



UNDERSTANDING LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN WISCONSIN

A BREAKDOWN OF LOCAL FUNDING AND SERVICES
PREPARED BY THE INSTITUTE FOR REFORMING GOVERNMENT

EXPLAIN IT TO ME: WHAT IS LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

For most Wisconsinites, local government is visible and present in their everyday lives. They see the county plows out during a snowstorm, the local police department at community events, and their clerk when they go vote on election day. Local government is exactly what it says - local. Whether it's an issue with services or an opinion on a zoning issue, local government affords the average Wisconsinite the venue to be heard and have influence in what decisions that are being made. This primer is meant to give you an insight into the basics about local government in Wisconsin and the resources that will aid in answering more detailed questions.

72 COUNTIES
1,253 TOWNS
190 CITIES
411 VILLAGES

COMBINED, WISCONSIN HAS JUST SHY OF 2,000 LOCAL UNITS OF GOVERNMENT!

CITIES & VILLAGES

Cities and villages have similar powers and duties as local governments; however, they differ in structure. In city government the common council acts as the legislative branch and the mayor as the executive. Aldermen are elected by district with the mayor being elected at-large. Villages are governed by a village board and act as the legislative and executive branches. Village trustees and the village president are elected at-large.

The powers and duties of both governing bodies are similar. Although cities are not required by statute to provide emergency services, they must have a police and fire commission if their population is greater than 4,000. Villages must provide these services when their population is greater than 5,500. **Resource:** Scan the code with your phone to find more information available from the League of Wisconsin Municipalities.



TOWNS

Town government was created in the Wisconsin constitution and unlike cities and villages, towns are unincorporated. This means that towns do not have the same right to govern themselves under home rule and its powers are limited to those provided in state statutes.

Towns are governed by an elected town board which consists of a town chairperson and two to four supervisors. Towns may have additional elected or appointed officials including town clerks, treasurers, constable or elected property tax assessor. Towns can vary greatly in size, population and services provided to residents.

COUNTIES

Counties are as old as Wisconsin and serve as the administrative arm of state government. County government is governed by a county board of supervisors. Supervisors are non-partisan elected officials that serve two-year terms in office. The executive functions of county government are carried out by either an elected county executive or an administrator, appointed by the county board. Counties are responsible for road maintenance, snow plowing, law enforcement, health and human services, vital records, elections, property tax collection, and court administration.

Counties also have other elected officers such as the sheriff, treasurer, county clerk, clerk of courts, register of deeds, district attorney, and circuit court judges. Counties are limited in their functions to what is expressly allowed by state statute. **Resource:** Scan the code for more information available from the Wisconsin Counties Association.



UNDERSTANDING SHARED REVENUE PAYMENTS

The state provides payments to municipalities and counties on an annual basis. Under the Shared Revenue program, funds can be used for general government operations at the discretion of the governing body. In 2021, \$753 million was sent to municipal and county governments by the state.

Resource: Scan the code for more information available from the nonpartisan Legislature Fiscal Bureau.



UNDERSTANDING LOCAL TRANSPORTATION FUNDING

Funding for local roads and highways are primarily funded by local governments; however, the state does provide General Transportation Aids to municipal and county governments. The funding formula for counties is based on average spent on highway projects over six years, while municipal funding is based on this same formula or mileage of roads, whichever is higher.

Resource: Scan the code for more information available from the nonpartisan Legislature Fiscal Bureau.



UNDERSTANDING LOCAL BUDGET WRITING

Municipal and county budgets are based on the calendar year. This means that preparation of the budget begins in summer with votes for approval taking place in fall. As is standard in the legislative process, committees will review portions of the budget that pertain to their subject matter expertise. After the committee process, the budget moves forward to a vote by the whole governing body (board or council).

UNDERSTANDING LOCAL LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES

Local law enforcement is a shared responsibility between county and municipal governments. All counties have a sheriff department that is led by an elected sheriff. The sheriff has countywide jurisdiction for all law enforcement activities and is also responsible for patrolling county roads, jail operations, and provides bailiffs for the county courts.

Resource: Scan the code for more information available from the Badger State Sheriff Association.



Police departments have jurisdiction within the boundaries of the municipality. The police chief is an employee of the municipality and oversight is provided by the police and fire commission in cities with populations more than 4,000 and villages with more than 5,500 people. The police and fire commission is an unelected commission whose members are appointed by the mayor or village president.

Resource: Scan the code for more information available from the Wisconsin Chiefs of Police Association.



The Institute for Reforming Government is a non-profit 501(c)3 organization that seeks to simplify government at every level by offering policy solutions to thought leaders in American government in the areas of tax reform, government inefficiency, and burdensome regulations.

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