

8. The Selection Process

Once the deadline for submitting résumés has passed and all applications have been received, the selection process begins. Principal steps are as follows:

- Reviewing the applications
- Determining which candidates will be interviewed
- Interviewing the candidates
- Making the final selection.

Reviewing the Applications

The selection process begins with a review of the applications and résumés that have been submitted. Depending on how the governing body has chosen to conduct the recruitment, the participants involved in this initial review may be the body as a whole, the chief elected officer, a subcommittee of the governing body, the staff, or the executive recruitment firm. Alternatively, some local governments have used a panel of chief administrators from other local governments to serve as a screening panel. Regardless of who performs the screening, the objective of the initial review is to identify those candidates who best reflect the qualities, characteristics, experience, and areas of expertise that were defined in the administrator profile.

Major Decision Point: Determining the Candidates to Be Interviewed

The determination of the candidates to be interviewed is a significant decision point in the selection process. The objective here is to narrow the total group of applicants to a smaller group that will continue to the next step.

Initial Background Check After the group of applicants has been narrowed down to those who meet the qualifications described in the administrator profile, the list may be further refined by confirming educational credentials and conducting online checks. Such reviews should not violate the confidentiality of the applicant pool. For online checks, it is important to consider the source and avoid drawing hasty conclusions from these sources.

Selection of Candidates After the review of the résumés and the initial background check, the participants in this process should meet with the governing body as a whole to recommend which applicants should be invited to an interview. The chosen group of candidates should be large enough to expose the governing body to an array of personalities. In most cases, five to ten candidates should be selected. The governing body may also establish a secondary list of candidates who could be invited to the interview if one or more of the first group of candidates decline or are unable to continue with the process.

Informing the Candidates Once candidates have been selected, the governing body representative, the staff, or the executive recruiter should contact the each candidate by phone and do the following:

1. Inform the candidate that he or she has been selected to be interviewed and offer congratulations (the candidate should be made to feel that the governing body is pleased to have reviewed his or her résumé). At the same time, confirm the candidate's continuing interest in the position.
 2. Advise the candidate of: the nature of the interview process, including date and time, number of other candidates, whether there are any in-house candidates, and when a decision is expected to be made. Indicate that all the details and information will be confirmed in a written correspondence. If email is to be used for this correspondence, confirm the candidate's email address.
 3. As described in the section on applicant relations, the governing body should have already determined the extent to which the recruitment process will be confidential. At this point, the candidate should be advised if the names of candidates are to be made public and be given the opportunity to withdraw.
1. Confirm that the candidate has received the information package provided during the application process. Indicate that a supplemental package with more detailed information will be provided directly to the candidate's home in advance of the interview. The supplemental package may include:

- A list of governing body members and their occupations
- Copies of meeting minutes from the past several months
- The general or comprehensive plan and land use maps
- The most recent budget
- A recent bond prospectus
- Any other material that would be of particular relevance, given the goals and objectives of the local government and the criteria for the position.

As an alternative to a paper package of information, the candidates can be directed to the locality's website for such information.

5. Confirm local government policy on reimbursement of expenses incurred in conjunction with the interview. Many local governments reimburse candidates for all out-of-pocket expenses, including reasonable transportation, room, and board. ("Reasonable" is intended to eliminate first-class airline tickets, four-star hotels, and gourmet restaurants.)

Such reimbursement of expenses is another way that the local government can demonstrate its interest in the candidate. It reinforces the positive nature of the recruitment process and is sometimes a factor in whether the candidate is able to attend. Should there be strong reluctance on the part of the governing body to reimburse all expenses, the local government can share expenses with the candidate or can agree to reimburse all expenses incurred after the first trip.

The local government staff can offer to handle all reservations, transportation, and related matters, but this can be cumbersome and time-consuming. In most cases, the local government confirms the time and place and lets the candidate make his or her own arrangements. The candidates usually prefer this approach as well.

Interviewing the Candidates

Most local governments use the interview approach for selecting the chief administrator. In this approach, the governing body will meet as a whole with each individual candidate. As the initial interview is usually limited to an hour, a second interview with one or more of the finalists is generally incorporated into the process.

Initial Interview The following provides important guidelines for conducting the initial interview.

Structure of the Interview The interview process should be well organized in a comfortable setting for both parties that invites open and relaxed discussions. This element of the process is generally not considered a public meeting, although the governing body, staff, or executive recruiter should consult with the city's legal advisor to ensure that all requisite notices are sent and other legal requirements are met.

All members of the governing body should participate in the interview with one member, usually the chair, designated as the discussion leader. This interview should last at least an hour as it is difficult to pursue a range of questions in less time. Further, all candidates anticipate and deserve an opportunity to present their qualifications to the governing body and describe their interest in the position. It is important to realize that the interview process not only provides the governing body with an opportunity to improve its knowledge of the candidate but also influences the candidate's interest in the position.

As part of the initial interview, the governing body may want to include a comprehensive tour of the community. A trusted senior staff person would be a likely tour guide.

Content of the Interview Questions During the first interview, the governing body will question the candidate about a variety of matters, such as overall work experience, specific accomplishments, career objectives, alternative approaches to practical problems faced by the local government, and similar matters. A list of potential questions is provided in Appendix D.

The interview also gives the candidate an opportunity to evaluate the governing body as a group and to ask questions. An important issue to discuss during the interview is the governing body's working relationship with the administrator, clarifying all roles and responsibilities.

During the formal and any informal meetings between the governing body and the candidates, discussions and questions should focus on the criteria for the position that were established at the outset of the recruiting process. Obviously, discussions should stay within acceptable legal parameters and should not include references to politics, religion, age, racial origin, and sexual preferences.

When the initial interview process is over, the governing body should avoid impulsive action but rather take whatever time is necessary to arrive at a comfortable and well-reasoned decision. At this point, either one person has emerged as the clear choice of the

governing body; or, more likely, the pool of candidates has been narrowed down to two or three individuals that the governing body would like to further pursue. In most cases, the process will involve a second interview of this smaller group of finalists. However, if there is one clear choice, please refer to the section entitled “Making the Final Selection.”

Second Interview If, after the initial interview, there are two or three candidates that the governing body would like to further consider, a couple of options exist for setting up a second interview:

1. The governing body may invite the finalists back for a second, more in-depth interview, coupled perhaps with some sort of community function. This arrangement often provides the governing body with the insight needed to make a final decision.
2. The governing body may invite the finalists back for a second, more in-depth interview, coupled with an opportunity for community leaders and/or staff to provide input into the selection of the chief administrator.

In either case, finalists should be notified of their status, congratulated for being among the select few who will be further considered, informed of the process, and asked for permission for the governing body to conduct reference checks.

Reference Checks As the governing body is now deciding between two or three qualified candidates, it is important at this point to conduct reference checks that provide additional information on which to base the decision. References should be checked to learn about each finalist’s ability to work effectively with people, to develop a more complete understanding of the finalist’s work experience and specific accomplishments, and to see if the finalist’s qualifications match the profile for the position. The following suggestions are important for ensuring consistency and thoroughness when conducting reference checks:

- The reference checks may be performed by members of the governing body, staff, or executive recruitment firm. In general, however, it is advisable to limit the number of people performing the checks to one or two. It may be difficult, depending on the number of candidates, to have one person perform all the reference checks, especially if there are three references for each candidate. Further, it can be helpful if two people compare notes on the same candidates.

- Be consistent in discussing issues with and asking questions of each candidate in order to provide a good basis for comparison.
- Contact enough people to ensure a consistent reading as to the candidate’s strengths and weaknesses. If a reference can say only good things about the candidate, he or she should be asked directly what weaknesses the candidate has.

Decision Point: Inviting the Candidate’s Spouse/Partner

While the focus of the recruitment is on the chief administrator, the governing body may formally invite the candidate’s spouse/partner to the community during the interview process. Generally, this type of invitation occurs only after the first interview process has narrowed the group of candidates down to the top two or three. The spouse/partner should never be included in the formal interview process, nor made to feel as if he or she is being interrogated in any way.

If the governing body formally invites the spouse/partner to accompany the candidate, it is important that this part of the process be as well organized as all the other parts that concern the candidate directly. Here, too, an important impression about the community is being made. The interests of the spouse/partner should be carefully determined and accommodated.

On the other hand, the governing body may use an informal, non-structured approach to the involvement of the spouse/partner. Understanding that a candidate may bring his or her spouse/partner along to explore the community as a possible future home, the governing body may consider having a packet of relevant community information available.

Decision Point: Community Involvement

The governing body must decide whether to involve community members or committees in the interview process. In most cases, the local government assumes responsibility for the interviews and conducts the process of selecting the new chief administrator without the involvement of members of the community.

In some cases, however, governing bodies have chosen to supplement the usual discussion between members and finalists by inviting community leaders to participate. For example, finalists may meet with selected community leaders to answer questions and receive their input on matters they consider important to the local government. If this option is taken, the purpose of the meeting should be made clear to all involved. Both the finalist and the community members

should know whether these meetings are intended simply to provide the finalist with additional information on the local government or whether the community group will also be involved in the actual selection process. In the latter case, although the input from the community will be valuable, it should be made clear that the governing body will make the final selection based upon a variety of factors.

Decision Point: Staff Involvement The governing body must also decide whether to involve staff members in the interview process. It may choose to supplement the usual discussion between members and finalists by inviting staff members to participate. For example, finalists may meet with selected department directors to answer questions and review departmental operations in more detail.

If this option is taken, its purpose should be made clear to all involved. Both the finalist and the staff members should know whether these meetings are intended simply to provide the finalist with additional information on the local government or whether the group will also be involved in the selection process. In the latter case, although the input from the staff will be valuable, it should be made clear that the governing body will make the final selection based upon a variety of factors.

Major Decision Point: Making the Final Selection

After the second interviews, there should be one person who is the clear first choice of the majority, if not all, of the governing body. It is important to both the governing body and the potential new hire that the decision be unanimous, if possible. A unanimous vote from the governing body demonstrates a commitment of support to the new chief administrator and sends a positive message to both the organization and the community. If the governing body is divided on the appointment and the decision is not unanimous, however, the chosen finalist should be advised of this prior to accepting the position.

It is important that the vote for the new chief administrator be unanimous, if possible. This sends a positive message to the organization and the community.

Once the selection has been made, the governing body, staff, or executive recruiter should contact the finalist, confirm his or her willingness to accept the position, and obtain permission to conduct a very thorough background check, which will be performed by an outside party. This process includes interviews with individuals in the candidate's current community, an investigation into possible criminal history, and a credit check, which requires the candidate's consent.

Another element of this final selection process may include some or all of the members of the governing body making an on-site visit to the finalist's current community. Often finalists insist that an agreement regarding terms and conditions of employment be agreed upon before being open to a site visit.

Once the governing body is satisfied with the results of that process, it may inform the finalist and move ahead to put together a total compensation package and discuss other related arrangements. However, if the governing body is unable to satisfactorily conclude negotiations with its first choice, it may need to engage in discussions with one of the other finalists. Thus, it should refrain from notifying the other finalists until all arrangements have been finalized with the first-choice candidate.

From a public image standpoint, it is imperative that all candidates learn about the final selection from the governing body or its representative, as opposed to hearing about it from a third party or reading about it online or in a newsletter or professional publication. A representative from the governing body, staff, or executive recruitment firm should personally contact the runners-up prior to or at the same time that a news release about the appointment is issued.