

# Sumter celebrates place in history

In May, the City of Sumter celebrated its distinction as the first city in the country to adopt the council-manager form of government. City leaders from around the state, plus the president of the International City/County Management Association, were on hand for the celebration.

The concept of the council-manager form of government started at the national level in the early 1900s as reformers wanted to create a more “business-like” approach to city governance. They wanted to make local government more efficient, visible and responsible to the people rather than just a few party leaders.

The positions proposed under the council-manager form of government concept mirrored the composition of a corporate board, which includes a chairman (mayor), chief operating officer (manager) and board members (councilmembers).

At the same time as this national reform movement, Sumter was experiencing an economic rebirth. Under the leadership of a new local chamber executive, economic activity substantially increased, requiring increased city investments. To make sure city services kept pace with this private-sector growth, the chamber advocated for changing the city’s governing structure and improving public sector services.

The national reform movement was being played out on the state level as several South Carolina cities asked the General Assembly to give them the authority to ask their voters to adopt



The City of Sumter celebrated the 100th anniversary of the council-management form of government at the Opera House in Sumter. (Photo/City of Sumter)

a new form of government. This new “commission” form of government would allow council to hire a professional manager. The General Assembly eventually did pass a bill in 1912 allowing this type of referendum but restricted it to apply only to Sumter.

On June 11, 1912, Sumter residents approved changing to this council-manager form of government, making Sumter the first city in the nation to officially adopt this new governance model.

After an extensive search process, the city’s first manager started work in January 1913. *The Sumter Herald* reported the manager’s role in these words: “He cannot legislate for the city, but his job is to see that the legislation passed is carried out in the best possible manner.”

While the first two years required quite a bit of adjustment for both the council and manager, Sumter has grown and thrived during the last 100 years, serving

as a national model for the council-manager form of government.

“The council-manager form of government has worked really well for Sumter for the past 100 years,” said Mayor Joe McElveen. “Council-manager separates politics from everyday operations, such as hiring, firing and purchasing, about as much as is possible. Yet it still leaves ultimate responsibility for results on the elected officials.”

*Information for this article provided by “How the Council-Manager Plan Began in Sumter,” written by Wayne Bowers in 1973 for the Department of Government and International Studies at the University of South Carolina. The paper was later published by the National Municipal League, Inc. Bowers has held city manager positions in South Carolina, Florida and North Carolina To read the complete paper, visit [www.masc.sc](http://www.masc.sc) (keyword: Uptown) and review the electronic copy of this article.*

## Tell us what you think

Technology is changing how we communicate in ways we could not have imagined ten, or even five, years ago. While mobile apps, streaming video, texting and social media make receiving and sending information easier, these advances may also hinder our ability to process what we are receiving.

City officials are busy people with lots of priorities crowding their days. The Municipal Association works hard to provide information in ways that work best for the membership. “While we tweak our

processes on a continual basis, every two years we undertake a formal evaluation of how we are doing,” explained Reba Campbell, deputy executive director. “Are our publications still relevant? Is our website easy to navigate? Are members getting legislative information in a timely manner?”

Starting in August, the Association will ask municipal officials to share their opinions through a survey. It will be included in the August issue of *Uptown* and be available online. The Association will also host a series of focus groups in the fall.

“We are especially interested in hearing from municipal officials who may not normally attend our meetings or use our services on a regular basis,” commented Campbell. “Making sure we hear from a wide range of our members will allow us to better meet the needs of all of the state’s elected municipal officials and staff.”

Keep an eye out for the survey next month and take a few minutes to share your thoughts.