

THE CITY MANAGER.*

By Gaylord C. Cummin.

ENGINEERS have been entirely too content in the past to take credit only for their technical achievements, and leave the glories of dreams that come true, of wonders of administrative effort, of wise and judicial counsel which have made our country great, to rest on the brow of those who were in positions of prominence, and to whom they do not rightfully belong.

A real engineer is much more than a man who juggles with figures and formulæ, and makes queer designs on a drawing board. A real engineer must know for what purpose he plans both economically and physically; he must know how his plans can become financially possible; in short, he must be an administrator in order to make his designs accomplished facts, and to build efficiently and well.

In this field of public service the engineer has always taken a much more subordinate position than that to which he was entitled. Seventy-five per cent. of the problems which occur in the administration of our cities are engineering problems pure and simple, and the rest of them are such that an engineer is at least as well fitted to handle as a man trained along any other line, they being largely problems of organization and social justice. The vital municipal problems are pure water and plenty of it, adequate sewers, clean streets, proper buildings, adequate transportation facilities, efficient police and fire protection, proper education and recreational facilities, etc.—these things to be secured with the smallest expenditure of money possible to get the needed results.

Most of these are engineering problems and can be best handled by engineers; hence our opportunity once the citizens can be educated to the point where the administrative part of the government is judged on its ability as such, political questions being relegated to the legislative branch where they belong.

The so-called "Commission" form of municipal government is a decided improvement in some ways, but falls far short of the ideal. This plan consists, in brief, of a small council elected at large which constitutes the legislative body, each member being made the administrative head of one of the city departments. This is an improvement, because ward lines are eliminated and the organization somewhat simplified, but still has a lack of centralized responsibility, places men in technical positions who are not specially qualified for them, and is positively vicious in making a man's success as a commissioner depend upon the success of his particular department and not the success of the city as a whole. This will result in time in a majority of the commission dividing the bulk of the funds among their departments, because in this way they can show more results, and the minority taking what is left, although their departments may be the most important. Under the commission form there is no fundamental improvement in organization, the improved results coming from an awakened public interest in municipal affairs shown by the fact that any change in government was made.

The commission-manager form of city government is an exact parallel to the form which our experience has taught is the only one under which satisfactory results can be obtained in business. It is not presented as bringing about a municipal millennium. Nor, is it new in principle

—only in application. There are no mysterious or wonderworking powers concealed within it. It is simply the application to city government of the only methods by which we have been able to manage business corporations efficiently. It does not insure efficient government. No charter form can do that, but it is the only form under which efficient government can be expected, judging by our experience in business.

It consists briefly of a small council elected at large, corresponding to a board of directors and whose duties are purely legislative. This body appoints the chief administrative officer, the city manager, who corresponds to the general manager of a corporation, and who has complete control of the whole administrative machinery. He holds office at the pleasure of the commission and is responsible to it for his acts. Responsibility is absolutely centralized on the commission and through them on the manager.

There is never any chance to dodge an issue by placing the blame on somebody else. If anything goes wrong in the administrative branch the manager can be held responsible and the people can call their representatives to strict account for mistakes and inefficiency in the administrative branch, because of the commission's power to remove at will the city manager.

What has been the result of this mode of operation? In the city manager cities party politics has been entirely eliminated from the administrative side of city affairs. A man's beliefs on the tariff has no bearing upon his efficiency as a waterworks superintendent.

We have teamwork in our organization and nothing can be accomplished without that. We must have it because the department head that refuses to work in harmony with the manager will soon be looking for another job, and the manager who will not work with his commission will not last very long.

Our department heads are selected for special fitness for the positions which they hold, and not because they are "good fellows." The manager must select on this basis because an inefficient department head will reflect on the manager and he cannot evade his responsibility.

Responsibility is centralized from top to bottom and this is the best incentive to honesty and efficiency that has yet been devised.

The special point of interest to engineers is that all the larger cities operating under this form of government have engineers as city managers and they are making good. In fact, in many cases none but engineers are being considered. A city manager must be primarily an executive, but given that qualification, the engineer is preferred over men of other professions, because such a large percentage of the problems which arise are engineering problems.

There are now over eighty cities and towns operating under this plan and the number is just about doubling each year. Where are we to find the city managers for these openings? Most of them will be drawn from the engineering profession direct, for a good many years, but finally we hope that the plan will spread so that a man can take it up as a profession, start as manager of a small town after having received an engineering education, and be promoted to larger ones if he makes good.

In this field there will be in the near future many openings for engineers, well paid, permanent positions, where the engineer can at last take his proper place in public service to the lasting benefit of both engineer and citizen.

*Journal of the Western Society of Engineers.