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Revisiting Tacoma's Government

A second look at its council-manager system

A joint study sponsored by
The City Club of Tacoma
and The Municipal League
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CITY CLUB
of  **Tacoma**


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Explanatory notes

A joint study group of the City Club of Tacoma and the Tacoma-Pierce County Municipal League produced this report. Members (listed above), conducted interviews and did the research.

Insights into Tacoma's government and its operations emerged from interviews of 27 civic and political leaders with city government background and experience, and an examination of comparable municipal governmental systems. Interviewees included present and former Tacoma mayors, council members, managers and other civically active individuals. (Complete list on Page 19)

The report was written and edited by Elvin J. Vandenberg and Ben W. Gilbert, the two study co-chairs, and reviewed by the joint study group and the sponsoring organizations. Our thanks go to City Club member Jean G. Cooper for proofreading the report.

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Tacoma WA

Revisiting Tacoma's Government

A. Is a change needed?

Should Tacoma retire its 50-year old council-manager city government and install a "strong mayor" in its place? A joint committee of members of the City Club of Tacoma and the Tacoma-Pierce County Municipal League spent the past year studying the question.

Although the volunteer researchers found support within Tacoma's leadership community for transforming Tacoma's council-manager city government into a "strong Mayor," mayor-council form, most civic leaders consulted preferred to make necessary adjustments within the present governmental framework.

The study quickly turned into a detailed examination of the appropriate roles of the mayor, city council, and city manager, and the way they relate to each other.

The council-manager system would work more effectively, it was suggested, if the mayor and other members of the city council more actively engaged in originating and developing policies and programs. The debate that emerged appeared to be more a reflection of dissatisfaction with the way both elected officials and the council-appointed manager exercise their power, rather than with the structure of the government and its council-manager system, the study group found.

Power has tended to drift from Tacoma's elected officials to the city manager, with the result that the mayor and city council often function as reviewers rather than initiators of policies and programs.

Many of those interviewed stressed the need to make the appointed city manager more accountable to the city's elected officials, the mayor and council, and to the public at large. They also would like to see these elected officials assert a stronger leadership role and take a more active part in directing city affairs.

"Strong mayor" (mayor-council) advocates see that system as a way to place Tacoma's elected officials, particularly its mayor, back in the driver's seat. Others interviewed counter that any deficiencies in the operation of the present system could be remedied within the government's existing council-manager structure.

Unlike a switch to a "strong mayor," proposals to provide for greater accountability of the manager would not require amendment of the city charter. The city council already has power to establish policies for the government and to assure accountability for its operations. Moreover, the mayor and council have the opportunity - and the obligation - within the present framework to take a greater part in policy and program development and to strengthen their lines of communication with the public.

The city council selects the city manager who is subject to discharge at any time under the present arrangement that does not include a formal contract. The mayor, who presides over the council and participates fully in its deliberations, does not have any special powers by virtue of the office.

(Conclusions and recommendations are on page 4.)

B. Under scrutiny – Tacoma’s government

As this study was getting underway, an independent group of Tacoma citizens began to circulate petitions for a city charter amendment to scrap Tacoma’s council-manager government and replace it with a “strong mayor,” mayor-council government. The petitions demanded that the city council make the charter change or, failing that, place it on the ballot for decision by the city’s voters.

Although the initial petition drive failed to collect the required number of signatures, it opened public discussion about the city’s government and how well it functioned. More recently, a new petition drive was started. It appeared to have acquired momentum in the current political environment.

The fallout from the shooting death of Crystal Brame at the hands of her husband, Police Chief David Brame, and his suicide, stimulated an unusually high degree of public scrutiny of the operation of Tacoma’s government and intense media coverage. Multiple investigations were launched into the way components of the city government functioned on the matter, with particular attention to the actions of the city manager, the city attorney, and the city council.

Investigators were asked to examine Brame’s movement through police ranks and his eventual promotion to chief despite the existence of negative information about him and an adverse psychological evaluation when he was first employed in the police department.

With investigations underway, City Manager Ray Corpuz, who had appointed David Brame chief, announced that he would leave the city government once the investigations concluded. Prior to that announcement, it had come to light that Corpuz had appointed Brame as chief more than a year ago without taking note of or possibly being aware of warning signs in Brame’s history with the Tacoma police department.

Initially, the council left arrangements for the investigation to Corpuz. However, public demands for an independent investigation welled up. After a week’s silence, the council held an unprecedented Saturday session. Splitting 6 to 3, with the mayor and two other members in the minority, the council rejected suspension of the city manager while the inquiry was being conducted. That decision failed to still the public clamor or the media interest in the event.

A series of conferences between manager Corpuz and those council members who supported him took place. Corpuz first requested temporary leave with pay, which was granted; but with the media spotlight undimmed, he said he would retire at the conclusion of the multiple investigations. The council, however, ultimately decided to accept his retirement as of July 15 without the special severance pay package he sought, but with his pension intact. As public attention on the Brame case continued at a high level, the city council relieved the city attorney of the restrictions of lawyer-client privilege that had blocked that officer from responding to media and investigator queries. The council also retained an outside law firm to defend the city against a \$75 million law suit filed by the family of Crystal Brame.

The conferences between Corpuz and supporting council members demonstrated the unique way that power often is exercised within the Tacoma city government. No more than four council members attended any one of the private conferences with Corpuz, thus evading a state “open meetings” law requiring meetings of public bodies to be open to the press and public. Such informal meetings between Tacoma’s city manager and supportive members in the nine-member council had become a way for the city manager to test his proposals with friendly council members and make sure that he had the votes needed to secure their adoption.

These “nose counting” sessions occurred with some frequency, the study group was informed. Taking place behind closed doors, they tended to foreclose public input and debate. It was not unusual for measures that were blessed at these sessions to receive perfunctory council

adoption at its regular open meetings. One respondent told us that some of these “unofficial” meetings took place at the Parkway Tavern, a discrete location blocks away from the municipal center, one that was unlikely to attract special attention.

What became the Brame-Corpuz story filled many columns of the News Tribune, and received continuing day-to-day attention in the Seattle papers, on area TV stations, and in major “wrap-up” stories in the Washington Post and New York Times and other newspapers around the nation. Tacoma was once again being stigmatized in out-of-town media reports as a corruption-tainted old mill town. Citizens expressed concern about the effect that intense attention would have on the city’s image and its on-going “renaissance.”

The story has become a continuing saga for both the print and electronic media, with running stories detailing not only the couple’s troubled marriage that ended so tragically, but also to actions taken in the matter by the mayor, council, city manager and other city officials. As the city council struggled to establish the terms for Corpuz’s departure, attention shifted to the way the city manager and the city council were interacting.

Public debate, as mirrored in newspaper letters-to-the-editor, swiftly spilled beyond the hiring and retention of Chief Brame into discussions of the functioning of the city government. Letters-to-the editor also blamed the city manager and the mayor and council. A letter-to-the-editor by Pat Richmond of Tacoma suggested that appraising the actions of city officials ultimately appeared more important than a change in the form of government.

“A new form of government may hold a promise of a better tomorrow, but it is ultimately the people in the government and their actions that will determine how ethical and responsible that government operates,” writer Richmond said, adding that “the city has ignored the basics such as street lighting, ethical governing, and the safety and well-being of all its citizens....I hope the citizens of Tacoma will firmly require and monitor the constructive changes that need to occur.”

In another letter-to-the-editor, David Droge, communications professor at the University of Puget Sound, said he was not convinced “that the current stampede to change the form of city government is a solution. Is it the people involved or the council-manager form of government that is at fault? I don’t think we know.” He favors establishing a procedure for regular citizen review of the city charter similar to the system that Pierce County uses.

According to an opinion poll commissioned by the News Tribune, residents were sharply divided on their appraisal of the government. Thus, 42 % of poll respondents said they disapproved of Corpuz’ performance, while 28 % expressed approval, and 31 % said they didn’t know. A similar division was recorded on the city council’s handling of the matter with 37 % disapproving, 34 % approving, and 29 % didn’t know.

News Tribune Columnist Peter Callaghan, a sharp critic of the secrecy enveloping the municipal decision making process, wrote that Corpuz “played the city council -- his bosses under the charter -- like a cat plays with its food.” Callaghan lauded Corpuz’ skill at simple arithmetic. “A city manager’s first skill is to learn to count to five, the number of council members needed to keep him employed,” he noted. Corpuz, he added, knew how to count to nine, the full complement of the city council.

The robust open public discussion of the direction and management of the city government growing out of the Brame murder-suicide is illustrative of the type of discussion that too often is missing from official public deliberations of important municipal decisions in Tacoma.

The process of getting issues resolved privately in advance of public council meetings appears to stifle debate. Understandably, little remains for the council members to debate or even discuss. Typically, the council acts on many of the measures presented to it for decision in a pro-forma way without discussion. Its deliberations are aired on the municipal TV station.

C. Conclusions and recommendations

- The joint study group believes that the intelligence, interest, and energy of the individuals chosen to direct and manage a city government are crucial to its effective operation, irrespective of its structure. The aim is to have a government in Tacoma that functions in a more effective, responsive and accountable manner.

- Mayor and council, regardless of the city's governmental system, must assure accountability of the city's operating officials to the public. To make more effective use of the present system and provide leadership that is sometimes lacking, the city's elected mayor and council members must reclaim their authority to lead the city government.

- The city charter should be amended to authorize appointment of two staff members, an assistant to the mayor and an assistant to the council, to set its agenda, do needed research, and track citizen complaints.

- Council meetings, hearings, and public forums should provide for open discussions of public issues and involve the public in the formulation of city policies and programs. The practice of holding private meetings between the city manager and selected council members to make behind-the-scenes council decisions should be abandoned.

- Mayor and council should select as city manager a qualified experienced city manager who is professionally educated and trained. The manager should be hired under a contract that allows for termination by the council at any time with appropriate severance pay.

- The city charter should be amended to require that the city council annually evaluate the city manager and formally consider retention of the city manager every two years. Evaluation and retention actions should be discussed and decided at open meetings of the council.

- The city's budget should be prepared on an annual basis along with a clear citizen-friendly explanation. The council should play a more active role in its formulation.

- Tacoma's employee compensation systems should be reviewed regularly. Reviews should include a comparative analysis of city government pay levels, pensions and other fringe benefits with those for similar positions in other South Sound jurisdictions, including large and small private sector employers, and in other cities of comparable size.

- A formal process to establish a commission to regularly review the city's charter should be instituted. The commission should be asked to review relationships between mayor and council and the city administration.

- Proposals to place the police and fire departments in a public safety department or to amalgamate the two departments into one unified department of public safety should be studied as should the question of retaining the Civil Service Board as part of the city government with its jurisdiction limited to non-contract employee grievances.

D. A second look

This report represents a second look at Tacoma's governmental organization. Six years ago, the City Club of Tacoma issued a comprehensive study entitled, "Tacoma's Government: Should it be changed?" A subtitle defined it as, "A study of Tacoma's council-manager form of government and proposals to replace it with a strong mayor." That study rejected switching Tacoma's government to a "strong mayor," mayor-council plan.

"The goal of achieving an accountable, responsible, and forward looking government can be achieved within the existing council-manager form," it concluded. That report contained recommendations for tightening the system that were not carried out, including a formal annual evaluation of the city manager.

"To move forward with a creative community vision requires leadership, rather than any particular governmental structure," the earlier report stated, adding that, "we did not find any evidence that any system is superior to any other as an incubator for leadership."

"The qualities of the persons that the voters elect often determine whether the city will be dynamic and forward moving, or locked in the status quo, regardless of the form of government," the earlier report stated.

That the people chosen, rather than the system, would determine the quality of government was strongly stressed by many interviewees. They argued that strong leaders could emerge under either form. Advocates of a "strong mayor" system did not agree, contending that the election of a mayor in charge of city operations would give the person selected by the voters both the opportunity and responsibility to lead. Mayors who did not rise to that challenge could be denied reelection.

This study draws on a series of interviews with key individuals and a comparative examination of government systems. It also includes capsule summaries of governmental systems in selected other cities.

Those interviewed were asked five questions about government operations in Tacoma. The questions concerned possible scrapping of the present council-manager form and replacing it with a "strong mayor." They focused on securing information about problems that could best be solved by structural change, improving government's responsiveness to citizens, strengthening accountability and professionalism with regular departmental audits, and having regular evaluations of the city manager and department heads.

Among the 27 persons interviewed were present and former council members, Tacoma's current mayor, and two former mayors. Several of those interviewed brought to the table city management experience in Tacoma and the area, including the incumbent city manager and his immediate predecessor.

Others participating in the interviews were the director of public utilities, the public library director, representatives of police and electrical unions, board members of related governing bodies including the Port of Tacoma, the Metropolitan Park Board, and the Public Utilities Board and the former cultural affairs director of Tacoma, the city's unofficial historian. By agreement, interviewees were not quoted by name without permission. The fire fighters union did not respond to a request for an interview.

For its examination of the workings of the council-manager form of government, the study made extensive use of research data including a model charter for American cities drawn up by the National Civic League (NCL).

As noted, the study group consisted of members of the City Club of Tacoma and the Tacoma/Pierce County Municipal League, joint study sponsors.

E. Defining the systems

The National Civic League (NCL), a more than century-old organization that monitors American cities, defines the council manager form of government as “the system of government that combines *strong political leadership* of elected officials in the form of a governing body (such as Tacoma’s city council) with the *strong managerial experience* of an appointed local government manager (Tacoma’s city manager)....

“The council-manager form establishes a representative system where all power is concentrated in the elected council and where the council hires a *professionally trained manager* to oversee the delivery of services.”

In recent years, Tacoma’s city council has hired knowledgeable political insiders for the position of city manager, but they have lacked the professional graduate education and training that the NCL considers essential. Nearly 73 percent of managers of cities surveyed by NCL have a master’s or other professional degree.

Tacoma managers have brought to the job a familiarity with the city and on-the-job administrative experience with the government of Tacoma or other area governments. Under the relationship that has evolved in Tacoma, the council has allowed its city managers to exercise much greater power over policy matters and operations than the model charter provides. The city’s structure is patterned after the manager-council form as it has evolved over the past 100 years, although in practice it has varied a bit from the model charter of the NCL.

The city manager of Tacoma functions like a chief executive officer, with the council serving as the city’s board of directors and the titular mayor as chairman of the board.

Tacoma’s city managers are hired by the council, but serve without an employment contract and can be discharged without notice. By a 5-4 vote of the city council, city manager Ray Corpuz was forced out as of July 15, 2003, and assistant city manager Jim Walton was named to succeed him.

Tacoma city charter provisions about selection of the city manager only differ slightly from the classic model. Tacoma provides that the city manager shall be selected on the basis of training, expertise and other administrative qualifications while the model states that the city manager “shall be appointed solely on basis of executive and administrative qualifications.”

By law, Tacoma’s elected officials cannot run under partisan labels. Although the idea is to keep politics out of municipal government, that probably is an unrealistic goal. “Non-partisan” candidates may reach the Tacoma ballot with histories of prior partisan activities. Political parties are not the only groups that “play politics.” Politics, defined broadly as the science or art of political government, may not be seen as undesirable, but the way it is used to achieve goals may be.

The “strong mayor” format proposed by initiative petitions now being circulated in Tacoma is more typically used in larger cities including Seattle. Middle sized cities (including Tacoma) and smaller cities are more likely to be governed under a council manager plan. Spokane, the state’s second largest city with only about a thousand more residents than Tacoma, according to current census estimates, recently abandoned its council-manager form of government and switched to a “strong mayor” in the wake of a much publicized riverfront land use scandal.

Under a “strong mayor” form, the elected mayor wields executive power, either directly or through a city administrator who conducts day-to-day operations. An elected city council functions as a legislative body to enact ordinances and adopt budgets the mayor submits. Councils often have power to confirm key mayoral appointments. Mayors customarily can veto council enactments and return them for revision or possible override.

F. Theory and practice

In theory, under the current council-manager form of government, the council establishes governing policy, acts on the biennial budget that the city manager prepares, and serves as the city's law-making body. **However, Tacoma's city council generally functions more as a review and approval body for matters placed on its agenda by the city manager, rather than as an initiator of policies and legislation. Although it has oversight responsibility for the workings of the city government, it rarely takes the lead in exercising it, the study group found.**

The mayor, elected by the voters, rather than by a majority vote of the city council, has no expressed executive powers. However, the prestige of the title and the duty to preside at meetings of the council allow the mayor to assume a leadership role. Some, but not all, mayors have seized that opportunity. That the city manager, rather than the mayor, actually runs the city government does not appear to be generally understood.

Typically, the Tacoma city council takes action on legislative or policy matters only after the city manager has placed them on the agenda. It is a rare event for the council to reject a request for action by the city manager. For the city manager to submit a potentially controversial measure without having an assured majority of five of the nine council votes in hand is even more rare.

The council seldom uses its formal public sessions to discuss and debate the measures before it; details are frequently thrashed out in working sessions in advance of the regular public meetings of the council.

Since the Tacoma council does not divide itself into committees with jurisdiction over particular activities, individual members do not become as expert in specialized subjects or research issues as do members of other legislative bodies. In practice, council members depend primarily on information received from the city manager and his staff. The council does receive citizen input at public hearings called to review proposals that may have been already formulated and even decided.

Recently, the council has convened itself as a "committee of the whole" two hours ahead of council meetings in a small ninth floor meeting room. There issues are expounded in some detail by department heads and members of the city manager's staff. Although the public has the right to attend these meetings, they are not widely known and few do attend.

Under Tacoma's hierarchical system, the city manager serves as the point of contact for council members. However, some Tacoma city managers have encouraged them to go directly to department heads for information, rather than through his office. Many council members and former council members told us they found that privilege valuable.

One of the great powers possessed by the city council, the power to act on the city's two-year budget, clearly has not been fully exercised, nor is the city manager, in the limited time allotted, able to fully inform the council on its intricacies.

Proponents of the biennial budget cycle, initiated in the past 15 years, view it as a necessary vehicle to assure more effective planning of city operations. However, the two year budget span may be difficult for some observers to follow. It was suggested that an annual budget would be easier for lay persons to understand.

Several city council members acknowledged they did not understand the details of the budget presented to them for action. The model charter strives to make sure that does not happen. It contains specific provisions requiring the city manager to submit a detailed budget and an accompanying explanatory message with a clear summary of its contents, including

estimated income and tax collections and all proposed expenditures. The Tacoma charter does not require such details, and such explanations are not usually provided.

The flap about the street lights is illustrative. The council did not question the line item to save \$200,000 by selectively turning off street lights when it first appeared. Procedurally, that funding cut was approved without special scrutiny or comment. After many streets went dark, igniting public anger, a much embarrassed council ordered the lights turned back on. The damage was done, however. It will take years and much more than \$200,000 to make the antiquated street lighting system function properly throughout the city. "Temporary" lights have been installed in some areas.

Apparently, the council was not informed that many of the older strings of lights, wired in series, could not be turned back on without being rewired in parallel sequences, an expensive operation. It was suggested that the public works department recommended the budget cut out of frustration at the continued refusal of both the city manager and the city council to appropriate sufficient funds to replace older, potentially dangerous street lights lodged too close to the surface for safe operation. **Despite its embarrassment, the council made no effort to determine responsibility for the action of the bureaucracy or of itself.**

Under the current classic model council-manager plan developed by the National Civic League, the city council, not the city manager, would conduct investigations of city departments and problems such as the street lighting situation. In earlier versions, the NCL allowed the council to share its power of investigation with the city manager, but that is no longer recommended. NCL clearly looks to city councils to initiate and direct such internal investigations.

Council power to authorize investigations may include the appointment of a special counsel, a power that was recently exercised, although it is not specified in the Tacoma city charter. Although Tacoma's city attorney is a department head appointed by the city manager, the city attorney represents both the city manager and the council, and at least theoretically, the general public.

Annual evaluations by the city council of the city manager in writing including goal-setting and performance measurement (similar to performance audits) were urged in the 1997 City Club report, and reportedly, are now underway. There is some uncertainty about how comprehensive they will be, whether the results will be made public, whether they will be done regularly as recommended, and what action, if any, will be taken.

According to one council member interviewed, the city manager was evaluated in 2002. The council did examine the city manager's self-evaluation of the goals he had achieved, but it did not appear to be an in depth assessment, nor did it get significant media attention.

Resonating throughout the interviews was the statement that the city manager could be unseated at any time by a five vote majority of the council, although that had not happened in recent years until this year with the termination of Ray Corpuz.

The 1997 report suggested placing the city manager under contract, but still subject to termination at any time. It suggested that the contract provide up to six months severance pay on termination. It did not propose setting a fixed term for the manager, nor does the model charter recommend that. However, the 1997 report did recommend that the council vote every four years on retaining the manager. This study is recommending that it be done on a two year cycle.

One respondent gave this appraisal of the way the role of city manager has played out:

"The single most glaring problem with the city manager form is that it places an immense amount of political power and governmental decision making in the hands of a person who is not democratically elected and is not subject to recall or initiative procedures, or other voter-controlled democratic tools. The form basically subjects the operation of the city (or at least several key functions like budget, public works and public

safety) to control by the enlightened self-interest of a professional manager, rather than the democratic necessities of an elected official.”

Sponsors of the petition to switch to a “strong mayor” are making that point.

G. The mayor’s role

By virtue of the office, the mayor of Tacoma presides at meetings of the council and occasionally represents the city at ribbon cutting openings and other ceremonial events. One of nine members of the council, the mayor, despite the prestigious title, has no more authority than the other eight members. The mayor is one of four members elected at-large, the others are chosen from districts.

Although lacking executive power, elected mayors have unique opportunities to take the lead on public issues and secure support for programs, the National Civic League believes. The mayor is chosen by the voters, a system that two thirds of council-manager cities use. In other cities, the mayor may be chosen by the council. In some cases, the most senior council member automatically becomes mayor.

“There is an awkward public perception that the mayor runs the city,” a former mayor stated.

Interviewees agreed that the general public does not know that the mayor of Tacoma lacks special powers. Nevertheless, it was suggested that Tacoma’s mayors could increase their influence by taking a lead position on public issues, the same point that the National Civic League makes. In fact, some prior Tacoma mayors have suggested proposals for city action and approval by the council. The amount of direction that other council members would tolerate from the mayor would likely depend on his or her political skills.

Several interviewees suggested that the city charter be changed to allow the council to select the mayor. At least in concept, making the mayor a creature of the city council would reduce the potential for public debate and disagreement, but such open airing of differences has rarely occurred with Tacoma’s separately elected mayor. The original 1953 charter provided for council selection of the mayor. Tacoma has elected its mayor for four year terms by popular vote since 1956.

A proponent of the “strong mayor” system believes that “the top person responsible for the operation of the city should be elected.” Although characterizing Ray Corpuz as “a great city manager,” the respondent made this point: “An elected mayor is more accountable and can hire staff to handle the daily nuts and bolts.”

An organized labor official suggested strengthening the mayor’s role within the existing system, a compromise approach. “We would like to see some additional tools given to the mayor that would assist him/her in leading and performing the needs of citizens...giving him or her a stronger presence in council voting process and/or...veto power unless a supermajority of council members see an issue differently.”

An experienced observer-participant in governmental administration in the region agreed that the system of electing the mayor without special powers created confusion in Tacoma about who is actually in charge of the government.

In effect acknowledging that there was room for improvement in the way the city government functions, Mayor Baarsma suggested that the University of Washington Tacoma create a public policy institute where faculty and students could study issues relating to government and provide impartial appraisals of the government.

H. The city council's role

Many individuals interviewed believe the city council should exercise a stronger role within the council-manager government structure. Ideas offered included establishment of an active and regular process of evaluating the city manager, a more rigorous system of accountability of the manager and his appointees, and a larger place for performance audits of government operations, all measures that the council is already empowered to take.

The hiring by the council of one or two full-time staff persons was strongly supported. The staffers would provide mayor and council with a more effective way to handle citizen inquiries and complaints and take more initiative on city policy issues. A charter change would be required to authorize the city council to hire its staff directly.

Except for the mayor's part-time secretary, the council does not have any staff assigned to it. Whatever services council members require are provided through the city manager's office. Some council members find that the effort and time required without supporting staff can become overwhelming.

"The situation lends itself to council persons not being motivated to respond to citizen complaints," one former mayor said. Lack of an independent staff also can have the effect of making the council depend on the city manager and his or her staff.

The way individual city council members address the job varies. Some members tend to make more independent decisions and relish the experience. Others appear content to wait for the city manager to formulate policies and programs. "In the absence of strong direction, we leave it to the city manager to interpret what he thinks the council meant," was one comment.

Leaving the initiative to the city manager appears to be a major characteristic of the system in Tacoma. The model city charter developed by the National Civic League does not favor doing so. It would give the city council the prime leadership role, with the city manager carrying out the council's directives.

Tacoma's pattern may stem in part from the fact that the council is a part-time body, although the volume of citizen inquiries and complaints prompt some dedicated council members to work extended hours.

Concern was expressed that a full-time council would become more political. However, it was contended that the part-time council setup makes it subject to political manipulation also. Special business and labor interests contribute to individual council election campaigns; labor unions help man telephone batteries and supply campaign workers for candidates.

A council member, one of several with demanding outside business interests who would not have sought election to a full-time council, candidly acknowledged he did not understand the city budget and wondered whether the city really faced a deficit. He did not think the city was responding adequately to the problems it faces and "needs a tremendous overhaul.... We need to think outside the box and come up with something else," he said.

Another council member asserted that the council "has not set any clear goals for the city manager," citing an unwillingness to devote time to supervise and evaluate the city manager. "It is a tough job, and we need a higher expectation of the city council."

Was a council of nine members the right number or would a smaller body work as effectively, but more economically? The petition to change to a "strong mayor" would reduce the membership on the council from nine to seven. Many ideas to modify the existing system were voiced, but no interviewee consensus evolved around any one change. Changes about accountability and open government would also apply as well to a "strong mayor" system.

One former council member did not see “big problems” under the present setup, but noted that “experts would support the view that we would be more coordinated and efficient if we had fewer boards and commissions” sharing power with the council.

I. The city manager’s role

Department heads report to the city manager who makes all appointments; they are not confirmed by the city council. In practice, as noted, under an informal city manager protocol, council members are allowed to contact department heads directly. Present and former council members cited that privilege as of great value, although, according to one former mayor, the charter does not authorize it. Council members no doubt understand that they cannot expect independent information from department heads appointed by the city manager.

Tacoma’s council manager system would be strengthened by hiring a professionally trained city manager, rather than a Tacoma grown product without a degree in city management or urban studies, the study group’s research suggests.

Professional city managers tend to move to other cities as higher salary opportunities open up. Some see that mobility of professional managers as benefiting both city and manager; the city gets new blood and the city manager advancement. The downside is the loss of the departing manager’s background and expertise and know-how.

For the past 30 years, the city manager’s job has gone to politically connected “insiders,” one former council member stated. Tacoma’s managers, being local hires, have tended to stay on, often encouraged to do so with generous boosts in salary. The salary of Tacoma’s city manager currently exceeds that of the state’s governor.

Under a merit-based system, the city council would choose the professional city manager for qualifications and performance, rather than for ability to navigate a city’s political maze, a National Civil League paper stated. The professional manager employs education, training, and experience to select department heads and other key managers to oversee the efficient delivery of services. At this writing, the selection process for Tacoma’s next city manager has not emerged.

Although most respondents favor performance audits of the city government in principle, several noted that they are expensive, calling for top-to-bottom review of the government’s operations. Sometimes called management audits, they are more complex than financial audits and take longer to complete. One respondent suggested that it would be less expensive to build performance goals into the budget as a yardstick to measure the city manager’s effectiveness.

One council member, opposed to structural change in the city’s government “at this time,” stated that successful government depends more on its people than its form. “A good person would work the same way in either system,” the interviewee said, adding that “members of the council have open access to the city manager and all department heads.”

The existing Joint Municipal Action Committee was cited as an arrangement that helps make the system work, one that possibly could be expanded. It provides for regular meetings of representatives of the city council with the Metropolitan Park Board and the School Board. However, there has been only one meeting between the council and the Port Commission in the past seven years.

Indicating that charter review committees had been selected every ten years to 1992, a council member suggested that it was past time for another one. As a matter of history, the city manager system was installed in Tacoma with the charter revisions of 1953 when the commission form of government was abolished. State legislative hearings chaired by Albert

Rossellini, held in the Tacoma Armory and broadcast over the then new TV medium, spotlighted evidence of graft and corruption under the old commission form.

As in many other cities that altered its governmental form after World War II, "Tacoma sought to benefit from professional soldier-style military management that proved so effective in channeling America's productive efficiency into the war effort," Michael Sullivan, a local historian, told the study committee. Fifty years later, the council-manager form has guided Tacoma only a few years longer than the commission form it replaced.

J. Answering five key questions

Interviewees were asked five key questions during 30 minute interviews by the joint committee study team. The open-ended questions were designed to discover just what changes, if any, would improve the way Tacoma's council-manager government functions. All of the interviews took place prior to the Brame affair and the Corpuz termination. The questions and summary reports of the answers follow.

1. Structural change

What problems, if any, with city government would best be solved by structural change? What changes do you envisage? (By structural, we mean the organizational relationship of the various elements of city administration including the council, the mayor, the city manager, staff, the various boards, and overlapping governmental organizations.)

Although many respondents identified operational improvements in the existing council-manager form, only four supported scrapping it in favor of a "strong mayor," mayor-council form. Fourteen were content to stay with the council-manager form that has governed Tacoma for 50 years. Others gave guarded replies or did not provide a specific answer.

One council member acknowledged supporting a "strong mayor" system in theory, but not in practice. Tacoma could not afford the extra expenses that might be generated, he stated. The manner in which the elected chief executive responds to voter requests conceivably could impact costs. Expenses might include higher salaries for the full-time mayor and council, provision of staff for the "strong mayor," and possibly for individual council members.

Respondents, including supporters of the present system, were not shy about criticizing the way top officials, both appointed and elected, were carrying out their responsibilities.

One council member who bluntly stated that "the city government needs a tremendous overhaul," said he did not think the city had moved aggressively enough to keep Tacoma icon Brown and Haley and its 280 employees from moving its plants to Fife. A prospective increase in water rates was cited as deterring efforts to keep the candy maker in Tacoma.

Another council member expressed satisfaction with the way the present structure is working: "Success in government comes from individual people and is not dependent upon the form of government. The present system is open to suggestions and new projects. Members of the council have open access to the city manager and all department heads."

Failure to provide regular evaluations of the city manager was cited as a council shortcoming as was Tacoma's failure to initiate a ten-year city charter review last year. Several commented on the need to select professionally trained city managers, rather than local figures with government experience but no professional training.

There were several allusions to what one person described as "outside pressures," evidently pressures from both labor unions representing city employees and downtown business interests. In responses to other questions, those pressures were described as adding to the city's budget difficulties. Cited were budget costs incurred by cost-of-living escalator provisions of employment agreements and parking garage subsidies for development projects.

Several would have the council name the mayor, rather than the voters.. Council selection of the mayor would, it was suggested, unify the council behind the mayor. Tacoma has not developed a "mayor's party" or a "council's party," but there have been a number of split votes with the mayor in the minority. Supporters of the present council-manager system where voters select the mayor believe that the elected mayor as the city's top elected official can exercise leadership as the holder of a title distinguishing him or her from other council members.

Fears were expressed that a shift to a strong mayor system would politicize the process. But it was also suggested that political pressures and cronyism exist within the present system. A former council leader, an advocate of the mayor-council form of government, offered a pointed commentary on the way the present system is functioning: "We changed our form of government (in 1953) because of a perceived need to rid government of the politics and cronyism of the other systems (the old commission format), but in reality, we now have politics and cronyism, but it is on the city manager level."

2. Improving government responsiveness

What changes, if any, would improve city government's responsiveness to citizens? What problems might such changes introduce?

This question drew a wide variety of answers.

Some incumbent council members and other city officials asserted that the city is doing a good job responding to citizens. Several noted that they, as council members, were getting good responses from Tacoma's government to questions they raised including many posed to them by citizens. Two cited the neighborhood council system, an innovation borrowed from Portland, as opening a convenient channel for information at the neighborhood level.

Mayor Baarsma said the council is doing a good job responding to citizen complaints, explaining that he strives to respond in a timely way, particularly to the many email messages he receives from citizens.

Others did not agree. **One member of the council stated flatly that "we need better customer service." He suggested that it probably would be useful to have an ombudsman to respond to citizen complaints. In the same vein, others said that the council needed to have staff subject to its direction, personnel hired by it, not by the city manager.** Other than the mayor's part time secretary, the council has no staff. A former mayor favored creating an office of constituent services, "a sort of point person" to help resolve citizen problems.

The lack of council staff has another consequence, according to one view. Because citizen complaints can become overwhelming, the absence of any staff to handle them "lends itself to council persons not being motivated to respond to those complaints... Someone can put in an hour a week or 40 hours a week, and the effect (on complaints) may not be noticeably different." But one former council member worried that an independent staff "would be disruptive of the relationship between the city manager and the council."

One former council member identified the Cosmos project as one that should not have gone forward without prior consultation with downtown business interests. Those interests were outraged at the city's action. They viewed the large office mixed use project outside the city's central core as one that threatened to undermine the city's efforts to funnel investment into Tacoma's downtown. As proposed, the massive project was to be built over a period of years on

city property close to the Tacoma Dome. It came out of the city manager's office but was abandoned as protests welled up, not only from affected business interests but others as well.

Conversion of the part-time council to a full-time body to improve the government's responsiveness drew mixed reviews. Advocates argued that a full time council would be better equipped to respond to the large volume of citizen inquiries. "The charter puts you on a lot more committees and task forces than you can't handle, resulting in your chairing many meetings without the proper amount of knowledge," a former council member said.

One council member said a full-time council would be more responsive to citizens, but it probably would be more politicized and more costly.

One respondent described the problem as one of getting citizen involvement before a crisis occurs, noting that part-time council members find it difficult to communicate with citizens without support staff. But another respondent said, "there should be a higher expectation for the time the city council spends on the job," with council members giving more attention to returning calls and letters and attending community meetings. Council members must balance the demands of council positions with those of the full time jobs that many hold.

Two present council members, both business people, said they would not have sought a seat on a full-time council. A related question was whether a full-time council with appropriate pay levels would become more political. That was countered by one council member who said that improved pay levels would attract higher caliber people.

Another council member expressed a willingness to serve full-time but added that full-time staff would still be needed to "process the flood of information" the council receives.

A related issue emerged involving the size of the council. One council member described the nine member council as having the right combination of at-large and district members, adding that he would not be comfortable if the number fell below seven. Another interviewee, a Tacoma government buff, urged that the number of council members chosen by district be increased to six from the present five to provide more representation for South Tacoma. That would reduce the number of at-large representatives to two, not counting the separately elected mayor, or require an increase in the council's size. As noted, the petition for the "strong mayor" form would cut the number the seven.

Differing views emerged about the organizational relationships of "the various boards and overlapping governmental organizations" that perform municipal functions. One former mayor said the city government would become better coordinated and more efficient if it had fewer boards and commissions.

"The city council funds the library and contributes a part of the budget of the park system," the former mayor said. "In my personal view, the one that pays the bills should call the shots. Savings could be made to consolidate budgeting, personnel, etc." Specifically, he recommended elimination of the boards that manage the government units operating the city's libraries, parks and public utilities. Those agencies, the member said, should be converted into regular city departments "to create a more centralized authority."

Given the special duties and constituencies of each of these bodies, proposals to eliminate them and subject their functions to direction by the city manager would probably prove quite controversial and unlikely to happen.

The council selects the members of the library and public utility boards, but the members of the Metro Parks Board are chosen by the voters. Another respondent noted that Metro Parks performs maintenance work at less cost than the city for park areas under its jurisdiction. City labor contracts probably account for the cost differential.

Differences emerged about the quasi-independent status of Tacoma Utilities, the public entity that has generated and supplied electric power and water to the city and some suburbs, operates Tacoma Rail for the Port of Tacoma and provides cable TV and Internet access through the Click! Network. There was some sentiment in favor of placing those functions within the

city government's departmental structure, but advocates for Tacoma Utilities supported providing even greater independence for its operations in the interest of efficiency and to keep it free of politics.

It is a unique municipal entity, a complex business enterprise that must focus on its bottom line, it was pointed out by interviewees favoring maintaining it as an independent entity. (Tacoma may be the only American city that operates a short line railroad.) Municipally operated public utilities in other cities enjoy more autonomy and have a simpler process for setting rates, it was contended.

A double regulatory review of changes in Tacoma power and water rates takes place, with the city council as well as the utility board having a say. The council, according to one comment, lacks expertise in rate-setting and rarely gives those complex issues the time and attention they require.

Tacoma, a city with a strong unionized presence, conducts labor negotiations with 26 different bargaining units, one source noted. The city's management-labor contracts typically call for regular increases in base pay, providing a minimum 3 % per year cost of living increase even when cost of living increases are below that level. "When so many voters are members of unions, the city finds it difficult to reject union demands," it was stated. The city generally uses outside professional negotiators for its bargaining.

The growth of collective bargaining contracts covering city employees and the development of arbitration procedures under those contracts may have preempted or made redundant the functions and duties of the Civil Service Board, a unique hybrid organization containing both elected and appointed members. Although its assigned task is to monitor the integrity of the city's personnel systems, it was described as "too political at times," and subject to horse trading among its members.

Stating that the police department is understaffed, a police union official suggested that the fire and police departments be combined into a public safety unit so that some duties could be shared, including handling 911 calls, preparing reports, and otherwise spelling each other. The police union has supported the consolidation, but the organized firemen have opposed it. The fire fighters union did not respond to the request to appear for a study interview.

3. Accountability and professionalism

What differences in accountability and professionalism would you expect with a strong mayor versus a city manager?

Running through many of the responses was this thread: A "strong mayor" would be more accountable, but more political. The city manager system, although accountable to the city council, was considered more professional.

One council member who favors retaining the present system bluntly stated that there would be no difference. "The individual is the one who is ultimately responsible. A good person would work the same way under either system." That was echoed by another council member who said, "either system works; it just depends on the people you elect."

Another respondent, a former mayor, voiced the opinion that a "strong mayor would be more accountable to the people," while the city manager, the city's top administrator, is accountable only to the council. A council member suggested that although the "strong mayor" system provides more accountability, the city manager system is more professional. Another council member sees Tacoma's city manager as more accountable because the manager must "satisfy five council members at all times," to keep his or her job.

With a "strong mayor," by contrast, correction of a problem must await the next election. (Tacoma's charter allows for the recall of a mayor by the voters, but only for misconduct, a state limitation.)

A third council member said the city manager would be as accountable as the council wants the manager to be. One critic who sees the city government as "dysfunctional," said that "the real problem is not the city manager system, but the current city manager," a reference to city manager Ray Corpuz who was subsequently terminated by the council.

A former council member's response: "With a city manager you have a professional who is trained to work in government. With a "strong mayor" you may have anyone, and some of our elected mayors were not particularly capable in the area of government."

A proponent of the present system commented that "a professional city manager is more likely to hire professional people to run the city than a "strong mayor" who would likely make political appointments to friends and campaign workers."

4. Regular departmental audits

How would regular departmental audits affect city government?

Although respondents appeared to favor audits, some questioned whether they should be done on a set schedule. The scope of the audits and what they are designed to do drew comments. There did not appear to be much enthusiasm for blanket "one size fits all" audits done on a regular basis. The expense of regularly scheduled audits also was a subject of concern. Another said "they would cost a lot of money but can be very helpful." Timing should be determined by the council, rather than by a set schedule, a council member said.

A member of the city council noted that the city's police department had been audited, but its recommendations had not been adopted. Negotiations with police unions to put them into effect would have been required.

Another council member voiced a typical reply: "Regular audits would make the city work better, but they are very expensive."

Still another council member said much would depend on the auditor's skill and method. Audits may encourage managers to take actions designed to satisfy audit criteria, rather than external values and needs. Another council member said audits would curb the tendency of department heads to expand payrolls to enhance their influence.

A member of a citizen board questioned the value of regular audits. "I have never been a big fan of departmental audits. They are expensive and do not provide what you really need." A city council member said, "You can performance audit to death, if you are not careful... Care includes taking time to review the recommendations to adopt the good ones." That member favors the city practice of having staff do its audits, rather than outside auditors as Pierce County does. "People fight recommendations if they are not part of the team."

Other comments: A valuable tool. Not a panacea. Set numerical targets. Necessary. Not necessarily useful. Informative. Do a necessary job. Good policy tools. Improve performance. Can be very helpful.

5. Regular evaluations of the city manager

How would regular evaluations of the city manager and/or department heads affect city government?

An experienced manager hit the theme of many replies: "Very important and should be done on a regular basis." At the time of the interview, one city council member suggested that the council was working on establishing regular evaluations of the city manager, but changes in the council membership slowed that down. The subject may be addressed in connection with multiple investigations of the Brame affair now underway.

Another council member explained that the proposed evaluation would have a performance dimension, a section for comments from individual council members identifying problem areas and recommendations. **Last year, according to another council member, the city manager had been evaluated, but that it was not "an in-depth review." "We only really looked at his evaluation of how well he had done in achieving goals that he had set for himself." A former mayor said that "the council has been lax in its evaluation of the city manager."**

Other comments: "It is important to have an evaluation instrument in place in fairness to the city manager...It is important as a symbol for the council." "As a council, we have only reviewed the manager twice in five years. What came out of that was that the city manager had to be more visible to the public." "We are just doing the city manager evaluation now, on a 1 to 5 point scale in a half-dozen categories...The evaluation is too much process, not result oriented...It should be a public process and all members of the council should participate."

"Evaluation of the city manager is a love feast," one observer said. "There is a level of intimidation because the manager knows who says what in the evaluation. There needs to be an evaluation that allows the council to evaluate the manager without disclosing the individual remarks of members of the council."

Another observer provided this evaluation of the evaluations: "Evaluations seem to be meaningless at this point. It would be beneficial to have the council evaluate the city manager and to allow staff to be part of the evaluation process. Of course, staff participation would have to be anonymous to elicit honest answers."

K. Governments in other cities

As noted, most large cities are governed by traditional mayor-council forms. The council-manager system flowered shortly after the opening of the Twentieth Century spurred by scandalous tales of corruption under the mayor-council form. More recently, changes in governmental forms have grown more from disagreements over personalities, leadership styles, or scandals, than desires for structural change. In some instances, it may be easier politically to get charter changes on the ballot than to mount a creditable campaign against an entrenched establishment figure.

A review of balloting in other Washington cities and in California suggests, for whatever reason, that change is in the air. Many cities have come up with modifications of the classic forms along the way, presumably to enhance their voter appeal.

Spokane WA, which had the classical council-manager system for many years, replaced it with a mayor-council system last year after charges of special treatment for the developers of River Park, a major shopping mall and parking garage at the Spokane River, arose. The fact that some affected properties were owned by members of the Cowles family, owners of the Spokesman-Review, the city's sole daily newspaper, spurred the change. Spokane, the state's second city, is slightly larger than Tacoma, the third city in size.

Seattle WA has retained the mayor-council system since its incorporation.

Bellevue WA voted in May 2003 to keep its council-manager government, rejecting creation of a charter commission to consider changes with a decisive "no" vote of 78 %. Bellevue has a seven member council elected at-large. The council selects the mayor and deputy mayor, but like Tacoma, the mayor has no special powers beyond those of council members.

Redmond WA turned down a move to change its government from mayor-council to council manager in the Spring of 2003 by a decisive vote of 70 % to 30 % in a special election, but with a sparse turnout.

Fresno, a California city that became a case study for the petitioners desiring to change the Tacoma government to a "strong mayor" system, scrapped its council-manager form in 1993. It replaced it with a mayor-council form where the mayor hires a chief administrative officer. The finding that the average tenure of the former system's professional city managers was only three years sparked the change.

San Jose, one of the largest cities with a council-manager government, partially modified its system in 1985 to give the mayor the task of overseeing the city manager, although keeping that officer subject to removal by the council. That has evolved into a division of work where the mayor manages the political side and the city manager develops the budget and runs the city's day-to-day operations, a relationship that appears to be working well.

Oakland has undergone an interesting series of transformations. Until 1931, Oakland had a mayor-council government that it scrapped for a council-manager system in the wake of a corruption scandal. The system survived challenges at the polls in 1992 and 1996, but it was changed to a modified mayor-council form in 1998, with the mayor hiring the city manager. The change was an outgrowth of the election as mayor of former California governor Jerry Brown, a unique political figure who promised voters he would retain the city manager.

San Francisco has another formulation of the mayor-council form. The mayor shares supervision of the city administrator with the city council.

L. List of those interviewed

Bill Baarsma, mayor of Tacoma
Mark Crisson, Tacoma director of public utilities
Ray Corpuz, Tacoma city manager
Brian Ebersole, former mayor of Tacoma
Bill Evans, Tacoma council member
Pat Franz, president, Tacoma Police Union, Local 6
Steve Galbraith, member, Tacoma Civil Service Board
Rick Hite, president, IBEW Local 483
Connie Ladenburg, Tacoma city council member
Mike Lonergren, Tacoma city council member
Dawn Lucien, former Tacoma city council member,
former Public Utility Board member
Sharon McGavick, Tacoma city council member
Doug Miller, Tacoma city council member
Erling Mork, former Tacoma city manager
Bil Moss, Tacoma city council member and deputy mayor
Andy Nieditz, city administrator, Sumner
Susan Odencrantz, director, Tacoma Public Library
Kevin Phelps, Tacoma city council member
Clare Petrich, Commissioner, Port of Tacoma
Malcolm Russell, citizen activist
Tom Stenger, former Tacoma city council member
Eric Stienmeyer, member, Metropolitan Park Board
Tim Strege, former member, Public Utility Board,
former city council Member
Michael Sullivan, historian, UWT adjunct professor
Doug Sutherland, former mayor of Tacoma,
former Seatac city manager
Rich Talbert, Tacoma city council member
Jack Warnick, former Tacoma city council member

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Downtown to improve livability and viability - 1998
- A BUILDING REBORN: Saga of a Landmark
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To deal creatively with Tacoma's youth problems - 2002