

Commentary

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A View from San Antonio: A City Manager’s Perspective

Sheryl Sculley began serving as city manager of San Antonio, Texas, in 2005, with more than 30 years of public management experience. She is chief executive officer of the municipal corporation of 11,400 employees, an annual operating and capital budget of \$2.2 billion, and a population of 1.3 million residents. Previously, she served as assistant city manager of Phoenix, Arizona, for 16 years and as city manager of Kalamazoo, Michigan.
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In their article “Understanding Shared Roles in Policy and Administration: An Empirical Study of Council-Manager Relations,” authors Tansu Demir and Christopher G. Reddick explore the overall increase in “role sharing,” in which city managers actively participate in policy making and elected officials regularly engage in administrative issues. The authors write that the increase in role sharing is attributable in large part to the increasing complexity of policy making.

The mayor and city council serve as the board of directors of the city organization and the city manager serves as the CEO running the business. As city manager of the City of San Antonio, I work closely with the mayor and city council. In a large and complex city organization like the City of San Antonio, at times the division between administration and policy is not completely clear. However, maintaining distinct roles helps ensure balanced and effective service delivery to 1.3 million San Antonio residents. As city manager, I oversee 11,400 employees and a \$2.2 billion annual operating and capital budget. The mayor and council members provide policy leadership and address

constituent-related needs. The policy-administration dichotomy serves a useful purpose in San Antonio, where collaboration is a central component of managing complex political and administrative issues.

Collaboration in Practice

As city manager, I collaborate with the mayor and council members to accomplish solutions to complex initiatives with a number of involved stakeholders. In May 2012, San Antonio voters approved a \$596 million capital improvements bond program for 2012. During the bond development process, the city focused on community engagement, seeking input from San Antonio residents on proposed projects. The mayor and city council appointed four citizen bond committees composed of 131 individuals. Four bond committees held a total of 20 public meetings to review projects and voted on a final list of recommended projects for the city council’s approval. While the city council appointed the citizen bond committees and approved the final list of projects, city staff managed the process, from analyzing and recommending projects to facilitating the bond committee meetings. This collaboration between city

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management and the mayor and city council helped ensure a successful, transparent civic engagement process.

Additionally, the budget development and adoption process provides a helpful illustration of our collaborative efforts in San Antonio. During the budget process, the administrative staff works closely with elected officials to develop a budget that reflects community and organizational needs and goals. In my role as city manager, I receive feedback from elected officials on policy-making priorities and provide advice regarding the overall budget impact of policy initiatives. During the six-month budget development process, the city staff develops a proposed budget that reflects elected officials' priorities. Additionally, the Office of Management and Budget and I work directly with the mayor and city council offices to engage stakeholders in community budget hearings in each of the 10 council districts. The budget process ensures that the city council is knowledgeable about significant budget issues. At the beginning of the budget process, we identify mayor and city council goals at a day-long budget goal setting session, develop a draft budget, and seek resident input at several community budget hearings. Throughout the process, the mayor and city council provide input on service delivery changes, priority-setting measures, and program enhancements. Elected officials lend their expertise in efforts to engage the community in the

budget development process. The political perspective from elected officials helps staff understand the political impact of the budget. This highly collaborative process helps develop a successful budget.

Mutual Trust

The discussion in Demir and Reddick's article regarding mutual trust between the city manager and city council is particularly relevant. Mutual trust enables the city manager and elected officials to collaborate on complex issues. To encourage this trust, I maintain an open line of communication with elected officials by meeting with them individually and collectively on a regular basis to review their priorities and provide updates on policies and issues. It is critical for any city manager and city council to maintain a relationship grounded in mutual trust; this allows management and elected officials to focus on their respective responsibilities and to collaborate on complex issues. The authors write that when mutual trust is established, elected officials incorporate the city manager's expertise into policy making and refrain from management operations—in San Antonio, this allows the mayor and city council to focus on policy initiatives while I work with staff to ensure effective and efficient service delivery. Mutual trust ensures successful collaborative efforts and allows city staff and elected officials to collaborate on issues when there is interplay between administration and policy making.