



City of Morro Bay
595 Harbor Street
Morro Bay, CA 93442
(805) 772-6200
Online: morrobayca.gov

A VIEW FROM HARBOR STREET

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Local Government 101

By David Buckingham, City Manager



Not many weeks ago I enjoyed a deep conversation with a thoughtful Morro Bay resident. We discussed many aspects of life in Morro Bay, including the role of the City Council and City staff. When I expressed that I hoped to serve our City for many years by working to professionally carry out the policies of each successive City Council, regardless of my personal opinions of those policies, my friend encouraged me to write a series of columns on this subject. This is the first and focuses on the two main forms of municipal government, with a focus on Morro Bay.

Morro Bay practices the “Council-Manager” form of government. We are not alone. Over 55% of all US cities appreciate and practice Council-Manager government, including the vast majority of smaller cities and many large cities including San Jose, Phoenix and Las Vegas.

The Mayor-Council form of government is the other predominant form of City government practiced by about 1/3 of US cities, including many large Cities such as LA, Chicago, and New York. The Mayor-Council form of government is what often comes to mind when we think of an elected Mayor who “runs the city”. This is also an effective approach but to better understand both forms of government a quick review of our democracy is helpful.

Our Federal and State governments have three branches. Generally speaking: laws are passed by the legislative branch, the executive branch carries out the laws passed by the legislature, and the judicial branch interprets and applies the law.

In a “strong” Mayor-Council form of government such as LA or San Francisco, the people elect a full-time Mayor who holds executive authority and is responsible for running the city’s administration. The people also elect a City Council (sometimes called supervisors, aldermen, commissioners, etc) that performs the legislative function functions of setting broad policy, passing ordinances and adopting the budget. Some very large cities also have municipal courts.

Morro Bay practices the Council-Manager form of government in which the people elect a part-time City Council and Mayor who has a special role as the ceremonial head of the city, while having one vote on the Council like the other Councilmembers. The City Council has three primary functions:

- First, the Council sets the broad, general policy for the city – the strategic direction. In Morro Bay this is effected year to year with the Council adopting our City Goals and annual Objectives.

The Council further manages the city's direction by approving and adopting important policy documents such as the General Plan and Local Coastal Plan.

- Second, the Council passes the City's "laws" – the ordinances laid out in our municipal code. This is crucial as the voters direct representatives decide what the city's "laws" will be. It is also important to understand that the Council can change our ordinances quite simply and quickly, from consideration to implementation, the Council can change our ordinances in under two months.
- Third, the Council approves and adopts the City's annual budget. This key function provides additional oversight on the operation of the City. The budget adopted by the Council must be followed carefully by the city's administrative / executive staff.

The second part of the Council-Manager form of government is the City Manager. The City Manager is responsible for efficiently and effectively running the day-to-day administration of the city - implementing the Council's policies, ensuring the Council's ordinances are followed, and managing all aspects of the City's functions within the budget adopted by the City Council.

Under the Council-Manager form of government, the City Manager (and the City Attorney in many cities, including Morro Bay) are normally the only employees directly hired by the City Council. The Council hires a professional (not political) City Manager who then hires and oversees the staff who manage city operations.

This aspect is one of the main reasons the Council-Manager form of government grew during the progressive reform movement before which it was common for newly elected Mayors, on their own, to "throw the bums out" and place their political supporters into every position of consequence in the city. In those days it was not uncommon for the City engineer to have no experience as an engineer – but to be a special friend of the Mayor. It was also not uncommon for unethical Mayor's to use their influence to give special perks – from fixing the streets only in a particular area of town, to unfairly awarding contracts - only to their supporters. The Council-Manager form of government essentially solved this problem by making the City Manager primarily responsible for the executive functions of the City.

In these respects, the Council Manager form of government is not unlike a public company in which the shareholders elect a board of directors (the City Council) and the board then hires a Chief Executive Officer (the City Manager) to manage the day to day affairs of the company according to the policies and budget approved by the board.

Future columns in this series will examine additional aspects of our Council-Manager form of government. In the meantime, I look forward to hearing from you at dbuckingham@morrobayca.gov.

Note: This editorial first appeared in Bay News on August 10, 2016.