



Bradford E. Cook
Direct dial: 603.627.8110
Fax: 603.641.2343
bcook@sheehan.com

Cook on Concord

Making Manchester more efficient

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Manchester Mayor Ted Gatsas appointed a task force on consolidations and efficiencies in his inaugural address and gave it until March 15 to study city government and report its findings. I had the job of chairing this group, and the experience proved to be a good one for several reasons.

First, a group of diverse citizens, coming from different political parties and philosophies, can work together to try to find ways government can do its job better.

Second, interaction with public officials, department heads and rank-and-file employees produced a large number of suggestions for improving city government, procedures and services. The task force report noted its members were impressed by the "dedication and obvious knowledge officials provided us, and their willingness to make suggestions that did not necessarily benefit their departments, but the city as a whole."

Finally, there was a reminder that what we were doing for a short period of time should be a process always in the minds of those who serve the public - "the search for new and more cost-effective ways to do business should be the constant mind set of public employees and officeholders," said the report.

The report was presented to Manchester's Board of Mayor and Aldermen at a special meeting held March 15. The report was divided into three sections - consolidation, best business practices and technology.

The first section included recommendations to combine the Parks and Recreation Department with the Public Works Department, a recommendation that had been made in similar reports under several prior mayors of both political parties. The day after the report was presented, this recommendation was the subject of action in an aldermanic meeting, where real decisions and action can be taken.

The task force also urged consideration of combining the Water Works Department with Public Works and, on another topic, combining the Economic Development Office with the mayor's office, finding that it is a major function of the mayor's office to perform economic development functions for the city.

The report also urged the merger of the Health Department, Welfare Department and Department of Youth Services, while recognizing that the welfare commissioner is an officer of the city established by the city charter and would continue to exist and perform that office's function.

The report also raised the issue of the facilities in which employees work,

noting that the physical layout of city buildings probably has an effect on the efficient delivery of services and the cooperation among departments.

In the second portion, the report looked at best business practices and urged hiring a professional fund-raising and development firm with expertise to seek sponsorship dollars, as well as instituting single-stream recycling and possible biweekly trash collection, if recycling is successful in reducing the amount of garbage. Also recommended was an evaluation of all jobs that become vacant before they are filled, paid advertising on appropriate city vehicles and charging for the use of city pools and other facilities that are susceptible to such charges, especially when they are used by those from out of town.

One of the more controversial suggestions of the report, although not one of its major findings, was the recommendation to eliminate the required use of uniformed personnel as “flaggers” at construction sites. This raised opposition from police and labor leaders who believe the practice is helpful for many reasons, although task force members were somewhat surprised at the vigor of the reaction.

In a city that has a nine-year cycle for the replacement of computers, there was plenty of topics for discussion in the third section, which covered technology.

Among the recommendations were those for allowing credit card processing in acceptance for payment for city services, permits and applications (but not property taxes). In addition, information systems need significant upgrades, existing software modules need to be examined carefully, field workers from many departments could improve client services and productivity with the use of tablets or other portable devices, electric document processing would be helpful and the report noted that all of this would cost money.

The task force pointed out to the aldermen that it had no power to do anything except make suggestions and recommendations. The Board of Mayor and Aldermen have the power to make Manchester city government better, to kick the tires on the recommendations, do further research and study to confirm the validity of the recommendations and then make Manchester a better, more efficient place.

Here's hoping they do so.

Brad Cook is a shareholder in the Manchester law firm of Sheehan Phinney Bass + Green and heads its government relations and estate planning groups. He also serves as secretary of the Business and Industry Association of New Hampshire.