City Managers in Local Policy Making: Responsibilities, Frustrations, and Legitimate Concerns

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Abstract

While scholars in public administration debate on whether city managers should share more policy making responsibilities and make greater influence in policy decisions, it is worth exploring the perspective of city managers: how city managers themselves perceive their responsibilities in policy making? What frustrates them in the process? Using interview data collected from city managers in Florida, this research attempts to direct scholarly attention to the legitimate conflicts underneath city manager’s role in local policy making. Suggestions for effective operations in local government are also provided in the article.

Keywords: city manager, elected official, policy making, responsibility, frustration, legitimacy
Introduction

In the public administration literature concerning policy making in local government, much attention has been paid to the question of who makes policies and who implements policies, a question that is associated with the politics-administration relationship in local government. The dichotomy model of the politics-administration relationship assumes that elected officials and appointed administrators have separate responsibilities in the policy sphere: making policy by the former and carrying out policy by the latter. However, public administration scholars have challenged the dichotomy model. On the one hand, they predicted a growing politics and policy role for local government managers in the future (Loveridge, 1971; Stillman, 1974; Sherwood, 1976; Mikulecky, 1980; Frederickson, 1989). On the other hand, they identified city managers' leadership role in the policy making process by empirical investigations (e.g., Boynton & Wright, 1971; Loveridge, 1971; Svara, 1985; Box, 1992; Montjoy & Watson 1995; Nalbandian, 1990, 1999; Dunn & Legge 2002). Scholars even advocated for local government administrators to have greater authority/responsibility to make judgments about the public interest and sometimes to make independent decisions free from elected officials’ control (e.g., Cooper, 1984; Nalbandian, 1989, 1990). Nevertheless, another group of scholars predicted that city managers would concentrate on their managerial responsibilities instead of policy making (Banovetz, 1994/2003; Lowi, 1995). They argued for strong political control for elected officials in local government (Mendonsa, 1977; Moe, 1984; Wood, 1988; Wood & Waterman, 1991).

In reality, local government charters do not usually grant managers formal authorities in policy making. Due to the lack of institutional legitimacy, local government managers may hold different understandings about how far they can go in the policy making process; and thus they
set up their own responsibility boundaries. For the same reason, they may face frustrations while they work with elected officials who have institutional authority to make policies but may lack expertise in policy issues. This research, using interview data, explores how city managers perceive their roles in policy making, and what frustrates them in the process. It attempts to direct scholarly attention to the tensions underneath city managers’ role in local policy making and thus provide suggestions for effective operations in local government.

**City Managers’ Role in Policy Making**

Although the dichotomy model of politics-administration relationship has provided a long-standing frame of reference for research on the behavior of elected officials and administrators (Svara, 1998), it has long been challenged in the literature. On the one hand, scholars in public administration predicted that city and county managers would increasingly play a leadership role in policy making and politics in the future (Frederickson, 1989; Loveridge, 1971; Mikulecky, 1980; Sherwood, 1976; Stillman, 1974; Svara, 1990). Svara (1990) predicted that younger and professionally trained city managers would be likely to devote more time to policy and political roles and less time to the management roles (p. 181). On the other hand, empirical studies repeatedly report that local government managers are participating in the policy making process on a regular basis (e.g., Box, 1992; Morgan & Watson, 1992; Svara, 1998, 1999a, 2001; Zhang & Feiock, 2010). They have identified alternative models to the dichotomy conception in the literature.

For example, Svara (1985) observed that both elected officials and administrators were involved in four dimensions of municipal governance: mission, policy, administration, and management. However, elected officials dominate in the mission formulation and managers controlled administration and management, with the power over policy being shared between the
two sides. Svara named such policy-administration relationship as the dichotomy-duality model. This model was partially tested by Browne (1985), who revealed that most city managers in his sample earned council support in leading policy initiatives. Svara (1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2006) later uses a more dynamic model, the “complementarity,” to replace the dichotomy-duality model. He explains that “In a model of complementarity, administrators accept the control of elected officials and elected officials respect what administrators do and how they do it. At the same time there is interdependency and reciprocal influence between elected officials and administrators who fill distinct but overlapping roles in policy and administration.” (1081).

Morgan and Watson (1992) focus on the policy making regime and propose four possible interaction patterns: 1) both the manager and mayor are strong; 2) the strong city manager dominates policy making; 3) the strong mayor dominates the policy making; and 4) both the manager and mayor are weak in policy leadership. They also examine the relationship between the mayor and the manager based on the frequency of their interactions. They discover that slightly over half of the cities fell into the category of mayor-manager team (frequent interactions between the mayor and manager); and within the team category, the most common arrangement was the manager-dominant partnership.

With attempt to explore systematic factors leading to city managers’ leadership role in policy making, a recent study by Zhang and Feiock (2010) uncovers that city managers tend to make great influence in policy making if they possess a high level of professional expertise and if they are willing to share administrative power with elected officials. Their findings suggest a collaborative model for city government in which elected officials and the manager reciprocally work together in a hierarchical relationship.
While empirical studies consistently confirm city managers’ influence and possible leadership in policy making, scholars through their normative studies also advocate for great discretion for local government administrators to make judgments about the public interest and sometimes to make independent decisions free from elected officials’ control (e.g., Cooper, 1984; Nalbandian, 1989, 1990). For example, Cooper (1984) argues that the relationship between the public, elected officials, and administrators should be horizontal rather than vertical. He recommends that city managers, while cooperating with elected officials, should look outward to the citizenry for direction. Agreeing with Cooper, Nalbandian (1990) thinks that local public managers should directly collect inputs from citizens and incorporate them into policy making, and that managers should be accountable to both community values and council oversight. He uses the terms “realism” and “idealism” to distinguish between two types of city managers: the ones who merely answer the council (“realism”) and the ones who are accountable to both the council and community (“idealism”):

“As a realist, the manager’s power stems from expertise and experience, balanced by the nature of the manager’s employment relationship with the governing body. The realist manager may respond to the council because it is democratically correct or because the manager actually believes that the council expresses the will of the community. But ultimately the realist manager responds because the council controls the employment contract.” (Nalbandian, 1990, p. 657)

“Managers as idealists are committed to employment relationships as vehicles of accountability. However, idealist managers are also committed to understanding and responding to an array of community values which go beyond efficiency and the practical justification for responsiveness. Commitment to a broader range of community
values than expressed in the governing body provides another source of professional authority for managers and for city/county management as a profession.” (Nalbandian, 1990, p. 658)

Nalbandian suggests that professionals in city management should ideally be committed to both council and community and take values from both as their dual sources of accountability.

While many scholars support city managers’ participation in policy making, another group of scholars express their conservations on this issue (Banovetz, 1994/2003; Lowi, 1995). Banovetz (1994) predicted that city managers would focus on managerial rather than policy responsibilities. He argued, “Scholars and practitioners who predict a growing policy role for city managers do so on the basis of a linear extension of the manager’s evolving role. …The notion that the city manager’s role will revert to a stronger managerial focus, with a lessening of its policy focus, is predicted on evidence that the managerial environment will not stay stable” (2003, p. 52). Banovetz suggested that managers should be policy initiators and coordinators, decision-making catalysts, and policy and program evaluators. In other words, city managers should provide knowledge support in policy making while rejecting policy leadership.

The debate on city managers’ policy responsibilities can be seen as an extension of the intellectual exchange between Carl Friedrich and Herman Finer (Finer, 1941; Friedrich, 1940), who debated decades ago on public managers’ discretion. Friedrich held that city managers’ professionalism could ensure their responsiveness to the public, thus managers should be granted adequate discretion. Finer countered that public managers should be subject to legislative control in order to maintain political accountability (also see Goodnow, 1900/1967, p. 92). Interestingly, the Finer-Friedrich debate has also catalyzed the development of two theoretical approaches that originated from economics but were applied into the public administration context: principal-
agent and transaction cost theories. In the framework of principal-agent theory, the relationship between elected and appointed officials is viewed as hierarchical; and policy discretion for appointed administrators is seen as undermining elected authority and popular control of government (Mendonsa, 1977; Moe, 1984; Wood, 1988; Wood & Waterman, 1991). The camp of transaction cost theory, on the contrary, argues that high-powered incentives of elected officials tend to produce dishonesty and opportunism in government; therefore, appointed administrators with low-powered incentives may ensure efficient operations of local government (Frant, 1996; Feiock & Kim, 2001; Feiock, Jeong, & Kim, 2003).

Box (1992) regards administrator’s discretion in a more balanced way and argues that advocating for greater discretion for public managers is useful from a normative viewpoint, but administrative practice is constrained by the relationship between the manager and the governing body. Therefore, he develops a more dynamic typology of manager’s discretion, by which he distinguishes between theory-in-use and normative theory. In Box’s typology, a “trustee—interpreter—delegate” continuum is used to describe the variation of local government manager’s discretion, as contrasted to Nalbandian’s (1990) idealism vs. realism dichotomous typology. Box specifies delegate managers as:

“Such administrators do not attempt to carry political signals from the community back to elected officials or to influence the governing body to change policy direction. They regard the governing body as the duly elected leaders of the community and wait for policy guidance from them before taking action. In an extreme version of this position, administrators make few if any recommendations, even on technical questions, to the governing body unless a serious and pressing matter forces them to do so.” (Box, 1992, p. 327)
Trustee managers are at the other extreme of the continuum of manager’s discretion:

“In addition to believing in their ability to identify ‘failures’ of the governing body to act in the public interest, trustee administrators regard it as proper to take actions to correct the deficiencies. Such actions could include advocacy of a new policy direction in dealing with the council; taking strong and inflexible stand on an issue, contrary to the expressed wishes of the council; using the normative view to shape daily decisions; using the normative view to shape research documents and projects which will result in policy or procedure recommendations to the council; and working with community groups to assist them in organizing and articulating their views.” (Box, 1992, p. 327)

Between the delegate and trustee is the interpreter manager in the continuum:

“Interpreter administrators see their legitimacy as defined by the employment relationship and their sphere of discretion as determined by what is acceptable to the governing body. …Such administrators would present alternative policy recommendations that include the normative vision (as contrasted to the trustee’s single-solution advocacy).” (Box, 1992, p. 327)

In sum, the existing studies have greatly contributed to the knowledge base to help us understand the work of city managers and operations of local government. However, the debate on city managers’ discretion in policy making may have overlooked the legitimacy issue. The political legitimacy originates in the elected body since its members have a political base resulting from their election by and accountability to the electorate (Protasel, 1988). Therefore, elected officials have formal authority to vote on policy decisions. While elected officials own the political and institutional legitimacy to make policies, they may lack expertise on policy issues, and thus may not be able to make rational decisions for the best interest of the
community. City managers, on the contrary, do not have political legitimacy for policy making; nor do they have institutional authority to vote on legislative decisions. However, they possess professional expertise and public values needed for policy making, which can supplement elected officials’ amateur knowledge and political bias. In other words, city managers have professional legitimacy to participate in policy making. The controversy of legitimacy may produce a large room for city managers to perceive their role in policy making.

Policy making consists of a set of activities including identifying the problem and initiating policy discussion (policy initiation), preparing for policy proposals (proposal preparation), recommending policy options (policy recommendation), deliberating on policy proposals (policy deliberation), and making policy decisions (policy decision). A strong governing body or a strong mayor may dominate in the whole process. But in most circumstances, the elected body has to rely on administrators’ assistance to make policies. In some extreme cases, city managers, rather than elected officials, lead policy making in the process from policy initiation to policy deliberation, leaving the final decision to council members. This article attempts to use a narrative approach to describe the variation of the policy making responsibilities perceived by city managers.

In addition, while scholars debate on whether city managers should have great discretion and influence in policy making, it is worth exploring the perspective of city managers: how city managers themselves perceive their role in policy making? Although empirical studies have generalized various collaboration patterns of city managers and elected officials in the policy making regime, how do city managers themselves view their relationship with elected officials on a daily basis? What are their frustrations and concerns in the policy making process? These
questions are the foci of this research and can be best answered through one-on-one interviews with city managers.

**Methodology**

The interviews were conducted in Florida because there are great institutional, political, and demographical variations among city governments in the state, which epitomize the nationwide conditions to a high degree. Twenty eight (28) city managers were selected by multiple ways for the interviews: seven (7) of them were viewed by their mayors as exerting very strong influence on local policy making according to the 2006 Florida Mayor Survey conducted by the author; thirteen (13) of them were evaluated by other city managers as having strong or relatively strong policy making influence in city government; and 8 of them were evaluated by other city managers as having moderate level of policy making influence. All these interviewees are seasoned public managers, with more than 10 years experience with local government. In addition, they serve for different forms of government: council-manager, mayor-council, and commission. And they are also from different geographic parts of Florida with varying population sizes, ranged from 7,600 to 140,000. All the 28 city managers accepted our invitation to participate in the research.

A questionnaire with the following open-ended questions was sent to these city managers prior to one-on-one interviews with them:

1. Regarding the local government managers’ role in legislative policy making, to what extent should they participate in the policy making process and why?
2. To what extent do you actually participate in legislative policy making with your elected officials, both in the preparation stage and the actual deliberation and decision making stage?
3. Have you experienced any difficulty or frustration in the process? Do you have any examples of those experiences that you can share?
The 28 city managers were given a choice to either prepare written responses and send them back to the surveyor or be interviewed via telephone. Six (6) managers elected to send written responses and 22 elected to be interviewed via telephone. A one-on-one phone or email interview was conducted with each of them in August 2008 through March 2009. The findings presented in the following sections are based on these 28 interviews.

Managers’ Responsibility Boundaries in Policy Making

By design, the city managers in our interviews are moderately or highly involved in policy making. They attribute their participation in policy making to their professional expertise and elected officials’ amateur in policy issues. They indicate that most council members take the political position without any background in the public sector, and that managers have to educate the politicians in their legislative responsibilities: “Over the years we’re getting less experienced policy makers. I’ve taken on a greater role in helping them develop policy, trying to make them understand when they come up with a policy, and what it will take to implement that policy.”  

In the meantime, city managers acknowledge that “there is a clear line between being the policy maker and being the staff person. The decision making is certainly the prerogative and the responsibility of the council.”

In our interviews, one fourth of city managers report that they identify problems and initiate policy questions more often than do elected officials. These city managers also tend to make policy recommendations and participate in policy deliberation. In other words, they tend to lead policy making from policy initiation to policy deliberation. These managers act like trustee administrators in city government (Box, 1992). On the other hand, some managers may not

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1 The quotations in this article are from the interviews with 28 city managers in Florida. For confidentiality concern, we don’t include the names of the managers in the report.
initiate policy questions, but they may still participate in policy preparation, recommendation, and deliberation.

All managers in our interviews think they should be responsible for preparing for policy proposals. They work with department heads and other administrative staff to collect practical evidence of the issues; they solicit community inputs; they provide council with background materials; they identify potential options and analyze the pros and cons of each option in terms of political and socio-economic costs and benefits; and finally they write policy proposal for the council to discuss. City managers may delegate some of the preparation responsibilities to their department heads or other administrative staff, while they closely monitor the process and play as a bridge between the elected body and administrative staff. A manager reveals:

“I, as an interpreter between city commission and the staff, try to identify what types of options and issues the council members may want to be able to consider in the policy deliberation, and help the staff research the various options that the council members may want to learn more about. I review the options to ensure they are unbiased. …I review all the items coming before on the agenda for the council members. I typically would talk through those options with the elected officials in private on a one-on-one basis before they get to the public to determine if there is anything we missed and we should include in our policy deliberation and analysis.”

While all city managers in our interviews take the responsibility to prepare for policy proposals including identifying policy alternatives for their councils, they vary in whether they stand neutral or advocate for specific solutions to the council. Some managers emphasize that they are just information sources and should not recommend policy solutions. “Usually I don’t give recommendations; I keep myself out of the battle,” indicates one manager. Another
manager reports: “I think sometimes we as managers have to be careful not to dictate what the policy should be through either the one-on-ones or the council meetings.” These managers show some characteristics of delegate administrators (Box, 1992).

In comparison, some other managers in our interviews take a stronger position to deliver their opinions to the elected officials about which policy direction they like to see occur and which direction they suggest the elected body to avoid. “I make recommendations as how to best address the particular issue of the problem, and to advocate for one particular solution which I believe to be the best solution,” explains one city manager. Another manager puts it more tactfully, but implying the same position:

“I don’t necessarily advocate a particular point of view in every case, but I make sure that they understand what it is that we think we are trying to accomplish. And then I provide support to the council to move in that direction. My commitment is to do what I believe is of the best interest of the community and our citizens. So, I have a professional obligation to express my concerns if I believe the council is moving in the direction that might be considered to be harmful, or simply unwise, or excessively costly. And my board understands that’s part of my role.”

A few managers suggest that whether they recommend particular policy solutions depends on what the issue is. “There are some things that are really strictly political issues and have generally very low impact on the operation of the city one way or another. Managers would hesitate to provide information and opinion in such circumstance.” “If there is a decision that is purely opinion, when you’re getting into total subjective things like how something should look, nothing to do with function, and I knew I had some diverse opinions on that, I let them work through that by providing them enough information and let the group come to a consensus.” On
the contrary, if the issue is associated with public interest or involves technical concerns, managers would be more open to offer their opinions and recommendations. “If there is an issue that, in my professional opinion, is in the best interest of the city, I will make a recommendation.” “In proposing a budget and talking through the various alternatives, the manager should take a significant role in that process. When they are neighborhood matters, probably the manager should take a lesser role and let the public deal more directly with the elected officials in the context of making ordinances and policy.”

In terms of their involvement in policy deliberation, managers diverge to a great degree as well. The managers who restrain themselves from recommending policy options do not participate in policy deliberation either because they see policy deliberation as a political process. They think their responsibility in the policy making process should be limited to providing enough unbiased information to the elected body. They may join the council meeting for policy deliberation, but they are merely sitting there to answer questions and clarify information. The reactions below reflect the caution of these managers:

“If you go to the preparation stage, that’s where my participation is at its greatest level. ...When we move to deliberation stages, my role diminishes to answering questions when they may have them. I do not enter my opinion into policy decisions until they request a specific information point. I fully step away from the decision making.”

“We don’t disturb council to make final decisions. I would stay out of the dialogue during deliberation process.”

“During their council meetings, I don’t really participate to a great extent. ...But let me preface that by saying that unless I feel like they’re going to make a decision where we fall off the cliff, I tend to let them just go ahead and do what they see fit.”
In the meantime, some other managers would assist council members during the deliberation process and make sure the discussion is focused. For example, one manager shares his experience:

“I assist in the discussion and try to refocus the discussion. Sometimes they start one direction, and lose sight of what actually behind them, which can happen to any group and to me also. I try to refocus and go back to what they are deliberating. But when it gets to the decision making part, I believe, this is the role of elected officials that I would respond to questions and dues if there are some from elected officials.”

Among the managers who believe they should make policy recommendations, most of them perform actively in the stage of policy deliberation as well—they guide council discussion to the direction of their recommendation. One of the managers frankly expresses that:

“We as managers can’t sit back when we see something going on at a commission table that they may not see may have a dire ramification. We need to step up to the plate and be more assertive.”

Other managers hold the same opinion:

“If I see them going to a direction that will create havoc, then I think it is incumbent upon the manager to provide the information and steer them in a different direction. After providing the facts, I think it’s important to move back but monitor the process so the end product doesn’t create more problems than you were trying to solve.”

“Personally, I like to involve myself in the discussion and the dialogue... I think they like my role because it may give another perspective, a different look. They may enter into a discussion thinking they want to go one direction and, through my input, they can go in an entirely different direction.”
In the interviews, a number of city managers also report that they would like to make extra efforts to ensure that legislative policy decisions are made according to their recommendation. First, they may tactfully lobby for their policy recommendations in one-on-one meetings with each of the elected officials before council vote. “Sometimes we know that they’re not going to make the right decision. I try to suggest to city councils privately that I will not intentionally get them in trouble. I try to be careful doing anything that would embarrass city council in a policy debate. But if I think they’re going down the wrong road I would suggest alternatives and maybe privately give reasons why I think a particular policy may not be effective.” Another approach for a city manager to possibly shape policy decisions is to request the council to postpone the voting so that the manager can collect more information and have a more thorough discussion with each of the elected officials before they reconsider the policy issue and deliberate it again in the council meeting.

This type of city managers are *trustee administrators*, who take a strong and inflexible stand on policy issues and believe that they are able to better understand policy problems than do elected officials. They see their professional expertise and ability to represent public interests as their legitimacy to guide the council in policy deliberation. Nevertheless, a clarification must be made that the *trustee managers* are not able to make final decisions on policy making. Only the elected officials are the legislative policy makers.

We also find a few *interpreter managers* among city managers in our interviews. They stand between the *trustees* and *delegates*. The *interpreter managers* may step a little further than the *delegates* to provide policy recommendations in addition to the work of policy preparation. However, they don’t make great effort to advocate for their policy recommendations; they are very caution to intervene in policy deliberation; and they are more likely than *trustee managers*
to comply with elected officials, because they regard their role as an active policy participant not a decision maker. “We must always remember that elected officials are the ones people entrust.”

Based on the interviews with city managers in Florida, we are able to identify city manager’s responsibility boundaries in policy making using Box’s (1992) typology. As shown in Table 1, delegate managers are those who limit their responsibility merely to policy preparation; interpreter managers usually draw their boundary to include policy preparation and recommendation; while trustee managers perceive that their policy making role should cover policy initiation, preparation, recommendation, and deliberation. The bottom line is that elected officials vote on policy options and make final decisions.

[Table 1 about here]

Managers’ Frustrations in Policy Making

About seventy percent of city managers in our interviews report that they face frustrations in the policy making process. Interestingly enough, most of their frustrations involve two scenarios: One is the split council; and the other is that council votes for a policy decision that is different from manager’s suggestion. The following three examples from our interviews demonstrate how a split council may frustrate a city manager:

“This is a crazy example. On the outset it seemed so easy. There was a group of folks in the community who wanted to build a dog park. That sounds quite reasonable, right? …Hey, we’ll be able to do this in a couple of months. But it took us two years! We had five different opinions on whether we should or should not have a dog park, and five different opinions on where it should go, and five different opinions on how much we should spend... An easy project really becomes hard. That happens to a lot of things. So
when you got a bunch of elected officials, and you know they are strong leaders and those types of personalities, you got to string that together, and that is difficult.”

“A lot times, policy is not created in a rational way. It is created for an irrational reason or for an emotional reason. One example in our town is that we had an area that wanted to put parking meters in for revenue purpose that we could provide property maintenance of the street right away in that particular area of the town. We had met with the residents, the businesses. They were all on the board. We had two commission members to hate each other. They just cannot buy each other. If one said white, the other would say black. One supported metering; the other one just opposed it without giving any reasons, just slammed the policy. The policy failed. That was very frustrating.”

“The most frustrating thing we do is to try to build consensus when you’ve got five different personalities on the council, or whatever the specific number is. Pulling that all together can be frustrating. Sometime even the simplest thing becomes tough, because you have got cynicism, skepticism, and optimism. You know all those things work sometimes against each other.”

In a split council, elected officials insist on their own opinions and do not share common visions on policy issues with each other; they do not respect perspectives of others including the city manager’s; nor are they willing to discuss and make compromise based on the information prepared by the city manager. A split council would make the policy deliberation an endless process without achieving any agreement; it may also lead the council to make decisions under emotional impulse. In any case, city manager’s professional expertise would be undervalued; and the local government would be led to inefficient operations.
Another major circumstance that may frustrate city managers is when elected officials make a policy decision in the opposite direction of the manager’s recommendation. The following examples illustrate such frustration of city managers:

“The greatest frustration is where you’re headed in a certain direction and all of a sudden that is changed. We had an 8 acre parcel of land that we purchased in order to do some water quantity management. The council backed away when some citizens complained that it was going to be too close to residential. That’s the greatest frustration. It makes you question if they were really committed.”

“One particular example that I struggle with has to do with the use of our community redevelopment funding and the manner in which the redevelopment board allocates those dollars. That is the only area of our budget that had surplus resources. When the revenue was flowing, the board was able to fund anything and everything. The difficulty was getting the board to spend those resources on capital projects. Now that the resources are becoming scarcer and there are more demands for those resources. Their hearts are in the right places but I need them to be thinking with their heads and not their hearts. That is something I struggle with.”

“You and your staff provide all the information, the best options for their policy making. But commissioners may not always make decisions based on effectiveness and efficiency. One example is the commission tried to buy a property that the city did not really need. Another example is that they decided to keep the golf course open even though we are losing money. They decided to do that. I feel frustrated because I have to find out the additional dollars to balance the budget.”
Such frustration of city managers takes place when council members, who make policy
decisions, hold different perspectives from city managers. As administrative professionals, city
managers may be more concerned about efficiency and common interest of the community,
while council members may be more interested in their constituency and democratic values. In
addition, city managers’ sense of comprehensive, analytical approaches to problem solving may
be upset by council’s decisions made for political expediency (Nalbandian, 1989).

The city managers suggest that the key for them to mitigate their frustration is to
skillfully manage the relationship with council members. They particularly recommend that
managers must stand neutral to any council members and treat them equally. “You cannot play
favorites with certain members of the elected body,” emphasizes a manager. This is especially
important for managers who confront a split council because playing favorites with certain
council members will stir up existing conflicts among the council or will make more complicated
problems to the government organization.

“I think you have to be very careful to ensure that when you deal with those one-on-
ones you have the same type of conversation with each elected official. You got to be
careful to ensure that you are being fair and equitable, and that you are perceived by the
council as not treating somebody different from anybody else.”

“We brief council members. For me it is very important from the staff perspective that
we brief every council member equally. For me, all council members receive all
information at the same time, the same quality, as much briefing as a council member
needs.”

“Don’t provide one with information that you don’t provide the others. …Dealing with
people is important. If they ask for something I copy all the other commissioners
because I think it’s really bad for a city when some elected officials have more information than the others. It makes for a rough road for them in advancing on policy decisions.”

Another suggestion for minimizing frustration is to provide council members with thorough information. “A mistake you cannot make is to hold back any information. It is their vote to make; but it is incumbent upon the manager to provide a high level of information for the decision making process.” In addition, some managers point out that although every manager faces some levels of frustration in the policy making process, long-time experience may help them to better manage frustration. They suggest that city managers do not have to firmly insist on their opinions if they are contradictory with council’s visions, especially when the issue is not huge.

“I had trouble letting go when the council would act on something that I really thought was not the best public policy. I would get frustrated. Then over time as I get matured, I realize that if they pass something and it is legal, I let go, move on, and implement it regardless my opinion. That’s the right thing to do.”

“It’s a seasoning thing. There’s an old saying in marriage ‘Don’t sweat the little things,’ which can also be said in local government. We’re not out there trying to win every battle. We’re not in the battle, we simply the conduit that allows them to make decisions and we have to internalize our personal thoughts sometimes, although that was probably the toughest thing I’ve had to learn.”

The experienced professionals also advise that city managers should learn to adjust their responsibility boundaries of policy making according to their political context that might change from locality to locality and from time to time in order to mitigate conflicts with council
members. “Some council members just prefer they are the ones out-front and making policy. … So I think the manager needs to feel the ocean and watch the current.” In other words, the question of whether the city manager should act like a trustee, a interpreter, or a delegate, depends on the acceptance of the elected body.

**Conclusion and Suggestion**

With interview data collected from 28 city managers in Florida, this study uses a qualitative approach to address the questions of how city managers perceive their responsibilities in legislative policy making, and what conditions frustrate them in the process. We acknowledge the limitations of this study. First, due to the nature of qualitative approach—the sample is purposefully chosen and the sample size is relatively small. Therefore, the study may not be able to cover all the activities of managers’ involvement in policy making. Second, determined by the feature of qualitative research, this study basically addresses descriptive questions of “what” and “how.” It is unable to answer explanatory questions for generalization purpose—for example, the question of whether managers’ perceptions are associated with their work experience or forms of government they serve. Future research with quantitative approach is expected to address the explanatory questions. Nevertheless, this study makes a possible contribution to the literature by addressing some fundamental questions that have not been sufficiently addressed in the literature.

Through straightforward research approach, this study reports how city managers set up their responsibility boundaries in policy making. It can help public administration students to correctly understand administrative discretion in local government. Previous studies in favor of managers’ leadership role in policy making have overlooked city managers’ institutional constraints, which may mislead students in the field to the point that they believe city managers
can make policy decisions free from political control of elected officials. On the other hand, previous studies that emphasize political control in local government may have overlooked the fact that local elected officials are mostly amateur politicians and have to rely on administrators’ expertise to make policy decisions. By discussing city managers’ policy responsibilities, this article makes the following clarifications: First, city managers do not have institutional legitimacy for policy making, which fundamentally constrains them from making policy decisions. Second, due to lack of institutional legitimacy, city managers perceive their policy making responsibilities in a great range. Where they set up their responsibility boundary is determined by their understanding and the acceptance of their city councils. Third, city managers’ policy leadership refers to the situation in which city managers are deeply involved in policy making activities—including initiating policy problems, writing policy proposals, recommending policy solutions, and participating in policy deliberation—and be able to influence policy decisions made by elected officials.

A city manager would face frustrations with elected officials in the policy making process when a split council occurs or when the council makes policy decisions in the opposite direction of manager’s suggestion. Fundamentally, the frustrations reflect the controversy that is inherited in the institutional system: elected officials are empowered to make policy decisions but they lack expertise for rational evaluation; the manager is equipped with expertise to make rational choice but he or she does not share the institutional authority to make policy decisions. A city manager is responsible for policy inputs, which include policy preparation and even policy recommendation. However, they lose control over policy outputs. In addition, the institutional conflict may be intertwined with divergent perspectives between elected officials and appointed managers. City managers may focus more on efficiency and common interest of
the community, while council members may be more interested in their constituency and democratic values. City managers are frustrated when they believe their expertise and efforts to make good policies are not adequately valued by elected officials.

Regarding the strategies to mitigate frustration, our interviews suggest that managers should skillfully manage their relationship with elected officials. For example, they treat elected officials equally and provide information thoroughly. City managers also advise that they should set up their policy making responsibilities within a range that is acceptable to elected officials. While these suggestions are helpful, we offer the following supplemental strategies, not only to minimize city managers’ frustrations, but also in order to make more reasonable policy decisions and to achieve more efficient government operations.

First, while it is not under city manager’s control to select elected officials, managers should help the amateur politicians to receive necessary training in policy making through one-on-one meetings or through group workshops. Managers may also recommend other training resources to elected officials and request them to participate. A more capable council will reduce the probability of opinion conflicts and improve the collaboration between the administrative team and council members.

Second, city managers should offer adequate respect to elected officials’ perspectives although they might be political, because the elected officials may understand the community needs better than do city managers. Sometimes, the community needs may not sound reasonable in terms of efficiency. However, meeting the needs may create a better situation to solve other problems in the community and thus make the government operations to be efficient in a long run.
Finally, maintaining a good relationship with elected officials is very important to city managers in policy making. According to the city managers in our interviews, they have to be ethically right in interacting with elected officials. For instance, they must stand neutral to any council members and treat them equally; and they should not hide any information to council members. City managers also suggest that they meet elected officials frequently and on a one-on-one basis in order to exchange their thoughts and perspectives in an effective manner. In addition, considering elected officials with different political perspectives and personalities among themselves, city managers should strive to develop their political skills in order to better handle the relationship. As Banovetz, (2003) suggests, city manager would need more sophisticated and developed political skills if they are to survive and succeed in the local government.
References


Table 1. City Manager’s Discretion Identified with Their Policy Activities

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