

The Circuit-Riding Manager

by
Jon Elam
City Administrator
Lucan, Milroy, Sanborn,
Wabasso, and Walnut Grove,
Minnesota



Jon Elam, right, and Bernie Turbes, Sanborn Maintenance Department

As recently as 1960, an article about a city manager working in a city of 2,000 or less would have been looked upon as quite unique and unusual. But since then something has happened, beginning in the early 1960s when the roles of state and local government changed from that of relatively passive participants in municipal decision making to that of being a major source of revenue for many cities and therefore an important part of city government. These changes have brought resources to programs in housing, economic development, environmental protection, health, and welfare.

Along with the federal and state dollars, however, have come demands for new skills, far beyond those of most small town city clerks and mayors. Worse yet, these programs in the latter half of the 1970s seem to be responsible for an era of incredible inflation which is seriously affecting the thousands of smaller cities waiting for costs "to decrease" before installing their first sanitary sewer system or surfacing streets for the first time.

In conjunction with this has been a rise in citizen expectations for their town. Small city citizens have become more mobile along with everyone else, and they like the services and amenities they see in larger towns. Just because they live in a small village of 500 does not mean that they have to flush their toilets into a ditch, drink water from an inadequate well, or not have fire protection services.

The demands of citizens for an improved quality of life, coupled with the ever increasing complexities of state and federal regulations, are causing a real revolution in the government of the nation's small towns.

Many cities are at a major crossroads in their development. In Minnesota, over 300 of the 855 incorporated cities don't have any type of sanitary sewer system. This poses real problems for these cities, because tough new county, state, and federal regulations prohibit new home building on standard size city lots without a central waste treatment system. This problem produces major conflicts between the older residents on fixed incomes and younger people who are trying to make an investment in the future.

The future of many a small town is strenuously debated at public hearings on these issues. Much new development is taking place in small towns, and mayors soon learn that getting through the hearing is sometimes the simplest part of the job. Managing the implementation process is considerably more difficult and time consuming, and is frequently one of the factors leading mayors and councilmembers to the initial interest in professional city management assistance.

For cities with populations from 3,000 to 10,000, the decision to hire a city manager is usually not as controversial as in a smaller town because of the existence of school districts and other organizations with professional management positions. In cities smaller than this, the general public often does not want to acknowledge that their city is facing any problems.

Difficulties with public acceptance have led to the development of a number of experiments in the last few years in bringing professional assistance to small towns.

Many of these have consisted of technical assistance programs, although they may refer to themselves as "circuit-riding manager" programs.

Among the leading programs has been one in the state of Tennessee which provides a team of resource people to serve from a dozen to several dozen small towns on a regular basis.

Another nationally known program providing technical assistance is the Mid-Missouri Regional Planning Commission project, which began in 1972. This consulting-type model has been adopted by several dozen area planning districts in the country, including districts in the states of Texas, Colorado, Iowa, South Carolina, California, and Georgia.

In programs such as these, the planning district has generally applied for a grant, most often from the Intergovernmental Personnel Act or the HUD 701 Planning Program. An outreach network of cities is developed (each circuit appears to be a bit different), and together they hire a person to work with the cities.

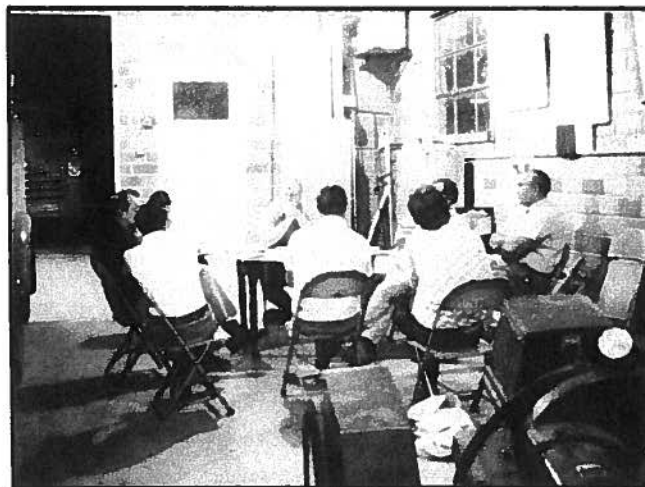
This program approach differs from that of the true "circuit-rider" in several ways. First, the cities themselves often do not make a significant financial commitment to the project. This lack of a vested interest in making the project succeed becomes crucial when the grant runs out, as most eventually do. The circuit then either breaks up or is reshaped, losing any sense of momentum that had been gained.

Staff turnover can also be a problem because of the constant travel and lack of time needed to really understand a city's problems in depth when working from the outside in instead of the reverse.

Obstacles and philosophy aside, the needs and demands of the smaller cities' citizens in the country are bringing thousands of newly elected officials into mayoral and council positions. These are frequently people who are not interested in doing things as they have been done in the past, who want to develop their city as a viable alternative to urban life for the future.

They respect and utilize the regional resources that exist in area planning districts, but also recognize that their city must receive almost daily management over the long term if their goals are to be met. Frequently the most practical way to do this is to hire a professional city administrator and share the cost with other cities.

In April, 1975, the cities of Lucan (population 254), Milroy (247), Sanborn (505), Wabasso (738), and Walnut Grove (736), Minnesota, following in part the evolution described above, began the upper Midwest's first program of city-funded and administered circuit-riding administration.



Lucan City Council meeting

Since its inception, this program has been a model for another four presently-operating programs and six proposed projects in the planning stages, together reaching almost 50 cities with populations of under 1,000. This first Minnesota project has proven successful from most outside evaluations and its approaches hopefully can be used by others.

Certain basic operational criteria were agreed to by all cities early in the planning process. The project grew from a county-wide organization of mayors, providing a basis of personal knowledge and commonly shared goals by the five mayors involved.

There was a feeling that all the participating cities should be somewhat the same size and have reasonably good geographic proximity to keep travel time and expenses minimal. A great deal of vagueness existed in the job description, since none of the participants had any experience in the field. The first administrator was then largely responsible for defining and clarifying roles as the project began.

One of the first tasks that must evolve from a beginning circuit-riding program (a term that is never used on the job) is the development of a regular schedule. For the Redwood County project this has meant one day per week in each town on a regular schedule, with lots of jumping back and forth between cities for meetings.

A flexible schedule must be maintained throughout the day, allowing the administrator to meet individually with the mayor, councilmembers, city employees, community groups, and citizens. An important part of each day is spent with the city clerk, helping with time consuming



Walnut Grove city clerk Don Lind with Jon Elam at future site for 25 unit apartment complex for the elderly

administrative paperwork. The remainder of the day is spent making housecalls, dealing with immediate problems, and the larger physical and community development problems of each city.

Three or four evenings each week are spent attending council and community meetings. A vital and most rewarding involvement in work like this is being able to serve as the community resource person for local arts and historic preservation groups, housing organizations, and local economic development activities. The administrator frequently has experience in dealing with outside agencies and organizations which benefits these local organizations.

In Minnesota most state agencies have in the past refrained from providing grants to smaller cities because of the lack of management capability to handle the grants. The Redwood County project has overcome this problem, with grants sometimes given to all five cities jointly with one serving as the contractor.

Grants like this have been received from the Intergovernmental Personnel Act, to help cover initial administrative costs; the HUD 701 program for comprehensive planning; Minnesota State Arts Board for arts and cultural programming; the National Endowment for the Arts for joint historic preservation planning; private foundation grants for a student internship program; Minnesota Housing Finance Agency for a joint program of Housing Rehabilitation grants which has resulted in improvements to over 50 homes since 1976.

This joint programming provides exciting opportunities for small cities not otherwise able to realize them and is continuing in the areas of urban forestry and energy conservation besides the areas mentioned above. Total grants to the five cities have amounted to over \$600,000 through the first two and a half program years.

Probably a more important priority for the citizens of each town is the level of basic services. Depending on the actual distance between cities, services such as fire and police protection, waste collection, and much capital equipment and manpower might be shared.

In the author's project, sharing has included legal and engineering services, ambulance services, and the acquisition through joint bidding or purchasing of water meters, police cars, water and sewer mains, nursery stock, and office supplies. Water and sewer systems, streets, parks, and housing have all shown major improvements, with a total of \$4.2 million in capital improvements from 1975 to 1977.

These improvements cover a wide range and point out another interesting point about shared administration projects. With a population base of only 2,500 people, a single city would not take on such a wide variety of projects as installing a complete sanitary sewer system, looping all the water mains, extending and redeveloping the storm sewer system, building a new water treatment plant, putting up a new water tower, installing curb and gutter, surfacing every street in town, building a new fire hall, and constructing five apartment houses. Because of this variety of projects, the administrator must be flexible and also an "expert" in a whole range of areas at the same time.

Major improvements have also been undertaken in areas of financial and personnel management. Budgets have been developed for the first time, and are being followed, with reserves building up for each city. Two of the five towns have had a mill rate reduction each year, and for all five cities the mill rate is closely in line with other area cities without administrators.

Smaller cities seem to have more problems in the personnel area than almost any other. With a very part-time

council and mayor, no one can really supervise the street commissioner or police officer, and the quality of work reflects the attention or support they receive.

Small city officials everywhere complain about serving as a training ground for personnel who then leave for the larger cities and higher salaries. This does not have to happen and the trend can be reversed.

Spending time developing job descriptions, interviewing candidates, and setting up performance standards can make a big difference in choosing new employees and working with older employees. The use of Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) positions to provide training for law enforcement or public works jobs can also prove successful.

Better supervision means better reporting to city councils (something almost unheard of in the author's towns two years ago), and better communication in general. Providing employees with the support they need to do their jobs well, training if necessary, and improved salaries can prevent the high turnover.

Financing the shared city administrator is something every group of cities must work out. Geographic proximity is important, as mileage has added up to as much as \$300 a month and averages around \$250.

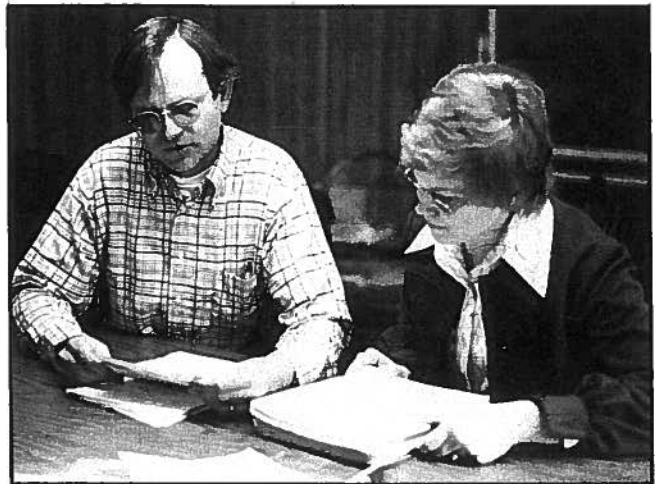
Salaries tend to run from \$12,000 to \$18,000 depending on experience, with almost all Minnesota circuit riders coming to their positions with little previous city management experience. With fringe benefits and other expenses, the first year's costs will range from \$16,000 to \$20,000.

For three Minnesota projects, first year funding came almost entirely from Intergovernmental Personnel Act funds, but recent circuit-riding projects submitted to IPA have been denied because they are no longer demonstration projects. In other sections of the country HUD 701 planning funds have been used to start projects but for most rural states these funds are too scarce to be dependable as a source.

A more practical funding for the present (and the approach used in the most recent circuits the author has helped organize) involved the commitment to use local funds with the hope that as grants are received the administrator's time can be recharged against the grant. If this approach is used, then it is that much more beneficial for the administrator to spend time working with community groups and organizations on their programs and problems. The administrator needs to do everything possible in the small city to establish his or her credibility.

The allocation of the budget between cities is important and generally some sort of compromise needs to be made between actual time spent and population, since population size is not an exact reflection of the work program.

Public Management/April 1978



Left, Jon Elam, and right, Marilyn Davis, Wabasso City

In the Minnesota circuits, budget costs have been divided in half. For a total budget of \$20,000, \$10,000 would be divided on an equal basis between the cities and the other \$10,000 divided on a per capita basis. This usually results in a larger dollar cost to the larger cities but a smaller per capita cost than in the smaller cities. This formula has been well received and adopted in each case where it has been suggested.

Clearly there are some exciting implications of all these developments. In terms of the ICMA the result could be dozens of new members in the next few years, and a need to seriously consider some new criteria for evaluating these circuit riders and fitting them into the existing categories of membership. ICMA can also strongly encourage programs like this through its work with state municipal leagues, and could develop new liaisons with national rural development groups and organizations.

More importantly, for the first time organizations at all levels of government are going to find increasingly aggressive and articulate voices speaking out for the concerns of the small town. Coalitions of urban and rural small cities will need to be formed and the cities of this country will speak with a stronger voice, hopefully making Congress more responsive to our cities' needs.

It will also provide a step towards a healing of the urban-rural split which has worked against many national urban policies which could have helped cities of every size, not just those over 50,000.

Thus I say to my colleagues in the big cities, I need you, but you also need me, and together we will make our cities better places to live and grow.