

THE PITTSBURGH CIVIC COMMISSION

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IT IS impossible for organizations like the Pittsburgh civic commission to "point with pride" to many definite results and work accomplished upon which their imprint may rest. Pioneers in civic enterprise seldom get credit for the foundations they have laid and upon which the superstructure must of necessity be carried on by others. This is especially true of an organization which must often fight the political powers that be. There can be no such words as "go along" in the vocabulary of an honestly conducted and voluntary organization made up of men who give their time and money for the public good.

The best work of a public commission is always done by way of education and suggestion. Otherwise too much pressure is at once met by the endeavor to gain political control of the organization, or the antagonism of public men who desire no help from any citizen. We prate about our democracy in cities—there is no place where there is so little of it. Let some good citizen who has a real interest in his city, go either to the council chamber or to an official in his native city, with some excellent suggestions. His prominence may save him from actual discourtesy, but both the scheme and himself will be looked upon with scant patience. The whole atmosphere of civic officialdom is expressed in the words, "Who's doing this?" The reason of course is obvious. We have permitted the impression to get abroad that the men we elect to office are public masters, instead of public servants.

A civic commission organized for the purpose of coaching citizens who aspire to office, so as to get clearly in their brains that they are servants, not masters, would have biblical backing for its existence and would be the best thing American cities could do at present. We might call it "the university of civic culture and democracy," and when men graduated their diplomas would be the best platform for civic campaigns. It is rather rough in a democracy to have to teach men that "public office is a public trust" and that he who would be a *real* master must first learn to be a *real* servant, but that is one of the most fundamental forward movements in civics we could make in America. The result may be summed up in a remark made by the burgomeister of a large German city some years ago. The writer had expressed both pleasure and surprise on the fact that, while keeping his city so splendidly clean and up-to-date in every particular, he at the same time had leisure for, and entire charge of, \$50,000,000 in expenditure for improvements which

¹ President of the commission.

would make his city a marked one, even among German cities. His answer was made in broken English—"My dear sir, I am building a city, not a machine." In Germany they make a man ruler over many cities, if they find he is public servant enough to rule over one.

It is very hard to keep public spirited citizens on a commission like the Pittsburgh civic commission, for it is only after many years of work and education they occasionally get their suggestions or plans adopted, and these largely upon the understanding that such improvements are to be credited to the political machine in power, to be used of course as a political asset. This has been the greatest work of the Pittsburgh civic commission—it has effaced itself in order to get its suggestions carried out. When you can get 15 men to spend their money and time for years and permit the credit to go elsewhere, you are getting close to the ideal of the real public servant.

The present grade of the greatest improvement of the last administration is the grade given by the engineer employed by the Pittsburgh civic commission. One of the great thoroughfares which now carries the principal vehicle traffic to the East End of our city with a new, beautiful and artistic bridge will be found suggested and outlined by the commission. The art commission which is adding so much to the artistic beauty of public work in Pittsburgh was created by a bill drawn in the offices of the civic commission and followed by the secretary of the civic commission in every particular through the legislature until the governor's signature made it a law. The ordinance making it possible for our present excellent traffic regulations was drawn up in conjunction with the officers and engineers of the commission. The initiative for a commission form of government was initiated through a meeting of prominent business men called by the civic commission, which in turn called a mass meeting. The resolutions were written by the officers of the civic commission, and the secretary of the commission lived in Harrisburg until the bill was passed. Another organization had the credit largely. The proposed wall for keeping out floods and the filling in of many of the principal streets was suggested by the civic commission. The wall has received the endorsement of the flood commission, and a large number of streets were filled in by the last administration.

The great work, however, was for comprehensive city planning by an outside commission, B. J. Arnold, John R. Freeman and Frederick Law Olmsted, three of the leading experts in the country, were retained to outline constructive investigation into "the needs and limitations of the Pittsburgh industrial district in so far as its physical development can be effectively controlled by the action of the community." That report covered transportation, construction of thoroughfares and parks, water supply, sewage disposal, wharf treatment for floods, smoke prevention

and building regulations. Detailed sketches have followed. Mr. Olmsted's report is a text book in Pittsburgh.

It is not the fault of the civic commission that the exhaustive report of Bion J. Arnold on the transportation problems of our city which cost the city \$50,000, has not yet been used with good results to the city. The commission had retained Mr. Arnold, but gave over that engagement to the city at its request and his report should be the basis for Pittsburgh action, as was a report made by him to Chicago for its action. The unfortunate political conditions obtaining in Pittsburgh have not yet produced a man who could take that report and utilize it for the benefit of a long suffering citizenship. The facts given by Mr. Arnold in his report to Chicago was the basis of an entire change in that city's transportation problem. It is no reflection upon his splendid work that the powers in Pittsburgh failed to do likewise. To get facts which might change conditions in your street car system which affects the welfare of a million people for \$50,000 makes that sum look small indeed.

Thus the work of the commission will find fruitage in the permanent improvements made in Pittsburgh for 100 years to come, long after the men who so unselfishly wrought have died. However, they are seeing many of their suggested improvements brought into existence even now. You have only to go over the city with one of the reports like "Pittsburgh Main Thoroughfares and the Down Town District" in your hands, to see how, by the suggestions of practical men, things somehow come to pass. This perhaps gives some idea of what such a commission can accomplish by untiring and unselfish devotion to the cause of civic advance, without hope of reward.

The difficulty, however, in going on with such work is at once apparent. When a commission does not get credit for the things done through such suggestions and powers of education, it usually goes to pieces on the financial rocks. You can't accomplish the splendid practical and constructive work done by the commission without a rather heavy expenditure of money. Mr. Andrew Carnegie has most graciously helped this commission by adding 20 per cent to all the money contributed by the people of Pittsburgh. The people of Pittsburgh naturally wanted results. They have gotten very many, but the credit has largely gone elsewhere. Raising money annually becomes more difficult.

The endowment of civic commissions made up of men who would give their time unselfishly to public work would be of incalculable good to any city. It presents a wonderful opportunity for men of wealth to make permanent civic spirit which must be fostered if our cities are to be what our great American nation has a right to expect. A citizen of Cleveland has started it. This beginning is well worthy of emulation in Pittsburgh.

One of the substantial improvements in which the Pittsburgh civic commission had a large share as mentioned above was that of the removal of the hump described by U. N. Arthur in the July, 1914, issue of the NATIONAL MUNICIPAL REVIEW (vol. iii, p. 547).

HOW TO MAKE STATE LEAGUES OF MUNICIPALITIES EFFECTIVE¹

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THE first problems arising in connection with increasing the efficiency of state municipal leagues are perhaps among the simplest, though not by any means necessarily easy of solution. The first question naturally would be whether the unit of membership should be the municipality or its officials. It seems to me that for practical purposes it must be a combination of both features.

The unit so far as membership and voting rights are concerned should, in my opinion, be the municipality, for only by giving to the cities as such in their corporate and continuing capacity the character of members, can the continuity of the league itself be insured. Of course municipalities, like all other corporations, public or private, can act only through individuals and those individuals are the municipal officials. The active personal participation, therefore, can come only through the persons who act as agents of the municipalities. The simplest solution of the problem would seem to be that the municipalities, as such, should be the legal members, paying the dues and exercising the voting rights through their representatives or delegates, while all of the higher municipal officials should be regarded as the active participants in the co-operative work of the league.

In addition to the municipalities, which through their officers are or should be most interested in the activities of the league, there are other sources of help and co-operation which should not be neglected. These are the commercial clubs, civic clubs, libraries and other organizations and institutions interested in municipal welfare, as well as a number of individuals who, though not belonging to any such organization, have public spirit enough to wish to promote the cause of good city government.

¹See article on "The League of California Municipalities," by H. A. Mason, NATIONAL MUNICIPAL REVIEW, vol. ii, p. 111.

²Paper presented at the 20th annual meeting of the National Municipal League, Baltimore, November 18, 1914. Professor James in addition to holding a chair in the University of Texas is also secretary of the League of Texas Municipalities.