THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MUNICIPALITY

by

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Local or municipal government is clost to the people of the United States. It affects them most directly in their everyday living. It is the level of government in which people can become, and do become, the most interested and effective. It is the training school for democracy.

It is generally recognized that our unique kind of American democracy may be in as much danger from within as a result of inefficient, ineffective and ignorant government administration, as it is from conflicting ideologies. If the administration at the local government level is not able to cope adequately with its problems, experience has shown that the functions of local government are invariably transferred to state and federal levels.

Loss of power of local government results from abdication of individual responsibility. We have all noticed a trned in this direction. People are more excited about the national elections than about their own local or state elections. "What's the difference who gets elected mayor or governor?" is their attitude. "What counts is who's in Washington." These people will say, "Washington ought to do something about it," whether it's a new street to be built, teachers' salaries to be raised or a health problem. Newspapers devote much more space to what's going on in Washington compared to what's happening in the city council. Perhaps even more striking is the fact that our other channels of communication -- radio and television, are almost exclusively directed to national events.

New Jersey -- On the New York-Philadelphia Axis

Here in New Jersey we are particularly in need of building strong municipal pride. Thousands of our citizens are commuters to adjoining New York and and Philadelphia. Their interests are split between the city where they make their living and the community where they live. All too often they are not familiar with the civic life of their community. At best, their interest extends to the taxes they

pay, the schools their children attend, the fire department which protects their property and the police which maintains order. They are little concerned with the zoning, city planning, welfare, public works, parking, sanitation or more remote problems. Many are not acquainted with the administrative structure or the relationships of elected and appointed office-holders. They take no part in meetings and campaigns. Yet these "commuters" are physically an integral part of our communities.

New Jersey also has thousands of industrial enterprises within its borders. But here, too, a unique situation exists. Because of the proximity of New York City and Philadelphia, the owners and top executives of such industries frequently have their headquarters in these large metropolitan cents. Their interest in New Jersey governments tends to be directed to fiscal policies, particularly taxation, at the state level. At the local level their concern is peripheral -- chiefly confined to such matters as ordinances that affect their property or operations. They often handsomely subscribe to community projects. But they are reluctant to match monetary donations with equally generous contributions of their time -- even though their proved managerial ability would be of inestimable help in running the local affairs.

Many of New Jersey's citizens are relative newcomers. The mushrooming suburbs are absorbing thousands who formerly lived in the big cities. These people have not been trained to exercise their privilege of participating in community affairs. Many have performed no civic duty beyond voting, often for candidates whom they have never seen.

Although it might be expected that the labor unions, whose many members live in New Jersey, would take a vital interest in local government, they, too, have hitherto been primarily concerned with government at the state and national level. Only recently have they shown a more objective attitude toward municipal problems.

Examples are participation in a drive for a new charter for the city of Newark, and specific attempts to motivate union membership to broader activities.

Thus, the burden of municipal administration has generally fallen upon the local merchants, on teachers and civic groups, and a relatively small number of public-spirited citizens. In the majority of New Jersey communities, these people have gravely accepted their responsibilities. They can well be proud of the reputation for "good government" which so many municipalties have established for themselves.

Municipal government, however, should be the concern of every individual -- whether he lives in the community, works there, or has a business or factory in its boundaries.

One of the reasons people have become indifferent about their local government is simply that they do not understand how it runs. They may feel that "politicians" make the rules. Of course, the type of officials who are elected have an important influence on the community. But, by and large, we must realize that municipal government operates according to an orderly plan. Its numerous departments operate effectively year after year, just as in a business organization, making our community progressively more prosperous, safer, healthier, and more attractive.

The Operation of Your Business - The Municipality

New Jersey communities, ranging from Newark, with a population of half a million to some shore points on Cape May and Barnegat with less than ten inhabitants necessarily differ widely in their administrative set-up. But basically, your community is a business much like a corporation. The people of the community are the stockholders. They elect men to handle the affairs of their corporation.

The Type of"Management"

Jersey communities may be managed

1. By a "Commission". This consists of 3 members in communities having less than 10,000 population and 5 members in municipalities having 10,000 inhabitants or more. The "Commission" in turn, selects a man to act as its "president" known as "The Mayor."
2. By the "Mayor-Council" form of government. The Council consists of 5,7 or 9 men, depending on the population. The Mayor is elected at large by the voters.
3. By the "Council-Manager" form of government. The Council consists of 5,7 or 9 men. The Mayor is elected by the Council. A "Township Manager" or "City Manager" functions almost like the executive vice president. He is a qualified municipal manager, paid to devote his full time to handle the administrative affairs of a community, and reports to the council and to the Major.

The Clerk

To many, the office of the Clerk is viewed as a filing cabinet for statistics, vital or otherwise. Actually through his office flows much of the lifestream of the community's business.

An idea of the Clerk's work can be gleaned from a list of some of the duties involved: recording and transcribing minutes of meetings, keeping records of all contracts, agreements, legal documents, conduction elections, advertising legal notices of the municipality, issuing licenses for peddlers, solicitors, scavengers, taxis, fishing and hunting, bowling alleys, retails consumption and distribution licenses, handling all details of sales of municipal property.

Handling the Financial End of the Business

Citizens become very interested when they receive their tax bills, but few bother to learn anything about the office of the Assessor which decides how much property is worth, and thereby how much taxes are going to be.

The Assessor though appointed by the Commission or Council for a 4-year term, in effect becomes is a State official, supervised and acting under the direction of the County Board of Taxation.

His duties, in the main, are to place a valuation on every piece of real estate, building and structure in the municipality and also to fix valuation on which personal tax is based.

Tax Collections

"Our constituion is in operation; everything appears to promise that it will last; but in this world nothing is certain but death and taxes," wrote Benjamin Franklin in 1789.

It happens that any municipality's ability to collect its taxes has much to do with its financial stability, which in turn, has much to do with how much we have to pay each year.

A municipality unable to collect most of its taxes on time, must borrow to meet current needs and thus takes on added expense which is paid by the taxpaers. There is no such thing as an unpaid tax, for if one person doesn't pay, the rest have to make up the deficiency, now or later.

The Tax Collector is appointed for a term of four years and is primarily responsible for the collectinn of all taxes listed on the tax rolls turned over to him by the Assessor. He has no power or authority to change any valuation or tax.

Whenever taxes are not paid after July 1, following the year for which they are levied, he is required by law to sell such property at a tax sale, thereby converting the delinquent taxes into a tax lien; leaving to the owner the right

for 2 years to redeem his property upon payment of all charges against him.

The Tax Collector must also collect all assessments, which have been levied against a property for improvements and he is also responsible for the collection of personal taxes. The police ordinance required a permit before moving from town, aids in the collection of personal taxes.

Any owner of property or prospective purchaser of property upon payment of a rather nominal fee, may obtain a Municipal Tax Search which is a statement showing whatever tax liens or unpaid claims the municipality may have against the property. Such a search is made by a Search Officer, a member of the Tax Collector's staff, who obtains his data from the books of the Tax Collector.

Treasurer

This is the office where all bills incurred in the operation of your business are paid and where, in addition to handling the regular municipal accounts, including current, trust, capital, bond interest and payroll, records are kept for Civil Service, vacation, sick leave, pensions, income tax decuctions and financial reports.

Monthly reports show in detail the operation of the Budget and the financial position of the municipality.

The Controller

Just as in business, the Controller serves as a governor on the over-expenditure or over-commitment of budget items by department heads.

The Purchasing Agent

Many municipalities do not have centralized purchasing. However, experience has shown that a skilled purchasing agent, buying for all the municipality needs can effect large savings to more than offset the cost. If a purchasing office exists, requisitions for the several departments pass through it and vary from office supplies to ammunition to tires to gasoline to gravel. Competitive prices are sought on practically all requisitions regardlessof size. Under the State Law,

no contract for certain material or services in excess of $1,000 can be awarded unless bids are received through legal advertising in the press.

The Police Department

The major functions of the department are to protect life and property, prevent crime, enforce traffice regulations and local ordinances.

The "Judge"

The Magistrate hears all and sundry regarding the violation of traffic laws and local ordinances. He is appointed for 4 years.

The fines paid for traffic offenses are taken by the County and State for the maintenance of highways and only court costs are added to the coffers of the municipality. In the case of violation of local ordinances both fines and costs are retained by the municipality.

The Fire Department

The Fire Department has a two-fold purpose -- to prevent as well as to extinquish fires.

The Department of Public Works

Just a few of the things done by this department are: the maintenance and repair of improved streets and unimproved thoroughfares; cutting of weeds along streets and highways; sweeping and cleaning streets; maintenance, operation and improvement of storm water and sanitary sewers;including flushing and cleaning both storm and sanitary sewers; removal of stoppages; repairing broken sewers; building new short stretches; operation of disposal plants and pumping stations; and snow removal. In addition it undertakes the supervision of public buildings, repair and maintenance of playgrounds, parks, parking areas and bus stops.

Parks, Playgrounds and Recreation

Almost all communities provide for recreational activities. These range from simple playgrounds, to teen-age clubs, "Little Leagues," band concerts, tournaments and hobby shows.

The Library

Most communities have a library. Some are housed in the municipal building. Others are located in stores. Large communities and cities have buildings with thousands of volumes. The "Business Library" a branch of the library system of the city of Newark, is one of the outstanding institutions in the entire country.

Department of Health

Maternal and child health care include pre-natal and post-natal attention; maintenance of Child Hygiene or Baby-Keep-Well stations; free injections for smallpox, whooping cough and diptheria; Schick testing and checkup on tubercular cases. Burses visit in the homes.

The butcher, the baker and the chocolate-soda maker are under constant inspection. Garbage collection is supervised and no little attention is given to lack of heat and unsanitary conditions in apartment dwellings. The inspection of plumbing plans and installation is usually the work of this department.

Engineering Department

This surveys engineering needs. Routine work consists of keeping tax maps up-to-date; checking site plans for building lots; sketches, lines and grade for numerous improvements; supervision of the work of private utilities; location of old sewer manholes and other underground structures; description of property and engineering services in connection with the foreclosure of tax liens.

Building Department

The head of this department is usually a registered architect and under his guidance, builders gladly cooperate in erecting structures not only modern in design but such as to blend in best with the characters of the neighborhood.

The local Zoning Ordinances are also enforced by this department.

Garbage Disposal

Garbage disposal is accomplished by means of scavengers, incinerators, or by dumping and reclaiming land by means of fill.

Welfare Department

The major function of the Director of Welfare is to prevent individuals or families from becoming relief cases. Among other things this calls for constant contact with outside agencies, the Red Cross, State Board of Children's Guardians, County Welfare Board, Parole Board, N.J.State Commission for the Blind, Veteran groups, physicians both in and out of New Jersey and hospitals.

Volunteer Ambulance Corps

Many smaller communities have volunteer ambulance corps supported by contributions and voluntary payments for service rendered. Larger cities, of course, have paid.ambulance service.

Conclusion

Good government not only means happiness and prosperity for ourselves and our children. Today, it may plan an important part in determining our chances of survival, both in respect to the ideologies which we hold, and the preparations we make for emergencies.

Since policies and issues in our municipality are decided by letting citizens vote freely upon them, our government can be only as good as we make it. It is as good as we deserve.