

The Selection Process

Once the deadline for submitting resumes has passed and all applications have been received, the selection process begins. Included in the process are those activities leading to the final selection of a city manager. Principal steps in the selection process include reviewing applications and determining finalists, interviews with finalists, and post-interview activities.

Reviewing Applications And Determining Finalists

The process leading to the determination of finalist candidates is extremely important because it separates all applicants into two groups--those who will receive further consideration and those who won't. Unless this process is done with both care and consistency, it is possible that outstanding applicants will be overlooked.

The selection process begins with a review of all resumes that have been submitted. While a deadline for submitting resumes is typically established, this is usually viewed as a planning deadline and all resumes are considered, even if they arrive after the planning deadline. Depending upon circumstances, a city can receive in excess of 75 resumes for a vacant city manager position. The review of resumes will take time, so guidelines need to be developed to assist in narrowing the total to a smaller group for further investigation.

Unless the city council has retained an executive recruiting firm to assist in the selection process, it must develop a system for reviewing resumes. One approach is to give each council member a fixed period of time to review all resumes, and to recommend a smaller number for further consideration. Someone on the city council should then act as a coordinator to group the common choices together, and to resolve whether those who were not picked by the majority of the city council will receive further consideration. Another approach is to ask a committee of the city council to assume responsibility for the application review process, and to ultimately recommend a group of finalists to the city council. In fulfilling this responsibility, the city council will sometimes ask the Council of Governments to assist in the narrowing-down process.

Several things are particularly important in the overall resume review process. These include the following:

- The resumes should all be acknowledged. Ideally, this will be done when they are received, and the acknowledgment will incorporate a broad timetable that provides the city council with adequate review time before finalists are selected.
- The process should move forward as promptly as possible, consistent with a

thorough review. If the review process takes too long, it is a signal to the candidate that there is a lack of leadership and the process is not well organized. For this or other reasons, the city council can lose good applicants who simply have second thoughts and change their mind.

- Consistent with applicable State law and the advice of the city attorney, the confidentiality of resumes submitted for the city manager position should be maintained. Contact with others as part of the review process is important, but it should be coordinated with the applicant as a courtesy and to avoid jeopardizing the applicant's current position. While there may be times during the application review process when it is helpful to check with others, this type of contact normally occurs after the city council has narrowed down to a smaller group those who will be subject to more thorough work-related background checks.

Those reviewing the resumes should compare them with the recruiting guidelines that were developed at the outset of the recruiting process. In this way the factors that were most important to the city council will be taken into account in narrowing down to a smaller group of applicants. Things to look for in the review process include:

1. Has the applicant had experience working in a city of comparable size?
2. Has the applicant had experience with the variety of services delivered by the city?
3. Has the experience been comparable in terms of size of budget and number of employees?
4. Has the applicant worked in a similar geographic area? Is the applicant likely to be comfortable in a rural or urban setting, and familiar with the problems faced generally by the city?
5. Has the applicant had broad administrative and supervisory authority, or has the experience of the applicant been limited to research or administering activities in specialized areas?
6. Has the applicant worked directly with a city council? Does the applicant have experience working with citizen and other groups?
7. What is the employment history of the applicant? Does it suggest a pattern of broad experience and increasing responsibility? Does the applicant have good tenure with each employer, or is there a pattern of frequent movement from one position to another?
8. What is the current salary of the applicant? Does it fit within the parameters of the city?
9. How have the resume and letter of transmittal been prepared?
10. Does it suggest a real interest in the city manager position?
11. What does the resume itself tell you about the person?

When the resume review process has been completed, it should be possible to narrow the total group of applicants to a smaller group consisting of perhaps 10-15 applicants. This smaller group will be subject to more thorough background checks and will itself ultimately be narrowed to a smaller group of applicants, who will be

designated as finalists and invited to the city for an interview. Two considerations are important at this point:

- The city council should resist the temptation to select finalist candidates before background checks have been completed. When reviewing resumes, some may suggest that the city council pick those that they feel are best, and move right ahead to interview. However, while resumes are helpful as an initial screening device, they can also be misleading. They tell you nothing about the personal characteristics of the individual in terms of ability to work effectively with people. They can also leave an exaggerated impression of the actual background, responsibilities, and accomplishments of the individual. It is neither practical nor necessary to conduct background checks on all applicants, but an important interim step is to conduct background checks on a smaller group as a prelude to and basis for selecting finalists.
- Be sure the background checks that are completed are work related. While there is nothing wrong with talking with community leaders and other general references regarding the strengths and weaknesses of a candidate, the purpose of the background checks is to provide the city council with a solid reading as to the candidate's ability to handle the job from an administrative standpoint, and to work effectively with the city council, staff, and people generally. Consequently, background checks should be conducted primarily with people who know local government, understand the job of city manager, and who have a firsthand knowledge of the performance of the applicant in this area. Such work-related background checks would normally be based on conversations with current and former council members, staff members the applicant has worked closely with and/or supervised, and others who have worked closely with the applicant. As indicated previously, confidentiality is extremely important, and the city should be sure to coordinate with the applicant in terms of any background checks that are undertaken.

When conducting background checks as a basis for narrowing to a group of finalists, several guidelines are important:

- The background checks should be done by the same person to assure consistency.
- Similar areas and questions should be covered with respect to each applicant to provide a good basis for comparison.
- Talk with enough people to get a consistent reading as to the strengths and weaknesses of the individual. If a person can only say good things about the applicant, ask them directly about the applicant's weaknesses.
- Use the background checks as a vehicle to learn about the person's ability to work effectively with people, as well as to develop a more complete understanding of the applicant's work experience and specific accomplishments.

Based upon the result of the background checks, and keeping in mind the city council's recruiting guidelines which indicate what the city is looking for in a city manager, the city council should be able to narrow to a smaller group of finalists. The city council obviously makes the final determination as to who and how many will be interviewed, but the finalist group should be large enough to expose the city council to an array of personalities. In most cases, a minimum of five should be interviewed as finalists. The city may also wish to establish a back-up group in case some of the finalists decide not to pursue the position.

Interviews With Finalists

Once finalists have been selected, a representative of the city council should call each finalist and confirm appropriate next steps. Among other things, the city should:

- Confirm with each individual that he/she has been selected as a finalist. Each individual should be congratulated and made to feel that the city council is delighted to have their resume. At the same time, the continuing interest of the individual in the position should be confirmed.
- Advise each finalist of the nature of the interview process, as well as the date and time. Also confirm how many will be interviewed, whether there are any in-house candidates, and when you expect a decision to be made. Indicate that this will all be confirmed in a follow-up letter.
- Unless State law or the advice of the city attorney dictates otherwise, assure the applicant that the confidentiality of the process will be maintained. If the names of finalists are to be made public, the applicant should be advised of this, and given the opportunity to withdraw.
- Indicate that a more complete packet of information about the city will be mailed directly to the applicant's home. Material to be included might include:
 1. Current budget and financial report
 2. Recent bond prospectus
 3. Organization chart
 4. Personnel rules and regulations
 5. List of council members, their bios and length of service
 6. Copies of city council minutes for the past several months
 7. General plan and land use map
 8. Statement of city goals, objectives, priorities
 9. Any other material that would be of particular relevance, given the goals and objectives of the city council

- Confirm the city's policy on reimbursement of expenses in conjunction with the interview. While this is obviously a policy decision to be made by the city council, it is clearly the practice of most cities to reimburse candidates for any actual out-of-pocket expenses. These typically include transportation, room, and board. Some of the finalists may have submitted their resume in response to an invitation from the city but, regardless, city reimbursement of expenses is another way the council can demonstrate their interest in the candidate. This tends to reinforce the positive nature of the process, and can also make the difference in some cases as to whether the finalist is able to attend. When there is strong reluctance on the part of the city council in this area, some cities have agreed to share expenses with the candidate, or have indicated they will reimburse all expenses after the first trip.

With respect to actual travel arrangements, the city can offer to handle all reservations, transportation, and related matters. However, this can be quite cumbersome and time consuming for the city. In most cases, the city confirms the time and place, and lets the finalist make their own arrangements. Finalists tend to prefer this approach.

With respect to the actual interview process, the city council obviously has the ability to structure an approach it feels comfortable with and believes will permit it to make the best decision regarding a new city manager. Typically, the city council meets individually with each finalist for an hour or more. During this time, the council has an opportunity to question the individual about a variety of matters such as overall work experience, specific accomplishments, career objectives, alternative approaches to practical problems faced by the city, and similar matters. The candidate, of course, also has an opportunity to assess the council as a group, and to ask questions.

The interview process should be well organized and the setting comfortable. A discussion leader should be designated, and all council members should participate. While the process provides the city council with an opportunity to improve its knowledge of finalists, it also results in an impression on the part of the candidate, which can affect interest in the position. In part, the process should help to cement the interest of the candidate in the position. In this regard, the city council may wish to arrange for additional events such as a dinner or a tour of the city.

Most often interviews are simply discussions between the city council and the finalists. Sometimes, however, the city council may choose to supplement the interview process, and may invite staff or leaders in the community to participate. For example, finalists may meet with the department heads or other staff to review departmental operations in more detail, or to receive a tour of the city. Similarly, finalists may meet with selected community leaders to receive their input on matters they consider important to the city. If this is done, it should be emphasized that it is to provide the candidate with additional information about the city, and that these individuals will not be involved in the actual selection of the city manager. Obviously the city council should use care in selecting the individuals with whom the finalists will meet, and the

importance of maintaining confidentiality should be emphasized to all concerned. Also, care should be taken to assure that the process does not confuse, offend, or take the candidate by surprise.

If the spouse is invited to accompany the finalist candidate, it is also important that this part of the process be well organized. While the spouse may prefer to have some free time, the interests of the spouse should be determined and accommodated. This could include a tour of the city, an opportunity to talk with realtors and visit homes, and a briefing on schools in the area. Spouses should not be included in a formal interview process, or made to feel like they are being interrogated in any way. As with the candidate, including the spouse should be viewed as a courtesy that lets both the city council and the spouse get to know each other, and should result in the same positive impression concerning the city and the city manager position.

During both the formal and informal meetings between the city council and the finalist, discussion and questions should focus generally on those things referenced in the recruiting guidelines. Obviously discussions should stay within acceptable legal parameters which suggests, in part, no questions concerning politics, religion, and sexual preferences.

Don't spend time during the initial interview talking about compensation, except to ask about the candidate's expectations. If the council is aware of general expectations, they can take this into account in making a final selection and, in subsequent negotiations, on total compensation. To discuss this subject in detail during the initial interview deprives the council of a chance to consider more substantive questions, and can result in a defensive or argumentative atmosphere with a candidate before it is even clear that the position will be offered.

Post Interview Activities

When the interview process is over, one of two things usually happens--either one person has emerged as the clear choice of the city council, or they have narrowed down to several that they would like to pursue further.

If there is one clear first choice, the city council, through its representative, can simply notify the candidate, confirm the willingness of the candidate to accept the position, and then move to finalize a total compensation package and other arrangements.

If, on the other hand, there are still two or three applicants to whom the council would like to give further consideration, several options exist. The city council may wish to invite the candidate and possibly the spouse back to the city for a second interview. A longer interview, coupled perhaps with some sort of function like a dinner, can oftentimes provide the city council with the insight it needs to make a final decision. Other options include conducting more extensive background checks with

individuals in the candidate's current community, or making an on-site visit to the candidate's current community. Either of these latter two activities can be helpful to the council in reaching a final decision, but it is essential that they be coordinated and conducted with the full advance knowledge of the candidate.

A final guideline is that the council should take whatever time is necessary to arrive at a comfortable and well-reasoned decision. However, the interview process and related follow-up activities should also move forward as promptly as possible so as not to lose momentum or encourage serious applicants to have second thoughts. Of course, once a final decision has been made, all of the other applicants should be notified. Until all arrangements have been finalized with the first-choice candidate, the city council should table notifying the other finalists. In the event they are unable to satisfactorily conclude negotiations with the first-choice candidate, the city council may want to reopen discussions with some or all of the other finalists. Again, from an image standpoint, it is important that all applicants learn first from the city, as opposed to hearing about it from another person or reading it in a newsletter or newspaper.

Finalizing Arrangements

Once the city council has made a decision and the individual has indicated a willingness to serve as city manager, there are several things that need to be done in order to finish the process. Among them, a compensation package needs to be negotiated, and several transition activities need to be completed before the individual relocates and begins work.

Negotiating Compensation

The process of negotiating a total compensation package needs to be handled correctly by the city council to assure that relations with the new city manager start well.

The Texas Municipal League collects salary and benefits information for City Managers across the State of Texas and this data is available through a subscription-based service. Information collected in the survey includes: salaries, deferred compensation, performance incentives, if an employment agreement is used, and what type of severance package is offered. Specifics about this survey and subscription information can be found at <http://www.watersconsulting.com/cityofficialsurvey/>.

Initially, the mayor or councilmember responsible for negotiating compensation with the new city manager needs to be someone who can deal firmly with the individual and, at the same time, be friendly, flexible, and realistic. Friendly in the sense that this approach will cause both parties to relax in what can be for either an unusual and tense situation. Flexible in the sense that there may well be more than one way to meet the financial objectives of the new city manager, and negotiating implies a willingness to

consider options and alternatives in pursuit of an acceptable package. Realistic in the sense that, no matter how beautiful and desirable the community, the city council realizes that the person, except in highly unusual circumstances, will not accept the new city manager position for an amount equal to or less than his or her present salary.

When negotiating compensation, base salary is the place to start, while always keeping an eye on total compensation. It is important that the person negotiating compensation on behalf of the city council understand what is overall acceptable to the council. The current salary of the applicant plus an indication of compensation expectations as expressed at the interview should give the council an idea of salary parameters. If an executive recruiting firm is being used, they are often asked to serve as an intermediary between the council and the candidate and to, in fact, negotiate compensation. TML or TCMA can be helpful in terms of providing information regarding the salaries of city managers in other Texas cities.

As a prelude to actually negotiating a compensation package, the city council should ask the person who has been selected to provide the council with a written itemization of current total compensation, along with a copy of a current employment agreement if one exists. This can serve as a starting point for the council, and permit a proposed compensation plan to be prepared that is both competitive and realistic.

Oftentimes there will be no negotiation on some benefits that are similar from one city to another. For example, medical insurance or holidays were provided there, and they are also provided here. The variables will most likely relate to cash compensation, that the city manager may have. Elements of a total compensation package typically include:

- Base salary
- Deferred compensation
- City car or car allowance
- Retirement plan
- Medical and related insurance (e.g., dental, optical, life, disability)
- Severance
- Vacation
- Holidays
- Sick leave
- Membership dues, and conference attendance

After receiving a listing of the current total compensation package of the new city manager, the city council or its representative should outline a proposed package that leaves the individual complete with regards to basic benefits, provides an appropriate step forward in cash-related benefits, assures no reduction in take-home pay, and deals with any particular financial objectives that the new city manager may have.

As a part of the compensation negotiation, there will undoubtedly be some issues that don't relate to the ongoing compensation package, but may well have significant financial implications for both the city and the applicants. Here again, both parties need

to be flexible and realistic in dealing with these issues, which may include:

- **Moving expenses**--it is common for a city to pay the onetime cost of the city manager to move his or her family and household furnishings to the new city. Sometimes a *not to exceed* figure is agreed to based on estimates from moving companies.
- **Temporary housing**--Until the new city manager is able to sell their former home and/or relocate family to the new city, an allowance is often provided for temporary housing in the new city. Typically, this amount is sufficient to cover the cost of a modern furnished apartment or condominium. Again, both parties may agree to a fixed time period or amount.
- **Commuting expense**--As with temporary housing, the city council will oftentimes agree to reimburse the city manager for periodic trips to visit family, or for the spouse to come to the new city for house-hunting purposes.

There are occasions where a city council is unable to reach agreement on compensation or other matters with its first-choice candidate. In these instances, the council typically enters into negotiations with its second-choice candidate. As indicated previously, when an agreement has been finalized, all other applicants should be promptly notified.

Once salary, benefits and other finance-related issues have been resolved, it is time to address a few remaining and important transition activities.

Transition Activities

Transition activities refer to those things that occur, or should occur, between the time the city council selects a new city manager and that person begins the job. Such activities can be grouped under three broad categories, as follows:

Employment agreement-- An employment agreement is simply a written summary of the terms and conditions for employment for the new city manager. While such an agreement typically does not refer to a specific term of employment, thus permitting either the city council or the city manager to terminate for cause or at will, it does generally include a section providing the city manager with severance pay for a fixed period of time if terminated by the city council.

Employment agreements are increasingly used to avoid any misunderstanding on the part of either the city council or city manager on the basic terms and conditions of employment. While not a lengthy legal document, they are typically drafted by the city attorney, although the city council sometimes provides the city manager with an opportunity to prepare a first draft for consideration. The International City/County

Management Association recommends the use of employment agreements, and has published a report and sample agreement.

Once the city council and city manager have reached agreement on compensation, start date, method and timing of announcing the selection in the city manager's new and old city, and similar matters, the next step is to prepare and execute the employment agreement. At a minimum, a formal letter of understanding should be prepared.

General assistance--To affect a smooth transition, the city council should, at its initiative, offer to provide general assistance as the new city manager prepares to move to the city. Such assistance might include introductions to realtors and bankers, assistance to the spouse in finding suitable employment, and similar types of activities.

Getting started on the right foot--In addition to providing general assistance as needed, there are some additional things the city council can do, at its initiative, that will be constructive, and in the best interest of all concerned in terms of getting things off to a good start. These include:

- **Orientation meetings**--The city council should arrange to introduce the new city manager to department heads and city staff. While the city manager may have met some of these people during the interview process, a special meeting or reception can be a pleasant way to turn responsibility over to the new city manager. In addition, the city council may wish to arrange similar meetings, briefing sessions, and/or receptions in order to introduce the city manager and family to community groups, civic leaders, and citizens in general.
- **Council orientation and review of objectives**--While some of these things may have been discussed during the interview process, it is desirable to have an initial work session with the city manager where initial expectations on both sides are discussed and clarified, and city goals and objectives are reviewed. This initial communication can help both the city council and the city manager be sure their relationship is working in the same direction from the outset.
- **Performance evaluation**--Using the goals and objectives as a starting point, the city council and city manager should agree to discuss annually or semi-annually the performance of the city manager. This established and more formalized process helps to assure that communication between the parties is maintained, that progress is monitored, and that goals and objectives are reviewed and refined on a regular basis.

When a city council commits itself to a comprehensive recruiting process, on its own or with the assistance of an executive recruiting firm, the chances of a long-term relationship that will be of benefit to the city council, city manager, and the community are greatly enhanced.