During the three years that I have served on the San Antonio City Council, I have also had the perfect complementary job, serving as a full-time lecturer at the University of Texas at San Antonio. Although I am a planner by education, my focus and interests in neighborhood revitalization, affordable housing, and inner-city revitalization through nonprofit organizations have prepared me well for this role as a lecturer who is an urban management practitioner. I also spent six years as a City of San Antonio employee working under two different city managers. These varying perspectives allow me to provide practical commentary on the article “Understanding Shared Roles in Policy and Administration: An Empirical Study of Council-Manager Relations” by Tansu Demir and Christopher G. Reddick, my colleagues at the University of Texas at San Antonio.

Because of my experience as a policy maker in San Antonio, I can provide some ideas on factors that I believe affect whether council members get involved in administration. Until our 2009 election, San Antonio had the strictest term limits in the nation.
for city council members (two two-year terms). That context made it very difficult for council members to focus on long-term, strategic policy initiatives because they had such a short time frame in which to show results to voters. In addition, council members who were reelected knew that they could not serve again, and thus many quickly began looking to make their next move. In this environment, it was almost natural that council members got involved in administration. This situation also created more motivation and opportunity for city managers to focus on policy making in response to the revolving door of council members. In 2009, voters approved a change to our charter enabling council members to serve for a maximum of eight years. This gives council members greater opportunity to focus on strategic policy issues that may take more time to implement. We still have two-year terms, however, so the pressure to produce short-term results persists.

Another important factor related to the involvement of council members in strategic policy making is whether council members are elected by district or serve at-large. San Antonio has 10 geographic districts and no at-large council members. The average citizen and voter is very concerned with immediate issues such as potholes, crime, graffiti, and service provision, especially in his or her neighborhood. In order to be viewed as effective, council members often concentrate on those issues so that they can show effectiveness and win supporters. I believe that at-large council members are able to focus more on policy making and strategic issues because they do not have to answer to a constituency in a specific geographic area.

While San Antonio’s current manager and council have a strong working relationship, the tension over who does what is inherent in the council-manager structure. I recall an incident in which the city council had to make a decision on a major contract, and the staff recommended a vendor that had met the criteria established in the city’s request for proposals. Nonetheless, other factors led some council members to push for a different vendor. A more senior council member attempted to persuade me to go against the staff recommendation, saying, “Sometimes we just have to show the staff who is boss around here.” I believe that statement captures some of the underlying tension. For that council member, “the boss” controlled decisions on policy, administration, and implementation. While elected officials struggle with determining the appropriate and most effective role for them to play, many citizens have varying views on who should be responsible for policy making versus administration. Some council members let the voices of those citizens and stakeholders guide them on this decision.

The most exciting recommendation that Demir and Reddick make in their article is the suggestion that training be provided for elected officials to help them be more effective representatives. As a former city staffer, trained planner, and community development professional, I had a strong background entering city hall as an elected official, but I still could have benefited from training on roles, responsibilities, and coalition building. In addition, while Demir and Reddick were able to identify statistical significance regarding questions about when city managers get involved in policy making and when city council members get involved in administration, I strongly believe that qualitative research would help us better understand how to strengthen the relationships and foster the effectiveness of city managers and city councils.

Demir and Reddick have made an important contribution to the dialogue, but the exploration of other factors can help us progress even further. I strongly recommend that someone take on the challenge of providing qualitative research to help us understand the additional dynamics at play.