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Creating a Local Government Manager Position in New York: A Summary of Four Case Profiles

The Case Study Series

This policy brief summarizes the efforts of four communities in New York that took initiative to consider change in the administration of their local government. In particular they assessed the changes needed to create the position of a central manager or administrator for their communities. These local initiatives were reviewed and summarized in 2020-22 by the Public Management Program (PMP), Department of Public Administration, SUNY Brockport.

The purpose of this work was to provide insights for other local leaders and citizens in New York about options for change in local administration and governance. They examine (1) how initiatives for administrative change got started, (2) how local leaders and citizens responded to the initiative and moved forward, (3) the barriers and useful resources that were identified in the process, and (4) the experience since a change has been adopted - or not. In this brief we provide an overview of attempts at change and outcomes across all four communities.¹

Selection of Cases

We reviewed four local governments that examined changing in form in the last ten years. Cases of change made in this time range improved the opportunity to interview relevant participants and provided an adequate time period for experience with the change. Table 1 includes the four communities with the year of administrative change and population according to the 2010 census.

Table 1: Four Local Government Cases

Local Government	Year of Change	2010 Population	Larger*
Town of Canandaigua	2017	10,020	16%
Town of North Castle	2012	11,841	15%
Village of Tuckahoe	2014	6,485	15%
City of Saratoga Springs	2020**	26,586	40%

*Percentage in column - is the percent of New York local governments in the relevant municipal class with larger populations.

** "Year of Change" in the City of Saratoga Springs represents the most recent voter referendum on the council-manager plan -which was defeated – and no change achieved.

¹ With a few clearly noted exceptions the material in this brief focuses on the three communities which made a change and created a manager-

administrator position: Town of Canandaigua, Town of North Castle, and the Village of Tuckahoe.

The four case local governments include three different municipal types – city, town, and village. Recent county cases were available but not included in the study because of the high incidence of manager-administrators among counties in the state.

Why study New York State cases?

Citizens and local government leaders who want to consider alternatives for local government administration often don't have available guidance to pursue options for change. Our goal with these cases is to begin to fill that void in guidance. The cases summarize the experiences of communities that have recently navigated local processes to examine creating a central administrator-manager position. These peer experiences highlight important lessons for others to draw from.

Among the 50 states, New York State appears to be very low on the scale in terms of the incidence of local governments with a central manager/administrator. States vary significantly in the incidence of the form. For example, in Colorado nearly all cities have a manager or administrator. A 2011 International City Council Management Association (ICMA) Survey found approximately 59% of cities in the US utilize the council manager system. One data source citing state level data for local governments with a population of 10,000 or greater indicates that New York State has the second lowest incidence or percent of local governments with the council manager form (14%) among five nearby states.²

Motivations for Change

Local government leaders and citizens who examined the change to a central administrator/manager identified a range of motivations for creating such a position. The

five most pervasive motivations are discussed here.³

1. Continuity of effective leadership. Each of the three communities that made the change to create a central administrator/manager had a period of experienced or effective chief elected leadership and in different ways faced concerns about future leadership continuity. Their efforts reflect a desire to find local government forms with a higher likelihood of continuity of effective executive leadership.

2. Professional operation of local government. Local leaders in each of the three communities expressed desire for improved local management and policy making for their community governments. They expressed the need for improved support for board decisions and policymaking, improved coordination of the local management team, strengthened personnel management, and improved financial management and oversight. In the Village of Tuckahoe, the failure to meet annual financial reporting deadlines and a related bond rating downgrade threat provided a strong incentive to look for change in the governance - administration framework.

3. Improve services and administrative efficiency. The ever-present pressure to improve community services and reduce costs was an important stimulus for local officials to examine the creation of a local central manager/administrator position. A parallel objective of exploring revenue alternatives and finding and securing grant opportunities for local priorities was also an important impetus for local communities.

4. Greater ability to explore service sharing and other intergovernmental opportunities. Local leaders in our case study communities expressed concern with their capacity to work with other local governments to tap service sharing opportunities and other beneficial

² Nelson, Kimberly. 2020. Form of Government Data Set, 2020. University of North Carolina School of Government.

³ In our fourth case, the City of Saratoga Springs, those supporting change to create a manager form shared concerns 2, 3 and 5 in this list of motivations.

intergovernmental arrangements. These leaders viewed a central manager/administrator as a potential solution to this core capacity need.

5. Expand governing board leadership candidates. Several case study communities were motivated by the belief that the presence of a manager/administrator would expand the pool of people willing to run for chief elected office – mayor or town supervisor. More people with other full-time obligations would consider the position a reasonable or tenable avenue of public service if an appointed manager/administrator was in place.

Useful Resources

Peer Examples. Several cases demonstrate the value of having observable examples of how local governments with a manager-administrator look and work. The presence of an active local government municipal association in the county or area facilitated communication and understanding of nearby examples. This type of contact provided insights into how municipal managers team with chief elected officials to serve their local communities and resources for officials as they began to do their own local assessment of the manager/administrator option.

Municipal Attorney. In some cases, the governing board received advice on process and assistance in drafting a local law from their municipal attorney.

Statewide Municipal Association. Local communities looked to legal staff from statewide municipal associations for guidance as they considered their options. Association counsel provided advice on existing state statutes as guidance for the creation of a manager/administrator position.

ICMA. At least one of our case study communities reviewed the ICMA-National Civic League [recommended charter](#) as a resource for drafting a local law to meet local preferences and needs. In another case, Saratoga Springs, ICMA and the New York State manager affiliate,

NYSCMA, provided financial support for one initiative for change in form.

Barriers

Municipal Form. The City of Saratoga Springs case involved a voter referendum that proposed a change from an existing commission form to a proposed council-manager form. The 2020 voter referendum failed. While there are many factors that influence voter outcomes, a change from the commission form involves significant diminishment in the role of current commissioners and their administrative staff in overseeing departments. This can present as a barrier in a plan to move to a different governing board role in a council-manager form of local government.

Economic Downturn. One of our case study communities was moving forward with the intent to create a position and hire an administrator/manager. In the middle of this process a national recession occurred, and the governing board members were hesitant to move forward when considering the potential for staffing reductions in the budget process. A manager/administrator position was created but not filled and implementation was delayed for several years.

Local Action

Three of our four case study communities took action to create a manager-administrator position. While each of these three had some level of public input and engagement, they were all accomplished by governing board action and local law without a citizen ballot item. Two of these three adopted a local law that defines the new position and outlines a set of changes in roles and relationships for governing board members and the administrative staff.

As we note in the [case profile](#), the Town of North Castle did not adopt a local law that would identify the authority of the manager/administrator nor any adjustments in the role of governing board members or

relationships with other administrative team members. We also note that this would be a valuable step to revisit.

Outcomes and Insights

The following outcomes that have resulted from creating a manager/administrator position in three of the cases. We summarize insights from governing board members, local government staff, and review of documents such as board minutes, administrative reports, and budget and financial reports.

Leadership. Current leaders confirm that the creation of a manager/administrator position broadened the pool of local leaders willing to step into the chief elected position. One mayor, a previous board member, indicated that he simply wouldn't have considered the office if the local government did not have a central administrator. Relatedly, in each of the three cases that created the position of manager/administrator, those on the governing boards who were opponents to the concept became supporters either during the board study process or implementation.

Governing Board Improvement. Board and staff working through the transition in the case study communities noted the improvement in board preparation and support for policy development as well as board operations.

Operation of Local Government. Case study local government participants indicated an improvement in the operations of local government, including improved inter-department communications and cooperation, improved financial management (budget process and capital planning), and improved personnel management. In one community, staff indicated the unanticipated outcome of improved administrative continuity and stability for department leaders and staff, increased administrative consistency and fairness across departments, in addition to increased transparency for staff and citizens.

Cost Savings. Regarding financial management, as noted earlier the Village of Tuckahoe was threatened with lowered bond ratings. In responding to this critical situation their plan to create a village manager/administrator along with other steps resulted instead in an *improved* bond rating. The Town of Canandaigua wisely conducted a two-year fiscal review - documenting substantial cost savings resulting from the new town manager's decision making and oversight.

Service Sharing and Intergovernmental Opportunities. One case study community experienced a significant increase in local intergovernmental service sharing activity and successful grant seeking for key project needs.

Two Stages in the Process. Local leaders that engage in efforts to change local government organization and create a municipal manager or administrator and face the prospect of a required or voter-initiated referendum will have a two-stage process. They will need to: (1) carefully draft a change proposal that will meet community needs and (2) conduct an effective communication campaign to convince citizens of the value and need for change. These two tasks are very different, requiring different skills and resources.

Resource Needs. The City Saratoga Springs case highlighted that communities facing this two-stage process, noted above, need tools and guidance in several areas. Organizations that want to assist communities engaged in this process can help provide tools and objective guidance in three key areas: (1) Guidance on assessing and framing potential financial impacts of change in form; (2) cases that provide insight into the experiences of other communities with change to a central administrative structure; and (3) guidance on how to approach informing and educating citizen voters of the value of the proposed change and an understanding of the financial resources required to conduct such citizen campaigns.

Implementation Insights. Our case study communities provided at least two implementation-oriented insights. First, when a manager/administrator position is created the upfront clarification of changes in roles for governing board members and department leaders varied across the cases studied and appears to make a difference. Working through these expectations at least in a general sense and clarifying them in local law or policy appears to improve working relationships and operations overtime.

Second, in considering a major change, like the creation of a manager-administrator position, intentional open communication with citizens is valuable regarding governing board goals, estimated fiscal impacts, and the future role of the governing board in policy, decision-making, and citizen engagement. For example, one of our case communities held a public information session early in the process of weighing the

manager/administrator option and followed that meeting with the development of a FAQ sheet that was disseminated in multiple media formats and venues for citizens.

State Policy Consideration. In our policy brief that reviews city, town, and village legal considerations for creating a manager/administrator position in New York, we noted an existing deficit in state legal options. In particular, our review identified that state law previously contained more detailed provisions for a “council-manager” plan for local government organization in towns and villages. Those interested in this form of organization as an option in New York State could consider the value of state law changes that would re-institute updated provisions for local adoption of a council manager plan for towns, villages, and cities.

Local Government Case Profiles

Cases summarized in this report

Hattery, Michael, and Celia Watt. 2021. [Managing Tuckahoe: Transitioning to Village Administrator](#). Public Management Program Policy Brief Series 2021:01. Department of Public Administration, SUNY Brockport.

Hattery, Michael, and Alison Simon. 2021. [A Long Time Coming: North Castle Town Administrator](#). Public Management Program Policy Brief Series 2021:02. Department of Public Administration, SUNY Brockport.

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