

## **Elect or Appoint; Who Should Run Municipal Government**

Recently the debate has been revived in the City of Williamsport as to whether an elected City Council should hire a City Manager or whether Williamsport should keep its Mayoral form of government. It should not surprise the electorate to learn that the debate between appointment and election of public officials has been going on since before the founding of the republic. At the Constitutional Convention which promulgated the United States Constitution the argument was made that the presiding officer, later called President, should be appointed by the high chamber of Congress, the Senate. Prior to the advent of the Jacksonian Democracy, a revolution in electoral government which really started with Thomas Jefferson, it was common for public officials to be appointed.

With the advent of modern notions of democracy, elections became all the rage, right down to local dog catchers. The public became enthralled by the idea of accountability through elections until incumbents started to become nervous. After the Civil War period, there was concern by the old land gentry in the South and the new powerful monopolists in the North that elections might become a tether on the ambitions of the rich and powerful. Academic literature followed, suggesting that certain officials were not appropriate for election. The argument was made that judges should not be elected but rather appointed, as in the federal system. The local municipalities, cities and even larger geographic areas should be governed by technocrats, which became the norm in socialist and communist models of government.

What is the best form of municipal government today? There are those who point to the example of Lock Haven as a city which has struggled and survived

through an appointed Manager system. Others have pointed to cronyism which has permitted essentially unaccountable City Council members to manipulate government through weak and powerless bureaucrats.

A number of modern academic studies have attempted to look at the question of municipal governance in an empirical way. One of those studies conducted by Tim R. Sass, Department of Economics, Florida State University, examined the relationship between government expenditures and elected as opposed to appointed executives. The results were consistent with prior opinions which argued that electoral competition “is sufficient to constrain the behavior of elected officials. Indeed, the results suggest that voter preference is not only determinative for level of municipal expenditures, but the structure of local government as well.” In other words, elected executives tend to be more accountable to the people and more careful about municipal expenses. It is more difficult to hold a divergent group of City Council members accountable because their elections are typically staggered and they will necessarily have differing points of view. The election or defeat of a Mayor, on the other hand, will assure more fundamental and dramatic change.

Other empirical measures with respect to the argument of municipal governance attempt to look at the corruption index, the ability to “get things done” and voter “satisfaction.” All of this data is necessarily “soft” but nevertheless bares examination. Backroom cloak and dagger deals are said to be more frequent in the city management scenario because there is no one person who becomes a focus of municipal policy. Voter satisfaction appears to be the same in City Manager versus executive elected municipal government depending upon how well the municipality performs.

There are other forms of city government to consider as well. Some additional choices would involve a smaller City

Council, a City Council based upon regionalization and term limits. How to make municipal government, and government in general, more accountable, efficient and to function with higher integrity is a never ending conundrum. To argue that the propensity of the electorate to favor one term Mayors implies that the current form of government should be changed, suggests that incumbency is a good thing. Others would suggest the opposite and say that four years is long enough for any Mayor.

Ultimately the citizens of the City of Williamsport will drive the question of how they want to be governed by whom they elect to City Council. There is no panacea to solve any city's problems other than engagement by citizens at every level of decision-making. More people need to go to debates; more people need to ask questions, more folks need to attend City Council meetings and each of us must think about our priorities for the City of Williamsport. If we are engaged as citizens, the debate about whether a Manager should run the City of Williamsport on behalf of the City Council is likely to melt away like a puddle on a sunny summer afternoon.

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