

Administration and Organization of the City Engineer's Office

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In reading the numerous statutes of Indiana dealing with municipal corporations, we find that the Office of City Engineer is set up in all cities from first to fifth classes, inclusive. We also find that nearly every city has some special legislation that affects the duties of the city engineer. Since this is the case some of the points I will discuss may not be applicable to your particular city and some very important phases in your city I may miss entirely.

Administration, in the sense that I will use it, means management of public affairs. Organization may be defined as a number of individuals systematically united.

The success of administration may most easily be measured by public relations. If the administration is good, perhaps the most contributive factor will have been the accessibility of the individuals that are responsible for the different services rendered to the public. They should all seek to avoid every unnecessary cause of offense. To avoid offense one must be courteous, and the first essential of courtesy is to be accessible. There is no escape from this, although there is no more annoying obstacle to the efficient performance of one's duties than the time which is required to meet the public. There are, first of all, the "nuts" who range all the way from the dangerously insane to the poor, confused souls who imagine themselves possessed of secrets which will remake the world. Much more numerous are the "seekers" who want jobs or other favors which in most instances they should not have. Then there are busybodies, the gratuitous advisors and the chronic grouches. But inseparable from all these useless time killers, there are some persons with legitimate complaints and sound suggestions.

The public, rightly or wrongly, is firmly convinced that it has a right to the ear of local officials. No man in such position can afford to get the reputation of inaccessibility. How often each of us

has listened to a statement by a citizen who says "I'm a taxpayer," prefaced with "I'm not an engineer, but —————," and just as often each of us has had the desire to say that they could end that statement very nicely with those five words. But we bit our tongue and listened inattentively to a long discourse on such topics as "why don't you build a large platform or wide bridge over White River to be used solely for off-street parking"?

A great deal can be done to mitigate the evils of accessibility by the organization of the office of the engineer himself. Even in the smaller class cities, he should have a competent secretary, not only to carry on his correspondence but to meet the public over the telephone and in the outer office. It is most important that the engineer have a private office where each individual can be dealt with confidentially and where at intervals, not too rare, he can get a chance to think. The secretary should be alert, understand human nature, possess a wide acquaintance in the community and know enough about the office to answer all ordinary questions intelligently. He or she should also be able to cut off all but the small undetectable minority of "nuts", together with book agents, necktie salesmen and others who have no real important business with the engineer.

I mention this in detail because the engineer has been saddled by state statute or local ordinance with so many administrative duties other than engineering that he actually has little time for the practice of engineering and of necessity must use his time wisely.

The city engineer in the state of Indiana might just as well be titled the Director of Public Works because he is either directly or indirectly responsible for streets, bridges, sewers, sewage disposal, water supply, sidewalks, alleys, refuse removal and disposal, street signs and house numbering. Also, as the cities vary in size and diversity of public services offered, the engineer may be concerned with such other things as airports, cemeteries, parks, playgrounds and traffic engineering. In view of these mentioned responsibilities, it is mandatory that authority be delegated to well chosen people to execute these duties directly.

I realize that the statement I have just made relative to well chosen people to be directly in charge of these duties is much easier said than accomplished. In any city there are people who have worked "teeth and toenail" for the elected officials and these officials feel obligated to the extent of giving their supporters responsible jobs. Too often, a good party worker that passed out candidates cards on election day or donated a few dollars, either to the central committee or directly to the candidate, is appointed to the job of street

commissioner, and his only qualifications were as above stated. If we were able to set up our administration and organization on the merit system, adopting minimum requirements and properly testing by examination, our jobs would be much easier and the public would receive greater value for their tax dollars.

As time passes, regulations for qualified officials for municipalities will come about by public demand. Recently I was asked by the Research Engineer of Traffic from Purdue if I felt that cities of the size of Muncie could benefit by the full time services of a Traffic Engineer. My answer was a definite yes. In my estimation we could save in costs to the motorist many times over the salary of such an engineer. Thus the saving in actual cost would be the safety factor which could not be measured in money. The preservation of the public's good humor would be worth the one cent or so tax levy necessary to pay the cost of the engineering.

There has been considerable press comment recently on legislation affecting the qualifications for county highway superintendents and city street commissioners. We hope that the legislators will act favorably towards this before long.

The State Board of Health has been trying to get legislation passed to license sewage treatment operators. This would be another step in the right direction to save the city engineer some headaches.

Having been faced with the very worrisome problems of refuse collection and disposal for the last three years, I asked our mayor to have a bill prepared for the recent legislature permitting cities to issue revenue bonds to construct and operate incinerators, purchase land-fill areas and equipment to operate land-fills, and purchase and operate collection services. These revenue bonds would be retired by collection and disposal charges to property owners, renters, or businesses that would receive this service, charged on a monthly volume basis. This bill was passed by the senate but was pigeonholed by the house. At the next session of the legislature I understand that the State Board of Health will get behind this bill and, if the cities will do likewise, it should be passed.

We are all well aware of the impractical workings of the Barrett Law for public improvements, even with the most recent amendments, and would welcome a new law permitting us to go ahead with many badly needed improvements. In many cities contractors are not even interested in bidding on improvements under the Barrett Law.

It may seem that I have gotten away from my assigned subject of Administration and Organization of a City Engineer's Office, but I have brought up these suggestions for changes to point out that

good administration and organization could be had much easier if we were given the proper tools of legislation with which to work.

No administration or organization will be successful without harmony within itself. A definite assignment of duties that each individual is to be responsible for and the idea firmly planted in that individual's mind that he alone will be held accountable, is essential. The individual, whether he be an inspector, a field engineer or other will be happier if he is given these various tasks and, when the job is completed, be complimented or have his short comings pointed out in a friendly manner.