County Government Form

The Public Performance and Management Group
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Prepared for the
DeKalb County Operations Task Force

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Roots of Reform

- The roots of todays discussion stretch back to the early 1900s.
- Urban areas of the US were far less structured than today in terms of business practices, labor laws, consumer regulation, and government operations.
- Yet, we were on the verge of a modern world, as scientific knowledge and industrial production were beginning to expand.
- Most of the professions we know today arose at this time, and many were focused on government, society, and the quality of life.

Reform Goals

- What began as municipal reform had many goals, healing the sick, better sanitation, honest government, better government, and improved efficiency.
- For some, reform also meant improving the living standards for the growing professional classes and breaking the political control of the rapidly growing immigrant groups.
- Thus, reform was partly about instituting professional standards and reducing the role of politics.
- Urban reform was a volatile mix of scientific progress, technological growth, and class conflict.

The Plan

- The city mar ay to separate politics from
- The first city nade the decisions an
- The work of s or failure were plain t
- Of course, th s also plain to see, as dema lectricity, hospitals, ar we take largely for gr

THE PRINCIPLES UNDERLYING THE CITY-MANAGER PLAN

By Richard S. Childs,
Secretary, The National Short Ballot Organization, New York.

The city-manager plan, or, as they more exactly call it in Dayton, the commission-manager plan, provides for a single elective board of directors, which may be called a commission or council. This commission receives nominal salaries or none (except, probably, in very large cities) and the members give only part of their time to municipal work, and thus are left free to continue their private careers without interruption. Their functions are to hire and supervise an appointive chief executive called the city manager, who holds office at their pleasure; also to pass ordinances and to contribute to the city government the amateur and representative element. If, for example, the city manager proposes the municipal operation of a street car line, the commission will have the duty of examining the proposition, first as to its wisdom, and second as to whether such a move accords with public sentiment with which they, as representative native citizens having wide personal acquaintance throughout the city, are supposed to be familiar. If the decision is favorable to municipal operation, they have the further responsibility of seeing that the city manager is competent to handle the job and that he does handle it properly in the years that follow.

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The city manager form of governments thrives today:

- More than 92 million individuals live in cities operating under council-manager government.
- 62% of U.S. cities with populations of 50,000* or more operate under the council-manager form.
- 63% of U.S. cities with populations of 25,000* or more operate under the council-manager form.
- 57% of U.S. cities with populations of 10,000* or more operate under the council-manager form.
- 53% of U.S. cities with populations of 5,000* or more operate under the council-manager form.

Change came later to counties. A few reformed early, but rapid changes accompanied suburbanization, as rural areas began to take on urban responsibilities.

Counties Today

Form of government	1989	2001
Commission	61.5% (1,893)	55.4% (1,697)
Commission-administrator/manager	25.4% (781)	31.6% (968)
Elected executive	13.1% (404)	13.0% (398)
Total	(3,078)	(3,063)

Source: National Association of Counties, *County Government Structure* (1989 and 2001).

Newer Census data is almost available. The most recent data is from the Census, but survey data from the International City County Management Association offers more detail.

Core Forms (Commission)

- It consists of a board of elected officials, generally ranging from three to five, serving multi-year terms, which effectively forms a unicameral legislature with executive powers. The commission or board controls both the legislative process, such as enacting ordinances and passing budgets, in addition to executive powers, such as administering policies and appointing employees.

Core Forms (Manager/Administrator)

- The commission retains its legislative and decision-making dominance, but appoints an executive to implement policies and manage day-to-day county affairs.
- County managers tend to have more power that county administrators, usually pertaining to preparing an executive budget and hiring and firing department heads.
  - There are 25 Georgia counties designated as having commission-manager government and five more that give the manager budgetary authority.

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Core Forms (Elected Executive)

- The elected executive is selected in a countywide election to serve a four-year term in most cases and stands at the head of the county's executive branch, managing its government. The executive often has either voting power in the county commission or holds veto power over proposed ordinances and resolutions. In an effort to balance the powers of the executive and legislative branches, elected executives are often required to submit proposals for commission approval.

Making Choices

- We can offer several perspectives on the choice of forms, which we requirement as a matter of judgment, rather than facts. Our report details the research evidence, but it the work to date is sparse and inconclusive.
  - One basic factual matter is that concerns about form are often misplaced, because the “trim levels” can vary considerably. Political pressures will produce almost infinite variations in how a county government operates.
  - Given that two types of executive authority—by a professional or elected official are inevitably the focus, we should remember that elected county row officers also impede executive authority in county governments.

The font size approximates prevalence.

Making Choices

- Another perspective to consider concerns our changing views of government. Consider that professionals are often associated with efficiency and that executives are often presented as accountable. But, what do we want?
- The early city managers were engineers, truly associated with efficiency. However, effectiveness became more important quite some time ago. We became increasingly concerned about identifying the right things to do.
- The current era takes effectiveness to the next level by focusing more on prevention. We want to do things now that will prevent bad things from happening later.

The End