

The Commission Plan of City Government

How it is Run in Cedar Rapids and Results Obtained, and How Keokuk People Can Obtain it if They Wish.

Burlington Hawk-Eye: Burlington has become aroused to the importance of a new plan of city government by commission. Thanks to the Men's Brotherhood of the First Presbyterian church of this city, the subject has been brought to the attention of the people in a forceful and instructive manner. At the banquet given by the brotherhood last Tuesday evening two addresses were made by men who had experience of what is known as the Des Moines plan, and a favorable sentiment was created by their remarks.

The address of Hon. Chas. D. Huston, of Cedar Rapids, was particularly instructive, and the Hawk-Eye here with prints it in full for the benefit of those of its readers who were not present at the banquet.

There are a number of questions which everyone interested in the new plan of government asks, and summed up they resolve themselves into the interrogative: "How is it done?" Briefly stated the commission plan of city government may be obtained and operated in the following manner:

First—Upon the presentation of a petition to the city mayor, signed by electors equal in number to twenty-five per cent of all votes cast for candidates for mayor at the last preceding city election, the question of the adoption of the commission plan will be submitted to the voters of the city. This election must be called within two months of the date of filing the petition.

Second—If the plan is adopted by the voters, candidates for mayor and councilmen may secure the placing of their names on the primary ballot by filing a nomination signed by at least twenty-five qualified electors with the city clerk. The primary election shall be held on the second Monday preceding the general election. The candidates' names will be printed on the ballot in alphabetical order, and their number is not limited—all who file petitions go on the ballot. All electors may vote at the primary and the two highest candidates for mayor and the eight highest candidates for councilmen will have their names on the official election ballot.

Third—At the municipal election one of the two majority candidates receiving the highest vote becomes mayor. The four of the eight candidates for councilmen, become the councilmen.

Fourth—Upon organization of the new administration the mayor becomes the head of the department of public affairs. The four councilmen are assigned, by majority vote, to the following departments: Department of accounts and finances; department of public safety; department of streets and public improvements; department of parks and public property.

Fifth—Thus organized this body of men proceed to the administration of the affairs of the city. They have no greater powers than the several officials under the present system now have, but do have greater individual responsibility, for their several duties are so clearly defined by their titles.

Mr. Huston in discussing the new system and its advantages over the old spoke as follows:

Every man of high ideals who has been interested in civic affairs realized the great weakness of the plan under which so many cities have valiantly struggled, and earnestly hoped more or less interested in politics—not particularly partisan—and therefore a little more shrewd than the average politician. That interest centered around the individuals "to be or not to be" in the control of civic affairs and the partisan label was secondary to them. These companies always have been and always will be found lined up with those and for those whom they can count upon to be friendly to certain legislation wanted by them and to strenuously oppose such legislation as was not wanted on the part of the companies no matter how it might affect the general public. Occasionally, it is true, (and because of this fact good men have taken renewed hope), the people would tire under the load and throw it off, and a municipal house cleaning would be had that would prove a betterment for a time. But even then, when the crucial test was applied, men of heretofore approved probity would be found lined up with the interests at the very moment their votes were said for legislation that would correct this one great evil particularly and many more of minor importance. And they particularly welcomed the act passed by the Iowa state legislature in 1907 which, in their opinion, presaged the dawn of a better day in the conduct of municipal affairs.

The Commission Plan. The commission plan of government recognized certain principles necessary to the successful conduct of city affairs.

In drafting the Iowa commission act, it was given out by the framers that the purposes were:

First—They wished to create a municipal office having such attractive features that it would prove an inducement

to representative men to seek recognition. They also wished to eliminate those objectionable features in politics which have heretofore been the means of squelching the political ambitions of desirable men and to destroy, as far as possible, the opportunities for the political parasite who seeks office not for the purpose of benefiting the people, but for the purpose of personal aggrandizement.

Second—The second object in view was to vest complete governmental authority in a small, deliberate body.

Third—The third object was to simplify the present complex municipal system so we might dispense with municipal boards, committees, and departments with their overlapping and conflicting duties. They also wished to substitute for the confusion resulting from the divided authority, a fixed official for every act of the administration.

Fourth—The fourth object in view was to establish a more democratic form of city government and to provide the means whereby the power of the people might be greatly extended and their control over municipal affairs rendered more effective.

The adoption of this plan was ratified by the voters of Cedar Rapids, December 2, 1908, and under this plan a mayor and four councilmen were elected March 30, 1909.

The basis and underlying principles of the commission plan are:

- 1—Concentration of executive authority and fixing of responsibility.
2—Elimination of parties and politics.
3—Direct nomination by the people.
4—An open field to all aspirants.
5—Preferential voting; election by majority.
6—The initiative and referendum.
7—The recall.

Fixing of Responsibility.

Principle 1—Concentration of executive authority and fixing of responsibility. How different under the new plan than under the old plan of committees (generally three), often with as many different ideas of procedure and as often opposition to any proposed improvement unless it is made in some particular ward or its equivalent promised before consent to make it is secured, and a needed work long delayed, if made at all, no matter how urgent. Under the commission plan there is no delay. If a certain improvement is needed, it is recommended by the head of the department under which it properly belongs, it is made regardless of what section of the city it is in. It becomes a matter to be treated wholly on its merits and no commissioner will take the responsibility of recommending an expenditure on even one piece of work of which the wisdom may be questioned, and thus subject himself to discipline by being shifted to another department and another being placed in charge to conserve the best interests of the public. As a commissioner in charge of a particular department he must and does take the responsibility of that department. The excuses made by derelict aldermen under the old plan that the other members of the committee overrode him cannot be offered under this. He must make good.

Principle 2—Elimination of partisan politics. The plan is certainly most successful in this respect. The form of the ballot is ideal, without party columns, and without a brand or trademark to appeal to the partisan, thus forcing every candidate to stand on his merit and reputation.

Principle 3—Direct nomination by the people. The system of nomination by petition eliminates the political boss, whether acting in his own behalf or for special interests. It effectively eliminates the political parasites who live by robbing the people and may in time put them to work. The nominations are made at the polls under such restrictions as govern general elections. Those who attend caucuses and who have observed at some time or another the manner in which caucuses have been manipulated for selfish ends, the good intentions of the majority often being thwarted by a cunningly devised motion which took out of the hands of the people the selecting of delegates and placed it in the hands of those who named delegates to vote for candidates or measures inimical to their best interests, will not be slow to recognize the privilege secured to them of expressing their preferences personally, at the primaries.

An Open Field.

Principle 4—An open field to all aspirants. Many men capable of rendering good service to a municipality, would never be able under the caucus system, to get their names before the people, owing to the manipulations of so-called ward bosses, who delegate to themselves from year to year the privilege of making a "slate" and seeing that it is carried out. Under the commission plan, any one can secure a petition and have his name appear on the ballot to be voted for at the primary, and every citizen has an equal opportunity before the voters.

How popular this plan is, we have but to mention the fact that fifty-seven

citizens took advantage of this provision at the election in Cedar Rapids last March; nine for mayor and forty-eight for councilmen, notwithstanding the fact that but ten could qualify and but five of the ten could be elected. Under this provision the people are given two opportunities to approve or disapprove an aspirant for civic position—once at the primaries and once at the general election. The man who thus passes inspection may be considered as a rule well worthy to entrust with the responsibility of government.

Principle 5—Preferential voting; election by majority. Minority election like minority rule is wrong in principle. Under the commission plan no one can be elected either mayor or councilman unless he secures a clear majority of all votes cast, thus there can be no doubt as to his being the choice of the electorate. Under the old system vicious and "undesirable citizens" have been frequently elected according to well verified reports from San Francisco, St. Louis, Chicago, Philadelphia, Pittsburg and perhaps occasionally in peerless Iowa. Some of those considered in the "undesirable" class may have been fairly representative of their ward constituents but not of the city as a whole, and their power for evil in a council has been great. As a concrete example we have but to refer to "Bath House John" and "Hinky Dink," who have held unbroken sway in their wards for many years and their influence has to be reckoned with always. They are not only a power in the wards from which they come, but being aggressive and ever at work their influence is felt in every department of the city. Clean handed men (not so "practical" as they) shun the notoriety of a contest with them, while others who have exposed their methods to public criticism and scorn have been retired for their temerity, and what is the result? Chicago is known the world over as one of the most corrupt and vicious of cities—not because a majority wants it so, but because a minority wills it so. These men are elected because of their fitness, but in spite of their unfitness. There is not a city on the face of the earth, if its affairs were administered under a commission plan similar to that of the Iowa plan where such men as the "Bath House" or "Hinky Dink" would know they had been in the running—and the plan should be generally adopted if it had no other redeeming feature. But it has others and many. The abandonment of ward lines, treated under this head, means the substitution of a majority form of government for a minority form of government. Under this plan no longer will our city's affairs be managed by a council of ten, the fitness of six (or nearly two-thirds) of whom have not been approved by the voters. Under the new plan the mayor and council are as they should be, the personal representatives of each and every citizen and personally accountable to them all for the economic and successful administration of the city's affairs.

Principle 6—The initiative and referendum.

The application of this principle places upon the people themselves the responsibility of government where it rightfully belongs. The initiative and referendum are the most efficient weapons of protection for the people—an insurance policy as it were against graft. In providing the referendum the commission plan trusts the people to pass upon great questions of public concern by taking the power to grant special privileges out of the hands of the council and vesting it in the hands of the people—those who are the rightful owners, and who are and who should be entitled to say whether they shall or shall not be granted. This means the elimination and does eliminate corporate influences in the selection of councilmen, because councilmen will no longer be able to "deliver the goods" bargained for. It leaves the people free to dispose of their own, as they see fit, instead of as under the old plan, delegating the power to a few who might be unscrupulous enough to use it for the furtherance of selfish ambition. This is a provision that should never be eliminated—the people should not permit it, and honest public service corporations should demand its retention. An effort to get away from this provision on the part of utility companies who exact large remuneration for poor service will be fully convince the public that the commission plan was adopted none too soon. But a company that is honest with itself and with its patrons that accepts the provisions of this act gracefully and gives good service may exact liberal compensation therefor, and yet so endeavor itself to the public that it may secure from it the most liberal treatment.

Principle 7—The recall.

This gives to the people the rightful power to discharge an incompetent, dishonest or unfaithful servant at any time as an individual has the right to do. A careful review of the commission

act will convince the most pessimistic that its provisions will insure a city the most democratic form of government ever known. The act provides for the city every principle and safeguard that has been advanced by anyone. It gives the people absolute control, and through the initiative, referendum and recall, they may, if they wish, pass upon all acts of the administration. To question the ability of the people to use it in their own interests is to question their ability for self-government. But, should the people even make a failure of it in some cities, they will nevertheless govern themselves more economically and more efficiently than the political "bosses" have exercised in governing them under the present system. Cities have nothing to lose and everything to gain in adopting this plan.

Cedar Rapids' Experience.

Cedar Rapids was one of the few special charter cities of Iowa. Its affairs were managed fairly well and there was no great and crying demand for the commission plan of government at the time of its adoption, there being but a bare majority of thirty-three in its favor when adopted. This majority was secured after a thorough canvass on the part of those who were convinced that the new plan would prove of great benefit to the city in many ways, morally and financially, in particular. They figured that under the new plan the mayor and councilmen would be paid as they should be for their services, and that their best thought would be given to the work, and in this, I believe, they have not been disappointed. Our city affairs are now managed, the mayor acting in the capacity of general manager and the councilmen acting in the capacity of a board of directors. They individually and collectively recognize that what the people want is results, and that the responsibility is theirs to get results. There is no opportunity to dodge. It was an alderman's business to dodge under the old plan, but under the new, never. He has duties to perform to the satisfaction of the public, and he knows, and the public knows, whether or not he is performing those duties, as there is a monthly record published of his every act.

In the selection of appointive officers, men have been chosen because of the belief in the minds of the council that they possessed all necessary qualifications to render good service and, in addition their being of good morals and possessing high ideals. The barnacles were scratched off the pay rolls, and in many instances men were chosen who were not applicants at all, being induced to take public service only after they had been convinced that it was a duty they owed the public to give some service to the city in which they had their habitation, and which guaranteed to them and theirs all the advantages and privileges that any city could guarantee. There being no political debts to pay not a single appointment was made on that account.

Things Being Done.

Because of reasons as stated, and many others not mentioned, our people are deeply interested in the commission plan of government. They see that things are being done and done promptly, that there is a responsible head to city affairs; that their money is being expended with a view to economy and results; that they are being constantly informed as to the progress of the city's business—in short that their municipal government is now a purely business proposition, and with this condition has come a general awakening as to civic affairs among all classes. It is a favorable sign when the voters take the time and trouble to keep themselves informed as to the movement of municipal matters. The commission plan law has done more to awaken civic pride in Cedar Rapids since last April than almost all that happened during the five years that the city was operated under a special charter. While it is interesting to all to know the advantages of a special charter city over those doing business under the general law yet I feel that my time is too limited to explain that feature tonight, but I assure you of one thing, and that is that it has kept the council busy devising ways and means to meet the new and changed order of things, partly because of the special charter, and which difficulties would not be yours.

The record of what has been accomplished in Cedar Rapids is a long one and I can make but brief reference to a few of the principal achievements.

The ordinances of the city were originally enacted under the provisions of the special charter, and it has been found necessary to amend and re-enact many of these to meet the new conditions. In fact, this work has taken a large portion of the time of the council, and it will undoubtedly be many months before this enforced legislative duty is complete.

The Iowa law also provides that the council shall act as the local board of health. The new administration had no more than taken the oath of office when it found on its hands a full-fledged smallpox epidemic, the result of non-enforcement of quarantine regulations by the previous board. Cases developed in all parts of the city, the detention hospital was speedily filled to overflowing, and on every hand perplexing questions arose. The council abandoned for a time much of its city

work, went into almost continuous session as a board of health, established vigorous quarantine, shut up and fumigated schools, colleges and homes, where necessary, and in sixty days the disease was stamped out and the detention hospital was closed.

Books Carefully Examined.

Immediately after taking office a careful examination of all books and records was made by experts, and as soon as possible the people of Cedar Rapids were given something they had never had before, a full, complete, and absolutely correct statement of the financial condition of the city. It was found that the outgoing administration had expended of 1908 funds, between January 1st and April 6th, 1908, the sum of \$119,639.12, or about \$40,000 per month, which, if continued throughout the year, would have added approximately \$100,000 to the city's debt. That the 1908 funds remaining were conserved excellently is evidenced by the fact that on January 1, 1909, there were no warrants outstanding unpaid, every obligation had been met promptly, the current bills having been cleaned up each month and discounted two per cent for cash, the same as any business house, and there remained a balance in every fund in the treasurer's hands.

During these months the sum of \$61,880.00 was paid for the retirement of bonds and for interest, extensive park improvements were made, additional park property was purchased, the police department was augmented by five patrolmen, the fire department stables were replenished, apparatus repaired and rebuilt, two stations re-roofed and all of them repainted, a fine new brick station costing \$6,000 was brought nearly to completion—and now occupied; the police and fire departments were fitted out in the best of new uniforms, the streets and pavements were cleaned and repaired as never before in the history of the city, the greatest amount of brick paving, macadam road laying, cement walks and curb construction, sewer building and water main extension the city has ever known in one season, was accomplished, the work of re-establishing the lines of the river front was prosecuted; the preliminary arrangements for a new concrete bridge, 600 feet in length and costing approximately \$75,000, across the Cedar river, and other minor bridge work, was completed. Charles Mulford Robinson, civic improvement expert, was brought to Cedar Rapids to investigate and report on the city's need, and following out his numerous suggestions, certain streets have been extended, street signs have been erected, neat waste paper receptacles of approved design have been placed on the business streets, certain street parkways have been established, and most important and noteworthy of all, we have accomplished the purchase for park and public building purposes of an island of some six acres' area, lying in the Cedar river. In the very heart of the city. This island, which is between and immediately adjacent to the business districts, both east and west sides, has for many years been a municipal disgrace. Tenanted in large part by unsightly shacks, and made a dumping ground for all manner of rubbish, it has been the cause of unfavorable comment on the part of all. At various times in the past, efforts had been made to secure this island for public purposes, but these efforts had all met with failure. It therefore has remained for the commission plan to accomplish that which was impossible under the old council system. The city offices are now moved to temporary quarters on the island, and the work of improving and parking the island is under way. In due time, the people of Cedar Rapids will erect suitable buildings on that island, and in the years to come Cedar Rapids will be unique in being the possessor of a civic center, the like of which is owned by no other city in the country.

be to weary you. It has been done by five ordinary men, who are not one whit smarter or more capable than hundreds of other men—their fellow townsmen and neighbors. Success has come because of "team work" and an honest desire on the part of each member of the council to see that his department does not lag behind the procession. Partisan politics are absolutely ignored. It so happens that three of the five are Republicans and two are Democrats, but it is accident and not design that makes it so.

Harmony, friendship and gentlemanly courtesy have prevailed without exception, and I wish to bear witness to the pleasant relations which characterize the daily routine of the council of which I have the pleasure and honor of being a member.

Bert Keltz.

Des Moines Capital. Bert Keltz is a member of the pharmacy board and is a man whom many people like. His manners are agreeable and he makes friends. But Mr. Keltz is accused of charging the state with days' work which he did not perform. The case would seem to be pretty clear against him. Scores of witnesses say that he was at the Republican national convention and his bills show that he charged the state for every working day during the month of June. To this charge he has not made answer. If he is guilty, he should forfeit his resignation to Governor Carroll at once. It is related that he attended the state convention held at Waterloo, and that he charged the state for the days thus employed. This accusation has not been denied. Attorney General Byers has decided that the governor has no power to remove a member of the pharmacy board. The attorney general is a good lawyer and has undoubtedly interpreted the law right. The law should be amended in this respect.

There is a board of state medical examiners. These men are all doctors. They ought to be capable of examining students in pharmacy. The work now performed by the pharmacy board should be transferred to the state board of medical examiners. This would operate to effect a great saving to the state.

The state pharmacy board was created some twenty-five years ago in response of the efforts of a pharmacist

from Fort Madison who said the drug trade needed regulating. So far as enforcement of the liquor law is concerned, the state pharmacy board has never been of any service. Furthermore, the state has now passed many statutes relative to the enforcement of the laws and the enforcement element of the pharmacy board could be dispensed with.

The Pulling Power of Doughnuts.

Knoxville Express: The "power of the pass" has been celebrated for several campaigns in Iowa, the power of firewater in elections is frequently noticeable, but it has remained for a Knoxville candidate for alderman to demonstrate the pulling power of the old-fashioned doughnut as an engine of political warfare. Alderman Fry, of the Third ward, found himself in a pretty close box during the recent municipal campaign; it was reported that his opponent, a well-known stock buyer, was about to use fat hogs to influence doubtful voters. Luckily, Fry thought of the doughnuts that his mother used to make—and the day was won! The Fenton bakery received an order to work all Sunday night and all day Monday on the free and unlimited coinage of doughnuts in a frantic effort to turn out sixteen doughnuts for each voter in the Third ward, and it is reported that Fry himself fired up the kitchen range at home and worked all Sunday night turning out with his own fair hands more and yet more of the perforated delicacies. He denies this, and as no fatalities have developed in the Third ward the Express is inclined to believe him. At any rate everybody who was in or about the Third ward' polling place Monday afternoon and evening knows that it was shoe-mouth deep in Fry-ed doughnuts, and that men who came to vote for Ward remained to eat doughnuts and about for Fry. Too late his opponent saw the awful avalanche of doughnuts which were overwhelming him, but resistance was useless. The Hon. Marion Doughnut Fry is alderman from the Third ward, and the Express hopes that in his greatness and puffed-up condition he will not forget the humble doughnut that made him. Hurray for the Third ward and its doughnut alderman.

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