

Wisconsin City/County Management Association



City of La Crosse, WI
ATTN: City Council Members
400 La Crosse Street
La Crosse, WI 54601

Dear Councilman Newberry and Council Members:

It is our understanding that you will be asked to vote on adding the position of Administrator to your City Staff. On behalf of the Wisconsin City/County Management Association (ILCMA), we strongly encourage you to vote “yes” on this matter to ensure accountability, professionalism, and effective governance as outlined below. WCMA is a professional association whose mission is “... to promote professional and ethical local government management by providing an inclusive, collegial environment for its members’ pursuit of public service excellence.”

City Administrators deliver tangible results. The city administrators help to ensure that local government operates efficiently, fairly, and in alignment with the needs of residents. Professional city administrators are tasked with implementing policies set by the city council and mayor and transforming their decisions into tangible benefits for the community. Decades of success in many Wisconsin communities demonstrate the effectiveness of this model.

City Administrators strengthen accountability. Under this structure, the city council, elected by the people, hires a professional administrator to oversee daily operations and serve as CAO of the government operation. This ensures that governance remains focused on serving the public, with the administrator directly accountable to elected officials. If expectations are not met, the board is empowered to make a change.

City Administrators uphold integrity and transparency. A city administrator does not have the power to override board decisions, advance personal agendas, or withhold critical information. Their sole responsibility is to implement policies in a manner that serves the best interests of the entire community.

City Administrators adhere to a strong Code of Ethics. Since 1924, professional municipal managers and administrators have adhered to rigorous ethical standards set forth by the International City/County Management Association (ICMA). These guidelines reinforce their duty to act with integrity, impartiality, and commitment to the public good. And they are peer-enforced, ensuring thoughtful adherence. Because governments with professional administrators limit the potential for political interference, they have a stronger track record of fiscal responsibility, fairness, and transparency.

Good governance requires both leadership and structure. While the effectiveness of any government ultimately depends on the individuals serving within it, a strong and structured system enhances accountability, efficiency, and fairness. A city administrator is the best framework to ensure that local leadership can meet the needs of residents today and in the future. This model has proven successful in communities across Wisconsin, the United States, and beyond.

Councilman Newberry approached us with a few specific questions that we want to address to the full council:

1. Does the ordinance structure make sense from an operational standpoint?

We do think that this ordinance makes sense in terms of the appointment of the administrator, the transition plan and the enumeration of duties. There are some items we would recommend be added or changed as indicated in 2 and 3 below.

2. Are the role definitions clear enough, or are there areas that will create confusion?

There are three areas where there should be further discussion about roles.

First is the fact that the new administrator does not appoint three key department directors – the Police Chief, the Fire Chief and the Library Director. A number of communities do operate in this fashion and perhaps La Crosse wishes to have these staff members appointed by the Mayor or Council. It is however a plan that can lead to issues in the future. Sometimes these department directors believe that they have special access to the Mayor and Council and do not work cooperatively with the administrator. For example, if one of the departments wants to submit a budget request that will negatively impact the general fund, the administrator (charged with fiscal responsibility) may decide that this request is imprudent in a given year and choose not to put it in the budget submitted to council. This can set the Council up for choosing sides in the public discussion about the budget, picking winners and losers and possibly engendering ongoing conflict in the organization.

The second area is with regard to what happens in an emergency. Clearly, the mayor has retained emergency powers here. What happens in a true emergency is that an emergency operations center is established. Usually, a public safety official is the lead commander of the emergency and in charge of logistics and conducting on the ground response. Many staff members will have roles to perform during the emergency – social services, volunteers, animal shelters, utilities infrastructure, communications, debris removal, the list is long. The city administrator is in the best position to direct these ancillary efforts while the Mayor is in the best position to speak with the public about the emergency and the city's response. There should be a policy committee consisting of the mayor, administrator, city attorney and public safety personnel. The way this ordinance is written it seems as though the Mayor is in charge of everything. In reality that is impractical. Perhaps there can be a policies and procedures document to more fully explain what roles the different staff members will play so there is more clarity.

The third area is with regard to city staff. This ordinance says that the city administrator shall “hire, evaluate, discipline and remove department heads. . . .” It would be clearer for staff members and Human Resources if it said “hire, evaluate, discipline and remove department heads and all subordinate officers and employees in such departments. . . .” This would make it

clear that the city administrator is responsible for implementing a consistent city culture around employee hiring and discipline, not leaving it to individual department directors to have their own cultural norms.

3. Anything you'd do differently if you were drafting this?

- The city administrator should be evaluated annually. This could be added to Section I(c) or included in the employment agreement.
- Consider if it is wise to have three department directors who are not responsible to the city administrator.
- Include responsibility for all city employees as part of the administrator's duties.
- Clarify the role of the city administrator during times of emergency. This could be in a different document.
- In Section VI(a), there is a slight typo. The last reference should read "Section **I**(f)"
- In Section VI(b), add that the search process shall include "participation by the Mayor and a subcommittee of the Common Council." The exact language is not important here, just that a member or two of the Common Council should be part of the preliminary search process before bringing the finalists to the entire Council for interviews.

4. What are the biggest implementation challenges La Crosse should anticipate?

This depends on the organizational and community culture. Staff members may be used to working more closely with the Mayor and Council members. Some may have a hard time reporting to a new leader and may want to continue their special relationships with the Mayor and/or council. This will be true for community members as well. The Mayor and Council need to be aligned in their support for the city administrator and remain firm in letting folks know that they need to work through that person and that office to get things done.

We fully support the move to hire a local government professional administrator in La Crosse and see many benefits to it as outlined above. We urge La Crosse City Council Members to vote "yes" in support of this effort.

Rachel Gorsuch Sorensen
Executive Director, WCMA

NOTICE: WCMA and its staff and members are not attorneys representing the City of La Crosse and nothing in this letter should be construed as legal advice.