define the powers, function, and duties of city officers and employees;
- Set employee wages and salaries; and
- Enter into contracts.

The mayor of a mayor-council city, or the city manager in a council-manager city, is the city's chief executive officer (CEO). This person oversees the day-to-day administration and will be responsible for duties such as:

- Monitoring operations and enforcing contracts to make sure that work is done well and within budget;
- Preparing a proposed city budget and presenting it to the council; and
- Reporting to the council on the city's financial well-being and needs.

Typical small city departments

Although some small cities may only have a few people carrying out multiple responsibilities, the following are common departments in a small city.

Administration

Depending on the city's form of government, the mayor or the city manager is the head of this department. Some key administrative tasks include carrying out the council's policies, preparing the city budget, directing the city's daily operations, coordinating the various departments, and keeping the council informed. Some mayors of small cities delegate day-to-day tasks and responsibilities to a city administrator.

Legal

The city attorney provides legal counsel to city officials, departments, commissions, and boards. The city attorney also prepares legal documents, ordinances, and resolutions pertaining to city business and represents the city in litigation. This position may be in-house or contracted.

City clerk

The clerk typically maintains the council minutes and records, catalogs and maintains all official city files and records, publishes all required notices, and prepares council agendas. In many small cities, the clerk and treasurer positions are combined.

Finance/Treasurer

The finance department plans and directs the fiscal operations of city government. The department keeps the city administration informed of the financial picture relating to revenues, investments, and expenditures. The department oversees accounting, purchasing, and licensing; prepares payroll; and often manages data processing functions.

Public safety services

These services include the police department, fire department (which may include emergency medical services), and building department, which enforces state and local building codes and issues building permits. These services may be provided in-house or contracted.

Planning

This department acts as technical staff advisor to the city council, the planning commission, and the city administration. The planner may be involved with decisions involving zoning changes, variances, subdivision applications, conditional use permits, etc. These services may be provided in-house or contracted.

Public works

This department manages the city's infrastructure services. This may include parks, city buildings, street construction and maintenance, water, sewer, and stormwater management. These services may be provided in-house or contracted.

Working with other entities

A city may be its own entity, but it must work closely with other governments and organizations. Particularly for small cities, partnering to provide services, borrow equipment, or rely on others' expertise can be a great way to meet service demands while being a good steward of limited public resources.

Municipal partnerships can be forged among a wide variety of entities: other cities, counties, schools, fire districts, other special districts, states, tribes, federal agencies (in any combination), as well as with private companies or nonprofit organizations. Small cities commonly partner with each other or with a county government for services like law enforcement, jails, courts, animal control, street maintenance, permitting, or information technology. Common contracts with private firms include solid waste, legal, planning, engineering, and other consulting services.

Service agreements

The most common partnership is in the form of a service agreement, involving one agency providing a service for another. In this agreement, the provider agency is responsible for delivering the service as well as exercising administrative and managerial controls over the resources employed in the process.

Service exchange

Sometimes jurisdictions discover that they have complementary resources or expertise and simply exchange services of approximately equal value. There is a certain equity and practical appeal to these exchanges and the added costs are avoided.

Joint service arrangement

In this arrangement, two or more entities share governance of the organization delivering services. Partner jurisdictions have joint responsibility for managing the enterprise for their mutual benefit.

Consolidation of jurisdictions

In this partnership, service functions are permanently transferred to another jurisdiction. For example, a city can be annexed into a fire district and relieved of providing those services. Virtually any transfer of a service must be accompanied by some direct or indirect revenues to offset the costs of service delivery by the jurisdiction accepting the transfer.

Property and liability insurance

If one thing is certain, it's that accidents happen. It's important that a city is covered when unforeseeable incidents occur, whether it's someone tripping on a sidewalk, a disgruntled employee filing suit, or damage to city property.

Most cities are covered by one of three insurance pools that provide property and liability insurance. Depending on the pool, they offer a wide variety of resources.

City leaders should consider potential risks before making decisions and contact the city's risk pool or attorney before acting. Risk managers can provide invaluable advice, legal resources, sample policies, and training resources that will protect a city's assets.

For more information on liability, see the following sections:

- Volunteer strategies for involving your community (Chapter 4)
- Public Records Act (Chapter 5)
- The Fair Labor Standards Act and Washington State Overtime Law (Chapter 7)
- Police and law enforcement service (Chapter 8)
- Streets and transportation (Chapter 9)
- Land use (Chapter 10)

When to consider a professional administrator

The responsibilities of a small city mayor can seem overwhelming, especially to a new mayor who is not trained in management or city administration. Some small cities have resolved this by hiring a professional city administrator to carry out the administrative responsibilities of the mayor.

Why would a city consider hiring a professional city administrator?

- Running a city has become much more complex in the past 30 years. State and federal mandates, complicated human resource issues, liability and risk management, growth management laws, complex contracts and agreements, difficult budgets, and many other tough issues face cities today. It is increasingly difficult for a small city mayor and city clerk to deal effectively with all these issues.
- In mayor-council cities, the mayor often serves as the chief executive officer. However, even though a mayor may be a very effective and visionary leader, they may not have administrative skills or deep expertise in the federal, state, and county laws and rules that city government operates under.

In many smaller cities, the reality is that the clerk-treasurer position has evolved into the “de facto” city administrator. In many places, this has worked well. However, many long-serving clerk-treasurers are nearing retirement, and with their departure a great deal of institutional knowledge and skill will be lost. Many cities have not planned for this loss and will find themselves suddenly in need of knowledgeable new administrators.

Advantages of professional management

A professional city administrator is trained to administer a government. Many colleges and universities offer special degrees in public administration to prepare people for exactly this kind of work. A full-time city administrator also has more opportunities to network with their peers and learn from their experiences. In a time when state, federal, and local laws are becoming more layered and complex, this depth of knowledge can be extremely important.

Disadvantages of professional management

The major obstacle to hiring a city administrator is usually the cost, which may be well beyond the ability of the city to pay without budget cuts in other areas.

Professional administrators are a rarity in cities of less than 2,500 in population. However, in the long run they may be the best investment that a city can make.

It's important to note that in some cases, voters may feel that the mayor is the only person accountable for city operations, regardless of whether there is a hired city administrator.

Know the law

- [RCW 35.18 – Council-manager plan form of government for non-code cities](#)
- [RCW 35.17 – Commission form of government](#)
- [RCW 35A.12 – Mayor-council plan of government for code cities](#)
- [RCW 35A.13 – Council-manager plan of government for code cities](#)
- [RCW 39.34 – Interlocal Cooperation Act](#)