

Proposal to create a City Administrator position for the City of La Crosse, WI

City Council to consider at October 10, 2024 meeting

Post Date: 09/24/2024



Legislation has been introduced to add the position of City Administrator in the City of La Crosse.

The information presented here is designed to provide some background on the nature of the position, how the addition may change operations of city government, and fiscal impacts of adding the position.

See [Proposed Ordinance](#)

[Professional Municipal Administrators - FAQs: Wisconsin City/County Management Association](#)

Please review and help guide decision-making of the Common Council and Mayor on this issue with your comments.

Rationale

Local governments are complex organizations that require expertise in community development, public safety, public works, emergency preparedness, planning, personnel, finance, customer service, intergovernmental relations and an administrative structure that encourages and supports overall team organization.

Additionally, communities throughout Wisconsin are increasingly facing global economic competition. Their abilities to compete depend not only on private sector initiatives, but on sophisticated and aggressive public efforts as well. The need for professional municipal administration is not a matter of a failure of local government, but rather adapting to changing condition by increasing the capacity of a municipality to provide effective and efficient services.

A publication of the League of Wisconsin Municipalities states that “as the need for full-time municipal management becomes greater, there has been a significant trend among Wisconsin municipalities toward hiring professional administrators.” An administrator acts as the chief administrative officer of the municipality.

Procedure

Cities operating under Wisconsin Statutes Chapter 62 can establish the position of administrator by charter ordinance (2/3rds vote) or simple ordinance. The duties of the administrator can be tailored to meet the needs of the city, although there are certain responsibilities that should be included in all ordinances, especially in the areas of personnel and budgeting.

The position of the Mayor remains, except the responsibility for the day-to-day operations of the city is transferred to the administrator.

Expertise/skill levels of a municipal administrator

Municipal administrators are trained to operate local governments. They are professionals in the same way that company executives, school superintendents, doctors and attorneys are professionals. There is a body of knowledge associated with their profession. Increasingly, the standard for professional administrators is that they have Master’s degrees in public administration, with training in budgeting, finance, personnel, labor relations, intergovernmental affairs, public works, community and economic development and public safety. They can gain administrative experience in other communities before they are ready to assume the position of City Administrator.

With focused education, training and prior experience, an administrator is already up-to-speed at the point in their careers when employment opportunities with larger municipalities become attainable. On the other hand, elected officials serving in administrative capacities do much of their learning while on the job. Administrators are part of a network of expertise and know where to go to get correct answers. They are committed to municipal administration as a career.

The community’s success is their success and, consequently, they have a very strong interest in doing the best job possible. Responsive Organizational Structure Administrators are responsible for the day-to-day operations of their municipalities. It is their responsibility to bring coordination to the provision of municipal services. They work to build a municipal team of department heads and other employees. They establish and enforce policies in the areas of personnel, purchasing, cash management, risk management, planning, and employee development. They are evaluated on their ability to provide more efficient and effective government. Administrators are responsible for advancing the organization in terms of overall performance and effectiveness. The administrator accomplishes this by bringing the council, mayor and staff together to set the priorities and to establish a framework for achieving the governmental mission of cost-effective quality services to the community.

Having an administrator provides more direct accountability to the council for the proper operation of municipal services. Elected officials know who is responsible. A dissatisfied council can easily dismiss the administrator. Stronger Council Elected councils benefit in several ways from an administrator. First, they can spend more of

their valuable time focusing on policy issues, community goals, and major projects rather than on administrative details. Second, they get better and more comprehensive information and analysis from the administrator in a staff role to enable them to make more informed decisions. Third, the changing role of the council may encourage more citizens to seek the office. Finally, the administrator can provide continuity when new persons are elected.

Duties of the Mayor and the Relationship with an Administrator

The Mayor is the chief executive officer of the City. In this role, the mayor is responsible for the general welfare of the city. This responsibility is exercised in both a policy-making role by recommending policies to the council, breaking tie votes, and vetoing legislation; and an executive role by seeing that laws are enforced, and that city officers and employees properly do their jobs.

The responsibilities are mandated by state statute (Chapter 62.09 (8)) and consequently apply to mayor with and without administrators. The difference is in the manner in which the mayor exercises their executive responsibilities. In municipalities without administrators, the mayor exercises this responsibility directly by supervising day-to-day conduct of city activities.

- Department heads report to the Mayor and receive their assignment from the mayor.
- Department heads also receive assignments from the Council and are often asked by individual council members to perform tasks and projects.

Conflicting assignments and unclear reporting responsibilities can be avoided with an administrator. In municipalities with an administrator, the mayor exercises the executive responsibility indirectly by monitoring activities of the administrator and the various departments of the city government. The administrator is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the city government including the supervisions of department heads. The duties of a mayor in a municipality with an administrator are as follows: The mayor shall serve as the chief executive officer of the city, performing executive responsibilities by monitoring the activities of the administrator and the various departments of city government to see that city ordinances and state laws are enforced. This requires knowledge of ordinances and laws and a procedure for monitoring city activities.

1. The Mayor shall serve as the policy leader for the community, providing policy information and recommendations to the Council.
2. The Mayor shall preside over the Council.
3. The Mayor shall vote in the event of a tie vote by the Council.
4. The Mayor shall have the authority to veto ordinances passed by the Council.
5. The Mayor shall serve as the chief representative of the city in relations with the media.
6. The Mayor shall represent the city in meetings with and presentations to other governmental groups, businesses, community groups and others.

7. The Mayor shall work with residents of the city in receiving their comments and complaints and seeking appropriate responses, in conjunction with the administrator and, if desired, the Council.

8. The Mayor shall perform any other duties not specified here that are defined in Chapter 62.09 (8).

Duties of Administrator in a Municipality with a Mayor

1. The Administrator coordinates and prepares the operating budget as a key policy document and presents the budget to the Council.
2. The Administrator establishes governmental effectiveness and performance measures/outcomes.
3. The Administrator coordinates and supervises a cooperative and interdisciplinary team of professionals serving the varying needs of the community.
4. The Administrator ensures that the organization is a high performing and learning organization.
5. The Administrator is responsible to the Council for the overall coordination and direction of the day-to-day operations of City government.
6. The Administrator is charged with providing the Council policy information and recommendations and implementation of Council policies.
7. The Administrator ensures that there is a fair and uniform application of policy between all departments within the city organization.

Myths about the City Administrator Position

- A. Hiring an administrator means giving up your right to elect your leader. **False.** The elected council members are the policy makers, and the administrator reports to them. The administrator is responsible for carrying out the policies on a day-to-day basis. The administrator can be terminated at any time by the Common Council.
- B. Hiring an administrator takes power away from the Common Council. **False.** 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.
- C. Administrators costs too much. **Not so true.** Although the salary range is currently between \$170,000 and \$190,000 per year, efficient management will likely pay for itself within a short period of time.
- D. Administrators don't stay very long in one community. **False.** In Wisconsin, the average is about seven years and experiences over fifteen years are not uncommon.
- E. Full-time mayors are the same as administrators. **False.** Mayors are 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.

Additional Resources:

UW-Oskosh Whitburn Center for Governance and Policy Research - Professional Management in Wisconsin Municipalities

City	Type of Management	Population
Eau Claire	City Manager	69,737
Fond du Lac	City Manager	44,339
Janesville	City Manager	65,911
Oshkosh	City Manager	65,948
Sheboygan**	City Administrator	49,773
Wauwatosa	City Administrator	47,289
West Allis**	City Administrator	58,950
Onalaska	City Administrator	18,975
Beloit	City Manager	36,449
Kenosha**	City Administrator	98,484

**Also has elected mayor

Compensation range from City of La Crosse Finance Department:

The salary range we are recommending is \$186,645.89 - \$194,422.80 based on current staff salaries but may increase if COLA are approved and/or step increases are provided prior to filling this position.