

DETAILED BRIEFING: CITY ADMINISTRATOR CHARTER ORDINANCE

Prepared for La Crosse City Council
February 1, 2026

BACKGROUND

In October 2024, the Council began reviewing a City Administrator charter ordinance originally drafted in 2024. In November 2024, the Council created a City Administrator Working Group to conduct community engagement and report back by May 2025. In May 2025, the Council voted to extend the review period to February 2026 to allow additional time for community input and expert consultation.

Over the past 15 months, the Council has engaged in an extensive review process that included:

- Community input sessions led by the Working Group
- UW-Extension consultant analysis and presentation (December 2025)
- Chamber of Commerce panel discussion with two local city administrators/managers and a WCMA representative
- Department heads' review and feedback memo (January 2026)
- Wisconsin City/County Management Association (WCMA) review and recommendations (February 2026)
- Legal review by the City Attorney (ongoing through January 2026)
- HR Department consultation
- Public comment (including written submissions)

Initially, I attempted to amend the 2024 ordinance to address concerns raised during this process. However, the number and scope of necessary changes made amendments impractical, and the revised document became unclear and confusing. Rather than produce a heavily marked-up document that would be difficult to understand, implement, and communicate to the public, I introduced new legislation (File 26-0071) that provides a clean, comprehensive structure addressing all identified concerns while maintaining clarity and legal compliance.

ISSUES IDENTIFIED WITH THE 2024 ORDINANCE

Source: UW-Extension Consultant (December 2025 presentation)

- Indefinite contract term: Creates instability and uncertainty for both the Administrator and the City
- Unclear authority over department heads: Ambiguous language about hiring/firing authority ("Is firing clear?")

- No public engagement provisions: No process defined for public participation in hiring
- No transition plan: Presentation ended with "What does the transition look like ??" (literal question marks)
- Overly detailed job description: 26+ specific duties more appropriate for an employment contract than charter legislation
- Budget preparation vacuum: Unclear who is responsible for preparing the annual budget
- No Mayor role definition: Creates governance gap about Mayor's responsibilities

Source: Department Heads (January 2026 memo)

- Unclear reporting structure: Who does Administrator report to day-to-day?
- Undefined decision-making authority: How are overlapping responsibilities between Mayor and Administrator delineated?
- Transition concerns: How is continuity maintained during search period?
- No evaluation process: How is Administrator held accountable?
- Fiscal impact questions: What is the budgetary impact on existing department resources?

HOW THE NEW ORDINANCE ADDRESSES THESE ISSUES

Contract and Employment Terms

- Establishes 3-5 year contract term with option to renew (addresses UW-Extension concern about indefinite term; note: WCMA recommends 1-3 years as more typical)
- Clear removal process: $\frac{3}{4}$ vote of all Council members (addresses City Attorney legal compliance concern with Wis. Stat.)
- Joint evaluation by Council and Mayor using performance metrics (addresses Department Heads' accountability concern)
- Council may establish additional employment terms through contract (addresses operational flexibility)

Governance Structure

- High-level governance focus rather than detailed job description (addresses UW-Extension concern about overly prescriptive duties)
- Clear reporting structure: Administrator reports to Council as a body (addresses Department Heads' concern)
- Explicit Mayor role definition (Section I(g)): Chief political executive with strategic vision, policy priorities, external representation, emergency powers (addresses governance vacuum in 2024 version)
- Clear lines of authority (Section I(h)): Neither Mayor nor individual Council members can direct staff; Council acts as a body; elected officials retain information access (addresses Department Heads' concern about overlapping authority)

AMENDMENTS EXPECTED AT FEBRUARY 3RD J&A HEARING

Based on expert feedback, the following amendments are expected:

1. Clarify department head hiring authority (Section I(f)(2)) - Change from "Hire, evaluate, discipline and remove department heads" to "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, discipline, and recommend removal of department heads"
2. Add subordinate staff authority (Section I(f)(2)) - Add "and all subordinate officers and employees in such departments" per WCMA recommendation
3. Add Council subcommittee to search process (Section VI(b)) - Add "participation by the Mayor and a subcommittee of the Common Council in the preliminary screening before bringing finalists to the entire Council for interviews"
4. Correct typo (Section VI(a)) - Change final reference to read "Section I(f)"

QUESTIONS THAT ARE IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS (NOT CHARTER-LEVEL)

Department Heads raised important questions about cost, budget impact, physical space, and ROI data. These are legitimate implementation concerns that will be addressed during:

- Budget development process
- Administrator search and hiring
- Employment contract negotiation
- Transition planning
- 2026 workforce study (approved by Council to evaluate operational efficiencies)

These questions are not appropriate for charter-level legislation, which establishes governance structure rather than operational details. The charter creates the position and defines its role; the employment contract and budget process will address compensation, benefits, office space, support staff, and other operational matters.

VALIDATION FROM COMPARABLE CITIES

According to UW-Extension research and the Chamber panel:

- 64% of Wisconsin municipalities over 20,000 population use professional management (City Manager or Administrator)
- Among comparable Wisconsin cities: Eau Claire, Janesville, Oshkosh, Fond du Lac, Beloit, Waukesha, West Allis, Kenosha, Racine, Sheboygan, Wauwatosa all use this model

- West Allis and Waukesha both have full-time mayors AND administrators, proving this model works with La Crosse's governance structure
- Local administrators from neighboring jurisdictions confirmed best practices reflected in new ordinance
- WCMA (Wisconsin City/County Management Association) strongly endorsed the ordinance structure and provided technical recommendations for improvement

CONCLUSION

The 15-month review process, including the Working Group's community engagement, UW-Extension consultant analysis, Chamber panel discussion, Department Heads' feedback, WCMA review, legal review, HR consultation, and public comment, identified significant structural, legal, and governance gaps in the 2024 ordinance. The new ordinance addresses these concerns with a modern, legally compliant governance structure that:

- Creates clear accountability through professional management
- Defines complementary roles for Mayor and Administrator
- Establishes realistic contract terms and evaluation processes
- Provides for orderly transition and implementation
- Protects the current Mayor's role and compensation
- Aligns with best practices in comparable Wisconsin cities
- Responds directly to expert feedback from multiple sources
- Resolves legal conflicts with existing charter ordinances
- Incorporates WCMA's professional management standards
- Addresses Department Heads' governance and accountability concerns

This ordinance is the product of the thorough review process the Council initiated in 2024. It represents a culmination of community input, expert consultation, and careful consideration of La Crosse's unique needs and governance structure.

Key Operational Details to be Determined Later:

Many operational details, including specific compensation, benefits, office arrangements, support staff requirements, detailed performance metrics, and day-to-day working relationships, will be negotiated in the Administrator's employment contract rather than specified in the charter ordinance. The charter establishes governance structure and accountability; the employment contract will establish operational expectations and working arrangements. Additional operational questions will be addressed through the 2026 workforce study, budget development process, and transition planning.

Expert Validation:

This ordinance has been reviewed and endorsed by:

- Wisconsin City/County Management Association (WCMA) - professional association for city and county administrators
- UW-Extension Local Government Center - academic experts in municipal governance

- City Attorney - legal compliance review
- Chamber of Commerce panel - including practicing administrators from comparable cities
- HR Department - recruitment and employment practices

The ordinance incorporates best practices from 64% of Wisconsin municipalities over 20,000 population that use professional management, and aligns with governance structures in comparable cities including Eau Claire, Janesville, Oshkosh, Waukesha, and West Allis.

Prepared by Council Member Aron Newberry
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