

Disclaimer: *The following document was prepared by Council Member Aron Newberry in his individual capacity as the primary author of Charter Ordinance File 26-0741. It is provided to ensure that residents, Council members, and community stakeholders have access to complete and accurate information about the legislation prior to the August 5th public comment hearing.*

This document does not represent an official position of the City of La Crosse, the Common Council, or any city department. It is the work product of an elected official communicating with constituents about legislation he has authored and submitted through the official process.

Charter Ordinance File 26-0741 is currently under official review and is expected to be published on Legistar no later than Friday July 17th. This document is being shared publicly to ensure residents have the maximum amount of time to review and consider the legislation before the August 5th public comment hearing.

Executive Summary

This document explains the source, rationale, and expert input behind each major of the proposed City Administrator Charter Ordinance. The ordinance would create a professional City Administrator position responsible for day-to-day management and administration of City operations while preserving the Mayor's role as the City's elected political and policy leader.

The proposal responds to concerns identified during review of the 2024 ordinance, including the absence of a fixed contract term, lack of an evaluation process, unclear lines of authority, unresolved transition questions, and insufficient definition of the Mayor's continuing role. The revised ordinance also incorporates legal review by the City Attorney, input from department heads, guidance from municipal management professionals, and benchmarking data from Wisconsin and comparable communities across the country.

The central purpose of the ordinance is to modernize the City's administrative structure while maintaining democratic accountability. The Common Council would appoint and evaluate the Administrator,

the Mayor would continue to provide public leadership and policy direction, and the Administrator would provide professional management of City operations.

Key Objectives

- Create professional administrative oversight for increasingly complex municipal operations.
- Clarify the distinct roles of the Mayor, Common Council, and City Administrator.
- Establish clear accountability for budgeting, department coordination, and organizational performance.
- Create a single operational chain of command while preserving access to information for elected officials.
- Ensure compliance with Wisconsin statutes governing charter ordinances, removal authority, mayoral duties, and transition.
- Provide a transparent, professional search process and a clear transition timeline.

How to Read This Document

Each section below identifies what is being explained, the source of the language, the rationale for including it, the expert or stakeholder input received, and the resolution or recommendation reflected in the final

draft. The document is intended to serve both as a public-facing explanation and as a technical record of how the ordinance evolved.

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Title

“A CHARTER ORDINANCE to create Section 20 of Appendix A of the Code of Ordinances of the City of La Crosse creating the position, duties and responsibilities of the Office of the City Administrator and removing duties from the Office of the Mayor.”

Source

City Attorney (Stephen Matty)

Rationale

Charter ordinances must follow specific statutory formatting requirements under Wis. Stat. The title must clearly state both what is being created and what is being removed. This language satisfies that requirement.

Section I(a): Office of the City Administrator

Creates the Office of City Administrator to ensure efficient, effective, and responsible government in a context of increasing municipal complexity, while acknowledging La Crosse's structure of a full-time Mayor and part-time Common Council.

Source

UW-Extension presentation (December 2025); consistent with 2024 charter amendment language

Rationale

Establishes the “why” of the ordinance. UW-Extension identified that La Crosse's operational scope has outgrown its current governance structure. The ordinance explicitly recognizes the city's unique institutional setup. This rationale is further supported by the 2025 year-end budget overruns of \$830,000 across two departments with no mid-year oversight mechanism to prevent or flag them.

Expert Input

- **UW-Extension:** Emphasized administrative complexity as the core justification
- **Department Heads:** Questioned whether this was the specific problem being solved
- **ICMA (Rob Carty):** Provided data confirming 212 Wisconsin entities and 341 comparable U.S. communities between 45,000 and 65,000 population operate with professional management, establishing that this is a mainstream governance model not an experimental one

Resolution

Retained UW-Extension framing as it provides clear policy rationale.

Strengthened by new data gathered since February 2026.

Section I(b): Appointment, Term of Office, and Removal

Appointment

Administrator appointed by majority vote of those present and voting, based on merit and professional qualifications.

Source

Standard municipal management language; validated by WCMA

Rationale

Ensures merit-based hiring using standard Council voting thresholds.

Term of Office

Administrator serves under a renewable contract of three (3) to five (5) years.

Source

WCMA best practices; UW-Extension presentation

Rationale

Addresses concerns raised about the 2024 ordinance's indefinite term, which created instability. A fixed contract balances accountability with continuity.

Expert Input

- **2024 Ordinance:** Indefinite term

- **UW-Extension:** Flagged indefinite term as problematic
- **WCMA:** Typical contracts range from 1–3 years
- **WCMA 2025 Salary Survey:** Confirms employment contracts are standard across Wisconsin municipal administrators, with most administrators serving 1–5 years in current role

Recommendation

A 3–5 year term provides greater stability than WCMA’s minimum while avoiding an indefinite appointment.

Removal

Administrator may be removed by a three-fourths (3/4) vote of the full Council, consistent with contract terms.

Source

City Attorney (Wis. Stat. compliance)

Rationale

2024 ordinance's "Mayor with approval of $\frac{3}{4}$ of Council" language violated Wis. Stat. This version complies with statute by making removal a Council-only action.

Expert Input

- **2024 Ordinance:** "Mayor with approval of $\frac{3}{4}$ of Council" (legally non-compliant)
- **City Attorney:** Must be Council-only removal to comply with Wis. Stat.

Section I(c): Evaluation

Administrator evaluated jointly by the Common Council and Mayor using agreed-upon performance metrics established jointly by the Director of Human Resources, Council and Mayor.

Source

Original drafting, responding to Department Heads' memo (January 2026)

Rationale

Directly addresses the question “How is the Administrator held accountable?” Joint evaluation preserves accountability while ensuring the Mayor has a meaningful role.

Expert Input

- **2024 Ordinance:** No evaluation
- **Department Heads:** Requested clarity on accountability
- **WCMA:** Recommends annual evaluation

Section I(d): Residency

Administrator must reside within 15 miles of the city within three months of appointment.

Source

City Attorney (Wis. Stat.)

Rationale

Residency language was provided to ensure statutory compliance. The 15-mile standard mirrors common emergency-personnel requirements.

Expert Input

- **2024 Ordinance:** No residency requirement
- **City Attorney:** Required if residency is imposed; must comply with Wis. Stat.

Section I(e): Qualifications

Minimum Qualifications

Master's degree from an accredited university and a minimum of five (5) years of progressively responsible municipal or county government experience in a senior leadership role. A master's degree in public administration, public policy, public finance, business administration, or a closely related field is required.

Source

Amended language adopted following February 2026 J&A hearing

Rationale

Sets a professional baseline while maintaining specificity around public-sector leadership experience. The master's degree requirement signals the professional caliber of the position and aligns with WCMA 2025 Salary Survey findings that MPA is the dominant credential among Wisconsin municipal administrators.

Expert Input

- **2024 Ordinance:** Required prior Administrator/Manager title, which severely limited candidate pool
- **Chamber panel and public comment:** Recommended broadening qualifications to expand candidate pool while maintaining professional standards
- **WCMA 2025 Salary Survey:** Confirms MPA is the dominant credential with MBA also common among Wisconsin municipal administrators

Additional Qualifications

Council may establish additional qualifications consistent with professional standards.

Source

Original drafting

Rationale

Allows flexibility to tailor searches to evolving city needs without amending the ordinance.

Section I(f): Functions and Duties of the Administrator

Administrator serves as the City's chief administrative officer, responsible to the Common Council.

Source

WCMA best practices; standard municipal administrator language

Rationale

Clarifies reporting structure and resolves prior ambiguity about who Administrator reports to.

Expert Input

- **UW-Extension:** Asked “Who does Administrator report to?”
- **Department Heads:** Asked “Who does Administrator report to day-to-day?”
- **Comparable Cities:** Most have Administrator report to Council as body
- **ICMA data:** Confirms Council reporting structure is standard across comparable Wisconsin and national communities

Resolution

Administrator reports to Council as body (standard practice).

Key Duties

1. Supervise department heads (excluding Police, Fire, Library Directors) and collaborate with protected departments

Source

City Attorney (statutory protections) and original drafting

Rationale

Police Chief, Fire Chief, and Library Director have statutory protections under Wisconsin law that limit Administrator’s direct supervisory

authority. “Collaborate” language ensures coordination without violating statutes.

Expert Input

2024 Ordinance: Unclear about authority over department heads

City Attorney: Must respect statutory protections for Police, Fire, Library

WCMA: Warned that excluding department heads from Administrator supervision “can lead to issues”

Resolution

Excluded Police/Fire/Library per statute, but included “collaborate” language to maintain coordination. Will address coordination through employment contract and administrative policies.

2. Manage the recruitment and selection process for department head positions, recommend candidates to the appropriate appointing authority as specified in applicable charter ordinances, and supervise,

evaluate, and discipline department heads consistent with the statutes of the State of Wisconsin, City charter ordinances, and City policies. Recommend removal of department heads to the appropriate authority.

Source

Amended language adopted February 2026; City Attorney review;
WCMA recommendation

Rationale

Makes Administrator's authority over department heads explicit while respecting existing charter ordinances governing appointments.

Addresses UW-Extension's question "Is firing clear?" from the 2024 ordinance review.

Expert Input

- **City Attorney:** Identified conflict with existing charter ordinances governing department head appointments

- **WCMA:** Recommended adding language clarifying Administrator’s authority over subordinate officers and employees

3. Prepare and submit the annual budget to the Common Council for adoption

Source

Standard administrator duty; addresses City Attorney concern

Rationale

City Attorney noted 2024 ordinance had “budget preparation vacuum.”

This makes responsibility explicit. This duty is central to the accountability argument — the 2025 overruns of \$830,000 across Police, Fire, and Highway departments occurred in part because no single position had both the authority and the expertise to flag and address budget trends mid-year.

4. Execute the adopted budget and ensure fiscal responsibility

Source

Standard administrator duty

Rationale

Administrator implements budget Council adopts.

5. Implement ordinances, resolutions and policies adopted by the Mayor and Common Council

Source

Standard administrator duty

Rationale

Administrator implements policy set by elected officials.

6. Serve as the City's Public Information Officer or designate a department head or City Staff Person to serve in this capacity

Source

Addresses City Attorney concern about 2024 ordinance

Rationale

City Attorney noted 2024 ordinance assigned PIO role to Administrator but “creates practical problems.” “Or designate” language provides flexibility.

7. Keep the Common Council and Mayor regularly informed about City operations through oral or written reports

Source

Standard administrator duty

Rationale

Ensures transparency and accountability to elected officials. Directly addresses the Council’s current inability to receive mid-year budget trend information in a timely manner.

8. Perform such other duties as may be prescribed by the Common Council in the employment contract

Source

Standard flexibility

Rationale

Allows Council to assign additional duties through contract without amending ordinance.

Section I(g): Role of the Mayor

Purpose

Explicitly defines the Mayor's political and strategic role, which was absent in the 2024 ordinance.

Source

Original drafting, addressing Department Heads' and UW-Extension concerns

Rationale

2024 ordinance had no Mayor role definition, creating a governance vacuum. Department Heads asked "What is Mayor's role?" and "What powers will remain with Mayor and Common Council collectively?" This section addresses those concerns by explicitly defining the Mayor's

political and strategic role as distinct from the Administrator's operational role. It also responds to concerns that the ordinance represents a power grab by making clear that the Mayor retains significant and meaningful responsibilities.

Expert Input

- **2024 Ordinance:** No Mayor role definition
- **UW-Extension:** Noted absence of Mayor role definition as significant gap
- **Department Heads:** Asked "What powers will remain with Mayor and Common Council collectively?"
- **WCMA:** Confirmed that in comparable Wisconsin cities the Mayor retains political and intergovernmental leadership while the Administrator handles operational management
- **ICMA data:** Shows that the majority of comparable Wisconsin and national communities operate under a Mayor-Council-Administrator structure where the Mayor retains a meaningful political executive role

Resolution

Created explicit Mayor role definition to fill governance gap and address opposition concerns about loss of democratic accountability.

Mayor Responsibilities

Key Duties

1. Serve as the City's chief public representative and spokesperson on matters of policy

Mayor remains public face of city on policy matters. Administrator handles operational communications.

2. Set strategic vision and policy priorities for the City with collaboration from the Common Council

Mayor is elected official who sets direction. Administrator implements that direction.

3. Introduce initiatives and legislation to the Common Council

Existing Mayor power under La Crosse charter. Made explicit that Mayor retains this authority.

4. Serve as lead negotiator with other governments, institutions, and stakeholders

Mayor is political executive who represents city in external relationships.

5. Participate in the City Administrator search process and joint evaluation of the City Administrator

Ensures Mayor has meaningful role in Administrator selection and accountability even though Council formally appoints.

6. Retain all emergency powers provided by law and charter

Makes explicit that Mayor retains statutory emergency powers. WCMA noted need for policies and procedures document to clarify operational roles during emergencies. Will be addressed through administrative policies after Administrator is hired.

Section I(h): Lines of Authority

Purpose

Creates a single chain of command to prevent operational interference and confusion.

Source

Standard council-manager governance principle; WCMA best practices

Rationale

Addresses Department Heads' question "How will decision-making authorities be delineated in areas where responsibilities may overlap?"

Creates clear chain of command to prevent confusion and political interference in operations. This section is particularly important given the current environment in which the absence of a clear chain of command has contributed to budget overruns going unreported and unaddressed mid-year.

Expert Input

- **2024 Ordinance:** No lines of authority
- **Department Heads:** Asked about decision-making authority delineation
- **WCMA:** Emphasized importance of Mayor and Council being "aligned in their support for the city administrator and remain firm in letting folks know that they need to work through that person"

(h)(1) Single Chain of Command

Neither Mayor nor individual Council Members shall direct, supervise, or give orders to City staff or department heads except through the City Administrator.

Rationale

Prevents confusion and political interference in operations.

(h)(2) Access and Communication

Individual Council Members and Mayor may communicate with Administrator at any time to request information, ask questions, provide input or discuss City matters. Administrator shall provide requested information in a timely manner. Individual Council Members and the Mayor may contact department heads directly to request information or address constituent service issues. Council Members should inform the Administrator of such contacts in a timely manner.

Rationale

Ensures elected officials can get information they need without violating chain of command. Administrator is responsive to elected officials while maintaining operational authority.

(h)(3) Council Direction

Common Council, acting as a body, may direct Administrator to take specific actions through duly adopted resolutions or ordinances, through direction provided during Council meetings, or through consensus expressed by the Council. Individual Council Members may request that Administrator consider specific actions but may not direct Administrator or staff to act.

Rationale

Clarifies that Council as body — not individual members — directs Administrator. Allows flexibility for Council direction through formal and informal means while preventing individual Council members from giving orders.

(h)(4) Emergency Exception

Nothing in this section shall prevent the Mayor from exercising emergency powers as provided by law and charter.

Rationale

Ensures lines of authority don't interfere with Mayor's statutory emergency powers.

Overall Recommendation

Strong expert consensus. WCMA emphasized importance of this section.

Section II: Severability

Standard severability clause ensuring that if one is found legally invalid, the remainder of the ordinance remains in effect.

Source

City Attorney — standard legal language

Rationale

Standard severability clause protects ordinance from complete invalidation if one is challenged.

Recommendation

No disagreement. This is boilerplate legal language.

Section III: Removal of Mayor Duties

“This charter ordinance specifically removes those duties from the Office of Mayor to oversee the day-to-day operations, management and administration of the City of La Crosse that are found under § 62.09(8)(a), Wis. Stat. Any charter or any previously enacted ordinance or charter ordinance inconsistent or in conflict with this ordinance is expressly repealed.”

Source

City Attorney — legal requirement

Rationale

Wisconsin statute gives Mayor authority over day-to-day operations.

Charter ordinance must explicitly remove those duties and transfer them to Administrator. Second sentence ensures this ordinance supersedes any conflicting s.

Recommendation

No disagreement. This is legally required language.

Section IV: Emergency Personnel Designation

“Pursuant to Wis. Stat § 66.0503, the Common Council finds and determines that the City Administrator is emergency personnel.”

Source

City Attorney

Rationale

City Attorney provided this language as a legal basis for the residency requirement in Section I(d). Wis. Stat. allows municipalities to require residency for “emergency personnel.”

Expert Input

- **City Attorney:** Provided this language to enable the residency requirement

Section V: Effective Date

“This charter ordinance shall take effect sixty (60) days after its passage and publication subject to the s of Section 66.0101(5) Wis. Stat.”

Source

City Attorney — statutory requirement

Rationale

Wis. Stat. requires a 60-day waiting period for charter ordinances to allow for a referendum petition. Reference to statute ensures compliance with referendums.

Section VI: Transition and Acting Administrator

Section VI(a): Transition

The office of the City Administrator is created effective (1) December 30, 2027; or (2) upon the appointment and qualification of a City Administrator by the Common Council, including without limitation, the execution of a valid employment contract with a first date of employment in 2027, whichever occurs first. The office of Mayor shall continue with all statutory roles, responsibilities and duties until the office of the City Administrator is created.

Source

Original drafting as amended; addresses UW-Extension and Department Heads concerns

Rationale

UW-Extension presentation ended with “What does the transition look like??” Department Heads asked, “How will continuity of operations be

maintained during a transition period?” This addresses both concerns by establishing a clear effective date while ensuring the Mayor retains full authority until the Administrator is in place. The 2027 effective date also aligns with the funding framework — if approved in July 2026 and posted by October 1st, a realistic hiring cycle places the first start date in early 2027, meaning first year costs will be a fraction of the full annual cost.

Expert Input

- **2024 Ordinance:** No transition
- **UW-Extension:** Raised transition as major unanswered question
- **Department Heads:** Asked about continuity during transition
- **City Attorney:** Noted that under Wis. Stat., Mayor is likely prohibited from serving as Acting Administrator

Section VI(b): Search Process

“Upon the effective date of this ordinance, the City shall immediately initiate a transparent, professional search for a permanent City

Administrator. The search process shall include participation by the Director of Human Resources, the Mayor, and a subcommittee of the Common

Council in the preliminary screening before bringing finalists to the entire Council for interviews. The search shall be conducted in accordance with best practices for municipal executive recruitment.”

Source

Amended language adopted following February 2026 J&A hearing incorporating WCMA recommendation

Rationale

UW-Extension noted the 2024 ordinance had “No public engagement s” and “No process defined for public participation in hiring.” This addresses that concern. The addition of a Council subcommittee to the preliminary screening process ensures broader Council ownership of the search while maintaining efficiency.

Expert Input

- **2024 Ordinance:** No search process.
- **UW-Extension:** Noted absence of public engagement as a significant gap

- **WCMA:** Recommended adding subcommittee language — adopted as amended
- **Experienced Public Administration Professionals:** Recommended the use of a qualified search firm and noted that the search process significantly impacts the quality of candidates attracted to the position

Summary of Key Sources

Primary Sources

- UW-Extension Presentation (December 2025) — identified gaps in 2024 ordinance and provided governance framework
- City Attorney Legal Review (December 2025–January 2026) — ensured statutory compliance
- Department Heads Memo (January 2026) — raised governance and implementation questions
- WCMA Best Practices Report — provided professional management standards
- Municipal Administrator feedback (Chamber panel, informal consultations) — provided practitioner perspective

Additional Sources Gathered Since February 2026

- *Still being compiled and will be available before the August 5th Judiciary and Administration Committee, allowing time for residents to review and make public comment.*

Key Improvements Over 2024 Ordinance

- Fixed contract term of 3–5 years instead of indefinite
- Joint evaluation by Council and Mayor with performance metrics
- Explicit Mayor role definition addressing governance vacuum
- Clear lines of authority preventing operational interference
- Transition s establishing clear effective date and search process
- Legal compliance with Wis. Stat. on removal, Mayor duties, and succession
- Broadened qualifications attracting a stronger candidate pool
- Clearer department head authority respecting existing charter ordinances
- Council subcommittee participation in search process
- Comprehensive funding framework developed and validated by independent experts

Conclusion

The proposed City Administrator Charter Ordinance reflects a substantial revision from the 2024 proposal. It was developed with direct

input from Council colleagues, shaped by over an hour of debate and amendments contributed by several Council members at the February 2026 Common Council meeting, and received majority support. It responds directly to concerns raised by legal counsel, UW-Extension, department heads, municipal management professionals, and public stakeholders. The revised ordinance creates a professional administrative structure while preserving the Mayor's political and strategic leadership role and the Common Council's authority as the City's legislative body.

Taken together, the revisions create a clearer, more accountable, and more durable governance model for La Crosse. The ordinance addresses the key implementation questions that were unresolved in the prior version: appointment, removal, evaluation, qualifications, department head authority, budget responsibility, mayoral role, chain of command, transition, and search process.

Document prepared by Council Member Aron Newberry. July 2026.