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The Local Government CEO: Making the Business of Governance Run

The following article/blog was posted March 2, 2010 and was copied with permission by Ron Carlee, Executive in Residence and Director for Domestic Strategic Initiatives, ICMA. As City Manager I often get asked what exactly does a City Manager do. I hope this article will somewhat answer that question. —Robb Corbett, City Manager

What is a city, town, or county manager? This is the question I heard repeatedly as county manager for Arlington County, Virginia, and even more often now that I work at ICMA, the International City/County Management Association. ICMA advances the professional management of all local governments. We require allegiance to a stringently enforced code of ethics, maintain a voluntary credentialing and training/professional development program. We research leading practices, provide technical assistance, and recruit and train the next generation of local government leaders. We do not lobby and are not involved in partisan politics. This blog will provide a glimpse into what city, town, and county managers do and why.

First, a definition: local government managers are the chief executive officers in some 4,300 local governments across the U.S. and a number of other countries. In the U.S., more than 92 million people live in communities that operate under the manager form of government.

Most people are unaware of what managers are or what they do because they operate in a system that is very different from the federal and state governance models we all studied in civics class as children. The federal and state governments are managed by elected chief executives: the president and governors. This political model was created by the Founding Fathers in reaction to the English monarchy. They created a highly decentralized and diffused form of governance. Our founders, with great intent, designed a system that makes it very hard for government to infringe on our most sacred value: personal freedom. The federal and state systems were intentionally designed to work, shall we say, "deliberately." Thus, we should not be surprised that major policy issues, such as health care and immigration, languish without action.

When it came to local government in the

U.S., initially we employed a similar political model of governance complete with elected executives (mayors, board chairs, and county executives) who are elected for defined terms and whose power is checked and balanced by the local legislative body (city/town councils and county councils/boards). The problem with the political model at the local level is the retail nature of what local government does. Cities and towns are formed as municipal "corporations" to provide goods and services upon which complex societies depend: clean water, sewage treatment, streets and roads, trash removal, law enforcement, and protection against fires, disasters, and disease. Local governments also provide amenities to enhance our quality of living: parks, recreation centers, libraries, museums, and arts facilities. Today, most county governments, once seen as only local extensions of the state government, also perform the same range of municipal services as cities and towns.

Not only does the political model of governance often result in partisan bickering and gridlock, too often, it also encourages incompetence and corruption. This statement is by no means intended to paint all elected chief executives as incompetent or corrupt. In fact, I am in this business primarily because a mayor gave me a political appointment at age 21 and taught me that government could do good things for people while being honest and ethical.

Unfortunately, we are constrained by the luck of the draw, i.e., those who are willing to run for office, and those who run the best campaigns. The mayor who inspired me, for example, finished fourth in a field of six when he ran for reelection.

As the U.S. grew more urbanized, and local services became essential to the safe and harmonious functioning of society, people grew uncomfortable with their reliance on the luck of the political draw. Largely in reaction to mismanagement, a "good government" movement emerged during the early 20th century. The reformists involved in that movement created a new governance model for local government. Rather than focusing on politics, this new form of governance recognized that local governments are indeed public "corporations" that provide the services upon which our quality of life depends and which should be managed as businesses.

Called the council-manager plan, this new form of government was designed to get work done, with honesty, efficiency, and effectiveness. Policy authority rests with the collective judg-

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ment of the elected legislative body (council or board). The legislative body -- often referred to as the "governing" body - - appoints a professional chief executive officer, just as the board of directors of any other corporation would do. The CEO, or "manager," is an experienced professional who runs the company. If a manager fails to perform, the council doesn't have to wait for a new election cycle; they simply fire the manager and hire someone more qualified for the job; thus, the power of the executive is "checked" in a highly effective manner; however, a competent manager can provide continuity across multiple election cycles and elected officials. Today, even among local governments that operate under the

political model, smart elected executives hire professional managers to serve as their chief operating officers and run the government's business while the former focuses on politics and community leadership.

So much for the quick history lesson. In future postings, I plan to write about the work of managers: balancing budgets in these difficult economic times; engaging with the public in ways that respect participatory democracy but without being partisan or political; and efforts to build more sustainable and resilient communities. Blog address listed below:

<http://huffingtonpost.com/ron-carlee/the-local-government-ceo>

Budget Committee Meetings Set

The first meeting for the Sutherlin Budget Committee will meet Monday, May 10th at 6:30 pm in the Civic Auditorium, 175 E. Everett Avenue, prior to the Council's regular meeting. At this brief meeting the committee members will be introduced, they will receive the proposed budget document, will elect a chair, co-chair and the budget secretary. City Manager, Robb Corbett, will give his budget message to the Committee.

The next scheduled meetings will be Thursday, May 13th and Monday, May 17th, when the Budget Committee will begin deliberating on the budget and receive public comment. Both of these meetings will begin at 6:30 pm in the Sutherlin Community Center, 150 S. Willamette Street. The public is invited and encouraged to attend this process. If you have any questions call 541-459-2856.



City Survey

We have a City survey on the City Website to get your opinions on City services. Won't you please take a moment and log in to the City website and let us hear from you.

Please log in at www.ci.sutherlin.or.us. You will find it on the home page in the upper right hand corner of the page. Thank you, we appreciate you for taking the time to participate!

Time for Weed Abatement



It's time to start thinking about cutting those weeds and tall grass. As fire season approaches, it's important that all Sutherlin residents do their part in helping to protect Sutherlin from wildfires. Sutherlin Fire Department and Code Enforcement Officer, John Hebard, urges residents to take the lead by cutting tall grass and weeds early this year. Sutherlin has adopted a noxious growth ordinance that requires residents to cut tall grass and noxious weeds by **June 15th** of each year. Noxious growth includes grasses and weeds over 12 inches in length, and vegetation that creates a health, safety, or fire hazard.

The noxious growth ordinance has been in place for many years and has been instrumental in reducing the severity of fires in the community. For questions or concerns contact Code Enforcement Officer, John Hebard, at 459-2211 Tuesday through Friday, 8-5pm. For more information about protecting your home from wildfire contact the Sutherlin Fire Department at 459-1394.

FireMed Renewal Time...

It's time to renew your FireMed. By now you've received your renewal notice in the mail. Be sure and check over your information for accuracy, add or delete any members of the household that may have changed since last year, sign at the bottom and return as soon as possible, either by mail or dropping it off at 250 S. State.

If you're not currently a member of FireMed you might want to become one. All members of the household are covered for the low price of \$52 per year and covers transports to the local area hospitals (Mercy & the VA) For more info call (541) 459-1394.

