CITY HALL Dallas' City Charter; adopted in 1931, was designed to keep politics out of government. But politics arrived along with single-member districts. Now, the city struggles with the worst of both worlds: a bureaucracy that can no longer manage, and elected officials who lack the tools to govern.

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Architect I.M. Pei probably didn't mean for Dallas City Hall to look like a ship run aground, but these days the imagery is hard to ignore. Consider these events: The city manager hires the police chief without interviewing him and fires him before informing the mayor or City Council. Neighborhoods crumble while code inspectors sit in their offices, writing bogus citations. The council protects the city's bond rating by limiting its borrowing - to the point that the bond rating goes down. Who's steering this ship of state? The answer - according to everyone from insiders to political scientists to management experts - is nobody.

"Nobody wants the ball," said George Schrader, who served as Dallas city manager from 1973 to 1981.

"There's no sense of where we're going. No one's really in charge," said Dr. Robert Fairbanks, who teaches Dallas history at the University of Texas at Arlington.

"Too inward-looking ... no shared vision or overarching strategy ... operates in uncooperative silos rather than as a cohesive whole," the Booz Allen Hamilton consultants wrote.

City Manager Ted Benavides begs to differ.

"The conclusion seems to be that we're in a ditch somewhere. I don't concur with that," he said. "Frankly, I think somebody wanted to write bad things."

Mayor Laura Miller was more receptive. "Do I think the report is off base?" she said. "No, I don't think it's off base."

People contribute to the problems the report cited, but most of the fault lies with the system of government itself - or, as Booz Allen found, the absence of a workable system.
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Under Dallas' 73-year old City Charter, no one - the city manager, the mayor, the council members, the city staff - is explicitly responsible for doing many of the basic things a modern city does: thinking strategically about its future; keeping its infrastructure in good condition; seeing that the city is able to meet its long-term financial obligations.

Here's how vague the charter is: The council, with $1.9 billion to spend this year, is directed merely "to make suitable provision for the assurance of adequate and appropriate prior review and consideration of [its] official actions."

That's less direction than is given to the city's Animal Shelter Commission, with a budget of zero. Like all other council-created advisory boards, it is required by law to formulate a mission statement, guiding principles, objectives, an annual work plan and indicators by which to measure success.

On paper and even more in practice, Dallas labors under "a highly fragmented decision-making process and a diffused governance model that make it all but impossible to maintain focus on the key objectives," Booz Allen concluded.

Fewer than half of the 14 council members accepted repeated invitations from The Dallas Morning News to see and discuss the report's key findings. Among those who took the opportunity, the overwhelming response was that they - unlike previous councils - personally work well together, so the report is wrong.

"The city is finally moving in the right direction," said council member Elba Garcia. "I'm very proud to serve with my colleagues. For the first time, all of us came up with five points where we're willing to focus."

In defending the council, First Assistant City Manager Mary Suhm inadvertently suggested just how low the leadership bar is set: "Some days, when they sit and have a discussion, you realize that they discussed issues, they've come to some decisions, they have developed some consensus."

And on the other days?

Despite its habitual claims to professionalism and efficiency, City Hall can no longer hide the consequences of its disconnects.

* * *

RESIDENTS LIKE LIVING HERE, according to the 2003 Dallas Morning News Poll. But they are less satisfied than they were 10 years ago with crucial city services such as crime prevention, streets and code enforcement. They are less satisfied than residents of Dallas' peer cities in the Southwest, even though the city's expenditures on those services are comparable.

The city has more than $193 million in long-term bills that it doesn't know how it will pay; the state is forcing it to pour more money into its pension system; and the agencies that rate its fiscal health have begun to raise red flags.

Even when Dallas sets out toward something visionary - say, the Trinity River project - it can still lose its way. The largest public works project in the city's history was sold to voters with lofty promises before the costs or benefits were thoroughly analyzed.

Six years after the $246 million bond election to pay for it, discord over the project continues, and residents wonder if they'll ever see the things they voted for.
Government Dallas-style not only lacks incentives for effective leadership, it provides cover for a host of failings.

"The accountability is fuzzed up. That's a good safety device," Mr. Schrader said.

"The way the charter is, people have built-in excuses," said David Holl, president and CEO of Mary Kay Inc.

The mayor can blame the manager, who can blame the council, who can blame the public, who can blame the staff, who can blame the mayor, who ...

When presented with Booz Allen's findings, Ms. Miller emphatically connected with the idea of an accountability gap - among the staff, that is.

"When people are nonperforming, it is the style of this management team to move them to another spot," the mayor said. "Nobody's ever held accountable for anything."

Ms. Miller sidestepped a question about whether elected officials also should be accountable, just as coaches are held accountable for providing players with a game plan. Again, she suggested that the problem is with the staff, and that the council should replace Mr. Benavides, which it has declined to do.

"On many levels, the council and I are running in the same direction," she said. "A lot of us have the same vision for the city. But I think we could get there a whole lot faster with one vote, and it's not happening."

Mr. Benavides said that he and the staff have always considered themselves accountable.

"I take responsibility for all the folks that work for me, and when there's issues, I step up and do it, and I think my staff does it."

The city manager noted, obliquely, that past councils have failed even to provide him with broad goals, much less a detailed strategy. He's glad, he said, that this year the council named priorities and is laboring to translate them into a performance plan for him.

"I want to come back and go through this section by section," Mr. Benavides told the council in March, after it failed to take up the performance plan during a workshop session. "I can't read your minds. I want to do a good job."

* * *

ANOTHER DISCONNECT: WHO speaks for the city of Dallas?

In the public mind, the mayor does. However, under the charter, the mayor - the one person who owes his or her job directly to voters across the city - is a figurehead.

"If you're going to get the kind of political leadership you need, it requires more than strong jawbones; it requires the ability to use the levers of power," said Dr. Royce Hanson, author of Civic Culture and Urban Change: Governing Dallas.

Under Dallas' council-manager form of government, the city manager is supposed to operate the levers. But in 2004, the city manager survives in Dallas by keeping council members comfortable, not by presenting them with long-range challenges that might generate controversy or cost money.
"Right now, there is a culture of hedging, stalling and trying to avoid decisions," said Jon Edmonds, executive director of the Foundation for Community Empowerment, which works to improve blighted neighborhoods.

"The exercise is: 'How can I make it through another year, just make it through another budget?'" said former Police Chief Ben Click, who also served as an interim assistant city manager.

"I think the challenge is balance," Ms. Suhm said. "The question every day is: 'What have I got to get done today, and how does that affect me long-term?'

"Right now, do we need to focus on the long term? Yeah, we need to."

The City Council is a disconnect unto itself.

The authors of the charter conceived of it as a board of directors, and of the city as an undivided whole. But for decades, white people living north of the Trinity got vastly more than their fair share.

Increasingly through the years - and especially since the city begrudgingly adopted the 14-1 voting system in 1991 - council members have functioned as representatives of distinct constituencies.

Trouble is, the mechanisms of government are disconnected from today's political realities.

For instance, council members, who are paid $37,500 a year for a full-time job, have no independent staff to analyze issues or handle the flood of constituent requests. They have little power to challenge the manager, given that it takes a two-thirds vote to fire him or her.

"Why would anybody want this [council] job?" asked Dr. Robert Behn, who runs training programs for local government leaders at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. "The elected officials don't have the wherewithal to set up a system to ratchet up performance. It's a great deal for the city manager. He realizes, 'They can't touch me.'"
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However, given Dallas' racial history, talk of realigning the powers of government raises alarms among many people of color. They fear a back-door attempt to turn back the clock on the continuing struggle to uplift people and neighborhoods long slighted by City Hall.

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THAT'S PART AND PARCEL OF THE final disconnect, which is ultimately the most serious. Trust - "fundamentally the coin of the realm," in Dr. Hanson's words - is in critically short supply.

In a 2002 poll by The Dallas Morning News, two-thirds of residents thought City Hall lacked vision and was rife with corruption. In The News' 2003 poll, nearly two-thirds of residents said that people like themselves have little or no influence over City Council decisions.

The second poll used some of the same questions that the city used to ask residents in its own polling. The city last did that in 1993.

"The citizens have a distrust of government," Dr. Fairbanks said. "The government has a distrust of citizens. Dallas leaders are really distrustful of the public."

One manifestation is what former Mayor Ron Kirk called "the no-new-taxes brick wall" - the refusal to even discuss the merits of paying more in the short term to make the city better or more competitive in the long term.

"That becomes a terrible disincentive to creative thinking," Mr. Kirk said.

Or consider the $555 million bond package for bread-and-butter improvements that was put before voters last year.

Nearly half of council members, including Ms. Miller, wanted to limit the proposal to $371 million on the ballot. The council ultimately went for the full $555 million - and it passed with large-to-huge majorities in every part of the city.

Subsequently, one bond-rating agency downgraded the city's bonds, which could make it more expensive to borrow money. The reason? Dallas is failing to invest enough in its infrastructure.

Several council members cited the bond vote as the point at which the city began to rebound from a period of lethargy.

"After that, everybody [on the council] looked around the room and said, 'Wow,,'" recalled council member Veletta Forsythe Lill.

"I wish now we had done a bigger bond program," said Ms. Suhm, the first assistant city manager. "We just weren't quite brave enough."

In effect, the council didn't lead the city, the city had to lead the council.

It doesn't have to be this way.

Some, including Ms. Miller, argue forcefully that Dallas should switch to a strong-mayor government. Booz Allen called the mayor-vs.-manager debate "a distraction," noting that workable systems can be found in council-manager cities and strong-mayor cities. Not perfect, but workable.

Some hallmarks:
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Each player in government - the mayor, the council, the top staff executive or administrator and the employees - has a clearly defined role, spelled out in the charter, in ordinances, or in rules of procedure. Duties encompass long-term planning as well as year-to-year budgeting.

As an aside, Booz Allen's report suggests that some turnover will be necessary if Dallas is to regain its momentum. "Inevitably, we would anticipate changes in key management and leadership positions that put the appropriate mix of change agents and turnaround experts in key positions," the report said.

In many council-manager cities, including San Jose, Calif., and Phoenix, the mayor has an enlarged role, such as laying out budget priorities or nominating a candidate for city manager when the post is vacant. In San Jose, the manager submits candidates for department-head jobs to the council for approval.

Through mechanisms such as strategic plans and land-use plans, the policy-makers focus more on broad, long-term issues and less on reactive, ad hoc decisions. Once the plans are in place, operational decisions - yearly budgets, capital spending and the like - should follow them.

The strategy encompasses clear, measurable steps for reaching the goals. Those translate into performance measures that provide accountability throughout the organization. Employees know what's expected, why it's important and whether they're meeting expectations.

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GOVERNMENT IS "TRANSPARENT," making it easy for residents and interest groups to know what's going on, to speak and be heard, and to participate in decisions.

When San Jose searched for a police chief, a panel of residents chose the search firm and interviewed the finalists. In Phoenix, 14 "Village Planning Committees" weigh zoning cases and other issues before they reach City Hall. (Booz Allen found that Dallas was the least transparent of the 15 cities it analyzed.)

"Of course, here at City Hall, we think we are just brilliant and we know everything," joked Phoenix City Manager Frank Fairbanks. "I can't tell you the number of times we've gone out and people on the Village Planning Committees have told us things we didn't know about their neighborhoods. They've kept the staff from making mistakes. They've kept the city from making mistakes."

"Transparency is the most important component," said former Phoenix Mayor Skip Rimsza. "It allows everyone to have ownership." Officials have to believe, he said, that "people are good. People are solid."

Mr. Schrader, too, said that in retrospect, he would have worked harder as city manager to hear the voices of ordinary people.

"You never know where the good ideas are going to come from," he said. "They come from the strangest places. You have to ask."

As a doctoral student, Dr. Luis Fraga wrote his dissertation partly about the Dallas Citizens Council, whose legacy lives on in the city's culture of conflict-avoidance.

"Dallas is very Southern," said Dr. Fraga, who teaches urban politics at Stanford University. "There's a lot of dysfunction, but that's part of its charm."
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His prescription for change at City Hall: Open up and lighten up.

"Adopt a risk-assessment strategy. Get the smartest people around and say, 'Give me some ideas.' Try something. Learn something. Reposition yourself based on what you learn. Allow room for failure."

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"Make suitable provision for..."

Dallas require vastly different levels of detail regarding the duties and performance of the City Council compared with what it expects of its advisory boards and commissions. Booz Allen concluded that Dallas' "diffuse" governance model is to blame for many of the city's performance problems.

FOR THE CITY COUNCIL
Under the heading "Policy-Making Procedures," the Dallas City Charter directs the mayor and City Council to:

* "Make suitable provision for the assurance of adequate and appropriate prior review and consideration of official actions."
* Assure "a high performance level of services to the citizens."
* Provide "responsiveness to the people" and "accountability in municipal government."
* Adopt rules of procedure.
* Create a standing finance committee responsible for "financial and audit oversight."
* Establish other standing committees and set rules for their operations.

FOR CITY BOARDS
The ordinance creating the city's citizen advisory boards and commissions requires that, each year, each one submit to the council an annual report containing:

* A mission statement and guiding principles
* A list of objectives, programs and success indicators
* Highlights of the past year's accomplishments
* A working program for the coming year, with revised goals
* A summary of the board's recommendations, including a minority report if one exists

LESSONS
"The Dallas City structure fragments the lines of accountability, responsibility, and authority among too many individuals and groups.''

"Much of the public commentary regarding the Dallas city government focuses on the role of the mayor and the city manager ... In our view, this debate is a distraction.''

"This review discovered ample evidence of successful cities that have a city-manager-as-executive model like San Jose as well as mayor-as-executive models.''

"Either model can work so long as operations of the city government are transparent and, most importantly, questions of who does what are clearly resolved."

SOURCE: Booz Allen Hamilton
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