

City of La Crosse - Mayor vs. City Administrator Information Paper

Created by Daniel Foth, Director, Certified Public Manager Program and Local Government Specialist, Local Government Education at University of Wisconsin-Madison Extension

Introduction & Purpose

This paper intends to provide information for La Crosse Residents and others regarding the benefits and challenges of

- a. The Mayor-Council form of administration, where the Mayor is both the Chief Executive Officer and the Chief Operating Officer, and
- b. The Mayor, Council, Administrator form of administration, where the Mayor is the Chief Executive Officer and the Administrator is the Chief Operating Officer, providing professional administration. The Mayor and Council legislate policy that the Administrator implements.

The University of Wisconsin Extension's Local Government Education Program prepared this Information Paper utilizing information from the following sources:

- a. City of La Crosse City Administrator Work Group
- b. Research and Interviews
 - i. City of La Crosse Department Heads (anonymous interviews provided by Working Group)
 - ii. Research specifics are noted throughout this information paper. Some of the research used, focused on the benefits of a "City (Village) Manager" as a professional municipal Manager. A City Administrator and a City Manager (Village) bring similar administrative expertise, so the research was used when describing those benefits and challenges. Under Wisconsin law, the City Manager is both the Chief Executive Officer and Chief Operating Officer. This requirement may or may not conform to the descriptive terms used in the research.
 - iii. Interviews with Rebecca Glewen, Former Mayor of Beaver Dam and currently County Administrator/Human Resources Director, Trempealeau County, WI; Jerry Deschane, Executive Director, League of Wisconsin Municipalities, and Sarah Diedrich Kasdorf, Director of Outreach & Member Engagement, Wisconsin Counties Association.
 - iv. Citizen and Others' comments and input. (provided by Working Group)

Background Information

a. City of La Crosse City Administrator History

- i. The City of La Crosse faced this question in the past, most recently in 2012 when the voters defeated a ballot question, with 10,206 votes cast, No votes 5,941 (58.21%) and Yes votes 3,936 (38.57%).
- ii. Former Mayor Mitch Reynolds introduced the need for a City Administrator in his State of the City address on January 11, 2024.
- iii. A Charter ordinance creating a City Administrator was introduced on October 10, 2024.
- iv. The Common Council, through a resolution, created a City Administrator Working Group on November 14, 2024, with a charge to report back to the Common Council by May 2025.

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- v. The Common Council voted, in May of 2025, to refer the vote to February 2026, to provide additional time to gather community input.

Definitions

- i. Mayor-Council Form of Government (*International City/County Manager Association*): Elected Council or board serves as the legislative body. The chief elected official (e.g., Mayor) is the head of government, with significant administrative authority, and elected separately from the Council.
- iii. Mayor - Wis. Stat §62.09(8) (defines the Mayor's position): Defines the Mayor's position as the chief executive officer, observes and enforces City ordinances and state laws, and all City officers and employees discharge their duties, presides at the meetings of the Council, has veto power as to all acts of the Council, subject to override.

The La Crosse Municipal Charter additionally defines the Mayor's position. - Sec. 2-59 - The office of Mayor shall be the full-time principal occupation for the holder of said office. The Mayor shall have all duties and powers permitted by law.

- iv. Administrator – The Proposed Charter Ordinance Sec. 19. – Office of the City Administrator, generally provides the Administrator duties to include: Efficient, effective, and responsible government, by carrying out the Common Council's policy directives, responsible to the common Council, administers day-to-day operations, prepare, then administer the annual operating budget as approved by the Common Council, receive cooperation from all officials and employees so that the City government shall function effectively and efficiently. Also, the Mayor's administrative duties will be transferred to the City Administrator.
- v. Council President – (Wis. Stat. § 64.09(8))
 - (e) At its first meeting, the City Council shall select by majority vote one of its members to function as president. The president shall be the presiding officer of the Council and shall have a vote but shall have no veto power.
- vi. Common Council –(Wis. Stat. § 64.07(1)) The Council shall possess and exercise all legislative and general ordinance powers imposed and conferred by general law or special charter upon the Mayor and common Council and the various boards and commissions not inconsistent with ss. 64.01 to 64.15, and in force in such City at the time of its reorganization and such additional powers as are hereinafter imposed and conferred, but such Council shall not have the power to enact special executive or administrative orders, it being the intent of ss. 64.01 to 64.15 to separate the legislative and executive powers of City government.

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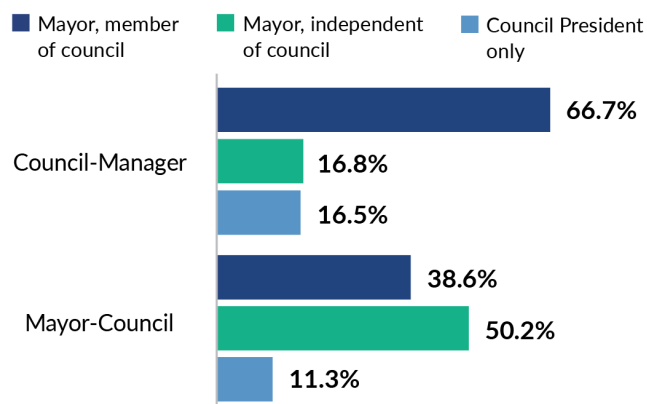
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Professional Administration – Refers to a City (or Village) Manager or Administrator providing day-to-day operational direction and oversight, as the administrative education and expertise are the same for both positions. The roles of a City Manager and a City Administrator are quite similar, and in the research, the titles are used interchangeably. Both positions are part of the Council-Manager form of government, where the City Council sets policy and the Manager or Administrator implements it.

WI Cities/Villages with an Administrator or Manager - Source: UW Oshkosh Whitburn Center

Wisconsin Cities	Totals	City Manager	City Administrator	Professional Administration% of Total
City Manager or Administrator (professional administration)	190	10	91	53%
Wisconsin Villages	Totals	Village Manager	City Administrator	
Village Manager (all in SE-WI) or Administrator (professional administration)	415	9	54	15%

2018 ICMA Municipal Form of Government Survey (Professional Administration)



Form of Government	Number	Percent
Council-Manager	4,386	40.0%
Mayor-Council	4,166	38.0%
Commission	1,302	11.9%
Town Meeting	1,056	9.6%
Representative Town Meeting	59	0.5%
TOTAL	10,969	100.0%

Data are based on extensive research and verification conducted by ICMA staff. Sources consulted include the ICMA Form of Government Survey, state association directories, historical data published in *The Municipal Year Book*, and state and local statutes.

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- a. **Comparable Municipalities List** as defined by the City of La Crosse City Administrator Working Group

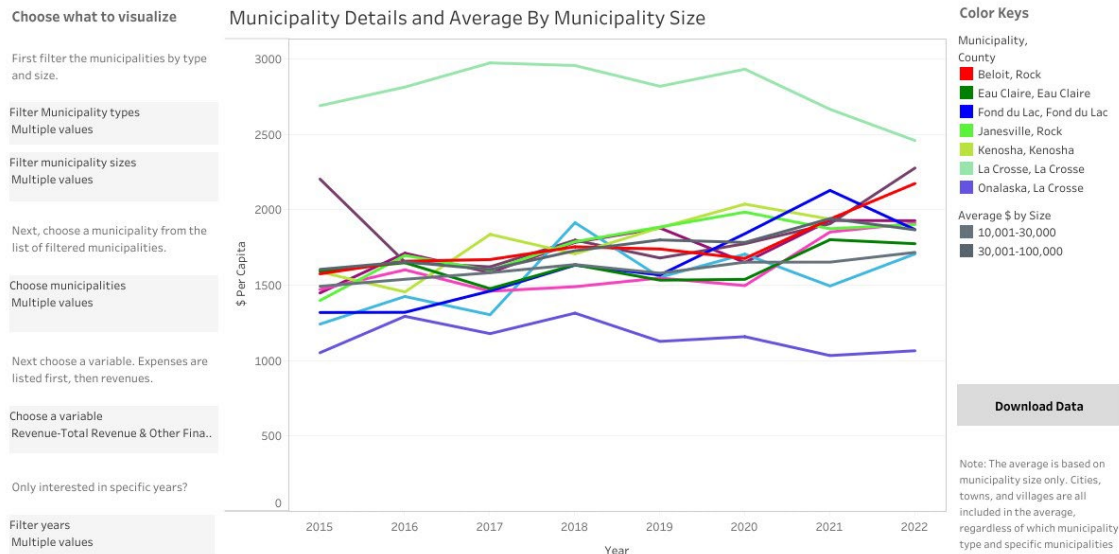
Comparison Cities	Type of Professional Management	Mayor	President / Council	Mgr.-Adm. Appointed by Council	Population
Onalaska	City Administrator	Yes	Yes	Yes	18,975
Beloit	City Manager	No	Yes	Yes	36,449
Fond du Lac	City Manager	No	Yes	Yes	44,678
Wauwatosa	City Administrator	Yes	Yes	Yes	47,289
Sheboygan	City Administrator	Yes	Yes	Yes	49,773
West Allis	City Administrator	Yes	No / Council	Yes	58,950
Janesville	City Manager	No	Yes	Yes	65,911
Oshkosh	City Manager	Yes	No / Council	Yes	65,948
Eau Claire	City Manager	No	Yes	Yes	69,737
Kenosha	City Administrator	Yes	No / Council	Yes	98,484

Comparison Cities -Total Revenue and Other Financing (2022 Data)

Note that La Crosse is the light green line. DOR Data as shown in the LGE Graphing Expenditures and Taxes database. All comparison cities are noted in graph. The color key is limited to 7 vs. all 10 comparison cities.

General Revenue, Expenditures, and Taxes

Select one or more municipalities and a variable to visualize your data.



This visualization was created by UW-Madison Division of Extension. Questions, feedback, or requests for accessibility assistance should be directed to Daniel Foth, daniel.foth@wisc.edu.

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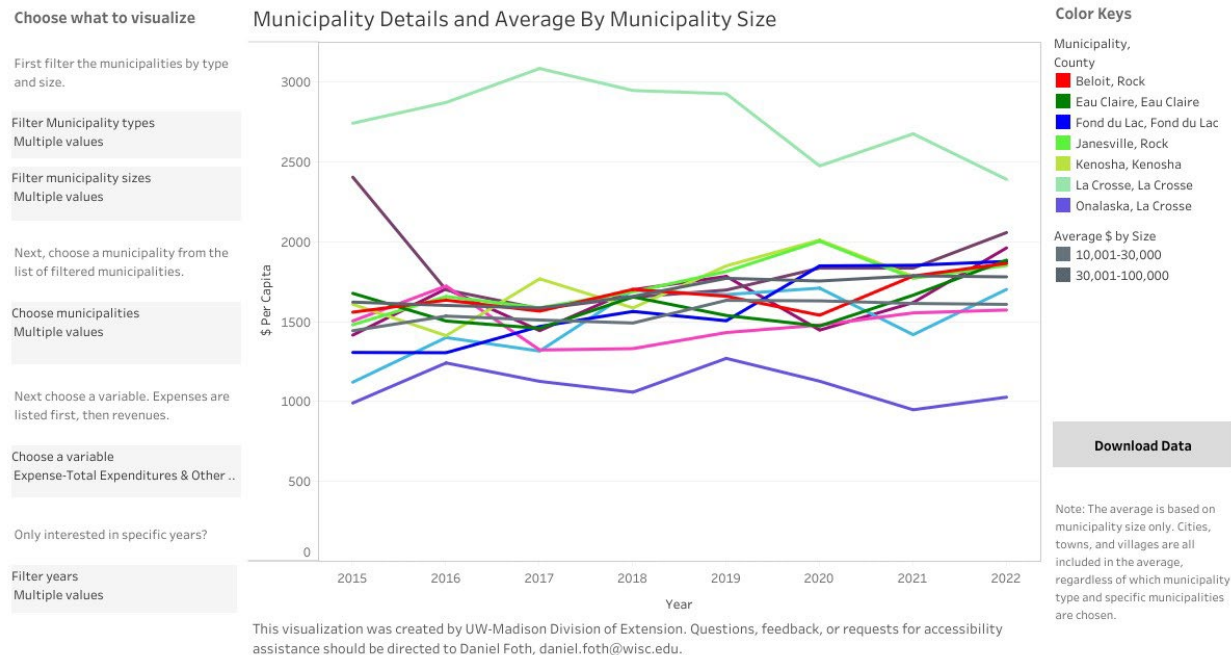
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Comparison Cities - Total Expenditures & Other Financing (2022 Data)

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General Revenue, Expenditures, and Taxes

Select one or more municipalities and a variable to visualize your data.



- b. City Administrator Costs (Compensation range from City of La Crosse Finance Department)
The recommended salary range is \$186,645.89 - \$194,422.80 based on current staff salaries. Still, it may increase if the Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) is approved and/or step increases are provided before filling this position.

Other potential costs include support staff and office space, both of which are not yet determined.

Interviews

Rebecca Glewen, Former Mayor of Beaver Dam and currently County Administrator/Human Resources Director, Trempealeau County, WI. A discussion summary follows.

- When she was the City of Beaver Dam Mayor, she initiated and led the effort to reduce the role of the Mayor and to hire a City Administrator.

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- The City of Beaver Dam had hired a Director of Administration who primarily served as the Finance Director with some administrative duties, but the role did not fully address the broader needs of the City government.
- Her view was that the City was stagnating, not moving forward.
- Transitioning from a full-time Mayor to a part-time role was challenging, as it required stepping back from day-to-day operations and trusting others to lead. Success in this structure demands a willingness to give up some control, both from the Mayor and the Council, to allow the administrative team to manage the City's operations effectively.
- Public engagement was conducted through radio broadcasts, newspaper articles, and Mayoral listening sessions.
- The Council voted for the position change, and with the organizational change, the Mayor's salary was reduced by two-thirds.
- After the organizational change, she continued serving as a part-time Mayor for one year before stepping down with one year remaining in her term to pursue an administrative career as the County Administrator/Human Resources Director for Trempealeau County, Wisconsin.
- As County Administrator, Rebecca has led improvements in communication among department heads, staff, and the community; achieved \$98,000 in insurance savings in her first year through budgeting efficiencies; streamlined departments and services through organizational changes; and strengthened employee culture to boost retention and promote a positive, engaged workplace.

Jerry Deschane, Executive Director, League of Wisconsin Municipalities. A discussion summary follows.

- The League of Wisconsin Municipalities has no formal position on Mayor/Council versus City Administrator.
- City Administrators have been around for over 100 years.
- Potential benefits include stability, the Separation of politics and administration, the Administrator presents options for Council review and approval and is a neutral implementer of Council policies.
- A successful City Administrator/Mayor/Council relationship is founded on clear lines of authority.

Sarah Diedrich Kasdorf, Director of Outreach & Member Engagement, Wisconsin Counties Association (WCA). A discussion summary follows.

- The WCA actively assists its members in providing information on the benefits of implementing the three state statutory approaches. County Executive, Administrator, or Administrative Coordinator.
- WCA provided questions, presentations, and other research it uses to assist their members who are addressing this issue.

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City of La Crosse Department Heads – The Working Group conducted interviews with the Department Heads and provided their comments anonymously. Common comments include:

- Need a CEO to run a \$70 million-plus entity.
- Administrator will provide continuity, consistency, and stability.
- Need to hire the “right person.”
- Better department collaboration
- Concerns about cost and where to put them, the City Hall is full.
- Department head impact
- Citizen buy-in
- How will the Full-Time Mayor and Administrator work together?
- Change will need to be managed.
- Frees the Mayor to be more public facing.
- Continuity of department projects, avoid spending time on projects going nowhere.

What the Research Says:

This paper also utilized the following research.

[Government Structure in Wisconsin, Does Form Matter, Nollenberger and Simmons, University of Wisconsin – Oshkosh, 2016.](#) This research surveyed 141 municipalities with a population over 5,000, and found:

- Concluded that there are few clearly identifiable differences between cities with differing governmental forms - *Page 83*.
- Where the Mayor (versus Council) appoints the Administrator, greater degrees of conflict and less cooperation exist – *Page 85*.
- Also, concluded that the Administrator position has brought professionalism to cities and villages that added the position – *Page 86*.

Smarter, Faster, Cheaper, IBM Global Business Services, Edwards, 2011

- Researched 100 American Cities – *Page 1*.
- Concluded that Cities with City Manager forms of government are nearly 10% more efficient than cities with strong Mayor forms of government – *Page 8*.

Professional Management in Wisconsin Municipalities, Whitburn Center for Governance and Policy Research, 2024, Used research gathered from 188 Wisconsin cities (excluding Milwaukee and Madison) notes the following:

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Whitburn Center - Table 1: Fiscal Characteristics of Cities with and without Administrators

Cities: All Administrators, Chapter 64- Manager and Non-Administrator

Cities	All Administrators	Chapter 64- Manager	Non-Administrator
	<i>(Professional Administration)</i>		
Property Tax Per-Capita	\$ 594.02	\$ 543.87	\$ 528.79
Spending Per-Capita	\$ 1,860.55	\$ 1556.77	\$ 1,877.23
Law Enforcement Per-Capita	\$ 297.18	\$ 256.72	\$ 267.55
General Obligation Debt Per-Capita	\$ 1,821.59	\$ 1,852.27	\$ 1,437.39
General Gov. Spending Per-Capita	\$ 195.98	\$ 125.76	\$ 205.00
Shared Revenue Per-Capita	\$ 195.09	\$ 210.27	\$ 250.34
Tax Incremental Financing (TIF) Per-Capita	\$ 153.59	\$ 112.73	\$ 144.12

Table 1 notes that non-Administrator cities have overall higher spending per capita, lower property taxes, lower law enforcement spending, and lower debt (perhaps due to less capital investment), and reduced use of Tax Incremental Financing (TIF) debt service.

Whitburn Center - Table 3: Agreement with Governance Statements

To what extent do you agree with the following statements, where 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree?

Item	Administrator	Non-Administrator
This local government has utilized strategic planning to frame its mission	3.43*	3.09
This local government has a clear emphasis on treating the citizen as a customer	3.81	3.67
This organization has successfully developed clear measures of program/service performance	3.37*	3.09
We view the executive as a full partner in the governing process	3.94*	3.76
Organized interest groups have significant influence over, Board/Council decisions	2.21	2.37
Board/Council members do what they say they will do	3.48*	3.29
Board/Council members willingly try new things without fear of ridicule	3.30*	2.93
Board/Council members willingly try new things without fear of retribution	3.39*	2.99
Board/Council members are open about how they feel about other members' preferences	3.37*	3.19

*Statistically different at the 95% level of confidence. (a difference of .30 and larger)

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Table Three illustrates that.

- Administrator/Manager-led municipalities have higher functioning Councils (less destructive conflict types).
- Administrator/Manager-led municipalities report higher levels of reform adoption.

Whitburn Center - Table 4: Agreement with Human Resource Statements

To what extent do you agree with the following statements, where 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree? Administrator versus Non- Non-Administrator.

Statement	Administrator	Non-Administrator
I have the necessary resources to do my job well	3.57	3.42
I have the opportunity to “reward” employees that I supervise when they do an outstanding job	2.93*	2.62
Organizational culture is a barrier to attracting new employees	2.38	3.04*
Work/life balance is a barrier to attracting new employees	2.67	3.09*
Employee quality is a barrier to retaining existing employees	2.78	2.92

*Statistically different at the 95% level of confidence (*a difference of .30 and larger*).

Table Four illustrates that.

- Administrator/Manager-led municipalities report slightly improved ability to reward better-performing employees, maintain employee work-life balance, and lower staff turnover rates.

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Benefits and challenges with the Mayor/Council operations form. This table was developed using identified research and comments received from citizens and Others. No attempt was made to verify this information.

Mayor – Council Potential Benefits	Potential Limitations with Mayor as Chief Operating Officer (COO) and Chief Executive Officer (CEO)
a. The current La Crosse Mayor-Council system has been in place since 1856.	a. A Mayor can be elected without any local government knowledge or experience to run a large, complex municipality
b. Direct accountability to residents, through the election process.	b. Time it takes to “learn” what they need to know
c. Committee, Commission, and Department head appointments by the Mayor and confirmed by the Council	c. potential for silos and individual departments to influence their committees and Mayor
d. City staff work within the current system	d. Concentrated Executive and Operations power in one person

Potential benefits and challenges with the City Administrator's operations form (*professional administration*). This table was developed using identified research and comments received from citizens and Others. No attempt was made to verify this information.

City Administrator Potential Benefits	City Administrator Potential Challenges
a. Mayor as CEO and Council Policy Focus	a. A City Administrator requires adjustments to the budget for Salary, Benefits, and support staff.
i. Council and Mayor retain authority over the Administrator	b. The Council must find the right candidate to succeed in the role.
ii. Mayor/Council continue to monitor budget and operations performance	c. Confusion as to Roles and Responsibilities
iii. City Council confirms Department head hire(s) – <i>proposed</i>	d. A poor Administrator may harm the City more than a poor Mayor
iv. The Mayor still appoints Committee and Commission members, confirmed by the Council	e. The Administrator may not stay long; thus, the replacement time and cost could be significant.
v. The Mayor and Council have one direct report, the City Administrator, versus all department heads	f. Unlike a Mayor who often serves as the public face of the City, a City Administrator intentionally operates behind the scenes. Thus, there is more potential for less public communication regarding initiatives.

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vi. Policy – Mayor and Council improved ability to focus on long-range policy	g. Change in leadership structure can be difficult to
City Administrator Potential Benefits	City Administrator Potential Challenges
vii. Collaboration – Mayor and Council improved ability to collaborate with the Council, other governments, and residents to effect policy	h. Administrators are not trained to be political leaders. This may lead to less ambitious or visionary leadership compared to a strong Mayor who can campaign and push a political agenda.
viii. Less focus on staff issues	i. Since the City Administrator is appointed by the City Council rather than elected, voters may feel disconnected from executive decisions, with limited influence over key municipal actions.
ix. Budget becomes a policy discussion	j. Because City Administrators are accountable to the Council rather than the public, conflicts may arise if political divisions exist within the Council, potentially limiting their effectiveness.
b. Administrator – COO	k. May not focus on Council priorities
i. Reports and are responsible to the Mayor and City Council	l. May keep HR issues from the Mayor and City Council
ii. Specific Training and Expertise in Municipal Operations	m. May believe that their training makes them smarter than the Mayor and City Council
iii. Expertise in implementing Mayor/Council policy	n. The transition to a Council-Manager system can be complex, requiring careful planning and communication.
iv. Stability – bridge during Council and Mayor changes	o. May use this time to think that training makes them smarter than the Mayor and City Council
v. Collaboration - Potential Increased focus on efficiency and operations optimization	p. Not a good collaborator
vi. Budget oversight – Administrator provides an overall budget review compared to department by department	q. Tension between the Administrator and elected officials, particularly if there are disagreements about priorities or management styles
vii. Risk Management through better issue understanding and risk identification (short and long term)	r. Better risk management may not be realized
viii. Budget becomes a policy implementation effort	s. Will an unelected Administrator make decisions without sufficient public input or oversight
ix. Potential for lower costs due to better efficiency, collaboration, risk assessment/mitigation, and improved staff collaboration	t. Lower costs may not be realized
x. Provides city-wide quality control and legal adherence by all departments	u. Better quality control may not be realized.

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xi. Improved understanding of City Policy and staff implementation	t. Concerns that a City Administrator could erode the power of the elected Council or mayor
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Citizen and Other Feedback

35 comments from residents and others were received by the City Clerk in November/October 2024.

September-October 2024 Resident Comments Summary					
For	Against	Against having both a Mayor and Administrator	Process concerns	Non-Resident - Commentary in favor	Totals
19	8	2	2	4	35
April - May 2025 Resident Comments Summary					
For	Against	Against having both a Mayor and Administrator	Process suggestions - concerns	Non-Resident Commentary in favor	Totals
8	0	1	3	2	14

What would be the Policy versus Operational Role?

This information was developed through research, citizens, and other comments.

Mayor/Council – Policy role

- Policy creation;
- Budget creation, prioritization, and approval;
- Organization-level goal setting;
- Serving as a bridge between residents and local government;
- Deciding the scope of services to be provided;
- Program creation;
- Approving legislation; and
- Evaluating the Administrator

Administrator – Operations role

- Oversight of day-to-day operations.
- Managing personnel decisions (i.e., hiring);
- Deploying resources across the organization;
- Developing and implementing budgets; and
- Implementing the Council’s policies.
- Reporting on goals;
- City spokesperson

If the City Council Votes for a City Administrator -Now What?

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This information was developed through research, citizens, and other comments.

Projected Timetable-

Item	Projected Timetable (subject to change)
Public engagement and input	July – October 2025
Create Council report	October – November 2025
Submit report to the City Council	November 2025
City Council votes on changing the ordinance (February 2026)	February 2026
Create and finalize the City Administrator position description.	March – June 2026
Advertise and recruit for the position.	July – October 2026
Complete the selection process (applications, interviews, offer)	Complete by January 2027
Negotiate and finalize hiring details	February 2027
City Administrator begins position	June 2027