

## Handbook Highlight from the Montana Municipal Officials Handbook

### 2.106 Executive Supervisory Role vs. Legislative Oversight Role

One of the most persistent and disabling problems encountered in the council Mayor form of municipal government is confusion concerning the proper roles of the mayor and council members in supervising employees of the government, especially the department heads.

The supervisory powers of the mayor are set forth in some detail at [7-3-113](#), [7-3-213\(3\)](#), [7-3-216\(2\)](#), and [7-4-4303](#), MCA. It is reasonably clear that these sections of law contemplate that the mayor, not the council, is to exercise supervisory responsibility for all departments and employees.

On the other hand, the legislative oversight responsibilities of the council are set forth primarily at [7-3-203 \(4\), \(6\), \(7\) and \(8\)](#), MCA and even more directly at [7-5-4101](#), MCA. These sections of law make clear that the council's role is to set policy in the form of ordinances and resolutions and then to ensure that those policies are carried into effect by empowering the council to require the mayor to report to the council on the affairs and financial condition of the government and such other matters as the council may require.

Perhaps because the citizen-volunteers who have been elected to govern their community are real people who may or may not have had previous experience in government or any other complex organization, the challenge of maintaining a working balance between executive supervision and legislative oversight is problematic. It may be helpful for these elected officials to think of the corporate model of the C.E.O. who runs the business and the Board of Directors that sets the goals and policies of the firm. This is the model that most Montana school boards employ quite successfully and is the model that characterizes the commission-manager form of municipal government wherein the commission is specifically admonished in law to refrain from giving any orders to the municipal employees or even dealing with employees except through the city manager.

While such rigid separation of the executive and legislative roles may not be functionally practical in the smaller units of the council-mayor form of government, it is nevertheless critical that council members, especially newly elected council members, refrain from involving themselves in the supervision of the municipal staff. That is the mayor's job. The council's job is to work through the mayor to ensure that the council's policies are being carried out as the council intended.

Effective and efficient governance in the municipal council-mayor form of government depends upon reciprocal respect for the municipal officials who comprise the "fragile triangle" of governing responsibilities: the council - the mayor - the department heads. Reciprocal respect among these municipal officials will almost certainly result in a more efficient municipal government. And when absent, the ability of these officials to govern as a team will almost certainly be lost and will probably result in paralysis of the government and an erosion of citizen trust in the ability of the government to serve its community.