

May 13, 2003

The Honorable Danny Forrester, Mayor
Town of Dresden
117 West Main Street
Dresden, Tennessee 38225

Re: Some Ideas About Hiring a City Administrator

Dear Mayor:

It is our understanding that you have expressed an interest in whether Dresden should hire a city administrator. Please accept this letter as our outline of the issues that are involved in making this important decision.

Even in small communities, municipal government is often a multi-million dollar business requiring the full-time care and attention of a professional administrator. Many cities have found that city administrators can play a useful role not only in day-to-day management, but also in helping cities to set and fulfill long-range goals and plans. Certainly, Dresden is a large enough community to at least consider making this important change.

Why Hire a City Administrator?

There are a variety of reasons cities decide to hire a city administrator. In many cases, the decision is made when the town's population or budget gets large enough to require full-time managerial attention and often the decision is made in response to a growing or persistent problem. In these circumstances, cities seek a administrator to accomplish the following:

- T Professionalism. The successful operation of a municipal government requires training and/or relevant experience in a wide variety of disciplines – finance, budgeting, personnel administration, organizational theory, strategic planning, research, etc. A city administrator can bring a professional perspective to each of these disciplines. In smaller cities, it is often difficult to find a mayor who has training in public administration.
- T Continuity of Service. Even the very best mayors are in office for a relatively short period of time – and any mayor can be defeated at the end of his/her term. When the

mayor leaves office, the town loses a substantial amount of talent, training, and investment. City administrators can provide continuity when there is turnover on the Board – letting newly elected officials benefit from the administrator’s experience in office.

- T Full-time Commitment. Especially in cities having only a part-time mayor, the addition of a city administrator provides full-time administration of the city government.
- T Empowerment of the Board. A considerable amount of a city administrator’s time is spent in research and communicating the results of that research to the members of the Board. As a result, Board members in towns having a city administrator are better informed, more knowledgeable and make more rational decisions.
- T Non-partisan. A city administrator is non-partisan at all times and is not subject to periodic election. As a result, the day-to-day operation of the city government can avoid the distractions that oftentimes accompany a municipal election. Good, non-partisan city administrators pay close attention to improving the decision-making processes of a town – making sure that these processes are open, fair, and well-respected.

Hiring a city administrator is not a cure-all. But those cities which employ a city administrator generally tend to be better able to solve their problems and to maintain focus on community goals.

Resistance to Creation of City Administrator Position

Cities exploring the creation of a city administrator position should, at least initially, expect some resistance from various segments of the community. For the most part, this resistance stems from a lack of understanding about the position or a fear that the Town is about to be taken over by “outsiders” who will not be responsive to community input. Some citizens may feel that the creation of a city administrator position is the beginning of bigger, more bureaucratic government in the community. These concerns can usually be reduced if the Board fully explains the role of the City Administrator in the community.

Particular sources of resistance may include the following:

- T The Mayor and Aldermen. In some cases, members of the Board may resist the hiring of a city administrator, fearing usurpation of their power or authority.
- T Former mayors/aldermen. In my experience, some of the loudest complaints about

creating a city administrator position have come from former elected officials of the municipality. These arguments are generally of the “that’s not the way we did it when I was in charge” variety. I should point out, however, that some former mayors and aldermen can be very helpful, as well.

- T Municipal employees. In particular, department supervisors may feel threatened by the hiring of a city administrator. Department heads who are used to part-time supervision may be resistant to the prospects of a full-time administrator directing their work.
- T Citizens concerned about high municipal taxes. Some citizens are likely to feel that professional government is also expensive government. There may be concerns that their taxes will be increased to afford the expense of hiring a city administrator. There may also be concerned that the city administrator can unilaterally raise taxes, without Board approval or public notice.
- T Citizens concerned about municipal regulation and bureaucracy. There may be a fear among some in the community that the change to a professional administrator will result in the adoption of new laws and policies – or the aggressive enforcement of existing ones.

Again, the city should expect to hear these concerns as it explores the creation of a city administrator position. A successful effort to hire a city administrator will anticipate these concerns and address them.

The Campaign to Create a City Administrator Position

Any effort to create a city administrator position will begin with the city council. It is absolutely imperative that the council members have enthusiastically embraced the concept before attempting to convince the staff and the citizens of the need for a change. Though it is not always possible, it would be best that the city administrator concept enjoy unanimous support from the city’s elected officials. Because a change in the City’s charter will be required, the change will have to have support from at least 2/3rds of the Board – simple majority support will not be sufficient to accomplish the change.

Care should be taken to fully explain precisely what a city administrator does – and does not do. MTAS, the International City Management Association (ICMA), and city administrators from neighboring communities can be helpful in this regard.

Be careful not to over-sell the position. The following arguments may help persuade the city council to support the creation of a city administrator position, but will ultimately make it difficult for the

newly hired city administrator to succeed:

- T HIRING A CITY ADMINISTRATOR WILL INCREASE THE GRANT FUNDS THE CITY RECEIVES. While it may be true that hiring a professional administrator will increase the number of grant applications filed by the city every year, there is no guarantee that such applications will be funded – especially in light of dwindling State and Federal resources.
- T A CITY ADMINISTRATOR WILL “SAVE HIS SALARY” EVERY YEAR. This argument is sometimes used to address criticisms that the city cannot afford to hire a city administrator. A city administrator has value to a community which often cannot be measured in dollars. What is the savings (in dollars) to the city, for example, of a well-written and uniformly applied personnel policy? Does a professionally managed code enforcement program make any money for the city? In the long term, hiring a professional administrator should result in a more efficiently run government – with the attendant savings to taxpayers one would expect. But these sorts of savings can take time to realize.
- T A CITY ADMINISTRATOR WILL ATTRACT NEW BUSINESS TO THE COMMUNITY. While a city administrator can play a significant role in the attraction and retention of business in town, economic development is a long-term effort which will require sustained involvement from a wide variety of local citizens. No city administrator can do this on his or her own. The city administrator can help orchestrate the effort, but care should be taken to avoid promises that the new city administrator will automatically result in job creation.
- T A CITY ADMINISTRATOR WILL SOLVE STUBBORN, LONG-TERM PROBLEMS. City administrators can help solve certain problems which may plague the city. But it depends on the nature of the specific problems and the amount of authority the administrator will be given to implement a solution. A city administrator who is hired to “clean up the town” will likely fail unless the council gives him/her the support needed for such a hard task. If a town needs “cleaning up,” it is very likely because the city government has not in the past had the nerve to take enforce reasonable nuisance abatement regulations. The same can be said about a variety of intractable problems that cities face. The solution to these problems may require the hiring of a city administrator, but they will also require the support of the council and the community-at-large.

A professional city administrator is not Superman. There are solid reasons for cities to hire a professional administrator without resorting to hype. Here are the talking points I suggest for Dresden:

' A CITY ADMINISTRATOR WILL IMPROVE THE COUNCIL'S DECISION-MAKING. Even the best city council cannot make good decisions if it does not have access to reliable, accurate information. Typically, city administrators provide written reports and analyses to their councils on a wide variety of city issues and programs. Their reports lay out a range of options, along with the advantages and disadvantages associated with each. The result is that mayors and council members know more about the matters brought before the city and are better informed about the possible alternatives.

' A CITY ADMINISTRATOR WILL HELP IMPROVE THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS. Good city administrators are less concerned about the actual decision made by their councils than the processes that were used to make the decision. Was the Board given enough information to make an intelligent choice? Did each of the council have equal access to the information? Was the staff given sufficient input? Was the public kept informed? Did the process assure a fair outcome? A City Administrator's emphasis on assuring a fair process will help the community to understand and support the decisions made by the Mayor and Aldermen.

' A CITY ADMINISTRATOR WILL HELP ENFORCE A PROFESSIONAL CODE OF ETHICS IN CITY GOVERNMENT. Good city administrators comply with the code of ethics adopted by the International City Management Association. This code requires that administrators meticulously avoid conflicts of interest, participation in partisan political activities, and other unethical behavior. The governing board is thus assured that the actions and recommendations of the administrator are rooted based upon the city's best interest.

' A CITY ADMINISTRATOR WILL FORMALIZE AND IMPROVE THE CITY'S PURCHASING PRACTICES. One of the primary goals of a city administrator is to assure that all purchasing is based upon a fair, competitive bidding process, with contracts awarded to the lowest bidder. Usually, purchasing is centralized with the result that every department of the city is adhering to a uniform standard for the acquisition of goods, supplies, services, etc.

' IMPROVEMENT OF PERSONNEL PRACTICES. City administrators will remove hiring from the political process. Applicants for city jobs will be evaluated according to objective standards and job descriptions, employees will be compensated, promoted, or disciplined according to standards approved by the council and without regard to their political affiliation or other "connections." Good city administrators establish clearly defined lines of authority and assure that city employees are not confused about who they answer to. Many council members find it a relief not to be making hiring decisions, deciding which employees to award raises to, etc.

- ' THE LEGISLATIVE AND THE ADMINISTRATIVE FUNCTION OF GOVERNMENT IS SEPARATED. The Founding Fathers recognized the need to keep separate the legislative and administrative functions of government – creating the legislative and executive branches of government. In so doing, the Framers of the Constitution attempted to assure that laws would be fairly applied to all citizens. At the city level, creation of a city administrator position will serve the same purpose. The city administrator cannot pass laws – only the council can do that. At the same time, the council stays out of day-to-day management of the city, avoiding favoritism, etc.

- ' ACCOUNTABILITY. In any organization, efficiency and fairness are improved when accountability is specifically assigned. In communities without a city administrator, accountability is diffuse – divided among the mayor, council and department supervisors – making it difficult to hold a single individual responsible for the success or failure of a program or project. In a city administrator form of government, the Administrator is assigned such responsibility and stakes his/her career on their ability to succeed.

- ' IMPROVED COORDINATION AMONG CITY DEPARTMENTS. A city administrator can assure that each city department understands its role in the local government and that their efforts are not a cross purposes with each other. Communication among department heads is improved through the holding of regular staff meetings, sharing of reports, etc. Decisions are not made until every department is consulted, assuring that no department benefits at the expense of another. Mayors, of course, can serve this function, too – but not on a part-time basis.

- ' REVENUE ENHANCEMENT. A full-time city administrator will focus on ways to increase the amounts of money available for city programs which do not involve raising taxes or utility rates. Among these would be:
 - C Competitive bidding for the cities banking services, assuring low cost banking fees and maximizing interest earned on the city treasury.
 - C Checking tax roles to assure that all properties and businesses in the city boundary are included.
 - C Assuring that the tax assessor is furnished with timely building permit information.
 - C Assuring that distress warrants are issued, without political

favoritism, to collect delinquent taxes.

- C Assuring that late fees and penalties are collected.
- C Auditing cable television, telephone, and utility franchises to assure that they are fully paying the franchise fees charged to local residents.
- C Applying for grants and low-interest loans that may benefit the city.
- C Periodic consideration of user fees to more fairly allocate the cost of programs among the citizens – and avoiding the need for tax increases.
- C Assuring that surplus city property is sold at public auction or bid so as to maximize income (and assure fairness).
- C Assuring that utility meters are scheduled for regular inspection and replacement, making sure such meters are accurate.
- C Assuring that utility deposits are sufficient to cover uncollectible accounts.
- C Performing water loss studies to assure against the cost of undetected leaks.
- C Assuring that annual audits and the city's books are accurate and understandable – serving to improve the city's credit rating.

' DEVELOPMENT OF INTERNAL CONTROLS WHICH PROTECT CITY FUNDS AGAINST LOSS OR THEFT. Good city administrators will centralize the town's cash management system, reducing the number of checkbooks, credit cards, and limiting the number of employees having access to city funds. Attention will be paid to cash management processes which will reduce the opportunities for embezzlement – and remove honest city employees from suspicion of embezzlement.

' DEVELOP INVENTORIES OF CITY EQUIPMENT TO AVOID UNNECESSARY DUPLICATION. Good city administrators develop and maintain equipment lists and look to see if departments can share high-cost items. Such lists also help assure the adequacy of the city's insurance program and aids in the development of replacement schedules.

' ASSURE COMPLIANCE WITH COMPLEX FEDERAL AND STATE

MANDATES. City administrators are knowledgeable about such programs as the Fair Labor Standards Act, the Family Medical Leave Act, the Occupational Health and Safety Act, the Right-to-Know Law, Open Meetings/Open Records laws, etc. and attend regular and periodic training to learn of new developments. Part-time mayors often do not have the time to attend such on-going training.

DEVELOP EMERGENCY PLANS, TRAINING, ETC. City administrators will work with FEMA and TEMA to assure that a plan exists to respond to any natural or man-made disaster likely to occur in town. During an emergency, a city administrator plays an invaluable role in coordinating emergency response, disaster relief, etc.

There are, of course, many more areas in city government where a professional administrator will play a critical role. It should be sufficient to say that well run organizations do not happen by chance or accident. The operation of efficient, fair, well-run organizations require the full-time attention of well-trained, full-time, professionals who can be held accountable for their management.

Once the Council has “signed on” to the city administrator concept, an effort will have to be made to seek community support. Again, MTAS, ICMA, and local city administrators can help in this effort. The amount of effort will, of course, depend upon the level acceptance (or resistance) that already exists in the community.

The Council should attempt to enlist the support of non-government leaders in the community – representatives of business and industry, civic organizations, influential retirees, and others who can help “sell” the idea. The Council should develop a list of such citizens, recruit them for service, bring them to meetings where the concept is discussed, and then let them go about organizing the community in favor of the plan.

Ultimately, the Council would hold a public hearing to discuss specifics and to answer any questions.

At this point, the Council would need to vote to request the Tennessee General Assembly to change its charter to allow the hiring of a city administrator. I am attaching some sample city charters for towns having a city administrator – these will provide a general idea of how Dresden might re-write their charter. MTAS will be pleased, of course, to assist Dresden in any re-writing of their charter, submission to the General Assembly, etc

Conclusion

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A city administrator can significantly improve the operation of local government. The success of a city administrator form of government is not automatic, however. Success will depend upon two critical factors: (a) community support for the position, and (b) the abilities, talents, temperament, and effort of the chosen city administrator. As it explores this decision, it is important that Dresden pay special attention to these factors and understand that the success of the program hinges on a thorough, realistic, fair, and open examination of the issues involved. MTAS will be pleased to help you in this regard.

Sincerely,

THE MUNICIPAL TECHNICAL ADVISORY SERVICE

David Angerer
Municipal Management Consultant