

County Government 101

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What are counties and why were they established?

Counties, in their infancy, were organized to be administrative agencies of the state as well as local governments. Traditionally, counties performed state mandated duties which included assessment of property, record keeping (i.e. property and vital statistics), maintenance of rural roads, administration of election and judicial functions, maintaining peace in rural areas, and poor relief. The Minnesota county structural model is similar to those found in Wisconsin, Ohio, New York and many other states. There are 87 counties in Minnesota.

How has the role of county governments evolved?

In addition to serving as an administrative arm of the state, counties have expanded services into other areas of government support, including social services, corrections, child protection, library services, hospitals and nursing homes, public health services, planning and zoning, economic development, parks and recreation, water quality, and solid waste management.

How are counties governed?

Boards of Commissioners are the governing bodies of Minnesota's counties. Each county commissioner is elected by their district's voters and serves a four-year term that is staggered among the board (not all commissioners are elected at the same time). As a board, commissioners are responsible for the operation of the county and the delivery of county services. Most Minnesota county boards have five members. Counties with a population of over 100,000 people may, by board resolution, increase the size of the county board from five to seven members. Six counties currently have seven member county boards.

Who makes up the board of commissioners?

County commissioners are the elected officials who oversee county activities and work to ensure that citizen concerns are met, federal and state requirements are fulfilled, and county operations run smoothly. Newly elected commissioners take office the first Monday in January following their election. County board chairs are elected at the board's first meeting in early January. County commissioners' salaries vary from county to county. Individual county boards set salaries at the beginning of each year. Most commissioners elected to the county board are considered part-time.

Are the commissioners the only decision makers in county government?

Because some other county officials are elected, county commissioners cannot directly control all county activities. Even though commissioners approve a budget for these offices, county commissioners have little say in how these offices operate. County commissioners (as well as citizens) need to understand that their power is limited in this way. All county attorneys and county sheriffs are independently elected, and in some counties the auditor, treasurer and recorder may also be elected. Some counties have transitioned their auditor, treasurer and recorder to appointment rather than elected officials. Public school systems in Minnesota operate independently of county government and the county board does not exercise control over its local school districts, school boards or school tax levies.

How are counties managed?

Counties are managed in a number of ways. Many counties have a central administration led by either a county administrator or a county coordinator. In some counties the county auditor provides the administrative function. In the past decade, many Minnesota counties have decided to move towards a county administrator model.

Do counties have complete autonomy in budgetary decisions?

No. Generally, when county boards begin working on the county budget, many of the expenditures have already been determined by mandates. Mandates are legal requirements imposed by the federal and state governments. Local government mandates are often passed without appropriate funding by state and federal lawmakers. In these cases, local governments must pay the cost of implementing the mandate.

Some examples of unfunded mandates are those setting requirements for waste management, pollution control, treatment of prisoners, providing court-appointed legal representation for those citizens who cannot afford it, providing disabled citizens with easy access to government buildings, voter registration, public health, welfare and social services, training for various licensed personnel, etc.

Do all counties provide the same services?

No. When you look at the types of services that counties choose to provide, you see that no two counties provide exactly the same set of services. Rather, each provides its own unique mix of a broad range of services, including street maintenance, garbage pick-up, landfills, hospitals, libraries, parks and recreation, law enforcement, emergency services, and water and sewer facilities.

Minnesota counties also provide extensive health and human services as the administrative entity responsible for the delivery of these services. For some counties, providing such services is relatively new and reflects the shifting and expanding responsibilities counties and county commissioners must undertake.

Where do counties get their revenue?

In Minnesota, local governments derive the majority of their funding from property taxes and from state and federal grants. Fees, fines, forfeitures, sale of public lands, investments and special assessments are other revenue sources that augment these major revenue sources. Property taxes are the chief source of revenue for Minnesota counties. Most counties receive between 30-50% of their revenues from property tax collections. All property except that owned by governments, churches, charitable institutions and certain other tax exempt entities, is subject to the "ad valorem" property tax. However, from time to time, the state has put restrictions on these levies, further hampering the county budgeting process.

How do counties spend their revenue?

Each county has a different story when it comes to expenditures. Some counties may spend a sizable portion of their revenue by building and maintaining county roads while others may have higher social services costs. The top three expenditure areas for counties are human services, public safety, and general government.

What rights to information does the public have to county government proceedings?

The Open Meeting Law requires that public business be conducted in public. The public has a right to attend the meeting and observe the transaction of public business. All formal and informal county board meetings, as well as county committee and subcommittee meetings, fall under this law. Also, under the Open Meeting Law, counties are required to maintain, in a journal, a record of all votes taken at open meetings. This journal must be available to the public during regular business hours. Anyone who believes the county board has violated the open meeting law can seek legal action against individual members of the board.

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