CRITERIA FOR AN ANALYSIS OF COUNTY GOVERNMENT*

by May Lou Stewart

Points pertinent to the LWV study

1. County affairs are becoming complicated. More counties are turning to highly trained professional administrators. County government structure affects what can be accomplished.

2. Theoretically, commissioners set policy and administrators implement policy. This separation of power and concomitant responsibilities draws clear lines of accountability. Administrators can make sound managerial decisions free of political pressures. Checks and balances can be set up.

3. Actually, in most counties there is a merging of legislative and executive responsibilities. The presence of a professional administrator, even of a high caliber, does not assure the county of full professional management. When commissioners have administrative powers, executive authority is "disjointed and fragmented." Some counties are choosing to alter their structure in order to give managers the necessary powers for running the county efficiently. Other counties prefer traditional forms with more "political leadership."

Strong Executive Structures give three crucial powers to managers:

1. Authority to appoint and remove most department heads.
2. Authority to develop a budget for board consideration. Commissioner input is limited to the public process of review and adoption.
3. Direct responsibility to the full board of commissioners with all reports made directly to that board, not to individuals.

Weak Executive Structures provide for mixed, not separate powers.

1. Executive control of appointments and dismissals may be limited by requirements for board approval. Some department heads may be elected.
2. Individual commissioners may be given a voice in any or all of the following: personnel decisions, budget formulation, operations.
3. At times the administrator reports to the chair, or to individual commissioners, rather than to the full board. The individual commissioner then reports to the board.

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"Weeks, J. Devereux and Hardy, Paul T. (Editors). Handbook for Georgia County Commissioners. Chapter II, County Government Structures, pp. 5-21"
STRONG EXECUTIVE STRUCTURE*

Strengths:
1. Professional knowledge plays a greater role in county decisions.
   a. The better trained, high caliber professionals seek positions in those counties where management is free of political pressures.
   b. They are more likely to appoint well trained, professional subordinates.
   c. Consultation with experts is more frequent.
2. The executive has the necessary authority to
   a. coordinate departments.
   b. operate services efficiently and fairly.
   c. make cost effective decisions.
3. Clear lines of accountability are established.
   a. Political pressure is minimized, hidden pressure reduced.
   b. Politics plays no role in budget preparation. Department heads know they must submit "requests that are managerially sound."
   c. Lines of command, responsibility are consistent.
4. Checks and balances are established, easy to apply.
   a. Direct reporting reduces the possible filtering of second hand reports and gives the administrator/manager a strong voice (not a vote) in policy discussions. His professional knowledge can help forge sound decisions.
   b. When the performance of an administrator/manager is unsatisfactory, the board can fire him.

Weaknesses:
Abuses of executive power can occur

*The analysis of the strength and weaknesses of these two government structures is taken primarily from the chapter reference on page 1. These additional comments are points made by citizens responding to the analysis:
1. Whistle blowers may not be protected --Wilson Broadus
2. Costly - especially initially
3. Weakens the political leadership that might be more sensitive to citizen needs and weigh more important considerations than cost effectiveness etc.
4. Commissioners have little opportunity to personally experience and understand managerial problems, limits.
5. Managers are fired primarily on overall performance. Specific failures are less easily corrected.
WEAK EXECUTIVE STRUCTURE

Strengths:
1. Limits possible abuse of executive power by reducing that power.
2. Gives greater role to political leadership

Weaknesses:
1. Minimizing executive power by distributing that power dilutes the advantage of professional management and opens the door to undue political pressure. The advantages of both structures may be lost in this hybrid.
2. This structure attracts less qualified candidates for managerial positions.
3. Direct linkages between commission members and departments in respect to budget, personnel, operation decisions make it difficult to remove these from undue pressure and undermine the administrator’s ability to control county bureaucracy.
4. Direct election of constitutional officers removes them from legislative and executive control. This may limit the power of the board to effectively set policy and the power of management to enforce that policy. “This is a serious issue” p.17
5. There is reduced accountability in other areas.
   a. Lines of decision are muddled.
   b. Avenues for political input are increased but pressure may be less open to public scrutiny.
   c. Proposed budgets may be based on a compromise between sound managerial needs and quiet political pressure.
   d. Deals between department heads are more likely.
6. The checks and balances of the strong executive structure (based on a separation of powers) are difficult to apply. Replacement strategies are not easily formalized where responsibilities merge.
7. Reduced reports to the full council opens the door to inaccurate second hand reporting - depriving the commission of the full and accurate information necessary to formulating sound policy.

Citizen comments:
1. Should be Strong Commissioner Structure
2. Permits a more direct and immediate response to citizen concerns.
3. Voters are given more power. Commissioners have broader responsibilities.
4. Constitutional officers run their own departments. Both answer to the voters.
5. Commissioners gain firsthand knowledge of department decisions, work more closely with personnel, learn more about administration.
6. Opportunities to check mismanagement are increased.
7. When administrative burdens are shared the cost of an extended professional staff is not necessary and commissioners become more realistic about policy.
CONCLUSION

The authors use this framework to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of Georgia's five different county government structures. They state there is no simple response to "Which structure is best?" Each county needs to analyze the alternatives and decide which approach can best solve its problems. (Crucial to any such analysis of Jackson County is a clear picture of the liaison functions of our commissioners)

P.S. #1 If we should decide to include the advantages/disadvantages of replacing the ordinance creating the office of administrator with a charter provision we might wish to quote this article:

"Since a local ordinance can be altered or repealed at any meeting of the governing authority, creation of the office of county manager through the passage of an ordinance rather than through local legislation could result in an atmosphere of instability that is inconsistent" with the desire for increased professionalism"

p.20

Food for thought from May Lou:

Jacquelyn Byers, the research director at NACO, says that NACO prefers "strength/ weakness" analysis as "pro/con suggests judgment and if goals differ pros are cons and vice versa.

Of course, there is some connotation here also but the article avoids biased analysis by using the labels "in respect to" how well each structure aids professional management and the advantages thereof - their main concern. Still its a one-sided article. Although they recognize that political leadership might be of value in some cases, this isn't their framework when looking at a Weak Executive Structure and of course they don't ask what produces strong commissioners. It seemed to me a balanced report would have to present the views also of those who fear strong executives and wish to keep commissioners powerful.

I found two people who favored "distributed shared power, not separate powers" and added their judgments about the strengths and weaknesses of a weakened executive structure. Their remarks are under citizen's comments.