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A Brief History of Santa Monica and its Charters

In September 1872, Col. Robert S. Baker purchased the San Vicente and Santa Monica ranchos from Jose del Carmen Sepulveda and other landowners. The purchase included a total of 38,409 acres of land for a reported \$54,000. Col. Baker was a wealthy businessman who married Arcadia Bandini de Stearns. She was the widow of Don Abel Stearns, one of the earliest American settlers of Southern California, and the daughter of Juan Bandini, one of the wealthiest and most distinguished of the early Californians, according to Ingersoll's Century History - California, 1542-1908.

Sometime in 1874, Senator John P. Jones purchased an interest in the San Vicente ranch and, in partnership with Colonel Baker, began laying out the townsite of Santa Monica. Senator Jones was a member of the State Legislature of California from 1863 to 1868, and a U.S. Senator representing Nevada from 1873 to 1903. (Ingersoll's Century History - California, 1542-1908.)

July 15, 1875. The Honorable Tom Fitch, announcing the auction of the first lots in Santa Monica:

At one o'clock we will sell at public outcry to the highest bidder, the Pacific Ocean, draped with a western sky of scarlet and gold; we will sell a bay filled with white-winged ships; we will sell a southern horizon, rimmed with a choice collection of purple mountains, carved in castles and turrets and domes; we will sell a frostless, bracing, warm, yet languid air, braided in and out with sunshine and odored with the breath of flowers. The purchaser of this job lot of climate and scenery will be presented with a deed of land 50 by 150 feet. The title to the land will be guaranteed by the owner. The title to the ocean and the sunset, the hills and the clouds, the breath of the life-giving ozone and the song of birds is guaranteed by the beneficent God who bestowed them in all their beauty. (Looking at Santa Monica, James W. Lunsford, 1983)

- 11/30/1886 A Special Election was held to decide the incorporation of the Town of Santa Monica .
- 12/09/1886 The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors met on 12/06/1886 to canvass the votes cast at the November 30, 1886, election for the incorporation of the City. The votes cast were 96 in favor and 71 opposed! At the same election, a board of five trustees was elected to administer Santa Monica. The City was officially incorporated on 12/09/1886.

The first City Seal was adopted December 22, 1886, by Ordinance No. 4, and is described as follows: "Around the margin of said seal the words 'Town of Santa Monica Incorporated November 30, 1886,' vignette, wharf ship in the distance, bathers in the surf." The Town of Santa Monica was situated within the Township of La Ballona.

FIRST CHARTER: MAYOR-COUNCIL ELECTED EXECUTIVE FORM OF GOVERNMENT

- 10/17/1905 The Board of Trustees called for a special election to be held on this date to decide whether to elect 15 freeholders to frame a municipal charter. The measure was approved.
- 03/28/1906 On this date, an election was held wherein the proposed charter framed by the freeholders was approved. The Charter was ratified by the Legislature on January 15, 1907. Under the new charter, the City Council was composed of one Mayor with veto power, and one Councilmember from each of its seven wards. The charter required weekly meetings. Councilmembers received \$5 per meeting, which were set not to exceed one per week.

SECOND CHARTER: COMMISSION FORM OF GOVERNMENT

- 12/01/1914 A Special Election was called for this date as a result of qualified petition submitted by voters for a charter amendment to change the form of government. The charter amendment was approved. City Government now consisted of 3 departments: Public Safety, Public Works and Finance with one elected Commissioner responsible for each department. The City Council consisted of the three elected Commissioners. The City Councilmembers had \$3,000, annual salaries. The Commissioner of the Department of Public Safety was the ex-officio Mayor; and the elections process included the use of a preferential ballot form.
- 12/07/1915 Municipal Election to elect the three Commissioners, as provided for under the new charter form of government. Three Commissioners were elected. The Commissioner of Public Safety was also the ex-officio Mayor and Chairman of the Board. This form of Government continued for many years.

CURRENT CHARTER: COUNCIL-MANAGER FORM OF GOVERNMENT

- 10/00/1945 The City Council voluntarily placed the question of election 15 freeholders to frame a new charter on the upcoming December municipal election in response to a petition that was being circulated and had already gotten about 7,000 signatures. The petition sought to place the same question on the ballot.

WHY WAS CHARTER REFORM NEEDED?

(The following information was gathered from a number of articles appearing in different editions of the Evening Outlook in 1945.)

In 1944, the Santa Monica Chamber of Commerce began a study of the problems confronting the City. Some time later, after a series of forum meetings, the Chamber arrived at the conclusion that a council-manager form of government was what was needed in Santa Monica. At that point, the recommendation was turned over to a city-wide Citizens Charter Committee, chaired by Charles Ashford. Mr. Ashford was quoted in an Evening Outlook article as follows:

For years Santa Monica has been handicapped by a system of divided authority in its city government and by other bad effects of a charter adopted when this city had less than 12,000 population. Today the need for a new charter has become apparent to the great majority of our citizens. If Santa Monica is to grow and prosper in the postwar era, it must have a progressive-minded and efficient city government which it cannot have under the present charter. The movement for charter reform is nonpartisan and nonpolitical. It is not directed against present office holders, who under the present form of government are equally paid to have too restricted an opportunity to serve the city. Under a

under the present form of government are poorly paid to have too restricted an opportunity to serve the city. Under a new charter they might find a much larger field for real public service.

In the summer of 1945, the Citizens Charter Committee began circulating a petition to place on the upcoming municipal election in December the question of electing 15 freeholders to frame a new charter for the City, and to elect the 15 freeholders at the same election. In October of the same year, when the petition gatherers had secured about 7,000 signatures, apparently influenced by the popularity of the petition and, perhaps not wanting to incur the costs of a special election if the petition did not meet the December election deadline, the City Council voluntarily placed the question of electing the freeholders on the December ballot.

Articles published in the Evening Outlook in the weeks prior to the election set forth the various problems surrounding the then existing three-commissioner form of government, as follows:

- “It divides authority among three men and makes none responsible for what happens outside their respective departments.
- “All three are equal in authority, and if a disagreement arises about a course of action, the matter is usually dropped. They rarely agree on any question of broad policy outside their own departments or overall policy looking to the future. This form of government prevents any of them from being responsible for the whole government and from considering city administration as a whole.
- “Specific examples: the botched breakwater project, where a great deal of money was wasted; failure to provide recreation facilities in the City; and lack of civic improvements of any importance.
- “The government, operating without any over-all business head or policy, has brought the city finances into a deplorable condition over a long term of years. In spite of stiff taxes, the city services cannot be maintained even at the present level but for the profits earned by the Municipal Bus Lines. If revenues from the bus lines were to decline in the future, the city would probably have to raise taxes.” (The Evening Outlook added that the then current combined tax rate for Santa Monica was higher than that of any other city in Los Angeles County.)
- “The Commissioner of Public Safety, ex-officio Mayor, is responsible for the Police and Fire Departments, and the airport and lifeguard service: This Commissioner gets a salary of only \$250 per month, the same as the other two commissioners. He is not allowed to engage in any (other) business or profession. And because he controls the Police Department and is responsible for law enforcement, he is exposed to great temptation. If the Commissioner yields to the temptation, there is no one in city government to do anything about it or to hold him accountable for his actions. The result is a demoralized police force - something that no community could afford.”

12/04/45 General Election held; the creation of a Board of Freeholders to draft a new Charter passed and 15 Freeholders were elected; Bond measure for sewage treatment plant passed; increase of Commissioner salary from \$3,000 to \$6,000 annually failed; and exchange of lands with UCLA Regents failed.

The total vote on whether to elect a Board of Freeholders was 8,733, with 7,150 “yes” votes and 1,583 “no” votes.

11/05/46 Special Election held for ratification of new Charter providing a Council-Manager form of government, with seven Councilmembers elected at-large, as proposed by the Board of Freeholders. The new Charter was adopted.

03/18/47 General Election for the selection of the first seven Councilmembers under the new charter: Mark T. Gates, H. George Markworth, George A. Neilson, Ben A. Barnard, Jack J. Guercio, J. Lee Schimmer, Jr., and Edwin Talmadge were elected. The Council elected Mark T. Gates as Mayor/Chairman, and J. Lee Schimmer, Jr., as Mayor Pro Tempore. City Engineer Maurice King was appointed Acting City Manager.

The Council-Manager form of government established in the 1947 Charter has served Santa Monica well for more than 50 years. Nearly half of the cities in the U.S. with populations of 2500 or more operate under the Council-Manager form of government with an elected governing body and a manager hired by that body to carry out the policies it establishes.

Last updated: 5/4/2011

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