

Community Governance in US Cities

Introduction:

This course will simulate the formation and early years of a new city. The idea is to expose students to a realistic example of community governance in the western United States.

Most cities in the United States are very small compared to Chinese cities. Regardless, the lessons and challenges of a typical formation should provide insights for all those holding an interest in community governance.

Course Methods:

Each day the students will address a new challenge. Lessons will enable thoughtful decisions that can lead to a successful result. Lessons will include political, financial, and legal challenges associated with community building. A final paper is due at the final class, which will include a summary of the lessons learned. The papers will be presented during this final class.

During class exercises, students will be asked to propose solutions as though they were a city official whose job was to help set policies for the new city.

The class will include an actual feasibility study on the formation of a city in the northwest United States. Portions of this study will be used in class exercises, to provide a realistic framework. However, the students' cities must be created from their own imaginations.

Course Requirements:

Students must complete their study assignments, attend class daily, participate in class discussions, and write a final paper. Up to 70 points will be based on class preparation and participation. The remaining 30 points will be based on completion and presentation of the final paper.

All classes will be important. Each unexcused absence will yield a 5% reduction in the final grade.

Class Schedule:

- July 21- Overview
 - Introductions of students and instructor
 - Expectations from students
 - Expectations from instructor
 - Summary of plans for course
 - Context Presentation – Ancient Origins of Community
 - Context Presentation – Cultural / Historic Context for Local Government in the United States
- Class 1 – Financial Challenge
 - Political Scenario
 - Budget requests for 2016 budget total 750,000 – Review actual requests
 - Available resources might reach \$150,000, unless economic conditions get worse.

- If economic conditions continue to get worse, balancing revenues and expenses will require that the city consider cuts rather than program enhancements.
 - Options if economic conditions continue to worsen.
 - Use resources from the city's reserves to manage expenses
 - Raise taxes
 - Cut services
 - Class Assignments ...
 - Create a priority listing of the budget requests.
 - Create a priority listing of programs that should be candidates for cuts.
- Class 2 – Organizational Structure
 - Study Assignment
 - National League of Cities Articles:
 - <http://www.nlc.org/build-skills-and-networks/resources/cities-101/city-structures/local-us-governments>
 - <http://www.nlc.org/build-skills-and-networks/resources/cities-101/city-structures/number-of-municipal-governments-and-population-distribution>
 - Birch Bay Feasibility Study, Pages ES 1 – ES 10
 - <http://mrsc.org/Corporate/media/MediaLibrary/SampleDocuments/Go vDocs/W47-BirchBay.pdf>
 - Political Scenario
 - The city is forming. How should you want organize its policy and administrative responsibilities?
 - Choices
 - Council Manager – Strong Mayor – Commission
 - Number of Council members
 - Other?
- Class 3 –Finances
 - Study Assignment
 - Birch Bay Feasibility Study, Pages 1 – 8
 - Birch Bay Feasibility Study, Pages 28-33
 - John Craig, “Group Votes to Disband” Spokane Spokesman Review <http://www.spokesman.com/stories/2009/feb/12/group-vows-to-disband/>
 - Political Scenario
 - Incorporation opponents creating pressure for
 - Faster emergency response times
 - Improved pothole filling
 - High expectations on city for harsh review of proposed developments
 - Failure to respond to the pressure will risk the life of the new city
 - Choices
 - What are the media / communications challenges of this scenario?
 - Borrowing options

- Start really slow - Borrow no money
 - Start slow - Borrow less money
 - Start fast - borrow lots of money
 - Political Scenario
 - The city's annexation study assumed that Parks and Recreation Services would not be enhanced over county service levels (at least in the initial years after incorporation). Regardless, a highly-vocal group did not agree with that assumption and now insists that the city spend more money on the parks and recreation program than is in the financial model.
 - Choices
 - Increase parks services and reduce some other service
 - Borrow funds to operate the services.
 - Ignore their pleas for improved services.
 - Other?
- Class 4 - Public Safety Services
 - Study Assignment
 - National Sheriffs' Association <http://www.sheriffs.org/content/faq> (Note: Read the answer to Question #8)
 - North Mason Regional Fire Authority Proposal <http://www.northmasonrfa.com/rfa/>
 - Shelton vs Mason County Superior Court Decision - Port of Shelton vs City of Shelton – Hand out
 - Political Scenario – County politics in play
 - The county has 9 elected officials, each with separate but interconnected duties. These include:
 - An elected Sheriff, the chief law enforcement officer for the county
 - An elected Prosecuting Attorney, whose job is to be the lawyer for the county
 - An elected County Treasurer, who manages money for the county
 - An elected Assessor, who oversees appraisals of all properties in the county, which serve as the basis for property tax collections (the higher the appraisal, the higher the tax).
 - An elected Auditor, whose job is to oversee county elections, and to ensure that the county manages its money in accordance with state laws
 - An elected Coroner, whose job is to determine cause of death whenever someone dies in the county
 - Three commissioners, who oversee all other county functions not led by separately elected officials and who control the budgets of all departments.
 - County Finances are very weak as a result of the recession
 - Due to the recession, county income has been dropping, and county commissioners have cut the budgets of all departments, including the Sheriff.

- The Sheriff has publicly raised objections to these cuts, raising concerns over the Commissioners' commitment to public safety.
 - County Sheriff has committed to providing specific police services for the next 3 years. The price matches with the consultant report estimate. However, there is no guarantee that he will maintain that price after the 3 years. Also, considering the pending cuts, you may not believe he will be able to maintain services at the level he has committed to.
 - The County Commission must sign off on any contract, and may not agree to accept the agreement negotiated by the Sheriff.
 - Choices
 - Contract for services
 - Establish a new police department
 - Other?
- Class 5 - Planning and Economic Development
 - Study Assignment
 - Hoene, Christopher "How Cities Across the Nation are Responding to the Great Recession" National League of Cities Report 2011
<http://www.awcnet.org/portals/0/documents/training/materials/EmergeGreatDepressionPPTHoene.pdf>
 - Zoning Primer for the City of Amhurst, Massachutes, Pages 1-3
<http://www.amherstma.gov/zoningprimer>
 - Political Scenario
 - The existing community is made up of homes on lots averaging ½ acre in size. Retail development includes about 500 meters of shops and stores, scattered along both sides of one roadway. There are about 20 4-unit buildings near this area. There is no job center.
 - Healthy cities include a mix of residential, retail and industrial (job center) development.
 - There are vacant lands on the south side of the city near a rail line and major highway.
 - The city has the ability to regulate land use. Areas of the city may be designated for residential, retail or industrial uses.
 - Choices
 - Allow new houses to be built on the vacant lands
 - Zone the land for industrial development and wait
 - Zone the land for industrial development and borrow the money to buy the land and build a new industrial center
 - Other?
- Class 6 – Sewer Service Delivery
 - Study Assignment
 - Handout - Superior Court Decision - Port of Shelton vs City of Shelton
 - Political Scenario

- It is one year after incorporation of the city.
 - Currently all city residents treat their sewage with on site septic systems
 - In the past few years, several wells have become contaminated. The source of contamination is likely from the on site septic systems.
 - Also, in order to develop the industrially zoned lands, sewer service will be required by state law and will be an expectation of future industrial land users.
 - Two miles away from the city is a sewer district. As the name implies, its purpose is to provide sewer service for homes and businesses connected to its system. It has its own employees and elected board of directors. It owns a treatment plant and a distribution system.
 - You have approached the district manager about connecting to their system. He has agreed to connect, but there are his terms:
 - The city must pay for the entire cost (\$10,000,000).
 - As city residents connect, they must pay a \$5,000 connection charge and the city must forward it to the district. (This is so the district can set aside money to pay for additional capacity at the district's sewer plant.)
 - The city must pay for an "oversized" line, making it larger than what is necessary to transfer city sewage to the district's plant.
 - The district will offer sewer service to potential developers along the pathway of the new line, and will not require any of the new connectors to commit to future annexation into the city.
 - The county, which regulates land use in the area, is likely to allow high density development, regardless of the impacts, in order to collect the building permit revenues and sales taxes associated with the construction.
 - Development along the sewer line would create car traffic problems for city residents who drive daily on this road to a larger city where many of them are employed.
 - City plans include residential growth north of the city, not south of the city.
 - Alternatively, the city may develop its own sewer plant and collection system. This will cost \$80,000,000.
 - Options – You decide... (Class discussion)
- Class 7 – Environment
 - Study Assignment
 - Brownfields Success Story: Taking Back Downtown One Brownfield at a Time, Great Falls Montana
[http://www.epa.gov/brownfields/pdfs/EPA_OBLR_SuccessStory_GreatFalls_MT_v5_RELEASE\[3\].pdf](http://www.epa.gov/brownfields/pdfs/EPA_OBLR_SuccessStory_GreatFalls_MT_v5_RELEASE[3].pdf)
 - Political scenario
 - It is 6 years after formation of the city
 - The owner of the industrial land near the highway has proposed to develop his land by building streets and large lots suitable for industrial uses

- Early site analysis has turned up spilled chemicals that probably came from adjoining railroad track, although there is no way to know for sure. Officials at the railroad will not return your phone calls or emails to them asking about the subject.
 - The land owner's banker will not loan money for the development unless the owner cleans up the property. Preliminary estimates are that the cleanup cost will exceed the value of the land.
 - The state has learned about the problem and demanded that the owner clean up the land.
 - Options – You decide... (Class discussion)
- Class 8 - Parks and Recreation Services
 - Study Assignment
 - Birch Bay Feasibility Study, Pages 28-33
 - Political Scenario
 - The city's annexation study assumed that Parks and Recreation Services would not be enhanced over county service levels (at least in the initial years after incorporation). Regardless, a highly-vocal group did not agree with that assumption and now insists that the city spend more money on the parks and recreation program than is in the financial model.
 - Choices
 - Increase parks services and reduce some other service
 - Borrow funds to operate the services.
 - Ignore their pleas for improved services.
 - Other?
 - Activity
 - Use class time to finalize your reports that will be due on Lecture 12.
 - Ask questions
 - Consult with other students
- Class 9 – Reports – Groups deliver final reports. Written reports to the instructor and verbal reports to the class.
 - Your reports must address the following:
 - Answer the following questions:
 - What form of government did you adopt?
 - Why did you use this form of government?
 - Evaluate the list of expenses on Exhibit 17 (page 48) of the Birch Bay Feasibility Study. Allocate \$5,300,000 in total revenue amongst the various items according to your own group's preferences for your city.
Assumptions: The Sheriff's contract for service \$1.3 million per year according to the agreement you have negotiated with the Sheriff and County Commission. Establish amounts for all the remaining items, and explain why you established these for the rest.

Assumption: If you did not select Council-Manager as your form of government assume that the relevant line item is labeled "Administration."

- Establish an ideal amount you should retain in cash reserves. Explain the reasons you believe that this amount is the correct amount
- Within the next few years, you will start up a city police department. Create a plan that facilitates this goal, including the date you intend to transition away from the Sheriff.

Assumptions: It will cost \$1.3 million annually to house and equip the new police department. Operational expenses are not an issue because they will match the amount you are paying the county.

- Create a 6 year park and recreation spending plan, including year by year expenditures over the next 6 years.
- Make a decision on the Questions raised in Classes 5 and 7. Decide what to do with the contaminated land and explain your reasons.
- Decide whether to plan for connection the neighboring sewer district or to develop the city's own sewer utility. Explain your reasons.