



Local Issue Brief

The American Institute of Architects • Government Advocacy • Current Issue Position and Analysis

City Governance

City Governance Key Points:

- *The city commission form of municipal government was first implemented in Galveston, TX, after the immense hurricane of 1900.*
- *Portland, OR remains the only large city to still use the city commission form of government, most recently surviving a 2007 ballot initiative trying to change the structure of government.*
- *Phoenix, AZ is the largest city in the United States utilizing a council-manager form of government.*
- *Staunton, VA was the first city to elect a city manager, in April of 1908. City managers can now be found in local governments around the world.*
- *In many Northeastern states, town meeting governance is still popular. This allows any registered voter to attend the town meetings to speak and vote on a variety of policy, administrative and budgetary issues.*

AIA Position

The American Institute of Architects (AIA) supports architects in their efforts to increase their civic participation. The AIA believes that through such participation, architects will be better positioned to use their business and professional expertise to guide the city, to affect community design and planning, and to position themselves for political office.

As **Isaac Benton**, AIA, contends, “My background as an architect, planner and small-business owner has helped me gain extraordinary credibility in my capacity as a city councilor, and now council President, in Albuquerque. The issues around growth, public input, streets, sustainability and the urban environment are key in local government.”

Action Sought

The AIA urges its members to learn more about the type of government that operates in their community. Depending on how the power is shared between the separate branches of government, there are different opportunities for an individual’s civic participation.

Explanation and Justification

Most American cities have representative municipal governments that consist of some combination of mayoral and city council power. The power relationship varies city to city, as city governments are formed and mature in a way that best serves the interests of the community.

The **city commission** government centralizes the majority of the power with the elected city council members. The commission generally consists of members elected to fulfill specific municipal positions, such as public safety, parks and recreation, etc. A single member is usually elected to the generally ceremonial title of chairman or mayor (leading to council-led governments often being called ‘**weak-mayor**’ governments).

As council-led governance matured, a city manager was added, to implement the policies of the council, and to oversee the day-to-day operations of the city. This **council-manager** government still sees the power centralized within the council, but as Raleigh, North Carolina Councilman **Thomas Crowder**, AIA, describes, when the city is “run by a professional manager, politics are minimized in the hiring and firing of personnel, delivery of services across the entire city, and in developing the budget and other policies.” He goes on to note that in a council-led system of government, decision making is more heavily influenced by the wants and needs of constituents, and influencing public opinion can often be far more productive than attempting to influence fellow council-members themselves.

The executive form of government relies on a popularly elected mayor as the nexus of power in the city. In the **strong-mayor** form, city budgets, appointments, appropriations and most other administrative duties flow through the office of the mayor. It is favored in larger cities for its unparalleled efficiency in decision making.

For architects interested in making headway in local politics, please visit our Citizen Architect homepage at <http://www.aia.org/advocacy/local/AIAB051121>.