

## City of young dreams come true

By GUY HALFERTY

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**When residents in Lakewood,**

**California voted to  
become an incorporated city,**

**the challenge of**

**municipal  
government faced them.**

**The young community had no  
fireman or policeman,  
and, worst of all, no treasury.**

**By contracting for services,**

**Lakewood has  
become a case-study for  
city-planners everywhere.**

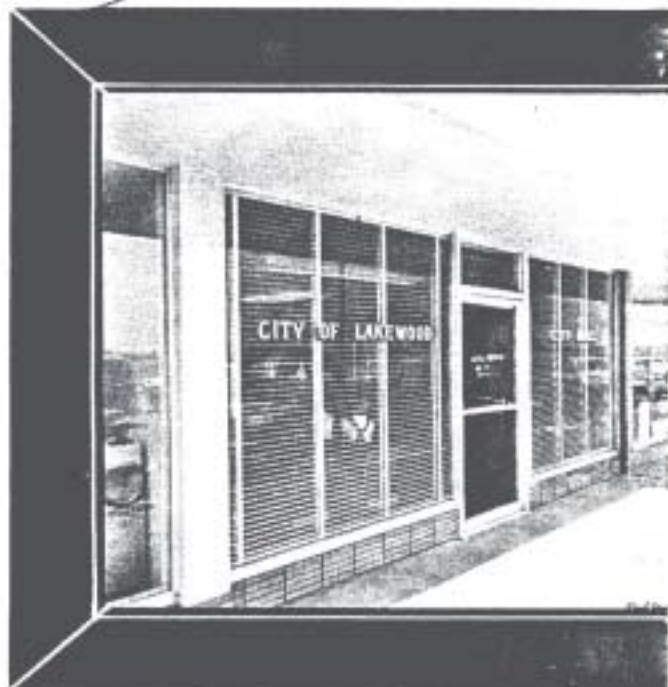
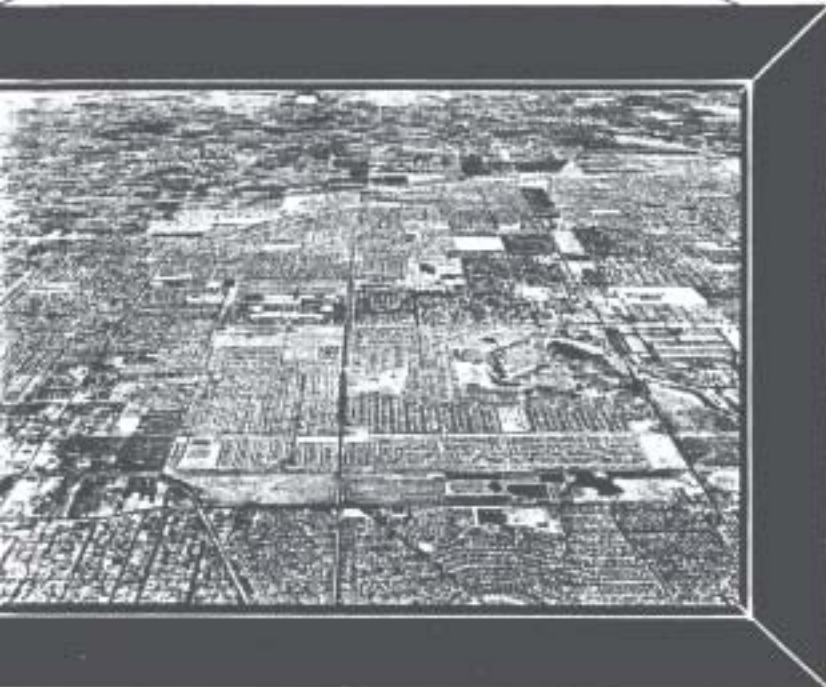
**A**T 3 a.m. on March 10, 1954, five tired young men held a caucus on the sidewalk outside a littered campaign headquarters. The residents of Lakewood, California had just voted to become an incorporated city, and on the same hectic ballot had elected these five candidates as their first city councilmen.

The problems they inherited that chill morning would have weighed down a Churchill. Neophytes all, they now had governmental responsibility over the largest community ever to incorporate at one whack in the whole history of the United States—a community of 71,316 inhabitants, larger than ninety per cent of American cities, and considerably larger than such historic California cities as Santa Barbara, Riverside, and Santa Ana.

Yet they had less money in the public till than Bless-Our-Buttons, Saskatchewan. And things promised to get worse before they got better.

Lakewood had voted on incorporation a few days after Los Angeles County had closed its tax assessment books for the fiscal year. That left the new city with no source of starting capital. It couldn't incur credit, sign a promissory note, enter a contract. It couldn't even buy a ream of paper, let alone rent a city hall. Unless some very adroit remedial legislation could be put through the state legislature immediately, Lakewood wouldn't have a cent to pay its bills for many long months.

On the credit side, the citizenry was solid enough. Average family income was \$5100, half again as high as the national average. There were 15,000 homes, most of them brand new. There were 104 miles of new streets, curbs, sidewalks and streetlights. There were no slums, no narcotics problems. Most of the 30,000 children were too small to be delinquent. According to the chamber of commerce, Lakewood had fewer



(Left) Lakewood (population 71,316) became a city in the largest incorporation election in history, a move that promoted a unique lend-lease plan of government. (Right) The modest, rented city hall has fewer than twelve employees. They channel the responsibility for municipal services to Los Angeles County on contract.

mothers-in-law and fewer flies (every home has an automatic garbage disposal) than any other city in the world.

That was all very well, but still the city was starting out dead broke. The councilmen were embarking upon a municipal career without a single penny in the city treasury. In fact, there was no city treasury. Not only that, there was no city police department. The city hadn't a single policeman, fire truck, dogcatcher or street sweeper it could call its own.

That was another thing. In campaigning to incorporate the vast county housing tract to the status of a self-governing city, the youthful candidates had had to sell the voters on a revolutionary plan, a lend-lease type of government that was brand new to the nation. Lakewood has no industry. Its homeowners, furthermore, claim a high percentage of veterans' exemptions. Ergo, Lake-

wood's income might not be—some maintained—sufficient to support the trappings of government and municipal services. Therefore, the planners of the new city proposed, why not buy all municipal services from the county, and not even go into the heavy expense of equipping and maintaining local police, fire, road maintenance and other costly departments? Why not contract for all city services—and let the city council concentrate on solving the multiple problems of parks, traffic and safety, zoning, business licenses, local ordinances?

Residents liked the idea, and bought it. Since then, the idea has aroused a storm of controversy and a pouring-out of interest throughout the United States and Canada. Crusty bureaucrats everywhere are stirring at the sight of a city and county actually pooling services and saving the taxpayers some dough.

But back to that later. On the night of the successful incorporation election, all that the five councilmen had were the echoes of their campaign promises—and a prayer. Characteristically, though, they weren't impressed much with the odds. Veterans of two years of campaigning—first against annexation attempts by neighboring Long Beach, followed by the long fight for incorporation—they had every right to feel confident of licking this latest problem.

Within a few hours, they put their city attorney-appointee, John Todd (one of the architects of incorporation), on a plane for Sacramento, along with councilman-elect Gene Nebeker and mayor-elect Angelo Iacoboni. Their instructions: Get the state law changed so that the new city could be awarded tax monies as collected by the county on the last assessment roll.

They succeeded, of course. It was

merely the first time in California history that such a thing had been done, and it took some fancy footwork in the nation's most-lobbied legislature to do it. But then, everything these men had done up to now had made political history of one sort or another. This was no different.

Lakewood was off and running.

They tell the story of a Democratic party bigwig who walked in on the Lakewood incorporation headquarters and came out an hour later, saying over and over, "Wait till they hear about this in Chicago."

Youngsters won this campaign. Young men and women are practically all that live in Lakewood. They are the family people who married during and after World War II. They organized a vast campaign of Kaffeeklatsches, night meetings, debates, bull sessions, all to explain this highly complicated subject of incorporation. They dug up some financing and had a twenty-minute movie made about Lakewood, and showed it to some 7000 people during the campaign.

They brought the old ward system up to date, and the young men and women who carried it off had never heard of a ward. Some of the wives who worked days and nights on the campaign weren't even old enough to vote. One of them, pretty Eleanor Hansen, carried incorporation petitions while decidedly pregnant with her third youngster, and missed the election night excitement only because she was flat on her back in the maternity ward.

It was a tough plan to sell to the voters, however. They didn't understand how the city could become a city and still use county police and firemen. There were thirty-nine candidates running for the five councilmanic offices, and some of them didn't understand it too well, either. Some of them ran into questions that required deft answering. In one Kaffeeklatsch a housefrau asked a fuzzy-faced young candidate about graft. "Wouldn't it be a severe problem in a new city?" she asked.

"Oh, no," replied the candidate earnestly. "You see, as I understand the thing, that would all be handled by the county."

Today, two and one-half years after its founding, Lakewood is a success. It has money in the bank. In comparison with many middle-class cities, it is relatively rich, despite the fact that it has no industry. Despite a low property tax rate of only twenty-eight cents per \$100 of



Compared to the 400 or more employees required to run most cities of its size, Lakewood has a small administrative staff. The duties are handled by the mayor and council (seated) and (rear, left to right) John Todd, city attorney; Guy Halferty, public relations director; Nita Birch, city clerk; Robert Anderson, city administrator.

assessed valuation, its total income from all sources—business licenses, state gasoline and auto license taxes, franchises, sales tax (imposed only because a new state law makes it virtually mandatory) amounts to approximately \$1,200,000 yearly—a stout sum with which to bring about the many needed improvements in parks, traffic safety, recreational facilities, street-planning, beautification and regular maintenance that were all but impossible under county status.

The Lakewood Plan has enabled this good-sized city to obtain park sites, erect recreational buildings, bring in municipal service facilities, and so on down a long list, all with only a handful of city employees—fewer than twelve. Contrasted with the 400-odd employees of a nearby city of the same size, this figure is all the more remarkable.

Career men throughout this coun-

try and Canada have been studying the plan earnestly, inasmuch as it was the first known case of a city contracting all its services. Some cities have sent representatives to see what it's all about. The success of the plan has spurred a rash of incorporations the length and breadth of California—a rash that is rapidly spreading eastward.

Since the incorporation election, the little, rented city hall has acquired a grownup look about it, and has settled down to a quiet gallop. Yet burly Robert T. "Bob" Andersen, whom the city hired away from Arcadia to be its first city administrator, confesses his greatest single problem is in keeping up with the town hall feeling that residents maintain toward the administration. Once a day, no less, one resident or another will call with a complaint, large or small, and preface his complaint with this: "I fought (bled, died, et cetera) for incorporation,

and I expect immediate action!" Lakewood's voters take the attitude—a healthy one, which more cities could use—that they all have an equal share in the city, since they all helped to make it.

During the first year and a half, the council passed scores of ordinances and hundreds of resolutions, without any noticeable major errors. The councilmen come from a cross section of American community life: Robert W. Baker, an electrical engineer; William J. Burns, a Los Angeles newspaper reporter; Gene Nebeker, a real estate man; George Nye, Jr., a schoolteacher, and Mayor Angelo Iacoboni, an attorney. For

the first few months, they did virtually everything themselves, from answering letters to conducting traffic checks. Gradually, a small, trained crew of loyal secretaries and assistants has replaced the original one-two crew of City Clerk Nita Birch, giving her more latitude for executive decisions. The council used to meet practically every night, in order to keep the city's affairs from piling up beyond the breaking point; today, a more even pace is possible—though the work load on the council and the administrative staff is still enormous.

Out of all the work has emerged a pattern of city-county relation-

ships that bodes well for the future of this type of government. For, while the effect of contract government is to force more work on the council and staff, the end result is one of combined efficiency and reduced costs, as compared to the conventional type of government, with its ever expanding bureaus and continuous, deadly depreciation of both equipment and people.

By contracting for services, Lakewood doesn't involve itself in personnel problems of any magnitude, and retains a remarkable freedom of movement for solving local problems and planning for future progress.

THE END