

HOG RIVER JOURNAL

Politics of Change: Mayor vs. Manager

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Hog River Journal Autumn 2004

www.hogriver.org

In 2002, the voters of Hartford approved an amendment to the city charter, effective January 1, 2004, which fundamentally altered the form of government in the city. The primary change provided for the direct election of a “strong” mayor, replacing a supposedly nonpartisan, apolitical city manager as the operating head of the city .

That successful amendment referendum followed several failed efforts and was prompted by a growing dissatisfaction with the existing system of city governance. A similar degree of discontent with the form of municipal government was extant almost sixty years earlier. Then, the city was led by a “weak mayor,” a position seen by many as lacking sufficient focused responsibility and therefore organizationally incapable of leading the city in meeting the challenges of the latter half of the twentieth century. The perceived solution was to depoliticize city government and turn to professional management to foster the continued growth and development of a prosperous, dynamic city.

In the mid-1940s, Hartford was a successful and thriving commercial and industrial municipality. The population of the city had grown over 10 percent since the 1940 census, to an estimated 184,000, largely due to an influx of workers and their families to fill war-related jobs in the city and immediate suburbs. While manufacturing provided the largest number of jobs in the city, wholesale and retail trade and the insurance and financial services sector also expanded in the postwar era. Hartford was among the top ten municipalities in the country in per-capita income.

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resources, and inferior standards.

Beneath the apparent affluence, however, many civic leaders, particularly those from the business community, were becoming more vocal regarding their increasing concerns about the future. One of the principal sources of anxiety was the potential for major companies to relocate from Hartford to the suburbs, following the example of Pratt & Whitney Aircraft, which had moved to East Hartford in the decade before the war. A critical factor in those potential relocation decisions was the tax burden levied by the city. Many in the business community attributed this to the highly partisan and complex system of municipal administration. Hartford was then led by a biennially elected mayor who served as the presiding officer of the twenty-member city council, the board of aldermen. Five aldermen were elected in a citywide vote while the remaining fifteen were elected from specific wards; like the mayoral candidates, the aldermanic contenders were chosen from party-endorsed slates to terms concurrent with the mayor's. The mayor had veto power over council decisions but could be overridden by a simple majority resulting in what is often described as a weak mayor-council system of municipal government. In addition to the mayor and board of aldermen, the city government included numerous boards and commissions. Some were headed by elected officials while others were staffed by mayoral appointees with terms that overlapped that of the mayor who named them. The local chamber of commerce, in a study comparing Hartford to other cities in and out of the state, claimed that the city suffered from "the disproportionate cost of government, arising partly out of its cumbersome and outmoded form."

In 1945, the incumbent Republican mayor, William A. Mortensen, convinced of the deficiencies inherent in Hartford's government structure, gained approval from the Republican-dominated board of aldermen to appoint a Charter Review Commission. The resolution called for the commission to consider amending or altering the current system and organization of city government, submit suggested revisions to a voter referendum to be held concurrent with the 1946 elections, and present voter-approved changes to the Connecticut General Assembly for final approval.

Mayor Mortensen named nine members to the bipartisan commission, all of whom were well-known business, civic, or political leaders. Lucius F. Robinson, a prominent Republican attorney,

was appointed to serve as chairman. John H. Hurley, a former Democratic alderman, was named cochairman. The majority of the remaining members were attorneys, including J. Agnes Burns, one of two women appointed to the commission; the other, Mrs. John R. Larus, was an officer of the Connecticut League of Women Voters. The two major newspapers in the city, the Hartford Courant and the Hartford Times, praised the mayor's appointments and commented favorably on the importance of the task the committee was undertaking. In its initial comments the Hartford Times, seen as generally supportive of Democrats in the city, did not urge the adoption of any particular change in the form of city government. The Hartford Courant, more outspoken in support of Republican goals, enthusiastically backed the creation of the Charter Review Commission and editorially urged the adoption of council-city manager government even before members had been named.

Any expectations that the commission's task was to be free of political considerations ended with the 1945 mayoral contest to succeed Mortensen, who had decided not to seek reelection. The Democratic candidate, former mayor Thomas Spellacy, endorsed a new charter for Hartford. He claimed his experience would be helpful in securing a "model charter" for the city. His Republican opponent, Cornelius Moylan, was more circumspect in his comments; Moylan claimed he also favored charter reform but noted that his role as mayor would be strictly to carry out the will of the electorate. Despite or, perhaps due to, his equivocation concerning any specific charter reforms, Moylan soundly defeated Spellacy and Republicans increased their majority on the board of aldermen. Mayor-elect Moylan's real views concerning charter reform would not become known for some months.

The Charter Review Commission scheduled a series of public meetings beginning in mid-November. At the first, the former chairman of the Republican Town Committee, Colonel Richard J. Goodman, urged the adoption of a council-manager form of government, observing that West Hartford, Hartford's largest and most affluent immediate suburb, had enjoyed the benefits of that system since 1919. Several other speakers, including a number of former Hartford mayors, condemned the inefficiencies of the current structure and spoke in favor of council-manager government. Later public forums sponsored by local radio stations, the League of Women voters, and the chamber of commerce also featured speakers who favored a council-manager system. One such enthusiastic proponent was

the city manager of Schenectady , New York , a city similar in size and economic circumstance to Hartford . Equally enthusiastic, but holding an opposing opinion, was former Hartford Mayor Dennis O'Connor, who likened the council-manager system endorsed by the Schenectady visitor to the Nazi government under Hitler, an opinion certain to arouse an emotional response in 1946.

A majority of the commissioners favored a “strong mayor.” However, there was continued pressure from the business community in favor of a council-manager government.

The city-manager system was not a new concept of municipal governance. It was first adopted in Staunton , Virginia in 1908. The theory of city-manager government was predicated on a belief in ‘scientific management’ and a conviction that political control of a city led to cronyism, misapplication of financial and human resources, and inferior standards of accomplishment. In the view of many committed to improving municipal government, the answer to those problems was the professionalism inherent in a trained city manager. A survey conducted a few years before the start of World War II revealed that over 450 American cities had adopted the city-manager system; besides Schenectady these included Rochester , New York ; Kansas City , Missouri ; and Dallas . Within Connecticut New London and Stratford had followed West Hartford’s lead.

The public meetings of Hartford’s Charter Review Commission concluded early in 1946, and commission members began to draft the proposed new charter. Despite the positive opinions expressed at earlier public meetings, newspaper accounts suggested that a majority of the commissioners had moved away from the much discussed council-manager system and instead favored a “strong mayor,” with a smaller council and a radical realignment of city boards and commissions. However, there was continued pressure, particularly from the business community, in favor of a council-manager government. The chamber of commerce released a survey which revealed that respondents overwhelmingly favored a governmental system led by an experienced city manager, supported by a smaller, more responsive council of elected officials.

The recommendations of the Charter Review Commission were made public in May 1946. Not surprisingly, and counter to earlier newspaper reports, Chairman Robinson announced that the

commission was proposing a “completely reorganized and streamlined city government” headed by a city manager, acting as the city’s chief executive, and a common council of nine members, elected citywide on a nonpartisan basis. Eleven of seventeen existing boards and commissions, their roles seen as redundant or superfluous, were to be eliminated, their duties assumed by functional departments headed by individuals reporting to the city manager. For the first time, the city would benefit from a merit-based, professional personnel system, eliminating the inefficiencies inherent in then-current patronage appointments. Robinson reported that if the proposed charter gained voter and legislative approval, the city would have achieved “home rule,” obviating the requirement that any future charter amendments would require approval by the Connecticut General Assembly; this was an especially important consideration in the city’s continued growth, given the control of the state legislature by representatives from small, largely rural communities. In noting that the commission’s proposals would “promote and advance the best interests of the city,” Robinson reported that the commission would hold another series of public hearings and hoped to complete the final report and recommendation by early August, well in advance of the scheduled November referendum.

The publication of the commission’s report and the first public meeting to consider its recommendations energized opponents of charter revision. A number of city employees, among them Daniel Coll and Thomas Reardon, stated that a city manager would lead to less responsive government, controlled by a very small, presumably wealthy, minority of city residents. Others claimed the tax burden on individual voters would increase, not decline as claimed by proponents. John Bailey, an attorney and leading Democratic spokesman in the city, objected to the singularity of the commission’s recommendation, which denied voters an opportunity to consider other options. Bailey, who later in the year was elected chairman of the state Democratic party, urged a “strong mayor” for the city, someone who would be committed to the city and its residents, in contrast to a city manager, “a transient staying until someone offers him a better job.”

The Charter Review Commission’s final report, incorporating some of the suggestions made at the public hearings, was released in midsummer. The report specified the retention of separate fire, police, and buildings departments rather than merging those functions into a single department of public safety. The report also spelled out the method of selecting a councilman to serve as mayor, the nominal

head of the city. None of the changes altered the core recommendations of the committee. The report was approved by all but one member of the Charter Review Commission and sent to the town clerk in early August 1946.

The publication of the report led to more serious challenges raised by aldermen and other city officials. Fearing for their incumbency, some aldermen claimed that any charter changes had to be approved by the board of aldermen before consideration by the voters. Mayor Moylan, still maintaining his official stance of public neutrality, agreed, stating that the aldermen had to act on the plan before he would announce his position. The Republican registrar of voters, Andrew Nystrom, a long-serving city official and consistent critic of the council-manager concept, announced that the charter revision would not even appear on the municipal ballot unless the board of aldermen approved. More ominously, charter reformers believed that Moylan opposed the committee proposals and, joined by Nystrom and other city officials, wanted a special referendum to consider the recommended changes rather than pose them to the voters at the state elections in November as originally planned. Moylan and his allies anticipated that voters opposed to the charter reform plan would be more likely to vote in a special election than those residents committed to the commission's proposals; a simple majority of "no" votes would defeat the reform proposal.

Proponents of charter reform were not idle. They formed the Citizens Charter Committee, headed by former mayor Mortensen, to actively counter Bailey's objections and the potential administrative roadblocks posed by Moylan, Nystrom, and their allies on the board of aldermen. The Hartford Times ran a number of front-page stories, favorably reporting the experience of other cities with council-manager governments while the Courant published a series of debates concerning the various elements of the commission's recommendations, focusing on council size, nonpartisan and at-large elections, and the establishment of a merit-based personnel system for the city. Both newspapers also made clear their objections to a special election and enlisted the support of the League of Women Voters and the American Veterans Committee in that position. The Hartford Times, despite its seeming neutrality at the outset of the charter reform question, claimed those who sought a special election were "politicians, entrenched or hoping to be entrenched. crackpots, Communists or others

who are chronically against things.”

Despite the objections of the newspapers and their civic allies, it was apparent by mid-September 1946, that a majority of aldermen favored a special election. Mayor Moylan couched his support of the anticipated decision in the guise of political equality stating, “I am a great believer in democracy.” On September 30, by a vote of 12 to 7, the board of aldermen approved a special election for December 3, 1946 to consider the proposals developed by the Charter Review Commission. Worse yet, it was learned that some Republican aldermen were considering adding a sales tax provision to the charter question, with full knowledge that such a provision, even if endorsed by Hartford voters, would not receive approval from the General Assembly, effectively killing charter reform. However, that provision proved even too much for die-hard charter opponents; negative public reaction and increasing political unrest prompted the board to drop the tax provision. Public sentiment was also a likely factor in the decision to reject Nystrom’s recommendation that the number of polling places in the city be reduced, supposedly to the benefit of poll workers scheduled for duty in unheated polling locations. Mayor Moylan and his Republican allies on the board prevailed on the issue of a special election but the voters would have to consider only a single question, presumably in a familiar but perhaps cold, polling location.

Mayor Moylan, not to be outdone in hyperbole, compared an appointed city manager “with Stalin as the national manager in command with absolute power.”

Just two weeks before the special election, charter reform opponents announced the formation of the bipartisan Second Charter Oak Committee, named to associate their efforts with colonial Hartford’s expressive act of political independence. Named as chairman was Police Commissioner Anson T. McCook, a Republican with extended family ties to the city. John Bailey, the recently elected state Democratic leader and Edwin Donnelly, a Republican school board member, were the committee’s cochairmen. Donnelly reportedly observed that the proposed charter had Communistic tendencies and former Mayor O’Connor persisted in his attempts to associate charter reform with dictators. Mayor Moylan, not to be outdone in hyperbole, compared an appointed city manager “with Stalin as the national manager in command with absolute power.”

As the election neared, both sides continued their efforts to sway voters. In a not-so-subtle effort to influence Irish American voters, the second largest group of foreign-born residents in the city, the Hartford Times reported that the United States was not the only country with city manager communities; Ireland had a number of such cities, including Dublin . The Courant published favorable comparisons between the wages and benefits enjoyed by town employees in West Hartford and their counterparts in Hartford, many of them Irish American and opposed to reform, fearing the loss of their jobs or a reduction in pensions. However, another article in **the Times with ethnic overtones almost backfired on the charter reformers**. In an editorial listing notable city officeholders opposed to charter reform, 20 of the 28 men listed bore Irish names. Some reform opponents quickly seized on the editorial as a prejudicial effort to influence public opinion. That claim was undermined by an editorial in the local Catholic newspaper, The Catholic Transcript , expressing the opinion that the Hartford Times was not guilty of anti-Irish bias.

The December 3 referendum proved to be a rout of the anticharter forces. Voters overwhelmingly endorsed the recommendations of the Charter Review Committee by better than two to one. The final tally showed 21,089 in favor, 9,748 opposed, a turnout of nearly 38 percent of the 82,043 registered voters. The measure carried in all fifteen wards. The expectation that a special election would favor those opposed to the council-manager proposal was proven wrong; voter participation was barely half that of the regular November election but those committed to reform were apparently more determined to cast their ballots. Mortensen and his allies, particularly those business and civic leaders who had long sought reform, won a major victory while John Bailey and others opposed to the charter were forced to endure a long-term defeat, ceding control of the city to a city manager not subject to their political influence. Unexpectedly, Mayor Moylan lived only three more weeks after the vote. He died on Christmas Eve 1946.

Any lingering hope by charter opponents that the will of Hartford voters might still be thwarted was

focused on the General Assembly. Reform opponents were particularly committed to deleting the provision requiring nonpartisan primaries for council seats. They were also confident that the “home rule” condition would be stricken, perhaps requiring another city referendum to consider the entire charter question. Neither hope prevailed. The proposed charter was reviewed by the committee on cities and boroughs. Despite testimony from numerous city residents, the committee unanimously approved the charter as submitted. Full senate and house approval quickly followed, virtually without debate. Governor James L. McConaughy signed the charter reform measure on May 1, 1947. Hartford finally had the machinery for a new government.

Clearly the adoption in 1946 of the council-manager system did not end the political struggle for control of city government in Hartford . During the several elections immediately following adoption of the new charter nonpartisan council candidates endorsed by the apolitical Citizens’ Charter Committee were successful, but in 1953 a slate of candidates endorsed by Democratic State Chairman Bailey was elected. This established a pattern of Democratic control of the city that has existed to this day almost without interruption. Another charter amendment, enacted in the late 1960s, sanctioned overtly partisan endorsements in city council elections and direct election of the mayor, but the powers of that office were still limited; control of the city rested with the city council and the city manager appointed by the council. Several subsequent attempts to establish a “strong mayor’ by again amending the charter foundered on competing personalities seeking political and personal advantage.

The charter amendments of 2002 ended Hartford’s half-century experience with a city manager-council form of government. The decisions of 1946 were reversed and the critical role of an elected mayor as chief executive officer of the city was reestablished. After an interruption of over fifty years, Hartford is again led by a direct representative of the voters of the city, a leader more closely tuned to the political will of the electorate than to the conceptual expectations of professional management.

Donald F. Fenton received his undergraduate degree from the University of Connecticut and a masters degree in history from Trinity College . This article stemmed from research he did at Trinity.
