City Managers came into being in the early 1900’s because of the corruption, waste, and lack of responsiveness of local governments in the United States.

Business leaders in large cities had begun to recognize that major changes in their local governments were desperately needed for their businesses to grow and prosper. Andrew Carnegie, a founder of United States Steel, had indicated that business needed a stable society to prosper. Local government had to become responsive to the changing needs of the poor, abused and neglected children, the mentally ill and the elderly, to cite a few examples.

Many city governments were the opposite of responsive local government. They were corrupt and inefficient and run by powerful political machines. Citizen and business tax dollars were feeding wasteful local governments which could not be easily accessed by citizens or businesses.

A group of business and other leaders came together to address this crisis. The group included Theodore Roosevelt. Thus the National Municipal league came into being and began to consider how local government should be structured and, just as importantly, how it should be managed.

Efficiency and quality performance were the major goals of their reform deliberations, as well as transparency and responsiveness. The ultimate result was a new plan for the reform of local government which is known as the Council Manager Plan.

The design of this reform local government was not just an idea which had no credibility until it was tried. It was based on a well tested business corporate structure which they adapted to provide not only transparency, but also business type efficiency. The new structure also had the capability of transferring the business ethic of quality customer service to quality citizen service for the new local government.

The new local government structure basically required successful performance to continue the management. Unsuccessful performance was the signal to change the management. This, of course, is the concept of the business chief executive officer who is compensated by business boards of directors for successful performance and terminated for unsuccessful performance.

History is replete with the many gurus of business management who helped build the legendary international corporations we have today such as General Electric, General Motors, Microsoft, and many others. CEO successful performance was a major factor of the business structure and it became a major factor of the Council Manager Plan. Providing for a city manager who was hired as the result of education and experience and continued based on successful performance was revolutionary at that time and remains in place today.

Also in the new local government structure, The National Municipal League created an elected legislative body, the city council, to provide for policy making by the people. This body is comparable to the parliament in the parliamentary system of government. The city council has the authority and responsibility to enact laws to address community problems as well as to hire the city manager based on professional qualifications and terminate the city manager if there is a lack of performance. The major difference between the city council and the business board of directors was the selection of board members. Business board members are selected because of their business skills. The city council was elected to represent the citizens.

The new structure also provided for a leader of the city council who facilitates and guides the policy making process to solve community problems and move the community into the future. This leader is generally called the mayor.
The mayor in this reform government has sometimes been described as a “weak mayor”. This description identifies strength with having the responsibility to manage day to day operations rather than the responsibility to successfully lead the community policymaking process. The effective and visionary mayor in the reform structure is in fact the strongest mayor of all.

This point was most vigorously described to me when I was providing assistance to the emerging municipalities of Chile, following seventeen years of dictatorship. My daughter Karen and I were visiting with a wonderful mayor who had invited us to have coffee with him. I had begun to describe our reform movement to the mayor when he interrupted me and explained that he had left his law practice to become mayor so that he could lead his city. He went on to exclaim that he is not able to lead at all because he spends his days hiring employees, negotiating with unions, buying equipment, and other administrative matters. By the end of his long workdays he told us that he hadn’t considered any new policies to lead his community, his time was spent on day to day operations. “I need a city manager”, he exclaimed. This was a poignant portrayal of how mayors need managers so they can have the time to lead the policy process of the city council. Professional mangers are educated at the graduate level to work with the mayor and city or county council to assist them with policy process by recommending plans to help solve community problems. Managers provide the research for the mayor and city or county council so that they will have well documented plans to consider to move the community forward.

An example of this is the manager recommended five years capital improvement program. This well researched document presents a five year projection for capital projects which the manager and staff have researched and recommended and which has the goal of achieving the optimum use of taxpayer dollars. The C.I.P. introduces new cost saving technologies and will be the financial plan which estimates capital projects and is a priority setting process and a financial plan for each project.

The manager relieves the mayor and city council from having to manage day to day operations. Instead of preparing bid documents and supervising the city’s department heads and administrative employees, as well as negotiating labor contracts and hiring and disciplining employees, the mayor or chairmen of the county council can lead the city or county council in making the best policy possible to move the community forward.

Managers are trained and experienced in the executive and administrative actions needed each day to keep the city’s financial condition positive and provide quality services including police, fire, emergency services, road maintenance, snow and ice control, street lighting, water supply, refuse and sewage disposal and other services. Managers are also skilled at measuring the performance of the city’s services so that poorly performing services can be identified and quickly reformed, replaced, or eliminated.

Many graduate schools throughout the United States came to the conclusion that a professionally educated and experienced city manager was to be an important part of this local government reform and began the process which today provides the candidates for entry level positions on the city manager’s staff who will eventually become city managers.

As the number of reform local governments with managers grew, it became clear that an association of professional managers needed to be created to provide continuing life long professional education for managers and a forum to discuss the constantly evolving problems of local communities.

The International City/County Management Association was founded in the 1914. This dynamic organisation has members from many countries. I was very honored to request that the flag of Romania be presented for the first time at the annual ICMA meeting in Philadelphia, September 29 through October 2, 2002. I was also honored to host my Romanian colleagues at the meeting.

ICMA is recognised throughout the world today as the professional organisation for local government management. ICMA develops state of the art programs to provide managers with the latest technology and training available. A good example is the Center for Performance Measurement which ICMA created four years ago. The centre is providing access for managers to compare their performance with other communities. The service areas measured by the centre include:

1) Code enforcement
2) Facility Management
3) Fire and Emergency Management
4) Fleet Management
5) Road Maintenance
6) Housing
The center collects data from more than one hundred and twenty cities and other local governments. The Government Accounting Standards Board (GASB), Task Force on Service Efforts and Accomplishments (SEA) has been developing performance measurement reporting guidelines since 1989. The Task Force, of which I am a member, includes a broad representation of the many organisations and professions which are involved in government management, accounting, and auditing at all levels of the United States intergovernmental system. The work of the Task Force will have a major effect on the transparency of poorly performing services at all levels. ICMA’s Center for Performance Measurement has brought the developing science of performance measurement directly to local government professional managers and continues to be a major force in improving local government service performance and performance transparency.

Performance is directly related to specific productivity improvement objectives as part of a continuing productivity improvement goal. City and other local government managers are trained to regularly seek new and tested technology which improves employee productivity and reduces costs. New equipment which uses less costly and more environmentally sound fuel is a good example. When I was county manager one of my capital improvement program projects was a compressed natural gas system (CNG). We built a CNG fueling station and converted or purchased over thirty vehicles which could operate with CNG. Using New York State grants, the net cost of the trucks and cars were not more expensive than regular gasoline vehicles. The CNG, however, was ten cents per equivalent gallon cheaper than gasoline. The engine maintenance costs were substantially less which make this change very cost effective, while improving air quality. The availability of CNG infrastructure, which was not available in the private marketplace, was also economic development backup support for the local CNG vehicle manufacturing plant.

To insure that technological innovation for local government is pursued vigorously, ICMA has a strong research and development department as well as Public Technology Incorporated which ICMA and other organisations created to identify new research results which can be applied to local government. When future managers are in graduate schools of public administration, they serve internships which are under the supervision of experienced city or other local government managers who place the interns directly in local government operations where they have real experience on the job. Knowing that professional competence is the result of life long learning as well as experience, ICMA created the ICMA University to provide continuing education to insure a high level of continuing professional manager competency, and to provide the citizens with the confidence that their tax dollars are managed in the most cost effective manner possible.

The ICMA code of ethics is a significant local government corruption prevention system. Having been a member of the ICMA Executive Board which is directly responsible for ethics enforcement, I remain impressed with the zero tolerance policy of ICMA in administering the ICMA Code of Ethics and rules of procedure for enforcement. The system is very successful in that there are few serious complaints and those are acted on quickly and rigorously.

The code and implementing rules are comprehensive and pervade the local governments where professional managers work. The code is a device to prevent even the perception of corruptibility. For example, managers may not own property in the community where they serve, except for a home and a personal recreation type facility such as boat house or barn for horses.

Managers may not participate in elections. This further becomes a prohibition from attending any kind of partisan political function, such as a political party dinner or election celebration. I have been asked many times to attend such functions and humbly decline citing the code of ethics prohibition.
The ICMA Code of Ethics is also a facilitative device for transparency. Citizens are assured that if a manager is censured for a serious ethics violation, notice would be sent to local newspapers by ICMA.

United States local government came from historical English local government and the early Dutch farming and merchant community institutions. Local governments suffered under the political corruption and dramatic change of the Industrial Revolution era and made many mistakes. Where reform efforts failed, however, better structures succeeded.

Most importantly, the National Municipal League (now the National Civic League) was created by citizens to reform local government and ICMA was created to provide highly skilled professional managers to manage the reform local governments.