MOVIE – "CHICAGO CITY COUNCIL: READY FOR REFORM?"
(27 minutes/color)

SYNOPSIS

Following the death of Mayor Harold Washington, residents and reformers of Chicago still hoped for continued reform in Chicago government. Chicago's traditional alderman/ward form of government had mostly insulated elected officials from accountability to their constituents. In the 1980s, the Chicago Tribune reported on the personal ties and conflicts of interest between many aldermen and companies that did business with the city. City services, such as road resurfacing, were more likely on the streets of politicians, their business associates, and their friends rather than on streets where they were needed most.

Despite the death of the old Chicago Machine, machine style politics dominated in many of the wards. The passing of Mayor Washington provided an opportunity for the old guard to reassert itself in the city council, and continue many of their criticized activities. Even when constituents were aware of the conflicts of interest, political favors, and patronage, the structure of the aldermanic system made it extremely difficult to defeat incumbent aldermen. Businesses in wards were often pressured to finance reelection campaigns through threats of city inspectors withholding business permits or the passage of ordinances detrimental to business.

Reform aldermen, like David Orr of the 49th Ward, introduced reform legislation designed to improve the function of city government and the confidence of residents in their system. Most government information was off limits to city residents, and even well-informed residents found it difficult to traverse the system when looking for assistance or reform. Reformers hoped that the new Daley administration would mark a break from the past, and succeeded in passing some measures of reform.

.

OBJECTIVES

1. Compare and contrast the advantages and the disadvantages of an aldermanic/ward system of city government.

2. Identify the ways in which dissatisfied residents can address their grievances under the aldermanic system.

3. Evaluate the potential for reform legislation to improve the function of city government and to instill confidence in city residents.

4. Describe reform legislation that was successfully passed by Alderman David Orr.

5. Evaluate reform legislation that was proposed to streamline the functions of city committees.

6. Evaluate reform legislation proposed by the City Club.

7. Explain why corruption, fiscal mismanagement, and lack of governmental transparency negatively affect programs for housing, education, transportation, and health care.

8. Investigate how many of the reform proposals were in place twenty years after the making of this film.

QUESTIONS

1. What problems were discussed concerning Alderman Dick Mell, and how did dissatisfied residents attempt to deal with their concerns?

2. What tactics did the city use against club owner David Shelton when he supported the electoral challenger of Alderman Bernard Hansen?

3. How did resident Nancy Tesmer become involved in attempts to reform Chicago government?

4. What reason was given as to why the city council could not air proceedings on cable television?

5. How did Alderman David Orr succeed in passing reform legislation that had been previously dismissed twice by the council?

6. What campaign strategy did Mayor Richard M. Daley employ to win his initial election in a city that was skeptical about reform?

7. How did Alderman Danny Davis appraise the prospects for reform to eliminate the problem of a rubber stamp council?

8. What was a common usage of the Rules Committee in the process of passing city legislation?

9. How has Mayor Daley delivered on his promise for reform in Chicago government?