

Foreword

This booklet was first written in order to provide a simple, down-to-earth approach to analyzing a city so that a city manager might spot potential problem areas before they develop into a crisis. In spite of the numerous and excellent publications now on the market, this booklet still has a niche for beginning city managers. Its original premise of “keeping it simple” is still correct. You keep it simple by identifying the priorities and working on them. However, I have added another premise and that is to “stay focused on the priority problems.”

This second premise was inspired by Davis Brinson’s work in Chapter II, “The First One Hundred Steps for a New City Manager”, which identifies 100 issues that can and will confront a new city manager. As Brinson explains, even though the 100 issues are not all-inclusive, they will provide the new city manager with “at least a rudimentary umbrella of knowledge about major city activities.” From this knowledge, the new city manager will be better able to identify priority issues and focus on them. I concur with Brinson’s thoughts because it is quite easy to be overwhelmed in your new city, regardless of your previous city managerial experiences.

You cannot focus on everything, so by reviewing the 100 issues listed by Brinson, you have a better sense of the city’s priorities. Chapters III - VI provide examples of how to identify priorities from the multitude of issues facing a city and how to focus on those priorities. Certainly the old cliché, an army can only fight so many battles at one time before it is overwhelmed, also applies to a city manager and the multitude of issues awaiting in a new city. If one takes on too many issues without regard to their priority, then it is easy to be overwhelmed.

My remedy for keeping it simple is based on something learned when my Volkswagen (VW) automobile required extensive work several years ago: I used a simple, illustrated, “fix it yourself” VW book which enabled me to dismantle and repair my VW in the home garage without specialized tools or knowledge. I did not have to be familiar with the theory of combustible engines, the pros and cons of air-cooled engines, or the maintenance record of the VW. I think that the same approach is applicable to city management; therefore, that is the purpose of this publication.

One word of warning. Unlike a VW automobile, of which millions were manufactured with few differences, city management positions are each different due to City Council and community tradition, financial conditions and political behavior. This publication should be read with that in mind. For example, when my VW repair book directed me to tighten a nut on a bolt seven turns, I did exactly that without any problems; because the nut and the bolt cannot debate the issue. However, tightening the budget in your community according to Government Finance Officers Association standards may be impossible because the City Council and interest groups demand otherwise. So, one element of city management with which no publication can help is acquiring knowledge of your community and using that knowledge appropriately to manage your city.

Hopefully this publication will impress upon you that the problems confronting a city are infinite, while the resources available for addressing the problems are finite. This means that you must understand the importance of determining priorities, informing the mayor and city council, and selecting a proper course of action.

Good luck.

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