

A Brief History of the Council-Manager Plan in Rhode Island **(June 2008)**

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When the Home Rule amendment to the State Constitution was adopted by the voters of Rhode Island in 1951, the only forms of government in the State were the Mayor-Council form and the Town Council-Town Meeting form of government. There were 7 mayors in office in each of the State's cities. (East Providence, which became incorporated as a City in 1958, was still a town.) All 32 towns operated with the town council-town meeting form of government.

In the 55 years that the Council-manager plan has been in existence in Rhode Island, 21 (54%) of State's 39 cities and towns have adopted the Council-manager plan. Based upon the 2000 census, these range in size from New Shoreham with 1,010 residents to East Providence with 48,688 residents. Together these cities and towns represent about 35% of the State's population. The Council-manager plan is most prevalent in cities and towns ranging in population from 10,000 to 30,000. The Mayor-Council plan is most prevalent in the larger municipalities.

There have been 113 town and city managers appointed during this period. In reality, it has been 108 managers since 3 managers served in 2 different Rhode Island communities and 2 managers were appointed at 2 different times in the same community. Only 5 women have served as town managers in Rhode Island. This does not include the more than 2 dozen local officials who served in an "acting" or "interim" capacity while a more permanent appointment was being recruited by the municipal council. These local officials included public works directors, finance directors, town and city clerks, council presidents, town engineers, and municipal solicitors.

William A. Gildea was appointed city manager in Newport, RI in 1953; becoming the 1st city manager in the State. He was followed by Roderick Gardner in North Kingstown in 1955 and then Earl Sandquist in 1959 ending the decade. The 1960's witnessed the addition of three (3) more town manager appointments: Barrington (1961), Narragansett (1967), and Westerly (1969). During the 1970's more than 25% of Rhode Island's Council-manager communities appointed their 1st town manager: South Kingstown & Middletown (1970), Coventry, Portsmouth, & East Greenwich (1973) and Jamestown in 1974.

Only one (1) town – Charlestown (1982) – appointed its 1st town manager in the 1980's, while in the 1990's a total of six (6) Rhode Island towns appointed their 1st town manager: Burrillville and New Shoreham (1990), Tiverton (1992), West Warwick (1994), Smithfield and Warren (1995). So far, in the 21st century, two towns have appointed their 1st town manager: West Greenwich (2002) and Hopkinton (2003).

During the past 55 years, the statewide average length of stay for a city or town manager in Rhode Island has been 5.5 years. Two towns – South Kingstown with an average tenure of 19 years and Portsmouth with an average tenure of 17.75 years far outdistance other cities and towns in the state. Each of these towns has had only 2 town managers; in 38 years for South Kingstown and in 35 years for Portsmouth. Other towns with a high average tenure for their managers include Barrington with 9.4 years and Burrillville with 9 years. As a general rule, with the exceptions noted above, the cities and towns which have had the manager plan for the longest period of time also have had the most managers; for example, Newport, which was the 1st in the state, also has had the most managers with 11; followed by North Kingstown (53 years) with 10 managers and East Providence (49 years) with 9 managers.

The distinction for being the longest serving town or city manager in Rhode Island belongs to South Kingstown's current town manager – Stephen A. Alfred with 31 years; followed by East Greenwich's current town manager – William Sequino Jr. with 20 years. Through the years, nearly 60 % of Rhode Island's Council-manager communities have had at least one manager who served more than 10 years.

Geographically, the Council-manager plan in Rhode Island, has been predominately adopted in the suburbs; specifically away from the greater Providence area. In four (4) of Rhode Island's 5 counties, the plan has been adopted in at least 2/3 of the communities within those counties as follows: Kent County – 80%, Newport County – 83%, Washington County – 78% and in Bristol County – 67%. Only in Providence County, the largest in the State, has the Council-manager plan not been as widely adopted. In fact, only three (Burrillville, Smithfield, and East Providence) of Providence County's 16 cities and towns have adopted the manager plan. The Mayor-Council form of government prevails in Providence County.

Despite the often held myth that the adoption of the Council-manager plan has been the demise of the financial town meeting, only 4 towns in Rhode Island abolished this meeting at the time they adopted the Council-manager form of government. Five other Rhode Island Council-manager towns operated for a number of years before abolishing this “last bastion of pure democracy”; South Kingstown as recently as 2006 after 36 years with the plan. Currently, ten (10) Rhode Island Council-manager towns operate with a financial town meeting.

In conclusion, the Council-manager plan in Rhode Island has stood the test of time. As mentioned earlier, it has been adopted by more than 50% of the state’s cities and towns. No community has abandoned the plan – once adopted, the Council-manager has never been replaced with another form of government. In fact, one Rhode Island town – West Warwick – actually switched to the plan after adopting the Mayor-council plan under their recently adopted home rule charter. As expected, the transition from part-time government to full time government with executive responsibility in an appointed chief executive has not always been smooth. This is evidenced by the fact that in 15 (more than 70%) of the 21 Council-manager communities, the tenure of the “first manager” was less than the average tenure for managers in that particular city or town. Nevertheless, the Council-manager plan has been both widely accepted and successful and has advanced the professional administration of local government in Rhode Island for more than 50 years.