

# **Draft 4-25-25 v.4 City of La Crosse - Mayor vs. City Administrator Information Paper**

## **Introduction & Purpose**

This paper intends to provide information for La Crosse Residents and others regarding the benefits and challenges of

- a. The Mayor-Council form of administration, where the mayor is both the Chief Executive Officer and the Chief Operating Officer, and
- b. The Mayor, Council Administrator form of administration, where the Mayor is the Chief Executive Officer and the Administrator is the Chief Operating Officer.

The University of Wisconsin Extension's Local Government Education Program prepared this Information Paper utilizing information from the following sources:

- a. City of La Crosse City Administrator Work Group
- b. Research and Interviews
  - i. City of La Crosse Department Heads (anonymous interviews provided by Working Group)
  - ii. Research specifics are noted throughout this information paper.
  - iii. Interviews with Rebecca Glewen, Former Mayor of Beaver Dam and currently County Administrator/Human Resources Director, Trempealeau County, WI; Jerry Deschane, Executive Director, League of Wisconsin Municipalities, and Sarah Diedrich Kasdorf, Director of Outreach & Member Engagement, Wisconsin Counties Association.
  - iv. Citizen and Others' comments and input. (provided by Working Group)

## **Background Information**

### **a. City of La Crosse City Administrator History**

- i. The City of La Crosse faced this question in the past, most recently in 2012 when the voters defeated a ballot question.
- ii. Former Mayor Mitch Reynolds introduced the need for a City Administrator in his State of the City address on January 11, 2024.
- iii. A Charter ordinance creating a City Administrator was introduced on October 10, 2024.
- iv. The Common Council, through a resolution, created a City Administrator Working Group on November 14, 2024, with a charge to report back to the Common Council by May 2025.

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b. WI Cities/Villages with an Administrator or Manager - *Source: UW Oshkosh Whitburn Center*

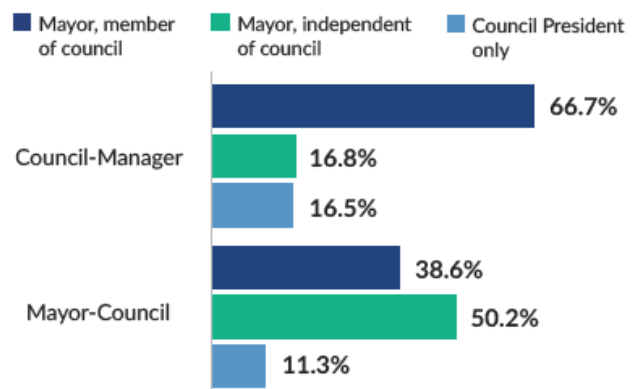
<b>Wisconsin Cities</b>	<b>Totals</b>	<b>City Manager</b>	<b>Administrator</b>
City Manager or Administrator	190	10	91
<b>Wisconsin Villages</b>	<b>Totals</b>	<b>Village Manager</b>	<b>Administrator</b>
Village Manager (all in SE-WI) or Administrator	415	9	54

## 2018 ICMA Municipal Form of Government Survey

Form of Government	Number	Percent
Council-Manager	4,386	40.0%
Mayor-Council	4,166	38.0%
Commission	1,302	11.9%
Town Meeting	1,056	9.6%
Representative Town Meeting	59	0.5%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>10,969</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Data are based on extensive research and verification conducted by ICMA staff. Sources consulted include the ICMA Form of Government Survey, state association directories, historical data published in *The Municipal Year Book*, and state and local statutes.

Chief Elected Official Structure by Form of Government



## Definitions

### a. Definitions - *International City/County Manager Association*

- i. **Mayor-Council Form of Government:** Elected council or board serves as the legislative body. The chief elected official (e.g., mayor) is the head of government, with significant administrative authority, and generally elected separately from the council.
- ii. **Council-Manager (administrator) Form of Government:** Elected council or board and chief elected official are responsible for making policy with advice of the chief appointed official (e.g., administrator/manager). A professional administrator appointed by the board or council has full responsibility for the day-to-day operations of the government.

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## a. Comparable Municipalities List as defined by the City of La Crosse City Administrator Working Group

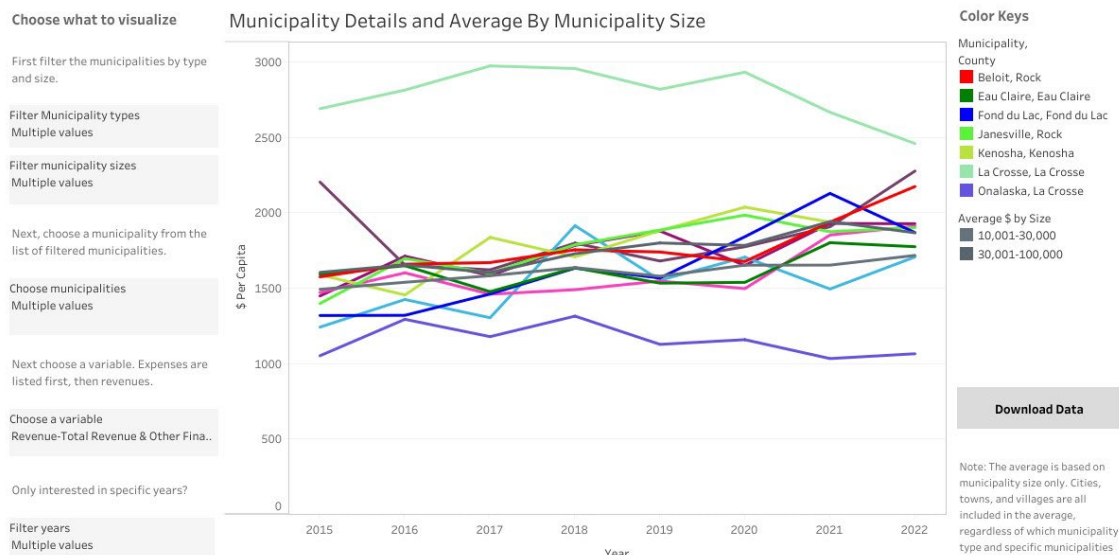
Comparison Cities	Type of Management	Mayor	President / Council	Mgr.-Adm. Appointed by Council	Population
Onalaska	City Administrator	Yes	No / Council	Yes	18,975
Beloit	City Manager	No	Yes	Yes	36,449
Fond du Lac	City Manager	No	Yes	Yes	44,678
Wauwatosa	City Administrator	Yes	Yes	Yes	47,289
Sheboygan	City Administrator	Yes	Yes	Yes	49,773
West Allis	City Administrator	Yes	No / Council	Yes	58,950
Janesville	City Manager	No	Yes	Yes	65,911
Oshkosh	City Manager	Yes	No / Council	Yes	65,948
Eau Claire	City Manager	No	Yes	Yes	69,737
Kenosha	City Administrator	Yes	No / Council	Yes	98,484

### Comparison Cities -Total Revenue and Other Financing (2022 Data)

Note that La Crosse is the light green line. DOR Data as shown in the LGE Graphing Expenditures and Taxes database. All comp ities are noted in graph, the color key is limited to 7 vs. 10 comps.

#### General Revenue, Expenditures, and Taxes

Select one or more municipalities and a variable to visualize your data.



This visualization was created by UW-Madison Division of Extension. Questions, feedback, or requests for accessibility assistance should be directed to Daniel Foth, daniel.foth@wisc.edu.

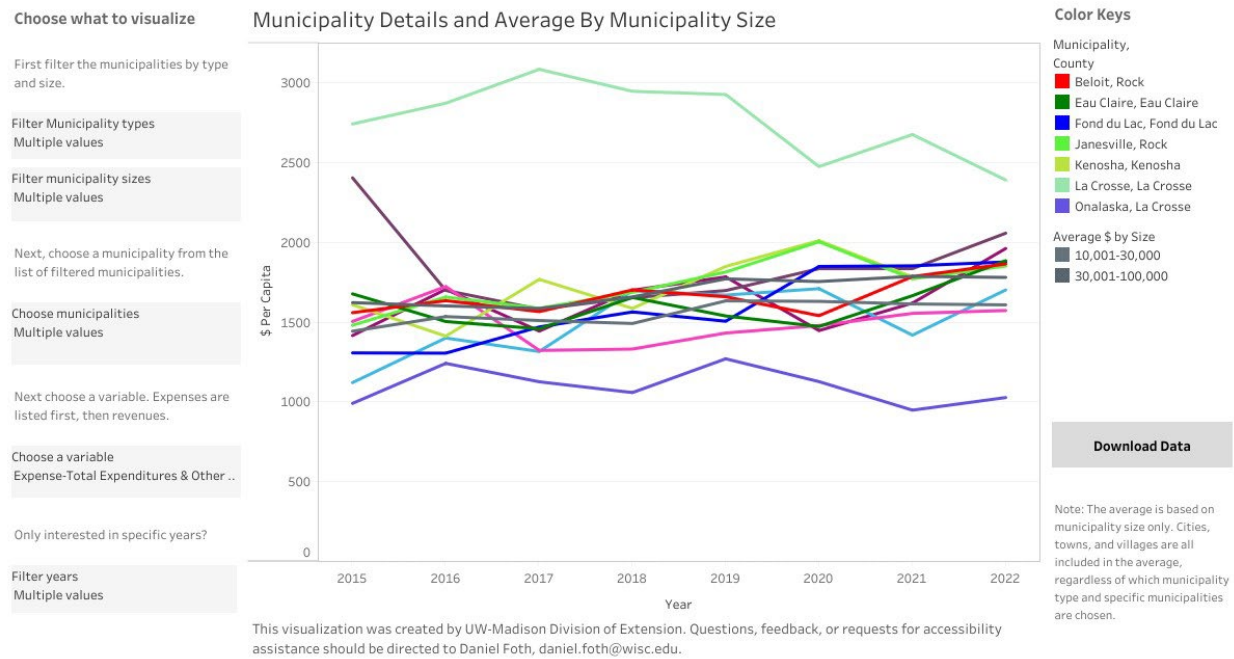
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**b. Mayor - Wis. Stat §62.09(8) (defines the Mayor’s position):**

Defines the mayor's position as the chief executive officer, observes and enforces city ordinances and state laws, and all city officers and employees discharge their duties, presides at the meetings of the council, has veto power as to all acts of the council, subject to override.

The La Crosse Municipal Charter additionally defines the Mayor’s position.

Sec. 2-59 - The office of Mayor shall be the full-time principal occupation for the holder of said office. The Mayor shall have all duties and powers permitted by law.

**c. Administrator – The Proposed Charter Ordinance Sec. 19. – Office of the City Administrator,** generally provides the Administrator duties to include: Efficient, effective, and responsible government, by carrying out the Common Council’s policy directives, responsible to the common council, administers day-to-day operations, prepare, then administer the annual operating budget as approved by the Common council, receive cooperations from all officials and employees so that the City government shall function effectively and efficiently.

The Mayor's administrative duties will be given to the City Administrator

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## Interviews

**Rebecca Glewen**, Former Mayor of Beaver Dam and currently County Administrator/Human Resources Director, Trempealeau County, WI. A discussion summary follows.

- When she was the City of Beaver Dam Mayor, she initiated and led the effort to reduce the role of the mayor and to hire a City Administrator.
- The City of Beaver Dam had hired a Director of Administration who primarily served as the Finance Director with some administrative duties, but the role did not fully address the broader needs of the city government.
- Her view was that the City was stagnating, not moving forward.
- Transitioning from a full-time mayor to a part-time role was challenging, as it required stepping back from day-to-day operations and trusting others to lead. Success in this structure demands a willingness to give up some control, both from the mayor and the council, to allow the administrative team to manage the city's operations effectively.
- Public engagement was conducted through radio broadcasts, newspaper articles, and mayoral listening sessions.
- The Council voted for the position change, and with the organizational change, the mayor's salary was reduced by two-thirds.
- After the organizational change, she continued serving as a part-time mayor for one year before stepping down with one year remaining in her term to pursue an administrative career as the County Administrator/Human Resources Director for Trempealeau County, Wisconsin.
- As County Administrator, Rebecca has led improvements in communication among department heads, staff, and the community; achieved \$98,000 in insurance savings in her first year through budgeting efficiencies; streamlined departments and services through organizational changes; and strengthened employee culture to boost retention and promote a positive, engaged workplace.

**Jerry Deschane**, Executive Director, League of Wisconsin Municipalities. A discussion summary follows.

- The League of Wisconsin Municipalities has no formal position on Mayor/Council versus City Administrator.
- City Administrators have been around for over 100 years.
- Potential benefits include stability, the Separation of politics and administration, the administrator presents options for council review and approval and is a neutral implementer of council policies.
- A successful City Administrator/Mayor/Council relationship is founded on clear lines of authority.

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**Sarah Diedrich Kasdorf**, Director of Outreach & Member Engagement, Wisconsin Counties Association (WCA). A discussion summary follows.

- The WCA actively assists its members in providing information on the benefits of implementing the three state statutory approaches. County Executive, Administrator, or Administrative Coordinator.
- WCA provided questions, presentations, and other research it uses to assist their members who are addressing this issue.

**City of La Crosse Department Heads** – the Working Group conducted interviews with the Department Heads and provided their comments anonymously. Common comments include:

- Need a CEO to run a \$70 million-plus entity.
- Administrator will provide continuity, consistency, and stability.
- Need to hire the “right person.”
- Better department collaboration
- Concerns about cost and where to put them, the City Hall is full.
- Department head impact
- Citizen buy-in
- How will the Full-Time Mayor and Administrator work together?
- Change will need to be managed.
- Frees the Mayor to be more public-facing.
- Continuity of department projects, avoid spending time on projects going nowhere.

### **What the Research Says:**

This paper also utilized the following research.

*Does Government Structure in Wisconsin, Does Form Matter, Nollenberger and Simmons, University of Wisconsin – Oshkosh, 2016.* This research surveyed 141 municipalities with a population over 5,000, and found:

- Concluded that there are few clearly identifiable differences between cities with differing governmental forms - *Page 83.*
- Where the Mayor (versus council) appoints the Administrator, greater degrees of conflict and less cooperation exist – *Page 85.*
- Also, concluded that the administrator position has brought professionalism to cities and villages that added the position – *Page 86.*

*Smarter, Faster, Cheaper, IBM Global Business Services, Edwards, 2011*

- Researched 100 American Cities – *Page 1.*
- Concluded that Cities with city manager forms of government are nearly 10% more efficient than cities with strong mayor forms of government – *Page 8.*

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*Professional Management in Wisconsin Municipalities, Whitburn Center for Governance and Policy Research, 2024*, Used research gathered from 188 Wisconsin cities (excluding Milwaukee and Madison) notes the following:

*Table 1: Fiscal Characteristics of Cities with and without Administrators*

Cities All Administrator Chapter 64- Manager Non-Administrator

Cities	All Administrators	Chapter 64- Manager	Non-Administrator
Property Tax Per-Capita	\$ 594.02	\$ 543.87	\$ 528.79
Spending Per-Capita	\$ 1,860.55	\$ 1556.77	\$ 1,877.23
Law Enforcement Per-Capita	\$ 297.18	\$ 256.72	\$ 267.55
General Obligation Debt Per-Capita	\$ 1,821.59	\$ 1,852.27	\$ 1,437.39
General Gov. Spending Per-Capita	\$ 195.98	\$ 125.76	\$ 205.00
Shared Revenue Per-Capita	\$ 195.09	\$ 210.27	\$ 250.34
Tax Incremental Financing (TIF) Per-Capita	\$ 153.59	\$ 112.73	\$ 144.12

Table 1 notes that non-administrator cities have overall higher spending per capita, lower property taxes, lower law enforcement spending, and lower debt (perhaps due to less capital investment), and reduced use of Tax Incremental Financing (TIF) debt service.

*Table 3: Agreement with Governance Statements*

To what extent do you agree with the following statements, where 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree?

Item	Administrator	Non-Administrator
This local government has utilized strategic planning to frame its mission	3.43*	3.09
This local government has a clear emphasis on treating the citizen as a customer	3.81	3.67
This organization has successfully developed clear measures of program/service performance	3.37*	3.09
We view the executive as a full partner in the governing process	3.94*	3.76
Organized interest groups have significant influence over, board/council decisions	2.21	2.37
Board/Council members do what they say they will do	3.48*	3.29
Board/Council members willingly try new things without fear of ridicule	3.30*	2.93
Board/Council members willingly try new things without fear of retribution	3.39*	2.99
Board/Council members are open about how they feel about other members' preferences	3.37*	3.19

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Table Three illustrates that.

- Administrator/Manager-led municipalities have higher functioning councils (less destructive conflict types)
- Administrator/Manager-led municipalities report higher levels of reform adoption.

### *Table 4: Agreement with Human Resource Statements*

To what extent do you agree with the following statements, where 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree? Administrator Non- Administrator

Statement	Administrator	Non-Administrator
I have the necessary resources to do my job well	3.57	3.42
I have the opportunity to “reward” employees that I supervise when they do an outstanding job	2.93*	2.62
Organizational culture is a barrier to attracting new employees	2.38	3.04*
Work/life balance is a barrier to attracting new employees	2.67	3.09*
Employee quality is a barrier to retaining existing employees	2.78	2.92

\*Statistically different at the 95% level of confidence.

Table Four illustrates that.

- Administrator/Manager-led municipalities report lower staff turnover rates.

### **Benefits and challenges with the Mayor/Council operations form.**

This table was developed using identified research, and comments received from citizens and Others. No attempt was made to verify this information.

Mayor – Council Benefits	Potential Limitations with Mayor as Chief Operating Officer (COO) and Chief Executive Officer (CEO)
a. The current La Crosse Mayor-Council system has been in place since 1856.	a. A Mayor can be elected without any local government knowledge or experience to run a large complex municipality
b. Direct accountability to residents	b. Time it takes to “learn” what s/he needs to know



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c. Committee, Commission, and Department head appointments by the Mayor and confirmed by the Council	c. potential for silos and individual departments influence their committees and Mayor
d. City staff works within the current system	d. Concentrated Executive and Operations power in one person

### Benefits and challenges with the City Administrator's operations form.

This table was developed using identified research and comments received from citizens and Others. No attempt was made to verify this information.

City Administrator Benefits	City Administrator Challenges
a. Mayor as CEO and Council Policy Focus	a. City Administrator Salary, benefits, and support staff will increase the current operations cost
i. Council and Mayor retain authority over the administrator	b. The Council may not choose the most qualified candidate
ii. Mayor/Council continue to monitor budget and operations performance	b. Confusion as to Roles and Responsibilities
iii. City Council confirms Department head hire(s)	c. A poor Administrator may harm the City more than a poor Mayor
iv. The Mayor still appoints Committee and Commission appointments, and confirmed by the Council	d. The administrator may not stay long; thus, the replacement time and cost could be significant.
v. The Mayor and Council have one direct report, the City Administrator, versus all department heads	e. Change brings its own set of issues.
vi. Policy – Mayor and Council improved ability to focus on long-range policy	f. Unlike a mayor who often serves as the public face of the city, city managers typically operate more behind the scenes. This can make public communication and rallying support for initiatives more difficult.
vii. Collaboration – Mayor and Council improved ability to work with the council, other governments, and residents to effect policy	g. Administrators are not trained to be political leaders. This may lead to less ambitious or visionary leadership compared to a strong mayor who can campaign and push a political agenda.
viii. Less focus on staff issues	h. A city administrator is appointed by the city council and is not directly elected by the public. This can create a sense of distance between executive decision-making and voter input, as citizens don't have a direct say in the manager's hiring or removal.

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City Administrator Benefits	City Administrator Challenges
ix. Budget becomes a policy discussion	i. Because city administrators are accountable to the council rather than the public, conflicts may arise if political divisions exist within the council, potentially limiting their effectiveness.
b. Administrator – COO	
i. Reports and are responsible to the Mayor and City Council	
ii. Specific Training and Expertise in Municipal Operations	
iii. Expertise in implementing Mayor/Council policy	
iv. Stability – bridge during Council and Mayor changes	
v. Collaboration - Potential Increase focus on efficiency and operations optimization	
vi. Budget oversight – administrator provides an overall budget review compared to department by department	
vii. Risk Management through better issue understanding and risk identification (short and long term)	
viii. Budget becomes a policy implementation effort	
ix. Potential for lower costs due to better efficiency, collaboration, risk assessment/mitigation, and improved staff collaboration	
x. Provides city-wide quality control and legal adherence by all departments	
xi. Improved understanding of City Policy and staff implementation	

### What are La Crosse Citizens' Saying?

This table reflects resident and other comments received in November/October 2024.

In Favor	Against	Against having both a Mayor and Administrator	Process concerns	Non-Resident - Commentary in favor	Totals
19	8	2	2	4	35

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## What would be the Policy versus Operational Role?

This information was developed through research, citizen and other comments.

### Mayor/Council – Policy role

- Policy creation;
- Budget creation, prioritization, and approval;
- Organization-level goal setting;
- Serving as a bridge between residents and local government;
- Deciding the scope of services to be provided;
- Program creation;
- Approving legislation; and
- Evaluating the administrator

### Administrator – Operations role

- Oversight of day-to-day operations.
- Managing, hiring, and firing staff;
- Deploying resources across the organization;
- Developing and implementing budgets; and
- Implementing the Council’s policies.
- Reporting on goals;
- City spokesperson

## If the City Council Votes for a City Administrator -Now What?

This information was developed through research, citizens, and other comments.

- **What Needs to be Done First?**
  - Ensure that clear lines of communication and operation are agreed upon and established between the Mayor, Council, and Administrator position.
  - Updating of city policies.
  - Decide whether to use a search consultant to assist the hiring process.
  - Hiring a qualified Administrator.

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**Frequently Asked Questions** – *This is a start of such a document – need to discuss if wanted or needed.*

Q - What will the Mayor do under the City Administrator operations approach?

*A – The proposed ordinance moves the mayor’s administrative responsibilities to the City Administrator. The Mayor is still a member of the Common Council and retains his Executive responsibilities (running meetings, policy champion, veto, and community engagement.*

Q – Why does La Crosse need a Mayor and an Administrator?

*A – The Mayor’s role will continue to be that of Chief Executive Officer, and the City Administrator will be the Chief Operating Officer. This approach allows the Mayor and Council to focus on long-term policy and the Administrator to focus on day-to-day operations and policy implementation.*

Q - How can the City fund a full-time administrator at a cost range of \$186,646 to \$194,423 with the City’s current budget deficit of \$ \$3,000,000?

*A – The expectation stated in numerous public comments and the research indicates that the City Administrator’s professionalism, continuity, expertise, and education focused on the City’s operations and budget are expected, over time, to fund the Administrator’s salary.*

Q - Will having a full-time position increase the property tax levy

*A – Not necessarily, the property tax levy is fixed by state law, and can only be increased by an increase in Net New Construction, borrowing, or a taxpayer referendum.*

Q - Is this position needed? The Mayor-Council form of government has worked well since 1856; why does it need to be changed now?

*A - The only qualification that a person needs to be Mayor is to be a resident of La Crosse, 18 years old, and elected. Whereas a City Administrator brings significant expertise, experience, and capabilities to run a City of 50,000 people, with a \$75 million budget.*

Q - Hiring an administrator means giving up your right to elect your leader.

*A - The elected mayor and council members are the policy makers, and the administrator reports to them. The administrator is responsible for implementing the policies on a day-to-day basis. The administrator can be terminated at any time by the Common Council.*

Q - Hiring an administrator takes power away from the Common Council.

*A - It will strengthen the position of the governing council to make key decisions. It will, however, result in adjustments in who is responsible for what.*

Q. Administrators do not stay long in a community.

*A - In Wisconsin, the average is about seven years, and experiences over fifteen years are common.*

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Q - Full-time mayors are the same as administrators.

*A - Mayors are usually elected for their political leadership, not their experience and education in administering the day-to-day operations of the municipality. Some mayors may have administrative skills; others may not.*