

Democracy Beyond the Ballot Box:

A New Role for Elected Officials, City Managers, and Citizens

By Valerie A. Lemmie



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Introduction

“The American Experiment is still in the laboratory. And there could be no nobler task for our generation than to move that great effort along.”

John W. Gardner

“We will ever strive for the ideals and sacred things of the city, both alone and with many. We will unceasingly seek to quicken the sense of public duty. We will revere and obey the city’s laws. We will transmit this city not only not less, but greater, better, and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us.”

The Athenian Oath

The dawn of the 20th century saw the emergence of the so-called “council-manager plan” in city governments across the United States, a reform movement that brought professionalism to local government administration, ending the unfettered reign of political machines and party bosses in cities that adopted it. This model became the dominant paradigm of city management and the backdrop for my career in public service; but it is a model, I have come to believe, that needs reform.

Coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s, my view of government was straightforward—it fixed problems and made life better for its citizens. In St. Louis, Missouri, where I grew up, whenever there was a neighborhood problem, the residents took it to the “ward heeler” with the local political party machine, who took care of it. Nationally, when African Americans and other citizens mobilized in cities all over the country to declare that it was time to end segregation, the federal government, if at first slowly, ultimately acted to change society.

And, like many others of my generation, I was moved to tears when I heard President John F. Kennedy declare in his inaugural address, “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.”¹ My family had been active supporters of his campaign for the presidency as they felt he would ensure government “did the right thing.” Nor was I alone. Many of my fellow citizens were confident in their government’s ability to solve problems. Jonathan Rauch writes, “In 1958, around three-fourths of the people said they trusted the government in Washington to do what’s right always or most of the time.”²

¹President John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address (January 20, 1961).

²Jonathan Rauch, *Demosclerosis* (Times Books, 1994), 9.

That is no longer true, as Rauch goes on to say: “In the mid-1970’s, the trust level had fallen by half to about 35 percent. [B]y the early 1990’s only one in five voters expressed trust in government to do the right thing.”³ A recent poll showed that the public’s approval of Congress’s job performance is down to 22 percent⁴ and polls on the performance of state and local officials showed a similar level of discontent.⁵ Not only do citizens have little trust in government today, but 72 percent agree that our national leadership sees problems and opportunities differently than they do.⁶

Citizens have lost faith in the federal government; they also have turned away from the Great Society-New Deal institution of my childhood. To some degree, we have moved from a more Hamiltonian view of a liberal democratic government that plays an activist role and assumes responsibility for solving problems on a macro scale, to a more Jeffersonian view of less government and greater personal responsibility. The federal government has caught the devolution bug, and now the human service programs it funds require more local funding matches under a more restrictive rubric of federal rules and regulations. The No Child Left Behind legislation is an example of a new federal initiative that places the responsibility for standards of performance and achievement on local school districts but offers little in the way of funding to meet its sweeping requirements. Most programs born in the days of the Great Society and federal revenue sharing have been dramatically curtailed as the dollars to support them have dwindled.

I now believe that the roles of city managers and elected officials need to be radically reshaped. And I have gradually come to understand that an essential component is missing from the equation—the engagement of citizens.

³Ibid.

⁴George Will, “Many Strange Emergencies,” *Newsweek* (May 8, 2006).

⁵See Daniel Yankelovich and Isabella Furth, “Public Engagement in California: Escaping the Vicious Cycle,” *National Civic Review* (October 2006); Opinion Consultants, *Forecast 2006* (Columbus, Ohio); and numerous media reports on political polls prior to the November 2006 elections.

⁶Joe Klein, “Which Brand Would You Buy?” *Time* (June 13, 2005), 34, citing a poll of voters conducted by Diane Feldman.

Clearly, the relationship between citizens and the government has changed. My career in public service reflects these changes in attitude toward the role and responsibilities of government. I entered public service because I believed in the power of government to solve society's problems by redistributing resources and stepping in to correct injustices. I came to see firsthand the immense structural and practical obstacles public administrators face when they attempt to tackle the "wicked problems"⁷ of communities. I now believe that the roles of city managers and elected officials need to be radically reshaped. And I have gradually come to understand that an essential component is missing from the equation—the engagement of citizens.

The notion of citizenship is very real to my family and runs deep through my understanding of American public life. Like most African Americans of my generation, religion was an integral part of my upbringing, and my childhood church was often a meeting place to discuss key community issues and political events. The importance of civic engagement, political participation, and voting was routinely advocated by our minister, and I can still hear his voice asking the congregation, "Do you know there is an election coming up? Do you know what the issues are? Have you registered to vote? You know you can't change things if you don't get involved, don't you?"

While I was too young to participate in the litigation or civil disobedience phases of the civil rights movement, I am of the generation that subsequently integrated public facilities and institutions, and I have vivid memories of the violence, pain, anger, and frustration that a Jim Crow society visited on African Americans.

I represented the first generation of African Americans to attend integrated schools after the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* directed the integration of public schools in segregated states and in 1955 ruled in what is known as *Brown II*, that public school integration proceed "with all deliberate speed."⁸ Within a few years I would join the "11.5 million school-age children, both African American and white, in 11,173 school districts being integrated"⁹ and realize the dream of my parents and grandparents of living in an integrated society where blacks and whites had the same rights and opportunities. I would become one of "the talented tenth," as described by W. E. B. DuBois in 1903—that small group of college-educated African Americans who would pursue social change and, he predicted, save the race:

⁷The term *wicked problems* was first used by Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber, in "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," *Policy Sciences* 4(2)(1973): 155-169, defined as "complex problems that don't lend themselves to quick fixes or easy solutions and that often require multiple levels of government cooperation across political jurisdictions."

⁸James T. Patterson, *Brown v Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 84.

⁹*Ibid.*, xvi.

Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of the schools— intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it—this is the curriculum of that Higher Education which must underlie true life. On this foundation we may build bread winning, skill of hand and quickness of brain, with never a fear lest the child and man mistake the means of living for the object of life. . . . You misjudge us because you do not know us. From the very first it has been the educated and intelligent of the Negro people that have led and elevated the mass.¹⁰

It was a broad coalition of American citizens that set new priorities of social justice, and it was their government that enacted the civil rights legislation that prohibited racial and gender discrimination in hiring. This ensured that, unlike my parents and grandparents, I would have access to a quality public education in an integrated environment, and that with these credentials, I could equally compete for any job in the marketplace and not be relegated to a low-paying, dead-end job because of the color of my skin. It was a time of hope and idealism, of believing all good things were possible to achieve, a time when we became a true democracy, when all citizens enjoyed the rights and liberties guaranteed by the Constitution. It was a time when citizenship took on its fullest, most vibrant meaning.

So as I thought about a career, the example of my parents' generation and JFK's call to action helped me decide what I could give back to my community in return for all that had been given to me—I would serve my community and my country through government service. I knew that once the new civil rights statutes were in place, we would need people working in government to ensure these new laws were institutionalized and the playing field remained level, so African Americans could be assured equal access and equal opportunity and be able to realize the American Dream. I was going to be one of those people!

When I entered the University of Missouri in 1969, one of only about 100 African American undergraduates in a student population of about 28,000 whites, little had changed since 1954. Fraternities donned Confederate army uniforms and serenaded white "southern belles." African Americans stuck together for safety; you didn't stray too far from campus for fear you might not make it back. Many professors still challenged African Americans' presence in class because "blacks were inferior" and didn't need a college education, so I was repeatedly asked, "Why are you here?" and

“Don’t you know your place?” My response was that I was an American and had the right and qualifications to be there. There was too much at stake to let somebody turn me around, so I sucked it up and decided to use this experience as preparation for life in the real world, beyond the boundaries of the campus.

As an undergraduate political science major in comparative political systems, I was particularly drawn to the Enlightenment philosophers John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Thomas Paine, because it was primarily their writings that influenced the founders of our country. In those days, I had a keen interest in understanding how the founders could craft such an enlightened document, yet continue to support slavery, and in some instances, own slaves. More radical at the time in my political views, I was curious about the governance structures of other countries, so my field of study was parliamentary systems analysis. In studying the work of the Enlightenment philosophers and juxtaposing that against the ideals espoused in the New Frontier and Great Society era programs, my university experiences and my moral obligations as one of the talented tenth, and knowledge of the civil rights movement, my political consciousness matured and framed my views about governance and public service.

I was struck by the power of the federal government to supersede local laws, regulations, and practices by directing federal dollars to communities for the purpose of improving the quality of life for residents whose needs had been ignored for generations by their city government. The sheer scope and magnitude of local governmental authority was amazing to me as well. It was not only involved in maintaining physical infrastructure and providing public safety and trash collection services, but was taking on the responsibility of addressing issues of poverty, health care, and economic development.

I was ecstatic when I landed my first full-time job after graduate school in a city department that was the successor to the Model Cities Program and the social policy arm of local government. I couldn’t wait to fix problems, ensure good government through improved efficiency and economy, and help people get on with their lives. Armed with the desire to “do good works and cause no harm,” I began my public service career with the city of Kansas City, Missouri, as a starry-eyed idealist, believing government had a responsibility to level the playing field between the “haves” and the “have nots,” to ensure equal access and opportunity for all.

When I entered public service, metropolitan areas in the United States were well on their way to widespread adoption of the council-manager form of government. The council-manager plan reflected the efforts of Progressive Era reformers to rescue local government from political machines and the corruption they often represented. Since I had grown up in St. Louis, a city with a strong Democratic party machine, I knew both this system's benefits—personalized response to complaints and encouragement of participation in party activities—and downsides—salary kickbacks to the party, graft, inefficiency, disparate service delivery, and little investment in the city's future. I saw that cities that adopted the council-manager plan brought scientific management and professionalism, helping to ensure organizational efficiency, effectiveness, economy, and equity in service delivery and decision making.

I agreed with the notion that politics should be removed, as much as possible, from city administration. I shared the view of Garry Wills who wrote in *A Necessary Evil* that under the council-manager plan, "Government is sometimes a positive good . . . cosmopolitan, expert, authoritative, efficient, confidential, articulated in its parts, progressive, elite, mechanical, duties-oriented, secular, regulatory, and delegative, with a division of labor."¹¹

Today, the council-manager plan is the dominant model of city management in the United States and the context for my career in public service. Armed with confidence and optimism, I found my work as a city manager immensely rewarding. Yet all too soon I came to realize that I had to do more than just manage day-to-day operations. My role and that of hundreds of other city managers was evolving, and I found I would need to lead more and manage less. Increasingly, I was being called upon by elected officials to improve government performance, to do more with less and to make our government more customer-service friendly. This was their way of responding to citizens who were complaining about city government. Under attack, they responded by applying more steam—demanding more managerial competence, which they believed would make citizens happier. They were out in the community, interacting with citizens, and as described by Daniel Yankelovich, they knew their constituents were not in a good mood.¹²

¹¹Garry Wills, *A Necessary Evil* (Simon and Schuster, 1999), 18.

¹²Brian O'Connell, *Civil Society: The Underpinnings of American Democracy*, with Forward by John W. Gardner (University Press of New England, 1999), xii.

What they were beginning to see, though they may not have recognized it, was a “disconnect” between people and their leaders. As Richard Harwood said in a study for the Kettering Foundation, “Today Americans are not apathetic—but they do feel impotent when it comes to politics. Citizens argue they have been ‘pushed out’ of the political process and left little room to understand, engage, and make a difference in the substance of politics.”¹³

I did not yet understand, though, that I, too, was part of the problem. There are structural, institutional, and organic reasons for the disconnect between citizens and their government, and one of them, going back over a century, was the advent of the “professional” or “expert” in local government, in the form of the city manager. For too long we have assumed that improving government efficiency, like building a better car, was the answer. Government is not in the business of making cars or some other product; it is the mechanism by which citizens run a democracy, which can be a messy process. To exclude citizens from the work of government is to invite frustration, and worse.

“The declining dependence of the government upon the allegiances of its citizens marks the end of the political era that began with the French and American Revolutions,”¹⁴ write Matthew Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg in *Downsizing Democracy*. “Governments can fight wars, collect revenues, and administer programs without having to rely much upon the collective and active support of millions of ordinary people. Indeed, in some respects, enthusiastic citizens have come to be seen as a hindrance rather than a help.”¹⁵

In the cities I managed, city council members looked to me to ameliorate popular discontent and to create a higher performing city organization. Their logic was simple: If we did a better job, citizens would feel better about us. In council-manager governments, elected officials set policy and the city manager executes policy and manages the delivery of city services, presumably effectively, efficiently, and with economy. But, while charters define the responsibilities of the city manager and his or her relationship to elected officials and staff, they are silent on the manager’s relationship with citizens. And one effect of this model has been elevating the value of technical expertise over citizens’ expertise, further distancing citizens from their local government.

¹³The Harwood Group, *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America* (Kettering Foundation, 1991), 4.

¹⁴Matthew A. Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg, *Downsizing Democracy: How America Sidelined Its Citizens and Privatized Its Public* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 46.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

Traditionally, the city manager focused internally on organizational and management issues, while the council and the mayor were understood to be the links to citizens. Indeed, a city manager who builds stronger connections in the community than her elected officials often will be viewed suspiciously, as someone with political ambitions. Accordingly, city managers rarely engage citizens in discussions about government or governance, including what citizens expect from government. Rather, in my experience, we would send them a survey every year asking them to rate city services. The survey results usually justified for us that citizens were pleased with what we did. We didn't think much about the questions we didn't ask: What should our priorities be? What role could you play in devising solutions to community problems?

Having spent my career working through public and nonprofit organizations to improve the quality of life in urban communities, I eventually became frustrated by the paralysis that infected these institutions and their inability to effectively address those issues that were of most concern to citizens. More and more, the relationship of citizens to their local government became one of conflict, confrontation, and polarization over issues. Terms like *not in my backyard* and *not during my term of office* reflected the inability of citizens and their political leaders to reach consensus on difficult, controversial issues, and more important, highlighted the growing distance between elected officials and citizens in solving community problems.

Having spent my career working through public and nonprofit organizations to improve the quality of life in urban communities, I eventually became frustrated by the paralysis that infected these institutions and their inability to effectively address those issues that were of most concern to citizens.

As city manager, I struggled to find the appropriate balance between ensuring organizational effectiveness, efficiency, and economy on the one hand, and encouraging and sustaining active citizen engagement on the other hand, in ways that would be meaningful, productive, and acceptable to elected officials and citizens. This was a struggle for me because there was little

institutional, political, or professional support for engaging citizens in ways other than endorsing decisions and plans already made in city hall on behalf of citizens. Most elected officials saw their role as representative much as the Federalists Hamilton and

Madison (in his early days) did—as a privileged elite making decisions on behalf of the masses. City staff saw themselves as expert owners of their respective agencies or departments and viewed citizen engagement as meddling or interference and for which they had limited tolerance beyond a public hearing, community meeting, or press conference when they would present their expert recommendations and explain why suggestions from the public were unacceptable—usually as being too expensive, time consuming, or technically impossible.

Citizens were also hesitant to get involved, even when I invited them, believing they would be patronized, their views ignored, or they would be used as a rubber stamp to make unpopular decisions ostensibly more palatable to the larger citizen community.

So here we were—stuck in a morass of inaction and indifference, blaming and finger-pointing, and getting nowhere with respect to building a common understanding of the issues and challenges facing the community—which loom larger every day. Citizens were absent from the democratic process and democracy wasn't working without them. Professional expertise, political acumen, and all the good will and best intentions of public officials proved insufficient to fix wicked community problems without citizens at the table. Polls, surveys, focus groups, and blue-ribbon committees were a poor and insufficient substitute for direct citizen engagement in the governance process.

It was clear to me something different had to be done to reduce the distance and enhance the connections between citizens and their government that the council-manager plan did not adequately address. Over time, and with practice, I came to understand that I could play an important role in improving citizen-government relationships and connections by finding the neutral territory, or public space, if you will, at which elected officials, city staff, and citizens come together, play a shared role, and take collective responsibility for doing public work.

Gradually, I began to realize that key to fixing wicked community problems was role redefinition: elected officials were going to have to learn how to share power with citizens; citizens had to move from spectators to participants; bureaucracies had to learn to value deliberation and collaboration in equal measure to its value of efficiency; professional staff must develop the skill set needed to develop and then practice deliberation and collaboration and then measure both; and city managers would have

to align professional practices with citizenship practices, including helping to define which problems citizens should address, how they get engaged, how they make sound decisions and what happens once citizens act collectively with government. Most important of all, city managers need to help create the environment where citizen input into the decision-making process is valued; educate the community, elected officials, and staff on ways to make it happen; and then, lead the change.

Donald Kettl, a political scientist and the director of the Institute of Government at the University of Pennsylvania, talks about what I am advocating with respect to redefining roles and responsibilities as boundaries that must be overcome. He says, “Boundaries have long played a central role in American public administration. . . as they define what organizations are responsible for doing and what powers and functions lie elsewhere.”¹⁶ He goes on to say:

New forces make managing these boundaries increasingly difficult: political processes that complicate administrative responses, indirect administrative tactics and wicked problems that levy enormous costs when solutions fail. Working effectively at these boundaries requires new strategies of collaboration and new skills for public managers.¹⁷

My struggle reflected the inherent flaws in a governance model that leaves citizens out of the equation of problem solving. Just as citizenship has to be about more than voting and filing complaints, governance has to be about more than political symbolism and technical problem solving. Kettl argues that we must find the appropriate strategies that allow us to retain organizational reliability, efficiency, and accountability while concomitantly meeting the challenges of governance.¹⁸ I believe that tomorrow’s successful communities will be those where public officials have invited citizens to the table to be active participants in naming, framing, and deliberating problems and concerns in terms that citizens understand and in ways they can influence their collective future.

My personal experience and the research of organizations like the Kettering Foundation have shown that in order for public life, including government, to work best, it is vital for citizens to participate in discussions on naming and framing issues and opportunities; deliberate with government and other stakeholders about what should be done; develop goals, objectives, and strategies; have some responsibility in program implementation; and give input and feedback on whether actions taken achieved the intended goal.¹⁹

¹⁶Donald F. Kettl, “Managing Boundaries in American Public Administration: The Collaboration Imperative,” *Public Administration Review* (December 2006): 10.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁹See H. George Frederickson, “How the Community Works: Officeholder Perspectives on Democratic Self-Government and the Community” (Kettering Foundation, 1999) and *Engaging Citizens: Meeting the Challenges of Community Life* (a draft working paper) (Kettering Foundation, May 2006).

When citizens are left out of the process of naming, framing, deliberating, committing, acting, and learning about community problems, they feel let down and betrayed and believe that their skills, abilities, and experiences bring no value to the governance process. Yet citizens bring the practical, experiential knowledge that our institutional experience complements but cannot replicate. Citizens have passions about their problems, and they force us to look beyond short-term solutions. Engaged citizens would demand government take a more holistic view in solving wicked community problems and would expect us to bring the appropriate resources, including other government agencies and nonprofit organizations, to the table with us.

Too much emphasis has been placed on how quickly government responds. Those efficient, quick responses often do not fix the problem over the long term. Engaging citizens requires us to slow down. It calls for collective decision making, not command-control decision making. Citizens are more than customers seeking to meet their needs in a marketplace—they own their government and have a right to mobilize to achieve collective interests.

My argument is that citizen engagement is not merely nice or noble or idealistic. It is pragmatic and essential. Our recent history teaches us that we can't fix those wicked problems in the community, or set reasonable expectations for the solutions, without them. Citizens have to be actively involved with government for community problems to be

resolved over the longer term, and that means we in government have to do things differently. It means we must value economy, efficiency, effectiveness, equity (in participation), and engagement of citizens. This requires more time and the loss of some power, but in return, gives us better solutions, participation and commitment from citizens in fixing community problems, and greater satisfaction for everyone because government and citizens are working in partnership to address key community issues.

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I am not alone in calling for such a change. A growing number of city managers and elected officials are getting frustrated with “business as usual.” And those of us who work in our nation’s oldest core cities are among the most frustrated of all. Urban city managers must not only manage the daily operations of an often unwieldy bureaucracy, but they also are expected to stimulate economic growth in the face of dwindling federal financial assistance, an eroding local tax base, middle-class flight to the suburbs, high rates of poverty and crime, underperforming public schools, aged infrastructure, a precipitous decline in unionized manufacturing jobs, citizen apathy, and elected officials running against “the bureaucracy.”

It is not surprising, then, that these city managers feel they are missing the mark, that somehow, no matter how efficient, effective, and economical the provision of city services might be, it is not sufficient to restore citizen trust and confidence in their local government. David Mathews describes it this way:

When officials think of themselves as guardians of the public interest, this self-concept informs and circumscribes what they do with the public. They believe it is part of their job to interact with the public—that is to be open if people want to say anything—although responsiveness to the public is not necessarily their first priority. They see their real job as decision maker. . . . Decision makers believe they have several responsibilities—to manage, arbitrate, advocate, and educate. In each of these roles, officials think of themselves as being in charge.²⁰

After years of feeling overwhelmed by trying to “be in charge” and do it all as a city manager, I began looking for ways to engage citizens in key issues of governance in the community, starting with small, more manageable issues. Let me first say that the decision to engage citizens was not an easy one to make, and the execution was even more difficult. As a practicing city manager, the literature I read and the professional development training I attended focused almost exclusively on managing city government more like a business, establishing performance measurements and creating an environment for competitive service delivery and treating citizens like customers. It was about telling “our story” in a more compelling way, getting the positive story out; not about citizen engagement.

Even today on its Web site, the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) describes the disconnect that exists between citizens and government as a lack of citizen understanding of government, which could be fixed with a good public relations campaign. “Few residents have a real understanding of what it takes to ensure that a city. . . runs smoothly and within budget and that essential services are provided efficiently and effectively.”²¹ It goes on to urge city managers to undertake a public awareness campaign “to educate the public about their local government’s operations and the contributions that skilled city, town and county managers make to those operations.”²²

I had to learn a new set of skills. In the process, I realized just how little I knew about what mattered to citizens. Their frustrations were not related to a lack of understanding of local government and the issues, but rather from a lack of active participation in naming and framing the issues with city government, and in turn, working in partnership with the city to solve important community problems.

I also discovered that citizens are not particularly interested in city government operations per se. What they care about most is how we respond when they reach out to us for help, guidance, and support in fixing vexing problems. While they expect us to exercise fiduciary responsibility and manage the business of government in an economical and efficient manner, they also expect us to be respectful, responsive, and attentive to their concerns about the quality of life in their neighborhoods, and to come armed with solutions to problems, not excuses.

And I found that if I listened differently, I learned. One of the most important lessons I learned is that the entryway to democracy for most citizens is through local government. At one point, I attended a neighborhood meeting where citizens were discussing a number of community issues, when they called upon a police officer to discuss a recent homicide and what could be done to make the neighborhood safer. You can imagine their surprise and anger when this police officer told them there was nothing the police could do; they lived in a bad neighborhood and at best the police could increase their visibility in the neighborhood, but this would only move crime to another neighborhood, and that wasn’t in the public interest. Even I was stunned at this response, and the neighborhood leaders went home feeling that once again their efforts to fix problems were ignored by government.²³

²¹Summer/Fall 2006 International City/County Management Association (ICMA) Web site, quote from public relations campaign. Also see “Professionals Must Make Noise About Making a Difference in State and Local Government,” by Robert J. O’Neill, page 3, available at www.governing.com (June 7, 2006).

²²ICMA Web site, public relations campaign (June 7, 2006).

²³I was not the city manager or public official in this community. I attended the meeting as an academic researcher at the community’s invitation.

But I understood now that conversations like this are an opportunity, to build relationships and understanding, to share knowledge, and to create a learning environment, which will allow citizen groups to begin the process of naming and framing issues in ways that lead to collective action. I realized my perseverance was worth it as I knew how to work with this group of citizens and help them create a partnership with their local government to begin working on their persistent problems. I knew how to help make a difference by being part of a citizen-government partnership.

This paper is for students, academicians, practitioners, and citizens interested in ways to make government relevant to the lives of everyday citizens. I believe the time has come for the institutionalization of strong government/citizen partnerships in solving community problems, and this is the crux of my proposed local government reforms. And further, that this model will become the best practice used by all public administrators.

In the pages that follow, I will share how I came to believe in the importance of engaging citizens in the governance process, as well as some of my experiences and lessons learned along the way. I conclude with recommendations I believe will move democracy beyond the ballot box and into our neighborhoods and communities.

It is my hope that in so doing, we realize the American ideal: "It is the fractious, maddening approach to the conduct of human affairs that values equality despite its elusiveness, that values democracy despite its debasement, that values pluralism despite its messiness, that values the institutions of civic culture despite their flaws, and that values public life as something higher and greater than the sum of all our private lives."²⁴

But before I talk about where we should go, I will begin my story with where we have been and how we got here.

Government Reform Movements

“A city should be a democracy first and then an efficient democracy. But a city is not a business proposition, pure and simple, as so many say.”

Richard S. Childs

The American tradition of government efficiency and economy began promptly with the Constitution, when the Federalists, in soliciting support for its ratification, spoke persuasively about these traits as primary responsibilities of government. While the framers of the Constitution created a “shared-power” system of politics and governance, they vested responsibility for executing legislation and managing the government bureaucracy in the executive branch. This is where the operations of government were to be performed and where efficiency and economy were to be demonstrated.

At the same time, the form of the new government reflected unresolved tensions among the founders over how much *democracy*—a word that connoted “mob rule” to some—ought to be allowed. In part, that’s why we have the Electoral College and the U.S. Senate, both intended to keep popular power from overwhelming the fledgling republic (until the last century, senators were chosen by state legislatures). Thus, from the earliest days of the republic, its systems and habits and public spaces were shaped by the inherent tension between state control and unbridled popular government.²⁵

With the rise of party politics and Jacksonian democracy in the early 19th century, cities came to be run by political machines. The institutionalization of the spoils system often resulted in corruption, as administrative power was transferred from elites to politicians of a more populist bent. Prior to the rise of political parties, citizen participation in matters of governance was limited by and large to elections, which were more like a “delegation of authority to a local gentleman.”²⁶ Even the New England town hall meetings were more reflective of the interest of the local elite who controlled when town hall meetings were held, determined the agenda for the meetings, and generally stood uncontested for elective office.²⁷

²⁵Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen* (The Free Press, 1998), 97; Wills, *A Necessary Evil*, 163; Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, “Federalist Paper #68, in *The Federalist Papers* (Bantam Books, 1982), 345; and Ronald O. Loveridge, *City Managers in Legislative Politics* (The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1971), 15.

²⁶Schudson, *The Good Citizen*, 7, 8, 22, 27, and 31.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 5.

Political parties brought forth a new relationship between average citizens and their government. Where they had deferred to elites in matters of governance in the 18th century now, through political parties, citizens became personally involved in government, from voting to securing patronage jobs.²⁸

Two competing visions emerged: one was the “boss” system, which saw personal power, connections, and patronage as the way to “get things done”; the other was the reform movement, which saw experts, efficiency, and “public service” as the way to build and run a city. What was literally at stake was who would control the future of the metropolis.

The latter part of the 19th century witnessed exponential growth in the population of cities and towns, as factories increased production to sell goods nationally rather than just locally and both rural residents and immigrants flooded in to fill jobs in those factories. Some see this period as the transition from the “agrarian ideal” to a society based on commerce; this was also the

period that saw the creation of significant class differences for the first time in our history.²⁹ While corporate officials amassed untold wealth, their workers were paid low wages and often lived in squalid, overcrowded, and unhealthy tenements. They worked long hours under hazardous conditions and had few benefits; there was no safety net if they were injured or killed on the job. Many of these workers were newly arrived immigrants seeking refuge from poverty or from religious or ethnic persecution, looking for better lives in America. Others included African American migrants from the South who headed to Northern cities in record numbers seeking economic opportunities and a means of escape from the violence, oppression, and racism of Jim Crow.

These dramatic changes in the urban landscape had no precedent upon which residents could call for guidance, no best practices on which to draw to develop a process for managing change. Two competing visions emerged: one was the “boss” system, which saw personal power, connections, and patronage as the way to “get things done;” the other was the reform movement, which saw experts, efficiency, and “public service” as the way to build and run a city. What was literally at stake was who would control the future of the metropolis—political bosses who engaged the masses but served their own ends, or the middle- and upper-class elite reformers who, through the use of experts, would bring efficiency and economy to the administration of government.

²⁸Ibid., 132, 147.

²⁹Robert H. Wiebe, *Self Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy* (The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 141.

Political parties served to connect immigrants and others to the public square, but they were too often machines run by party bosses who put self-interest above the greater community good. The governments they led were inefficient and corrupt. Speaking of Cincinnati, Ohio, in the late 1800s, Professor Zane Miller observes, “Partisanship, the use of money in local conventions, and the arrival of a new breed of politician had produced a chaotic political system based upon unorganized bipartisan corruption, which was incapable of orderly and efficient government.”³⁰

A nascent reform movement that began shortly before the Civil War was concerned about political patronage, corruption, and the power of political parties to mobilize immigrants, the urban poor, and African Americans to vote the party ticket. Indeed, in many cities, immigrants who declared their intention to become citizens were allowed to vote. These reformers advocated the appointment of public administrators who would make government more effective, more honest, and less costly. Post-Civil War reformers were initially concerned with “morality and the rightness of government”³¹ as the nation healed from the atrocities of war and concomitantly sought to secure the rights of former slaves. However, a few decades later this interest gave way to the broader governance concerns of earlier generations of reformers. By the late 1880s, reform groups were again attacking political corruption and party machines.³²

Who were these latter-day reformers? They were predominantly white Anglo-Saxon Protestants from business and the professions, known variously as Liberals, Independents, Mugwumps, Muckrakers, and Progressives,³³ and they sought “both social justice and a place for themselves in the emerging metropolitan society.”³⁴ Mugwumps were those Republicans who defected from the Republican Party in 1884 over corruption, party patronage, Reconstruction, and other issues.³⁵ Progressives were associated with the good government philosophies articulated by Woodrow Wilson in his 1887 essay, “The Study of Administration.” In this seminal work, Wilson argued that it was important to know what happened to legislation after it was approved by a legislative body and given to the bureaucracy to implement. He also stressed the need for government administration to be efficient and economical and argued that a field of study to help train public administrators on best business practices was needed.³⁶

³⁰Zane Miller, *Boss Cox's Cincinnati* (Ohio State University Press, 1968), 71.

³¹Larry Walker, “Woodrow Wilson, Progressive Reform, and Public Administration,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 104, No. 3 (Autumn 1989): 516. Also see Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (Simon and Schuster, 2000), 64.

³²R. Claire Snyder, *Shutting the Public Out of Politics: Civic Republicanism, Professional Politics and the Eclipse of Civil Society* (occasional paper) (Kettering Foundation, 1999), 35.

³³Schudson, *The Good Citizen*, 158.

³⁴William M. Sullivan, *Work and Integrity* (HarperBusiness Publishers, 1995), 64.

³⁵Schudson, *The Good Citizen*, 158.

³⁶Woodrow Wilson, “The Study of Administration” (November 1986).

The Mugwumps were distrustful of democracy and sought to limit party influence.³⁷ They “advocated ending immigration for people from southern or eastern Europe, requiring literacy and intelligence tests for voting and a morals test as well for blacks, naturalization laws to keep immigrants from voting, and extra votes for the wealthy.”³⁸

The Progressives believed in the power of government to improve the human condition:

Progressivism was a rebellion against limited government and the individualism of nineteenth-century liberalism. It accepted collectivism, the welfare of the community as a whole, as a positive value. It advocated the forceful use of the powers of government in order to achieve advances in the collective public welfare, and it advocated the improvement of public administration in order that progressive policies might be carried out effectively.³⁹

Both Mugwumps and Progressives were against the power and corruption of political machines. Mugwumps attacked political patronage while the Progressives challenged party chiefs and advocated the adoption of the short ballot, the secret ballot, and state- rather than party-sponsored elections. “It is the reform movements of this era that can be credited with transforming voting from a social to a civic act, rationalizing electoral behavior.”⁴⁰ Yet while motivated by their disdain for political machines and the sway they held over the masses, these reforms also removed citizens from active participation in the political process, according to Michael Schudson:

The meaning of the human act of casting a ballot changed. Correspondingly. . . the act of reading a newspaper and the process of political education changed; the discourse of citizenship and citizenship ideals was transformed. The outcome was a world in many respects more democratic, inclusive, and dedicated to public, collective goals, and, for all that, less politically engaging. By the close of the Progressive Era, the cultural contradictions of democracy would reach a point of mournful clarity.⁴¹

In addition to campaign reform, the Mugwumps and Progressives secured other reforms in the name of popular democracy, science, and efficiency. For example, in the interest of popular democracy, reformers helped bring about popular primaries as a replacement for party caucuses for nominations, and the citizen-based efforts referred to as initiative, referendum, and recall. Collectively, these reforms lessened citizens’ reliance on the platforms and slogans of political parties. Now, campaigns were less emotional and more educational, fewer offices were on the ballot, ballots were secret (referred to as the

³⁷Schudson, *The Good Citizen*, 147, 158, and 160.

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹Larry Walker, “Woodrow Wilson, Progressive Reform, and Public Administration,” 512.

Also see Crenson and Ginsberg, *Downsizing Democracy*.

⁴⁰Snyder, *Shutting the Public Out of Politics*, 39.

⁴¹Schudson, *The Good Citizen*, 147.

Australian ballot) and printed by the state rather than parties, and patronage was replaced, or at least minimized, by civil service reform. The role of the party diminished as they had fewer rewards to bestow and citizens, theoretically, took responsibility for educating themselves about the issues and candidates standing for office.

Rather than reform parties, the Progressives sought to minimize party influence and reduce the number of participants in the electoral process. So while these reforms brought us “good government,” they also had a downside—they took citizens out of the public square. By weakening rather than reforming the structure of political parties, the Progressives and Mugwumps took the excitement and enthusiasm out of politics for the average citizen. And with the creation of means tests and citizenship requirements, they virtually eliminated African Americans, immigrants, and many poor whites from the electorate altogether.⁴²

The municipal reforms that were instituted, such as the professionalization of public administration through civil service reform and the adoption of the council-manager plan, improved government efficiency, accountability, and economy. Other reforms, like nonpartisan elections, the short ballot, the Australian or secret ballot, voter registration, and direct ballots or referenda, served to lessen the power and influence of political parties and ensure informed voters who would make individual choices about the issues and candidates they supported.⁴³

One organization born in the Progressive Era, and of particular interest to citizens and officials today, is the Municipal League (now the National Civic League), founded in 1894, which produced and disseminated reports and papers on good government and later introduced the concept of a model charter.⁴⁴ Model municipal charters have evolved from the original charter in 1899 that organized city government around the principle of the “strong elected leader” in a separation-of-powers structure, to endorsement of the council-manager plan in 1915.⁴⁵ The current Model City Charter, now in its eighth edition, has several key elements of reform to which we should pay heed: the value of local self-governance, representative democracy, responsible professionalism, citizen participation, and regional integration.⁴⁶

What is important to note about this period in our history is how these political, economic, and social changes influenced governmental form and structure, and the relationship between government and its citizens over the next 100 years.

⁴²Schudson, *The Good Citizen*, 155, 158, and 159; Crenson and Ginsberg, *Downsizing Democracy*, 15. Also see, Wiebe, *Self Rule*, 135-136.

⁴³See Bernard Hirschhorn, *Democracy Reformed: Richard Spencer Childs and His Fight for Better Government* (Greenwood Press, 1997); Wiebe, *Self Rule*, 137, 163-164; and Sullivan, *Work and Integrity*, Chapter 3, for more detailed discussions of Progressive Era reforms.

⁴⁴H. George Frederickson, Gary A. Johnson, and Curtis H. Wood, *The Adapted City: Institutional Dynamics and Structural Change* (M.E. Sharpe, Inc, 2004), 83-85.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 86; and *The Model City Charter* (National Civic League Inc., 2003), 69.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, comments by Jim Savara, 69-72.

According to Snyder, “the problems created by industrialization resulted in both the construction of large corporations and the building of a modern, regulatory state. As a consequence, the vibrant civil society that had existed during the nineteenth century was crushed between these new forms of state and market.”⁴⁷ The days of both the citizen volunteer and engaged citizen were over, replaced by “expert” professionals who adhered to the scientific management practices of Frederick Taylor⁴⁸ and whose primary responsibilities were the efficient, effective, and economical administration of government. Some political scientists, like Snyder, believe the reformers attacked political parties and promoted professional management out of a fear of the public, while others suggest they were concerned about the loss of power that would accrue to elites with an active, mobilized citizenry.⁴⁹ While all agree that the reform of political parties was needed, many argue it could have been done in ways that eliminated the corruption, but continued to engage citizens and support civil society.

An important and often overlooked aim of Progressive Era reformers, as William Sullivan notes in *Work and Integrity*, was social justice, even though they “could be both cosmopolitan and hostile to immigrants, confident of the eventual triumph of universal moral principles over parochial attachments and shrill about the corruption of political bosses.”⁵⁰ This is an important point to remember as it is this sense of social justice that frames the values and behaviors the Progressives integrated with scientific management principles to define what the role of a professional public administrator should be—efficient government that served to achieve the long-term greater good.

And just what is the public interest government should serve?

The Progressive journalist Walter Lippmann described the public interest as what people “would choose if they saw clearly, thought rationally, acted disinterestedly, and benevolently.”⁵¹ Others describe it in more philosophical and religious terms. I view public interest in more Lockean terms related to our individual choice to come together to work on those matters that individually one cannot do as effectively, efficiently, or with economy alone, but that when done collectively, makes life better for all. What is important for the future is that public administrators begin to define the greater good not just in the context of their elite understanding of what is in the public interest, but by what citizens actually say they want through public deliberation.

⁴⁷Snyder, *Shutting the Public Out of Politics*, 34 and 37.

⁴⁸Frederick W. Taylor, “Scientific Management,” in *Classics of Public Administration*, fifth edition (Shafritz, Hyde and Parkes, Thomson and Wadsworth, 2004), 43-45; Sullivan, *Work and Integrity*, 88-90; H. George Frederickson and Kevin B. Smith, *The Public Administration Theory Primer*, 99; Wiebe, *Self-Rule*, page 158; Schudson, *The Good Citizen*, 217-218; and Richard J. Stillman, II, *The Rise of the City Manager: A Public Professional in Local Government* (University of New Mexico Press, 1974), 10.

⁴⁹Crenson and Ginsberg, *Downsizing Democracy*, xiv.

⁵⁰Sullivan, *Work and Integrity*, 64-65.

⁵¹As quoted in an article by Carol W. Lewis, “In Pursuit of the Public Interest,” *Public Administration Review* (September/October 2006), 694.

The Council-Manager Era, Its Triumphs and Disappointments

“The cities were where most government was, where most action was, where most problems were [and] where the services of public administrators could most dramatically be made more effective, more honest, and less costly.”

*Frederick C. Mosher*⁵²

“[The] chief responsibility of the manager is for the efficient and economical conduct of the administrative services ... with the expectation business administration will develop.”

*Leonard White*⁵³

In 1908, Staunton, Virginia (the birthplace of Woodrow Wilson), became the first city in America to hire a general manager to run the day-to-day business of government. This was followed in 1912 by the appointment of the first city manager in Sumter, South Carolina. In 1913, Dayton, Ohio, became the first large city to adopt the council-manager plan.⁵⁴

The council-manager form of government was a product of the efforts of Progressive reformers, especially Richard Childs, and embodies the principles set forth by Woodrow Wilson: nonpartisan elections, the separation of politics and administration, incorporation of the best business management practices, and the concentration of power in a single, responsible, and technically trained individual who is given a wide range of discretion.⁵⁵ Moreover, according to Richard Stillman, the council-manager plan combined two disparate schools of Progressive thought, the need for centralized planning and citizen participation in the policy making process.⁵⁶ He goes on to say, “Every citizen could be included in the policy making process by way of the ballot box. Two apparently irreconcilable Progressive ideals, equality of participation and centralized administrative authority, were thus neatly balanced in the manager plan.”⁵⁷

⁵²Frederick C. Mosher, “Introduction: The American Setting,” in *American Public Administration: Past, Present, Future* (University of Alabama Press, 1975), 8.

⁵³Leonard White, *The City Manager* (The University of Chicago Press, 1927), 13.

⁵⁴Hirschhorn, *Democracy Reformed*, 68-72; and White, *The City Manager*, 135 and 314; Landrum R. Bolling, *City Manager Government in Dayton* (Committee on Public Administration of the Social Science Research Council, 1940), 14; and Loveridge, *City Managers in Legislative Politics*, 16.

⁵⁵Wilson, “The Study of Administration.”

⁵⁶Stillman, *The Rise of the City Manager*, 9.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

But looked at another way, it was merely a new response to the central tension of the republic, between state control and pure democracy, and its ongoing resolution, which in large part shapes the respective roles of “leader” and “citizen.” “From Plato onward, many theorists have insisted that government is best served by ‘guardians’ who are qualified to govern because of their superior knowledge and skills.”⁵⁸

The design of the council-manager plan was similar to that of a corporate business structure in which boards of directors were responsible for representing shareholder interests, deciding company policy, and hiring a chief executive officer to manage business operations. As envisaged by Childs, city council members, like corporate board members, would be nonpartisan volunteers who had been successful in their business, professional, or civic lives.⁵⁹ These volunteer board members, who were not dependent upon government for an income, and whose reputation and respect had already been earned, would bring their private sector skills and expertise to the position of council member and make city government honest, accountable, and responsive. Elected officials, like corporate directors, would meet infrequently to determine broad policy directives and leave administrative matters to the chief executive officer, the city manager. Council members would not hire personal staff or direct administrative staff other than the city manager.

Key to the success of the plan was the expectation that council members would act as a body, sharing joint responsibility for citizen representation on the one hand and determining the direction and priorities of city government on the other.⁶⁰ These civic volunteer leaders were preferred over strictly “partisan” officials because they would not bring party politics to bear nor use the coffers of city government to promote party agendas or platforms. Rather, they would use the “bully pulpit” of council chambers to promote the public good. Under the council-manager plan, there would be no party bosses awarding contracts or political machines providing patronage jobs in return for votes or contributions.

Childs believed this form of government would “provide conditions of service attractive to businessmen, lawyers, labor leaders [and] women who would continue in their private careers but would only be required to meet in city hall periodically, like a board of directors.”⁶¹ Childs elaborated by adding, “[t]he prominence of council resulting from such a structure would make their votes important and consequently, would attract a more political class to serve in these prestigious

⁵⁸Jeffrey M. Berry, Kent E. Portney, and Ken Thomson, *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy* (The Brookings Institution, 1993), 7, footnote 18.

⁵⁹Hirschhorn, *Democracy Reformed*, 69, 76, and 77.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 71.

⁶¹*Ibid.*

positions.”⁶² By “political class,” of course, he meant white members of the middle and upper classes.

The genesis of the council-manager plan is the result of a convergence of forces during the Progressive Era, which included the rapid urbanization of America’s cities, elite discontent with the corrupt practices of political machines, the emergence of scientific management principles with the prospect of more efficiently run and accountable public organizations, the advent of municipal research bureaus that collected data and reported on government expenditures, and the promotion of public administration as an academic discipline.⁶³

Wilson wrote, “The field of administration is a field of business. It is removed from the hurry and strife of politics; it at most points stands apart even from the debatable ground of constitutional study.”⁶⁴ Civil service reform, the method of making executive appointments, and better organizational alignment and action were reforms he believed were necessary in “establishing the sanctity of public office as a public trust, and, by making service unpartisan, it is opening the way for making it businesslike. By sweetening its motives it is rendering it capable of improving its methods of work.”⁶⁵

Wilson also had this to say about administration: “Administration lies outside the proper sphere of politics. Administrative questions are not political questions. Although politics sets the tasks for administration, it should not be suffered to manipulate its offices.”⁶⁶ Of the study of administration, he added that, “to be efficient, it must discover the simplest arrangements by which responsibility can be unmistakably fixed upon officials; the best way of dividing authority without hampering it and responsibility without obscuring it.”⁶⁷

Prior to the municipal reform movement, the operations of city government were performed through numerous boards and commissions, each elected on long ballots, making it difficult for citizens to know much about individual candidates and more susceptible to party influence. The theory had been that democracy was strengthened by citizens voting for as many candidates as possible. Reformers like Childs and Wilson disagreed. Wilson argued, “Long ballots resulted in government by political machines, thwarting the people from electing representatives of their own choice.”⁶⁸ Childs fought for municipal reform to address the fundamental problems he saw in

⁶²Ibid., 71

⁶³See Charles Taft, *City Management: The Cincinnati Experiment* (Kennikat Press, reissued in 1971), 119; and Stillman, *The Rise of the City Manager*, 11-12.

⁶⁴Wilson, “The Study of Administration,” Section II, first paragraph.

⁶⁵Ibid., Section II, third paragraph.

⁶⁶Ibid., Section II, fourth paragraph.

⁶⁷Ibid., Section II, paragraph 11,

⁶⁸Hirschhorn, *Democracy Reformed*, xxii.

government administrations dominated by party machines: the long ballot, unwieldy constituencies, and diffusion of power.⁶⁹ For Childs, the “separation of powers and checks and balances, characteristic of mayor-council government, made for weak, ineffective, and ramshackle government and led to legislative delays and inaction.”⁷⁰

Furthermore, as Dayton, Ohio, discovered after its 1913 flood, a governmental structure with multiple autonomous divisions and independently elected officeholders with discrete responsibilities provided no mechanism for any one official to be in charge in an emergency. When the flood waters rose and Dayton's downtown was submerged, there was no

The council-manager plan is distinguished from other forms of local government organization by its small number of nonpartisan elected officials, its appointment of a professional administrator to manage day-to-day operations under policy guidance from the council, and the authority of the manager to appoint key executive officials.

municipal official in charge to coordinate the city's response and recovery. In this instance, Dayton's rescue and recovery was managed by John Patterson, president of the National Cash Register Company.⁷¹ After chaotic and uncoordinated efforts by the city, Patterson assumed control and brought the city back from the destruction unleashed by flood waters. An early advocate of the need for reform of local government in Dayton,⁷² immediately after the flood, he chaired the campaign for adoption of the council-manager plan with a single executive to run the operations of city government under the policy direction of a small board of elected officials. He and other like-minded reformers, including Lucius E. Wilson, director of the American City Bureau of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, who introduced the concept to Dayton, believed that government by experts responsible for ensuring operational accountability, economy, and efficiency was compatible with representative democracy and preferable to the spoils system of machine politics.⁷³

During this same period, residents of Cincinnati, Ohio, were becoming frustrated with the blatant corruption and mismanagement of city government by the party machine, and they, too, launched a reform movement.⁷⁴ Like others across the country, they were looking for a better way to structure local government to further democratic aims and to ensure that local government was more resistant to

⁶⁹Ibid., xv-xvi.

⁷⁰Ibid., 63.

⁷¹Mark Bernstein, *Grand Eccentrics: Turning the Century: Dayton and the Inventing of America* (Orange Frazer Press, 1996), 144, 146, and 152.

⁷²Stillman, *The Rise of the City Manager*, 30.

⁷³Bolling, *City Manager Government in Dayton*, 8-13.

⁷⁴Taft, *City Management: The Cincinnati Experiment*, 11-12; and Miller, *Boss Cox's Cincinnati*, “Chapter 14, Progressives in Power, 1911-1913.”

the evils of political party machines. Thus the council-management plan was created as an alternative to prevailing political practices, shifting power away from political parties and to professionally trained experts.

The council-manager plan is distinguished from other forms of local government organization by its small number of nonpartisan elected officials, its appointment of a professional administrator to manage day-to-day operations under policy guidance from the council, and the authority of the manager to appoint key executive officials. In cities that adopted the council-manager plan, the “scientific management” theory espoused by Frederick Taylor, which was already in vogue in the private sector, was incorporated into the practice of local government administration. Municipal research organizations were also created to evaluate government efficiency and document both organizational performance and the best management practices of the day. Good government organizations like the National Civic League promoted the council-manager plan, and professional associations like the then International City Management Association (now ICMA) established professional standards and credentials for city managers and recognition of cities that adopted the council-manager plan.

But, as noted by John Nalbandian, the Progressive Era reforms that led to the creation of the council-manager plan were not universally accepted at the time as the best response to machine corruption and political patronage.⁷⁵ While their goal was to promote representative democracy by ensuring that citizens voted for elected officials because they had studied their platforms and deemed them the best candidates, not simply because they were endorsed by political parties, one significant effect was removing citizens from the political process through the limitations they placed on who could vote. Immigrants, the poor, and to a lesser extent, African Americans who had been active participants in the political parties of the day, suddenly found restrictions placed on them that, for all practical purposes, blocked their access to the “ballot box.”

“Contemporary critics as well as their predecessors charge that council-manager government creates powerful bureaucracies at the expense of political supremacy, obstructs political focus in the community, and represents mainstream interests better than minority interests,”⁷⁶ Nalbandian writes. “These criticisms have been consistent over time, suggesting that they emanate in general from the environment of municipal government and in part from the design of council-manager government, and not from the people who are elected and appointed to serve.”⁷⁷

⁷⁵John Nalbandian, *Professionalism in Local Government* (Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1991), 35.

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Ibid.

Nevertheless, city management in the United States would continue running primarily on the council-manager model for the next half-century, with minimal alterations. But in recent decades, the history of city management has been marked by two significant trends: the adoption of “high-performance organization” theories and the rise of the well-paid, “professional” politician in local government. The first was a promising and largely positive development, but one which relegated citizens to the role of consumers in the market place. The second was a disaster.

Both are responses to the persistence of wicked problems. Ironically, the council-manager plan’s origins can be found in the impulse to shape a scientific or professional method to solve problems—yet today, most citizens don’t believe local government officials can lead a one-car parade, let alone solve real community problems. The relationship between government and citizens has changed dramatically from what it was 50 years ago, when citizens had more confidence in us. Changing economic conditions and demographics, along with lingering issues of equity, racial reconciliation, and justice, as well as the limited capacity of local government bureaucracies to respond adequately to these changes, have resulted in little agreement on the role of government and citizens in meeting the challenges of governance and democracy, especially in older core cities. Most of all, citizens are frustrated.

My first appointment as city manager coincided with the emergence of the “high-performance” or “excellence in government” reform movement, which hearkened back to the roots of the council-manager plan by emphasizing best-business management practices and making government more attuned to customer service. To me, these ideals were reminiscent of the Progressive reformers at the beginning of the 20th century, and it seemed logical that over time, administrative practices, procedures, and policies would need to be updated and that emerging technologies would allow the work to be done better. Implicit in these reforms, too, was a mandate to use the power and authority of government for the benefit of the collective welfare of the public.

“The pursuit of human dignity is the essential active ideal that we serve,”⁷⁸ said Bob Matson, Director of Leadership Development in the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service at the University of Virginia.

It is therefore the measure for the worth of all acts pursued in the service of democracy. The integrity of each act as tested against this ideal brings a means-ends guide to the work of government. When worthy ideals and congruent values are at stake in our actions, organizational life is inspiring. When this connection between how we do it and why we do it is made more visible, work can be a part of life at its best. Government work in this sense has the greatest opportunity to be inspiring for both the served and the servant.⁷⁹

So I fully embraced these notions of “reinventing government” and “continuous improvement.” This meant I had to convince the mayor and members of city council that organizational improvements would be gained if staff members were better trained, new equipment purchased, and the work culture changed to one that embraced teamwork (rather than individual stars). What’s more, we would measure performance and outcomes, demonstrating that this new approach would be well worth the time and money spent. And if government worked harder but smarter, citizens were bound to appreciate it! Improving government operations played to my values, my training, and my experiences, and with the city council providing the authorizing environment to inaugurate change, I was enthusiastic about what could be accomplished. What a way to make elected officials and citizens happy. They were going to love us! The cost of services would be stabilized if not reduced—so taxes and fees would not increase, the size of the bureaucracy would be reduced while concomitantly improving service quality, and customer satisfaction would rise exponentially, all through the implementation of best-management practices and measuring performance outcomes. And we would share our results with the public.

Like many of my peers, I became an acolyte of the reinventing government movement and began analyzing the best way to move forward. Training was an integral component of this new approach, as executive staff, in particular, would have to take on additional leadership responsibilities like coaching, mentoring, communicating, convening, and managing to results. In order to find the time to lead, we would have to delegate some management authority to subordinate staff. Decision making would be less hierarchical and more driven by organizational vision, values, and customer demands. This would require

⁷⁸Quote from Bob Matson, Director of Leadership Development at the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service at the University of Virginia, in training material on creating a high-performance organization, entitled “Democracy at Work! Public Service Leadership” (May, 2003), 1.

⁷⁹Ibid.

everyone to know where the organization was going, and that meant we had to move beyond traditional organizational cultures, which limited access to information, organized work in autonomous silos, and caused departments to compete for limited resources. If everyone had information, we would all have power, and through this expansion of knowledge and power, government would operate more efficiently, effectively, and economically.

I worked with Bob Matson, John Pickering, and others of the Weldon Cooper Center staff in four communities, over the course of almost 15 years, to improve local government organizational performance. My approach was simple: find the space to do the important, but nonurgent work of strategic planning, a luxury rarely enjoyed by city managers or their senior staff because almost all of our time is spent responding to “urgent” demands from elected officials, department heads, and irate citizens.

In focusing on how to improve government service delivery for our customers, we did not spend enough time on what government and citizens could do to address community problems that require not just efficiency, effectiveness, and economy, but equity and engagement as well.

We did what we set out to do. We improved organizational systems, strategies, and structures and thereby improved performance. We learned to value teamwork and collaboration, to involve the entire workforce in defining problems and finding solutions and to share the responsibility for good government among all city

employees, not just appointed or elected officials. We reviewed our work in a new, more inclusive, less hierarchical context. By using this model, in most instances, organizational performance did, in fact, improve and customer satisfaction with the services we delivered increased.

And yet—citizens continued to complain about our lack of responsiveness to those wicked problems that were outside the boundaries of internal organizational improvements. While our customers were happy, our citizens were not. I felt a strong sense of inefficacy in my inability to address vexing community problems over the long term. Citizens didn’t care about best-management practices. They simply wanted their children to play safely in front of their houses or to walk safely from

their cars to their homes. They couldn't understand why what seemed like such a simple thing didn't get done. Best-management practices meant little to them given the reality of what they lived every day.

Citizens expect that city managers will continually improve services and promote efficiency and economy, and by and large, they give us the latitude to do so. But by itself, it is not enough. There is a distinction between citizen and customer, and in attempting merely to gauge customer input and satisfaction with the delivery of city services, we had inadvertently pushed the citizen farther from the public square. In focusing on how to improve government service delivery for our customers, we did not spend enough time on what government and citizens could do to address community problems that require not just efficiency, effectiveness, and economy, but equity and engagement as well.

The second major trend is the rise of professional politicians serving on city councils. These politicians have much higher salaries than their predecessors, allowing them to work full-time in what was once envisaged as a part-time, volunteer position. They have office staffs and significant budgets, and through council committees, play a much larger role in managing operational issues, historically the purview of the city manager.

Rather than acting as a "board of directors," meeting periodically to set policy, they are more like a second set of managers, elbow-deep in the details. Yet reelection, not credible action on community problems, is their real priority, delaying unpopular decisions in order not to anger voters, often at the expense of the long-term greater good. Through an infusion of money and the influence of the methods often used by candidates for higher office, local city council members in many major cities have become a professional class, advised by consultants, running for office on values-driven platforms, raising millions of dollars for campaign "war chests," and marketing their message to narrow constituencies. They conveniently project an unresponsive bureaucracy as the problem and advocate privatization for work traditionally performed by government as the solution.

Too many of these local politicians actively work to portray government as corrupt and untrustworthy and use wicked problems not as challenges which need to be met but as wedge issues that pit constituencies against one another in a win-lose

zero-sum game. They imply that a vote for them will fix problems with no pain and at no additional cost—whether in human capital or taxes. Voters want to believe that there is a painless cure to what ails America’s cities, and they vote for them, only to be disappointed anew.

In frustration, voters have passed a variety of ballot measures aimed at controlling politicians, by instituting term limits, more stringent ethics and campaign finance reporting requirements, and stronger sunshine laws. Yet they still feel marginalized by government, so they continue to look for the silver bullet that will make politicians and the local governments they oversee more responsive and more attuned to the interests of average citizens.

Increasingly, the public demands a single, strong political leader in the person of a directly elected, full-time mayor. They want someone who can relate to them on a more personal and political level, someone who can “take charge.” Experience has taught them that the mayor should play this role, not the nonpartisan, internally focused city manager. In the process, citizens seek a reform or adaptation to the council-manager plan that changes one of its most fundamental assumptions—the equal footing of all elected members of council. Childs believed that the strength of the council-manager form depended upon elected officials having the same authority, power, and responsibilities.⁸⁰ The direct election of mayor would, in his view, divert attention from the body of council and give undue attention to the mayor which would hinder the council’s ability to work as a team, so he endorsed the idea that the highest vote getter in a city council election would become the mayor, and that he or she would be given added ceremonial responsibilities.⁸¹ Today, that has been turned on its head. With the full support of frustrated citizens, more and more urban council-manager cities are abandoning this practice in favor of a system in which the mayor is directly elected to that position by the people. The operating theory is that a strong mayor can cut through the red tape and “get things done.”

In practice, these adaptations have dramatically altered the relationship between the mayor and members of city council, adding a more competitive and political edge, and often putting the manager in the middle of a now divided legislature—the mayor on one hand and the body of council on the other. In one example from my experience, the mayor wanted to move forward on a development project recommended by staff members and supported by the manager, but council members saw it as potentially

⁸⁰Hirschhorn, *Democracy Reformed*, 71.

⁸¹Ibid.

boosting the political fortunes of the mayor and his party at election time and voted it down. The interest of the community in rebuilding disinvested neighborhoods took a back seat to party politics and individual self-interest—precisely the fate that Progressive reformers felt could be avoided with the council-manager plan.

As a city manager, you know you have a substantial problem when elected officials tell you—and I have heard this myself—that they will not support a tax or fee increase because it means they will not be reelected, even if they agree that it is needed. Nor will they reduce services to ensure that the budget is balanced; they do not want to be identified with reducing programs citizens want because this may cause them to lose votes in future elections. At the same time, they are telling citizens that their government can do more with less. While government should always seek efficiency and economy, there is a limit to the amount of revenue that can be saved when “more with less” becomes a long-term approach to structural budget imbalances that ought to be addressed through policy changes. Too often now their hope is that the hard choices will not have to be made “on their watch.”

My observation is that far too many council members no longer believe in nor respect the council-manager form of government. And if they don't respect the form of government or the staff hired under its charter, it is easy to see how hard it is for the average citizen to gain the respect and attention needed to solve wicked problems.

It's a painful cycle to watch. Elected officials run on party lines, against their peers and the bureaucracy, promising to make it better. Citizens elect people they hope will tackle community problems but find those they elect don't want to assume any responsibility when things go wrong. Nothing changes. Citizens become more frustrated and feel disenfranchised, and react by placing more demands on government and supporting structural reforms like term limits, sunshine and open-meeting laws and direct democracy through referenda.

The result is a set of dangerous effects on the respective roles of citizens, city administrators, and elected officials. Citizens become customers whom elected officials promise more services for fewer tax dollars; the city manager mostly struggles to address the undue hardship this puts on the city's financial balance sheet; elected officials believe citizens place unrealistic demands on them and won't take responsibility for fixing wicked problems; and everyone feels betrayed. Citizens

become more disengaged, believing their voice is not heard over those of lobbyists, special interest groups, and the elite—groups the average citizen does not see as representing them. Elected officials believe more of the same will get them reelected, and city managers adapt by managing on the margins, trying to save vestiges of the council-manager plan and trying to give relevance to their role.

I think sometimes we forget that elected and appointed officials come and go, especially in an era of term limits, but citizens stay around for the long haul.

Never before has the gulf between citizens and their government been so wide, frustrations and anger so high, and the solutions so seemingly elusive. Rather than policy discussions, many city council meetings have descended into “infotainment” sessions—meetings that are more like reality television shows, viewed for their entertainment value, and punctuated by a lack of civility and respect, which brings out the worst in both elected officials and citizens. A cottage industry of professional complainers has emerged that brings a theatrical brio to televised council meetings, makes a mockery of the formal processes of government, and discourages those with concerns that actually can be resolved by government from coming forward. The opportunity for public discussion is lost in the shouts, acrimony, threats, and intimidation, and the lack of tolerance and respect shown to those with different opinions and positions diminishes our sense of community and willingness to engage in problem solving.

To both observers and many participants, it appears as though self-interest, partisan politics, scapegoating, and acrimony have clouded our shared sense of the greater good. The need to tackle pressing problems gets lost in the rhetoric. How did we come to this, especially in council-manager cities, where professional management was thought to be the means by which we would end the corruption and political spoils system and put the interest of the people, the “greater good,” first?

As I became a veteran city manager, I began to sense a huge divide between what government does and what citizens want from their local government. As this divide grew, our ability to bridge the gap lessened. My responsibilities centered mainly on the administrative tasks of government, such as balancing budgets, negotiating contracts, supervising staff, implementing policy decisions of council, managing staff and line operations, and improving our performance and service outcomes.

After trying for over 30 years to make communities better, I left the profession feeling that while I had mastered the “business” side of government—creating more efficient, effective, and economical city governments—it just wasn’t enough. That while the business performance of government was important and critical to the successful operation of any city, it somehow didn’t address what citizens saw as lacking—our inability to deal with those vexing, wicked problems that smacked them in the face every day.

As a matter of fact, touting data on how much more efficient we were, what services had been competitively bid, the number of city positions eliminated and the results of customer satisfaction surveys did little to restore citizen confidence in us. Bombarded, as they are, by constant messages of government waste and abuse from the media and from elected officials and candidates for public office, it’s hard to convince citizens that some things about their government are working well. And, understandably, the mechanics of internal organizational improvements are interesting to managers but have little resonance with the average citizen, who tends to care more about what is not working than about what is working well.

That we had reduced the cost of refuse collection by reordering collection routes and purchasing larger trucks, thus reducing the number of trips to the landfill, was good news, but what about those drug dealers on the corner or that vacant and abandoned factory the former owners refuse to tear down? High performance sounded fine, but citizens didn’t see us fixing problems that were really important in their everyday lives.

Why couldn’t the city fix problems like racial profiling, economic inclusion, violent crime, and neighborhood disinvestment? Those were the issues that mattered to citizens. While the city manager was “reinventing” government, wicked problems got worse. Elected officials ran on a platform of “fighting crime” or attracting “new development” or “revitalizing downtown,” but problems only got worse. By and large, solutions to these intractable problems would take time and a concerted, comprehensive response, and no one was prepared to make this level of commitment, or to be honest about it with citizens. Improvement, then, occurred on the margins.

And how did citizens respond? They retreated from public life in disgust. Those who could just moved away from the problems. If they couldn’t get the local government—the government closest to them and to the problems they encountered—to do something, what hope did they have? While some would organize and work on

problems in spite of their sense of alienation from their local government, most just became frustrated and angry and lost confidence in government.

But why didn't we help? We were good people, wanting to do good works, to make communities better. I turn to a passage in Sullivan's *Work and Integrity*:

What makes one free and renders life worth living is finally neither satisfying one's desires nor accomplishing one's purposes, valuable as these are, but learning to act with the good of the whole in view, building life act by act, happy if each deed, as far as circumstances allow, fulfills its proper end.⁸²

Sullivan was talking about the professional satisfaction that comes not only from doing a good job as a manager, but—he tied good management to social outcomes, and to concern about the community's well-being, not just the well-being of the institution. For me, the best way to ensure positive social outcomes and organizational excellence is by inviting citizens to join us in fixing wicked problems.

Sullivan argues that our future under the new world economic order will be tied to “whether or not those who wield professional skill do so with a large sense of their responsibility for enhancing the quality of life for all.”⁸³ This approach certainly harks back to my early belief in activist government.

For me, it translates into a keener focus on issues of equity and engagement as important areas of work for today's city managers—in the context of our best traditions from the government reform movement. Sullivan argues, and I agree, that today's city managers must deliberate with citizens on how to solve wicked problems and think in terms of “complex balances rather than the maximization of effectiveness as measured by a single objective.”⁸⁴

I also believe it is important for professional organizations and public administration schools to embrace expanded roles for city managers in the areas of citizen engagement and social equity. If working in these areas is professionally valued, as it should be, it will be taught, learned, implemented, measured, evaluated, and recognized.

⁸²Sullivan, *Work and Integrity*, 237.

⁸³*Ibid.*, xv.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 171.

One of the most important attributes of the council-manager plan is its adaptability to changing economic, political, and social conditions, new technologies and best-management practices. I argue that the plan now needs to adapt in ways that recognize that in the final analysis, there is “no separation between the skills of problem solving and those of deliberation and judgment, no viable pursuit of technical excellence without participation in those civic enterprises through which expertise discovers its human meaning.”⁸⁵

An example of this approach can be found in my work in Cincinnati with police and citizens to address community safety issues. In one neighborhood, drug dealers congregated on a dimly lit pedestrian bridge, making it unsafe for neighborhood residents and a quick, undetected “in and out” for those buying drugs. For the police, this was a minor concern given other, more flagrant violations in the neighborhood and they agreed only to add temporary patrols. It was citizens who came up with the best solution to “take back” convenient access to their neighborhood. With the city’s endorsement, they glued plastic eggs to the railings, making it an uncomfortable place to sit. That was the end of drug dealing. Better lighting, more police patrols, and improved landscaping helped ensure that the dealers did not return.⁸⁶

I suggest that it is time for another major local-government reform movement like that of the Progressive Era which ushered in the single, confidential ballot, civil service, and professional city management under the council-manager plan.

⁸⁵Ibid., xix.

⁸⁶Valerie Lemmie, “Involving Ordinary Citizens in Public Work: The Cincinnati Experience,” *Connections* (Winter 2006): 10. Also see the Annual Report, *Collaborative Agreement, City of Cincinnati and the ACLU*, 2005.

I have had the opportunity to work in six urban communities, with the last half of my career spent serving as city manager in Petersburg, Virginia, and in Dayton and Cincinnati, Ohio. I continue to believe public service is the highest of callings, but I have observed that students in my graduate public administration classes are looking more and more to the nonprofit sector and advocacy groups for employment. They see more clearly than us old-timers the limitations local government officials face, and our inability to devise reasonable and viable, long-term solutions to wicked problems, while concomitantly ensuring well-managed cities.

So what is the answer? I suggest that it is time for another major local-government reform movement like that of the Progressive Era which ushered in the single, confidential ballot, civil service, and professional city management under the council-manager plan. I will show how that reform can complement and improve the council-manager plan and offer some recommendations, which will stimulate further discussion and action by elected officials, city managers, and citizens.

Beyond New Public Management: Making Local Government Relevant to Citizens

“The real intent of civic engagement is to shift the context where traditional problem solving, investment and social and community actions take place. It is this shift in context, expressed through a shift in language that creates the condition where traditional forms of action can make a difference.”

Peter Block⁸⁷

I propose that the context Block refers to must be public space, that region of interaction among citizens which is neither wholly in city hall nor entirely within the individual sphere, but which overlaps both. Harry C. Boyte refers to the need for a space where ordinary people of different views and interests work together to solve problems that are connected to but different than private life.⁸⁸ A considerable body of work has demonstrated that public space cannot be taken for granted: it can be robust or it can wither away from neglect and ill-usage.

As city managers, we relate to public space in two important ways: we have the power to influence it, to shape and nurture it; and we can control, to some extent, how we operate within it. We act in both of these ways routinely—by influencing public spending priorities, by making our offices and city government more or less open to citizens—but we need now to be conscious of these roles, and think about our actions in this context.

The tension and distrust which now exists in local government does not promote democracy, is not healthy or viable, and can no longer be ignored or minimized. When citizens and government do not work together in naming, framing, deliberating, and collectively assuming responsibility for fixing wicked problems, we have marginalized citizens’ contributions to the greater good and reduced their worth. We also have robbed the community of the skills, talents, experience, and expertise citizens bring to solving wicked problems.

⁸⁷“Civic Engagement Key in Restoring Communities,” *Nation’s Weekly* (June 26, 2006).

⁸⁸Harry Boyte, *Everyday Politics: Reconnecting Citizens and Public Life* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), xiii-xiv.

Robert D. Putnam argues, “It is commonly assumed that cynicism toward government has caused our disengagement from politics, but the converse is just as likely; that we are disaffected because as we and our neighbors have dropped out, the real performance of government has suffered.”⁸⁹

David Mathews, in writing about the lack of citizen engagement in public education, describes it this way:

People’s sense that they don’t own the schools is also a major problem for American democracy. The perception in and of itself would be troubling enough, but it doesn’t stand alone. Americans feel the same way about many other institutions they created to serve them, including the electoral system and the government. Citizens say they have been pushed out of politics by a professional political class. “The government is supposed to work for us,” they complain, “we are supposed to be in charge.” When political leaders have tried to respond to this criticism by offering better services for citizens, people have been quick to say, “we aren’t customers, we own the store!” This feeling of being dispossessed also influences the political climate in which schools operate.⁹⁰

It is time for substantive reforms that more honestly respond to the way governance is practiced in large, urban, council-manager cities, and concomitantly incorporate new roles for the manager, elected officials, and citizens. My purpose is to move the discussion from the closet where a few managers lament in private to a broader stage where all voices can be heard and solutions can be found. One of our more pressing tasks is to begin a discussion, within the profession and without, of what is to become of the council-manager plan in large cities if we are not proactive in addressing the concerns I have raised. In fact, we need to discuss the role of the city manager and determine what we stand for.

In this chapter, I will first discuss several specific targets for reform, then turn to the larger question of the city manager’s role and his/her responsibilities toward citizens and public space. Finally, I will address some of the likely obstacles to citizen engagement.

The effectiveness of the council-manager plan has been hampered in recent years by several developments that I believe call for the following reforms:

⁸⁹Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (Simon and Schuster, 2000), 347.

⁹⁰David Mathews, *Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy* (Kettering Foundation Press, 2006), v.

Mitigate the effects of money and partisan politics. We have moved too far from the ideal of civic-minded citizens serving as council members. We need to create a level playing field so that those without political party backing can afford to launch political campaigns. This requires campaign finance reform that puts effective spending ceilings in place, uses public campaign financing to the extent possible, and stringently enforces nonpartisan campaigning. This also will diminish the influence of special interest groups, lobbyists, and elites, because elected officials will be less dependent on them for campaign contributions.

Cut back the kudzu of boards and commissions. Just as the Progressives reduced the number of elected positions, I think we need to revisit the number of appointed political jurisdictions, special districts, authorities, and commissions. We also should discuss whether they tend to improve or diminish citizens' connections with local government. In my view, boards and commissions spread authority too thin, making it more difficult for a local government body to reach decisions and too easy to pass the buck. Although it may not have been the intent, they also make it more difficult for citizens and reporters alike to keep track of government business.

Alternative, or perhaps complementary, structures would be neighborhood councils, an idea I will address in more detail later.

Provide space for elected officials to think and plan. The flip side of open-government laws is that they have made it more difficult at times for local officials to think and plan together. Elected officials need time to talk to one another outside the glare of camera lights, just to be able to share ideas in a long-term planning mode, rather than a politically reactive one. Although this seems to run against the notion of increased engagement, and it is tricky to achieve without counterproductive results, research and my own experience indicate that fresh ideas, these days, can wither in the often brutal environment of local politics before they ever have a chance to be seriously discussed.

Diversify communication. Press conferences and town hall meetings often give only the impression of communication with citizens. In practice, they rarely address citizens' real concerns. Local officials, both elected and appointed, must explore all possible avenues of communication with citizens. Deliberative forums, online listservs, low-key weekly breakfast gatherings—all these tools are available to us. They increase engagement and communication, and simultaneously avoid the often negative dynamic of traditional methods like press conferences. Local media, while

critical to good government and oversight, too often take the “gotcha” approach, producing stories with black-and-white perspectives that give little weight to the difficulty of solving complex problems and addressing controversial issues. This diversification can help move us from armchair quarterbacking to engagement.

The most important reform, however, is communitywide and transformative. Citizen engagement is the act of involving citizens in the governance process through deliberation to help address wicked community problems. It begins with naming and framing a problem, moves to deliberation about the problem, and ends with action to be jointly taken to fix or ameliorate the problem. Monitoring and evaluation, along with reporting mechanisms, are also integral parts of this process.

O. E. Carr, one of our country’s first city managers, advised that the city manager should rely on the city council to work with citizens because “it is their city and they are responsible to the people.”⁹¹ In this model, public administrators name and frame the problem and provide expert and scientific solutions on behalf of citizens; the deliberation is internal to city hall, and does not include citizens. Today, city managers can no longer restrict themselves to playing the insider role; they must move beyond the internal functioning of city government and provide leadership in forging new relationships among elected officials, city staff, and citizens in order to fix complex community problems.

What is the structure of government that would allow for more shared power between local government officials and citizens on those issues that really matter to citizens? What are the routine powers best left to nonelected, professionally trained public administrators? And how do we reengage citizens after having excluded them for so long?

Creating trust through action and honest dialogue, and including citizens in the naming, framing, deliberation, action, learning, and evaluation processes of problem solving, is how we begin the process of rebuilding the relationship between government and citizens. City managers are key to this relationship; they can push the boundaries of city hall and create a culture in which citizen voices can be heard. It requires the creation of an authorizing environment within city hall and with elected officials for building trust with citizens through listening and engagement. ICMA can help by reinforcing the importance of equity and engagement as key precepts in public management as well as in convening forums of citizens, elected officials, and city managers to help define and institutionalize these tenets.

Let me illustrate the value, importance, and power of citizen engagement by sharing some of the positive changes that came from the 2001 riots in Cincinnati (when anger over the shooting of an African American teenager by police and other incidents led to two nights of destruction in the downtown area and other neighborhoods). The quintessential achievement for us was engaging citizens to help fix wicked problems identified as contributing factors to the riots. Government, citizens, and community stakeholders met, named and framed problems, deliberated about what should be done, committed to a series of undertakings, assumed individual and collective responsibility to fix problems, and established mechanisms to measure performance. It was awesome to witness these deliberations, which were actually led by citizens, not government. (Mayor Charlie Luken appointed a citizen committee, Cincinnati Community Action Now [CAN], which served as the umbrella organization; but they did not receive public funds; they raised private dollars and leveraged public funds already allocated for services prior to the riots.) Thousands of citizens from every part of the city participated, along with most civic, community, and business organizations, foundations, universities, and nonprofit organizations. They addressed problems that included youth unemployment, health care, early childhood development, economic inclusion, and public safety.⁹²

I worked personally to coordinate the city's commitment in the area of public safety. One of the initiatives the community recommended and funded was the Community Police Partnering Center (originally known as the Neighborhood Partnering Center). The center serves as a resource to citizens seeking to understand how they can help the city and police department make Cincinnati safer, trains citizens in deliberative practices, works with citizens to foster engagement in fixing wicked

⁹²See CAN's final *Report to the Community* (June 2003) and *Cincinnati in Black and White: A Report to the Community, 2001-2006* released by Better Together Cincinnati.

community problems, and serves as an advocate for citizen engagement. The city holds an ex officio seat on the Partnering Center Board and works collaboratively with the center's staff on its Community Problem Oriented Policing (CPOP) teams, which are organized by neighborhood and comprised of neighborhood residents and city and police officials who meet regularly to work on wicked community problems.⁹³

The aftermath of the riots demonstrates two key principles that should guide city managers in their interaction with citizens:

Focus on both immediate and long-term responses. Hiring more police officers, for example, is a short-term response to citizen concerns about crime—and it does address those concerns to a certain extent. But the surest way to build credibility is to show that you have not forgotten the issue after it fades from the headlines and that you are working with citizens to address the problem over the long haul. That in turn leads to the second principle.

Acknowledge that each concern is linked to others. Citizens understand the connections between issues, often better than we do. Many political consultants, on the other hand, prefer to isolate issues and make them “hot buttons”—it’s less complicated that way. Learn to trust citizens’ instincts. With regard to crime, for example, it’s easy to get sidetracked by focusing only on the number of police to be hired, and their deployment. But citizens recognize that a comprehensive strategy—one that looks at a broad range of tools, including programs to reduce recidivism, youth unemployment, and school dropout rates—is the way to get at the cause of the problem.

The aftermath [of the 2001 riots in Cincinnati] demonstrates two key principles that should guide city managers in their interaction with citizens: Focus on both immediate and long-term responses....Acknowledge that each concern is linked to others.

A report by the National League of Cities describes it this way:

“Democratic governance is the art of governing a community in participatory, inclusive, deliberative, collaborative ways. A number of successful principles have emerged from the new wave of democratic governance efforts.”⁹⁴ The report goes on to suggest ways to

promote governance by tapping into citizen organizations thereby mobilizing a wide array of organizations and groups; convening face-to-face dialogues; creating

⁹³Lemmie, “Involving Ordinary Citizens in Public Work: The Cincinnati Experience,” 10.

⁹⁴National League of Cities, *Building Democratic Governance: Tools and Structures for Engaging Citizens*, report (November 2005), 3.

opportunities for citizen deliberation; making progress on issues of race and cultural differences; and providing multiple reasons for people to become engaged.⁹⁵

Our challenge is to find ways to address the present flaws of council-manager government and remain true to its original goals—good government that is economical, efficient, and accountable, and government that serves all its citizens. Whatever the final form takes, it must embrace economy, efficiency, effectiveness, engagement of citizens and social equity. I particularly call your attention to social equity. We must not allow a council-manager form of government, or the reforms we enact, to be driven solely by utilitarian interests of efficiency, or attempt to create customers rather than citizens, or to let the greater good be determined by market forces rather than moral forces. The Progressives were driven in part by a sense that government was not serving all its citizens equitably, and I reach back to that tradition in calling for a new era of reform.

The National Academy of Public Administration defines *equity* as:

The fair, just and equitable management of all institutions serving the public directly or by contract; the fair, just and equitable distribution of public services [according to that which is needed by a given community] and implementation of public policy; and the commitment to promote fairness, justice, and equity in the formulation of public policy.⁹⁶

To that formal definition, let me add a practical one. Experience teaches that *equitable* is not the same as *equal*. A wealthy neighborhood might need trash collection once a week, whereas a poor neighborhood might need this same service twice a week to be equally free from litter and debris on the sidewalk and streets. The equitable response is to ensure both neighborhoods are equally free of litter.

Let us return to the discussion about the role of manager in exercising leadership outside of city hall. I have found this issue to be especially problematic for women and minorities in communities unaccustomed to seeing such individuals in leadership roles. H. George Frederickson estimates that female city managers comprise about 10 percent of the profession and African Americans about 2 to 3 percent, even though women are 50 percent of MPA graduates.⁹⁷ On the one hand everyone wants to appear politically correct, but on the other hand they have no experience with, in my case a woman of color, in an important leadership position, and their racial fears, biases

⁹⁵*Ibid.*

⁹⁶National Academy of Public Administration Web site, available at http://www.napawash.org/aa_social_equity/index.html.

⁹⁷Conversation during municipal advisors committee meeting at which a draft of this paper was reviewed (September 2006).

and ignorance inform their actions. As city manager, African Americans looked to me as someone who would single-handedly and immediately fix decades of unanswered complaints regarding the lack of economic inclusion, racial justice, and social equity. This is another reason why I have become an advocate for citizen engagement—I have a broader base of community partners in dealing with issues of race and reconciliation, key ingredients to strengthening a city’s economic, political, and social viability.

Thus, public officials and citizens need to deliberate together about community priorities—with the clear understanding at the outset that government can no longer do everything. This is critical if government is to have the capacity and the resources to do something new, and do it well.

The founders recognized that there is a reciprocal relationship between citizens and government and that this relationship is the cornerstone of our democracy. They incorporated into our Constitution the philosophy of Enlightenment era thinkers like John Locke, who, in *The Second Treatise of Government*, spoke to the ultimate sovereignty of the people, the legitimacy of government coming from the consent of the governed and the power of government being limited to the public good.⁹⁸

To put the notions of engagement and deliberation in concrete terms, I believe more cities need to implement a system of community or neighborhood councils, a very old idea that has found new traction in recent years.

Thomas Jefferson, who believed that making citizens acting members of the government would give them a strong sense of the republic’s values, even proposed a Constitutional amendment that would encourage involvement through the creation of ward governments, instrumentalities that would be small enough to garner active citizen participation in the management of government programs, including education, public safety, care of the poor, and maintaining public roads.⁹⁹ Putnam observes that cities with institutionalized and engaged neighborhood associations enjoy higher levels of citizen support for and trust in municipal government.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, “Chapter XI, Of the Extent of the Legislative Power,” 1690, Section 134.

⁹⁹Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 336.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 347.

We must continue reviving this initiative and reform local charters to reflect a role for citizen participation in policy planning and policy setting. Research shows that if citizens have a meaningful role, they will participate as partners in the governance process. Musso et al. have studied community councils in Los Angeles and they argue:

Neighborhood councils have the potential to change elite-dominated governance through several network effects: development of bridging social capital, network relationships that cross-cut traditional community cleavages, broadening of horizontal networks that improve information required for collective action, and creation of new ties that elevate previously peripheral groups in the system of political communications.¹⁰¹

I have worked with institutionalized neighborhood councils in both Dayton and Washington, D.C. What is clear from the research and from my experience is that they must be given an authentic role in addressing larger community issues. It is too easy for these groups to get bogged down in the routine work of government and lose sight of the forest because of the attention they lavish on the trees. For example, in Dayton, neighborhood councils, known as Priority Boards, handle neighborhood complaints which put them at the disadvantage of spending time on individual constituent issues—time that could be better spent working on solving larger, more collective community problems. Similarly, in the 1980s the Area Neighborhood Councils in the District of Columbia were given too much tedious, minute paperwork, leaving them no time or energy for more important community issues. If this sounds familiar, it is exactly the predicament local government itself has fallen into, and we cannot allow the same fate to occur in neighborhood councils.

The challenge in establishing an institutional role for citizens is to keep community councils focused on problem solving, and resist putting them to work performing general administration or routine government operations. Musso et al. suggest that there are several preconditions for effective community councils:¹⁰²

- dense and diverse networks within the neighborhood council governing structure to build individual political skills and contribute to organizational capacity
- networks among stakeholders to aggregate political demands and communicate them to city decision makers

¹⁰¹Juliet A. Musso, Christopher Weare, Nail Oztas, and William E. Loges, "Neighborhood Governance Reform and Networks of Community Power in Los Angeles," *American Review of Public Administration*, Journal 6, Number 1 (March 2006): 79.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, 80.

- broad horizontal networks across the city to improve information flow and facilitate collective action
- centrality of local community groups in city-level political processes, thereby increasing the community power relative to other political forces, such as business groups and development interests
- integration of local governance structures with neighborhood governance, to generate high levels of government performance and citizen involvement
- local government decentralization which encourages neighborhood-based, democratically organized, nongovernmental organizations and/or neighborhood-based governance

Other cities have created different processes by which citizens can steer government policy. Dayton has a citizen-driven budgeting process in which citizens develop annual budget proposals for all city expenditures. City staff members are assigned to support the citizens engaged in this process. They meet with department heads and staff and are given ready and immediate access to the city manager, as needed, as well as to all financial and budget documents prepared by departmental personnel. As manager, I agreed to present their recommendations jointly with mine to the mayor and council.

Elected officials were initially wary that their role would be diminished through such a process, but two realities quickly emerged. The first was that having citizen support rather than opposition for budget proposals made their jobs easier, and they liked this. Second, they learned to influence the process in several important ways. This included setting an annual budget mark or a set of guidelines describing their budget priorities and the financial standards that should be followed—the kind of guidelines any fiscally responsible organization uses. This might include advice, such as not to use one-time revenues for recurring expenses and the need to maintain a fund balance at 20 percent of annual revenues, or it might reflect a desire to give a higher funding priority to a particular program or service.

I found the members of the Citizens Financial Review Group (CFRG) to be uniformly professional, talented, and committed volunteers. The expertise they developed over time rivaled that of city staff. CFRG members were recommended by their neighborhood council, or Priority Boards, and officially appointed by the city manager. More often than not, their recommendations were fully supported by the

manager, elected officials, and the community. To the extent there was major opposition, it tended to come from city employees who felt the proposals would adversely affect their job security.

What are the principal obstacles to the engagement strategy?

Many critics argue citizens don't have the time, capacity, interest, or inclination to work on public problems; in my experience, this is not true. When we ask citizens to get involved, they do. I believe the examples in Dayton and Cincinnati confirm that citizens are willing to work when there is a space for them to do so. Brian O'Connell tells us that many citizens do want to be active participants in the governance process: "I direct your attention to a trait shared by a great many citizens of this land. There is in them something waiting to be awakened, wanting to be awakened. Most Americans welcome the voice that lifts them out of themselves. . . . They want to help make this a better country."¹⁰³

After trying for over 30 years to make communities better, I left the profession feeling that while I had mastered the "business" side of government—creating more efficient, effective, and economical city governments—it just wasn't enough.

Another, very practical obstacle naturally arises from the prospect of sharing power with citizens. In sharing power, roles change for everyone involved, including city staff. Often this group, like bureaucracies everywhere, is the most resistant to change. They have civil service protection and firing them is darn near impossible. At the same time, staff people are a valuable asset in local government, with decades of embedded knowledge of people and practices. To be effective, they must feel their contributions will be valued and supported.

¹⁰³O'Connell, *Civil Society: The Underpinnings of American Democracy*, xv.

Staff members can make or break any new strategy. This, along with their longevity, makes them a powerful force that has to be considered in discussing changing relationships among citizens, elected officials, and the administration. Organizational visioning exercises can be employed to tap into this reservoir of power and talent and direct it consistent with the views, values, and expectations of the manager. Engaging citizens will require you first to engage the bureaucracy and inspire it to develop mechanisms to actively engage citizens.

The local-government reform movement of the 21st century has to be the institutionalization of a role for citizens in naming, framing, and solving community problems and in finding equitable ways for all voices to be heard, not just those who speak on behalf of special-interest groups and elites. Our foundation of efficiency, economy, and effectiveness must be expanded to embrace engagement and equity.

We told citizens for too long that they didn't have to get involved, that we would fix things for them. We are now beginning to realize that we cannot do it without them. So, it is time to tell citizens we were wrong; we need them after all. The local-government reform movement of the 21st century has to be the institutionalization of a role for citizens in naming, framing, and solving community problems and in finding equitable ways for all voices to be heard, not just those who speak on behalf of special-interest groups and elites. Our foundation of efficiency, economy, and effectiveness must be expanded

to embrace engagement and equity. Only then will wicked problems be addressed and the promise of democratic government truly realized for all citizens.

Conclusion: Democracy Beyond the Ballot Box

“When citizens feel that they own a public problem, they are not scapegoats; people realize that the responsibility to deal with the issue rests with them.”

John Doble

I began by talking about where I came from, and about the sources of my impulse to public service. Recall my minister, who would ask, “You know you can’t change things if you don’t get involved, don’t you?” Yes, I know.

More than 100 years ago, as we approached the second millennium, the nation was experiencing a fundamental shift in the character of its economy and the result was a profound set of social upheavals. Then, as now, there were great disparities of wealth, poverty and despair, racial and ethnic tensions, and a widespread fear of crime and urban violence. Then as now, citizens were frustrated by the failure of their political institutions to respond adequately to the challenges they faced in their daily lives. As a result, they developed a contempt for and cynicism about their political leaders and they looked for ways to remove politics from public life.

The city manager as we know it was born out of a desire that cities should be healthy, prosperous, and honest places for their citizens and of a belief that a public servant freed from politics could make that happen. I believe that is still our best bet, that we need selfless men and women to take on those duties and I feel they can make a difference. The city manager can provide stability and continuity amid social and political upheaval, which, I believe, is why the council-manager form of government has held its own for so many years. I do not want to see that vision destroyed in my generation by reckless political maneuvering, an overemphasis on efficiency, and a frustrated, alienated citizenry.

Government has unfortunately helped perpetuate the alienation of citizens from civic space, making it easier for them to retreat to their homes and families. Last summer, I had my graduate public administration students conduct public issue forums on topics related to democratic governance. Here are some of the comments we heard:¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴Results reported from issue forums held by graduate students in a course I taught on civic engagement at the University of Dayton, summer 2006.

- “I view politics as a cut-throat, but necessary way to formulate effective policies for citizens.”
- “Meetings are hardly ever attended by large numbers of the public unless there is a controversial issue on the floor. Those who do attend are there for the pomp and circumstance of the meeting, i.e., to get an award or other recognition, or to appear on TV. They [citizens] seem to feel the actual government portion of the meeting will go on without them.”
- “I believe the governing body doesn’t really listen to those who are very angry and do not take the time to research the project they are complaining about.”
- “I believe that they [city council] would like to be concerned [about citizens], however, they are probably overwhelmed with the day-to-day grind. They are concerned during the elections, but once they are on council other things seem to take priority.”

While government responds to demands from citizens who have mobilized for action, we have been less effective in collaborating with citizens who are concerned but not angry—and they know it, as these comments illustrate.

As a result, on the one hand we have high performing governmental organizations that promote efficiency, economy, and effectiveness, but on the other hand we have citizens who feel alienated from their government and their neighbors. This is about more than having citizens support public institutions; it’s about joining with citizens, tapping into their expertise and energy to solve wicked problems.

American democracy depends on the active participation of the governed—a force that has weakened over time. As the role of the public in civic affairs has diminished, so has the credibility of government. Citizens can be more than voters or customers; they must be partners in creating the civic space necessary to work with their neighbors and government in solving community problems. They must become collaborators in moving this experiment of democracy forward.

Our democracy is also about more than individual self-interests. It is also about the relationship between individual freedom and collective good. While our society prides itself on the notion that we each chart our own course in pursuit of our holy grail, it also requires, as the Progressives advised, “the adoption of common civic values and standards enforced by government initiatives to bring balance into the economic order ... through government planning, subvention, and regulation of the economy for the sake of social justice.”¹⁰⁵

It is not too late to turn things around. As Richard Harwood reports in *Hope Unraveled*, there are signs of citizens taking their place again in the public square.¹⁰⁶ In a growing number of communities, citizens and government work together in the governance process. Our challenge is to move this work into the mainstream and to institutionalize power-sharing relationships among elected officials, city managers, and citizens.

This will require a radical departure from the way business is done now. A new way of governing is needed for the 21st century, one that includes all stakeholders. Our new governance model must include among other reforms:

- limits on campaign spending
- joint public and governmental accountability and responsibility for the performance of government
- a bureaucracy that responds more readily to changing community needs for services
- measuring success both through benchmarking and valuing the active engagement of citizens from diverse interests, life experiences, races, ethnicity, and religions
- reimagined, institutionalized roles and responsibilities for citizens, elected officials, and the city manager
- development of new community institutions, such as neighborhood partnering centers and community leadership programs, that support skills training for citizens and public officials alike
- creation of a community vision and values statement
- mutual respect and appreciation for the contributions each group brings to the governance process

¹⁰⁵Sullivan, *Work and Integrity*, 64, 147-148.

¹⁰⁶Richard Harwood, *Hope Unraveled: The People's Retreat and Our Way Back* (Kettering Foundation Press, 2005).

One tool we must pick up anew is deliberation. I have worked with several organizations, and helped create others, that use deliberation as a tool for engaging citizens in solving community problems like public safety, education, and race relations. I feel a connection to the deep roots of deliberation in democratic societies, from ancient Greece and Rome to New England town hall meetings and the beauty and barber shops in today's African American communities.¹⁰⁷

It is easy to confuse deliberation with direct democracy, in which no action by a public body occurs without a vote by all citizens. This is not deliberation. Deliberation is best described by example, and I refer you to those organizations that specialize in convening deliberative forums. Briefly defined, deliberation takes place when individual citizens come together to share their views on key public concerns and work through their differences. It is not about voting or reaching consensus, but rather moving through stages of engagement on a concern (as described by Daniel Yankelovich) and developing a "public knowledge" that can lead to individual and/or collective action.

A public voice emerges from deliberation among a diverse body of citizens. Among its strengths, deliberation:

- reconciles competing perspectives.
- mitigates the feelings of anomie or inefficacy citizens feel when their views are not heard.
- engages citizens in ways that gives them ownership of solutions.
- gives citizens an opportunity to express their views and hear the views of others.
- strengthens understanding of how government works.
- provides an opportunity for citizens to understand the role they can play in fixing wicked problems.
- legitimizes fairness of process whether or not they substantively agree with the outcome.

As noted above, the city manager provides stability and continuity amid upheaval. In addition, the city manager is primarily interested in solving problems, not getting re-elected. Thus, I believe the city manager is the best person to promote citizen engagement. They can create the necessary organizational structures, design internal and external deliberative processes, and reward the staff for increasing engagement.

¹⁰⁷Michael X. Delli Carpini, Fay Lomax Cook, and Lawrence R. Jacobs, "Deliberation, Discursive Participation, and Citizen Engagement: A Review of the Empirical Literature," *Annual Review, Political Science*, 7315/44 (2004): 315-316.

Finally, there is a key product of engagement and deliberation which city managers need: understanding that government has its limits. We have too often told citizens, implicitly or explicitly, that we could supply any service, respond to any problem, handle all problems at once—and all without raising taxes. If there is one aspect to engagement that can lessen tensions and mitigate frustration all around, it is the recognition that we must have priorities in public policy, that we cannot “do it all” and all at once. Resources, both human and physical, are limited. This may sound like a depressing lesson from engagement, one sure to drive people away, but it is, in fact, liberating. When people feel that they truly can take a hand in harnessing their community’s resources to attack any problem, that realization is so powerful, so invigorating, they will be eager to decide what should come first.

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It is time to move beyond messaging, spin, and public relations. Putnam writes:

Civic engagement matters on both the demand side and the supply side of government. On the demand side, citizens in civic communities expect better government and (in part through their own efforts) they get it. On the supply side, the performance of representative government is facilitated by the social infrastructure of civic communities and by the democratic values of both officials and citizens.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 346.

We must get on the same wavelength as our citizens and other community stakeholders and build relationships and a base of support to fundamentally change our approach to solving wicked problems. Government cannot do it alone, nor can citizens. We need each other. This means we must find new ways for government and citizens to interact and ways for them both to own the problems and their solution. Solving wicked problems requires moving from top-down campaigns when the goal is for citizens to “buy-in” to proposals they had no role in developing to a process of collaborative engagement in which both citizens and government jointly identify problems and determine how to fix them, with each group taking responsibility to resolve a given problem.

America’s local government structures are malleable and have changed over time. They are the most dynamic part of American government. This creates a tremendous opportunity to shape the government closest to the people in a way that directly involves them in the governance process and includes roles and responsibilities for their engagement beyond voting.

I am optimistic that my colleagues will join with citizens to find a path forward that leads to better, stronger communities. I believe there are more people every day who share my concerns and who are willing to work with me to make local government reform a priority. I am confident that through such a process we can restore public faith in government, make a profound difference in solving community problems, and help our next generation truly live the blessings of democracy.

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Author Biography

Commissioner Valerie A. Lemmie was appointed to the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO) by Governor Bob Taft in 2006. She was reappointed by incoming Governor Ted Strickland in 2007.

Prior to joining PUCO, Commissioner Lemmie served as city manager for the cities of Cincinnati and Dayton, Ohio and Petersburg, Virginia, where she was responsible for the day-to-day administration of city government. As city manager in Cincinnati, Lemmie oversaw the operations of 15 city departments with more than 6,000 employees and an annual budget of \$1 billion. She also supervised the implementation of city policy, controlled government finances, advised and supported the mayor and city councilors, and ensured the delivery of essential city services.

Most recently, Commissioner Lemmie was a scholar-in-residence at the Kettering Foundation, a research organization focused on democracy and the strengthening of public life. Additionally, she has been an adjunct professor in public administration at the University of Dayton and senior fellow at the Center for Excellence in Municipal Management at The George Washington University. Commissioner Lemmie served as chair of the board of directors of the National Academy of Public Administration, an independent, congressionally chartered organization that reviews and analyzes public management issues and provides technical assistance and support to governmental agencies.

A distinguished speaker, Commissioner Lemmie has made presentations at many conferences on a wide range of topics, including the environment, business development, leadership, finance, citizen participation, law enforcement relations, workforce performance and competitive service delivery.

Commissioner Lemmie is an active community volunteer, serving on the board of directors of numerous organizations, including the Cincinnati Zoo and the Cincinnati Fine Arts Council. Her service extends internationally where she has led delegations and conducted seminars in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. She has received numerous local and national awards, most recently from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Cincinnati Chapter of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), and the National Forum for Black Public Administrators. In April 2005, she was appointed to House Speaker Dennis Hastert's Urban Advisory Committee.

Commissioner Lemmie earned a bachelor's degree in Political Science and Urban Society from the University of Missouri and a master's degree in Urban Affairs and Public Policy Planning from Washington University.



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