CHAPTER 14
Local Government

Most Americans live in cities and towns. Their local government has a direct influence on their daily lives.

How City Governments Are Created

How are local governments created, funded, and organized?

Do you live in a city? If you do not, it is likely that you will sometime in your life. Today more than 80 percent of Americans live in cities or urban areas.

Local governments are closer to the people than are other units of government. They provide services such as road maintenance, police and fire protection, and schools. Though local governments are important to people, they are not fully independent. The powers they have come from a higher level of government. In the United States, state constitutions usually set up the powers and duties of local governments.

Paying for Local Government

Where do local governments get the money to pay for the services they provide? Grants from the state and federal governments make up about 40 percent of local governments' income. More than 25 percent comes from taxes on land and buildings. Other taxes, such as sales taxes, make up about 10 percent of their budget. The rest comes from fees and fines for things such as parking, dog licenses, and traffic violations.

Becoming a City

A city is officially called a municipality. Most states define a municipality as an incorporated place—a local area with an organized government that provides services to residents. An area incorporates when the people ask the state legislature for a city charter and the state grants it. The charter gives power to a local government. An area must meet certain standards in order to get a charter. For example, it may need to have a certain number of people living within it. A city charter is like a constitution. It describes the type of city government, its structure, and its powers.

Some states give home rule to their cities. Under home rule, cities have the power to write their own charters. As a result, they can choose their own type of government. Home rule allows cities to act with less interference from the state. Still, these laws do limit city governments' freedom of action.

Summarizing How are city governments created?

21st Century SKILLS
Analyze News Media
Scan a copy of your local newspaper from 25 years ago, 50 years ago, and 75 years ago. Make a note of the issues that were important to your community at those times. You may look for copies of old newspapers at your local library or historical society.
In what ways has your community changed? In what ways has it remained the same?

The Mayor-Council Form

How does the mayor-council form of government operate?

Do you know how your local government is set up? Every city charter describes the type of government the community will have. Most urban areas in the United States use one of three basic forms of government. These are the mayor-council form, the commission form, and the council-manager form.

Until the early 1900s, most American cities had a mayor-council form of government. It is still a common form of city government today. In fact, it is the form of government favored by the nation's largest cities.

The Division of Power

Like the national government, the mayor-council form is based on the separation of powers. Executive power belongs to a mayor. Legislative power belongs to a city council. Voters elect both the mayor and the members of the council.
The mayor is similar to a state governor or the president. He or she is the chief executive of the city government. The mayor oversees the running of various city departments. Often the mayor appoints the people who head these departments and other offices. Major departments usually include public works, the police and fire departments, and the transportation department.

The council acts as the city’s legislature. It passes city laws, which are usually called ordinances. The council also approves the city’s budget.

Most city councils have fewer than 10 members. These members usually serve four-year terms. Cities have different plans for organizing council members. Some cities are divided into voting districts called wards. Each ward elects a representative to the city council. In other cities, council members are elected at-large. In an at-large election, council members are elected by voters in the entire city rather than in individual wards. Some cities mix these two systems. Some council members are chosen by ward, and others are elected by voters at-large.

**Strong Mayors and Weak Mayors**

There are two main types of mayor-council government. What sets them apart is how much power the charter gives to the mayor. These two types are the strong-mayor system and the weak-mayor system.

Today, most large cities have a strong-mayor system. Under this system, the mayor has strong executive powers. The mayor carries out the day-to-day activities of the city, much like a governor carries out the affairs of a state. A strong mayor’s administrative powers can include appointing various city officials and writing the city’s budget. A strong mayor typically has the power to veto, or cancel, laws passed by the city council.

Strong mayors tend to dominate, or have great influence over, the cities they lead. This influence partly comes from the great authority granted to strong mayors by their city charters. Two other factors also play a part in giving these mayors so much influence.

First, in most cities, council members hold their positions part-time while mayors work full-time. This means that mayors have more time to spend on matters of government. Mayors also tend to have large staffs. That means they have more resources to draw on. As a result, they can become more involved in more issues.

Second, in large cities, council members are usually elected by wards. As a result, they usually focus on issues that are important to the part of town they represent, rather than the entire city. By contrast, strong mayors represent the whole community.

The strong-mayor system was developed in response to the inefficiencies of the weak-mayor system. Under a weak-mayor system, the mayor’s power is limited. The council, not the mayor, names department heads and makes most policy decisions. The mayor usually directs council meetings but votes only in case of a tie. The weak-mayor system dates from the nation’s earliest days. Former colonists were tired of the injustices done to them by British officials. As a result, they were reluctant to grant any official too much power.

The success of the mayor-council form of government depends largely on the person who serves as mayor. In the strong-mayor system, a politically skilful mayor can provide effective leadership. Under the weak-mayor plan, many people share responsibilities. Thus, success depends upon the mayor and council working well together.

**Making Inferences** Why would successful government be less likely under a weak-mayor plan?

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**Why It MATTERS**

**School Government**

Understand how your school is governed. Find out how many members serve on the school board, how they are selected, how long they serve, and what their qualifications are.

What are the duties of the school board? What is the role of the superintendent of schools?

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**Council-Manager and Commission Governments**

*How do the council-manager and commission forms of government serve local communities?*

Two other forms of local government are the council-manager and commission forms. Both started in the early 1900s. The council-manager form is still quite popular. When it began in 1912, this form was seen as a way to solve the problem of city leaders being corrupt or ineffective. Today the council-manager plan is often used in newer suburbs.

**The Council-Manager Form**

Under the council-manager form, the city council appoints a city manager to administer the city’s day-to-day affairs. The manager draws up a budget for the city. He or she also directs city departments. The manager handles all issues that affect city workers. The manager reports to the council. City council members can fire the manager if a majority of them choose to do so. Most city managers have special training in areas such as managing money and city planning.
In many smaller cities with managers, council members gain their seats through at-large elections. Some people believe this system makes it possible for council members to look out for the interests of the whole city and not just their neighborhood.

The Commission Form

The commission form was first used a few years before the council-manager form. Only a small number of cities still use it. A commission government does not divide legislative and executive powers. Instead, the government is split into several separate departments. Each of those departments handles a different set of tasks. Examples include police, fire, finance, and health.

The heads of these departments are called commissioners. Each is elected by the city’s voters. In their roles as department heads, they have the executive power. That is, they run the daily activities of the department under them.

Commissioners meet regularly as a body called a commission. They choose one commissioner as chairperson. The person in this position leads the commission meetings. He or she has no additional power, however. The commission acts as a legislature by passing ordinances and making policy decisions.

Many cities have discovered the limitations of the commission form of government. With no clear leadership, a commission is often unable to set and meet goals. Each commissioner is likely to focus on his or her own department and not the city as a whole. Commissioners may compete for a larger share of the city budget. Nearly all cities that once used a commission form of government have changed to a council-manager or mayor-council form of government. Even Galveston, Texas, which created the commission form, now has a council-manager system.

Other Units of Government

Two other important types of municipal government are the special district and the metropolitan area. The special district is a unit of government that is formed to handle a specific task. This task may be education, water supply, or transportation. A local school district is the most common example of a special district. A board or commission runs the district. Its members might be elected or appointed.

A metropolitan area is formed by a large city and its suburbs. Suburbs are the communities near or around cities. A metropolitan area may also include small towns that lie outside the suburbs but that are influenced by the larger city. The U.S. Census Bureau has a name for areas that include a central city and suburbs with a total population of 50,000 or more. They are called Metropolitan Statistical Areas. The Census Bureau collects data about all of these areas across the country. That information can then be analyzed to compare what different metropolitan areas are like.

Suburbs have expanded around central cities since the 1950s. As a result, the number of people living in suburbs is often greater than the number of those living in the city. For example, Detroit had 2 million people in 1950 and only about 910,000 in 2009. At the same time, the suburbs of that city grew to house more than 4 million people.

Metropolitan areas have been growing larger and larger in recent decades. More people and more businesses can lead to more challenges. More people mean more cars. This can cause traffic jams and other problems. Larger numbers of people can lead to more crime. Issues may arise over land use. Pollution can be a problem too.

These challenges can become worse if different cities and towns try to address them separately. If different governments take different approaches, they may cause problems for one another. The communities in some metropolitan areas, therefore, have decided to face some of their challenges together. They have created councils that bring together city and suburban officials. These councils are able to make area-wide decisions concerning population growth and municipal services such as mass transit.

Contrasting How does a council-manager government differ from a commission government?

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**Florida CONNECTION**

**Metropolitan Areas**

About 94 percent of Floridians live in a metropolitan area. The state’s 19 metropolitan areas provide most of its jobs and produce most of its GDP. The Miami-Fort Lauderdale-Miami Beach Metropolitan Area is the seventh-largest metropolitan area in the nation.

**LESSON 1 REVIEW**

**Review Vocabulary**

1. How are the terms *incorporate*, *city charter*, and *home rule* related?

LA.FS.68.RH.2.4

2. Write a sentence explaining how the terms *metropolitan area* and *suburb* are related.

LA.FS.68.RH.2.4

Answer the Guiding Questions

3. **Specifying** What is a city charter, and what is its purpose?

SS.7.C.3.14

4. **Contrasting** What is the difference between a strong-mayor system and a weak-mayor system?

SS.7.C.3.9

5. **Analyzing** What advantage does a city manager have over a mayor in running city government?

SS.7.C.3.9

6. **ARGUMENT** Suppose that your unincorporated community has decided to become a municipality. Write an entry for your blog page explaining which type of city government you favor forming and why.

SS.7.C.3.9
Like city governments, county governments affect people’s everyday lives. However, county governments provide different services and meet different needs.

How County Governments Are Organized

_How is county government organized?_

Have you ever had to call 911 for help? Have you ever had to buy a license for a dog or to go fishing? In most states, these needs are handled by county government. The county is normally a state’s largest territorial and political unit. The U.S. Census Bureau recognizes more than 3,000 counties or divisions like counties in the nation.

County Characteristics

The first county in what is now the United States was formed in Virginia in 1634. Massachusetts and Pennsylvania also had counties in colonial times. Today, all states except Connecticut and Rhode Island are comprised of counties. Texas has 254 counties. Delaware and Hawaii have only 3 each. Two states do not even use the word county. In Alaska, they are called boroughs. In Louisiana, they are known as parishes.

Counties come in many sizes. Los Angeles County, California, has about 10 million residents. Only 45 people live in Loving County, Texas, though. San Bernardino County, California, has more land area than the states of Vermont and New Hampshire combined.

County Seats

During the 1800s, the county courthouse was the center of county government. Trials took place there. So did other government activities. The courthouse was also home to government records. The town where a county courthouse is located is called a county seat. County seats often became a center for the network of county roads.

As states in the Midwest and South mapped out counties, officials thought about the importance of county seats. They wanted to be sure that all people in the state would be able to have county services. They believed that people who lived in the farthest corners of a county should be able to travel to the county seat and back by horse and buggy in the same day. That is why states in those areas have so many fairly small counties.

**Explaining** How were county seats originally chosen?

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21st Century SKILLS

Analyzing Historical Maps

Go online to find a political map of your state before it achieved statehood. Compare it to a political map of your state today. Have the state, county, or town boundaries changed? How?

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The Functions of County Government

_What functions do county governments perform?_

County government has changed in recent years. In some areas, cities now provide many services that counties once did. On the other hand, many counties have taken on duties that city governments once handled. These duties range from providing sewer and water service to mass transit systems.

Who Runs a County?

Most counties are run by a board of elected officials called commissioners or supervisors. Typically, three to five commissioners serve on a county board. They usually serve four-year terms. The board acts as the county’s legislature. It passes ordinances, or laws, and sets the county’s budget for the year. It also _levies_ taxes and may enforce the laws. In addition to commissioners or supervisors, other officials play a role in county government.

Forms of County Government
County governments are organized in a few different ways. The basic form is the strong commission. The two other forms are the commission-manager and commission-elected executive types. These forms have come into more use in recent years.

In the strong commission form, the county board acts as both legislature and executive authority. Board members pass laws and also see to carrying out the laws. They work alongside other county officials to do some of this executive work. They also oversee the work of people they name to particular offices. The chart on the organization of county government shows examples of these departments.

The people who serve on county boards have a great variety of backgrounds. They come from many different jobs. They may not have experience in government. To help them, many states now run training programs for board members. Most board members work part-time. They have to be ready to respond to emergencies, though. Many meetings are at night, so county residents who work in other jobs can attend.

As public needs have grown, many counties have changed the role of the county board. In these counties, the board operates only as a legislature. Counties use one of two methods to handle the executive power. First is the commission-manager form of government. In this method, the board names someone as county manager. This official acts much like a city manager. Second is the commission-elected executive type. In this approach, counties create a new office called the county executive. This official, like the members of the board, is elected.

Whether appointed or elected, the county manager or executive carries out the laws for the county. He or she manages county government. He or she also appoints top officials. The county board works alongside this leader.

Sheriffs, DAs, and More

Sheriffs are elected officials. They typically serve two to four years. The sheriff is the county’s chief officer for enforcing the law. The sheriff’s department enforces court orders and runs the county jail. In some counties, the sheriff’s department shares duties with one or more police departments. Because counties were often the first governments formed by American settlers, sheriffs have played a leading role in local law enforcement.

Other county duties are handled by officials who may be appointed or elected. Bringing criminals to justice is the role of the district attorney (DA), called the county prosecutor in some counties. In most counties, the district attorney is elected by voters. The district attorney investigates crimes and brings charges against those suspected of breaking the law. He or she then works to prove in court that the accused persons are guilty.

Three county officials handle the county’s finances. The assessor looks at all taxable property within the county. He or she estimates, or sets a rough value on, how much it is worth. The tax placed on each property is based on the assessor’s estimate. The county treasurer is in charge of the county’s funds. He or she collects taxes and pays the county’s bills. An auditor makes sure that the county spends its money according to state and local law.

A county clerk keeps official government records. Some county clerks’ offices maintain public records such as birth, marriage, and death certificates. They also conduct elections.

The county coroner works closely with the police. This official is called on to look into any death that might not be natural. A coroner does not necessarily have any special medical training. In some counties, the duties of the coroner fall to the sheriff’s office or the justice of the peace, a low court official. Other counties have replaced the coroner with the medical examiner system. This system uses trained scientists to investigate deaths caused by injury, violence, or unknown causes.

More than 2 million people work for counties across the country. The number of county workers has grown in recent years. That growth reflects the increase in tasks that county governments have taken on.

Identifying What body governs most counties in the United States?

Florida CONNECTION
Jacksonville

Jacksonville is Florida’s largest city. It is also the county seat of Duval County. In 1968, the city and county were consolidated, which means that they share a single government. That government has the strong-mayor form. Its 19 city council members and the mayor serve four-year terms.

LESSON 2 REVIEW

Review Vocabulary

1. Explain what a county is.

LA.FS.68.RH.2.4

2. What is a county seat? Explain the relationship between a county and a county seat.
LAFS.68.RH.2.4

**Answer the Guiding Questions**

3. *Comparing* How do counties vary across the country?

SS.7.C.3.14

4. *Explaining* List three of the elected officials in a county. What services does each provide for the county?

SS.7.C.3.14

5. **INFORMATIVE/EXPLANATORY** Write a brief description of how counties originated in the United States and how they have changed over time.

SS.7.C.3.14
American democracy began in towns. The town meetings held in the New England colonies allowed community members to take part in their government. Town meetings are still held today.

**Towns and Town Meetings**

*How and why did town governments and meetings develop?*

Think about a meeting that you attended recently. Was it well organized? Was something accomplished? Read on to find out how meetings like those you may attend are an important part of local government in some parts of the country. In fact, they are the foundation of local government in some areas.

In 1654 a group of men in Sudbury, Massachusetts, gathered to discuss how to divide the land. The town has changed in many ways since that day. But one thing has not changed. The people of Sudbury still meet to discuss issues.

**Towns, Townships, and Counties**

Most states are divided into counties. Counties, too, are often divided into smaller political units. In the New England states, political units that are smaller than cities and larger than villages are called *towns*. In many other states, especially in the Midwest, counties are divided into areas called *townships*. Townships can have several smaller communities within them.

The United States Census Bureau identifies 20 states that have towns or townships. Like county and city governments, town and township governments receive their powers from the state.

The governments of towns and townships relate to county government in different ways across the nation. The differences tend to appear in different regions. In New England, town governments handle most of the government duties of most small communities. In this part of the country, counties are mainly judicial districts. That is, they are set up mainly as areas to organize the local court system.

In the mid-Atlantic states and in the Midwest, township government is important. In those states, county and township governments share powers. States in the South and the West often have no townships. In these regions, county governments tend to be more important.

**New England Town Meetings**

New England town government is one of the oldest forms of democracy in the United States. Town meetings allow community members to voice their feelings on matters ranging from local issues to world events.

In early town meetings, citizens—rather than elected representatives—made the important decisions. Town meetings, therefore, are a form of direct democracy. They are called direct democracy because the people are directly involved in governing themselves. This differs from the representative democracy common throughout most of the United States. In a representative democracy, of course, voters elect people to public office. Those officials are the ones who pass the laws and see that they are carried out.

Town meetings are still important in some New England towns. Town meetings are held once a year. Residents come to the meeting to discuss local ordinances, taxes, and budgets. The majority of registered voters at the meeting decide these issues. They determine how the town government will act over the course of the next year—until the next town meeting.

There are limits to the effectiveness of town meetings, though. Because they occur only once a year, they are useful only for making broad decisions. They are not a good way to deal with the everyday details of government. So each New England town elects a group of officials called selectmen to run local government. Selectman, a very old title, now applies to women as well as to men. Towns may also elect executives such as a clerk and a treasurer.

As New England towns grew larger over the years, their governments became more complex. As a result, direct democracy did not work as well as it had in the past. In response, some New England towns replaced the traditional town meetings with representative town meetings. In these meetings, only town meeting representatives may vote. Town meeting representatives are elected by the town’s voters in annual town elections. Other towns have ended the meetings altogether. Instead, they have a town council that runs the local government.

**Defining** What are town meetings?

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21st Century SKILLS

Conduct Research

Conduct research to find out more about town meetings that are held today.

Choose a place governed by a town meeting and write a short report that tells where and when the meeting takes place, who participates, and what kinds of specific issues are discussed.
Townships and Villages

How are township and village governments organized?

Towns and township governments in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania are similar to New England town governments. These local governments typically serve densely populated urban areas. Townships in states such as Indiana, Kansas, Nebraska, and Ohio are more rural in nature.

Townships

As the United States expanded westward, it gained new land. Congress conducted surveys of the land. A survey is a study and measurement of an area of land. For purposes of description, surveyors divided the land into equal square blocks. Each block was usually six miles wide and six miles long. These blocks are known as congressional, or survey, townships. These measurements helped the government distribute land to settlers.

Settlers moved into these new areas. They set up local governments, also called townships. Sometimes people use the term civil township to distinguish them from congressional townships. A typical township is 36 square miles. Many of these townships follow the original congressional survey lines. Unlike congressional townships, civil townships are units of government.

Most townships elect a small body of officials. This body is known as a township committee, board of supervisors, or board of trustees. This group has lawmaking powers. It usually holds regular meetings that citizens may attend. In this way, the people of the township have a voice in their government.

Townships have become less important as cities and counties have taken over many township duties. Counties and townships may work together to provide local services.

Village Government

The village is the smallest unit of local government. Villages almost always lie within the borders of townships or counties. Communities with small populations often have no need for their own government. County or township governments handle most of their needs.

In some communities, people may grow unhappy with the services the county provides. For example, people might want to set up their own school system, or the community might want to organize as a village. A community cannot simply decide to form a village government, however. You may recall that a community has to ask the state for the right to incorporate as a city. In the same way, a small community needs the state's permission to set up a village government. When the state legislature passes a law, the community can form a village government.

The government of most villages is made up of a small board of trustees. This board is elected by the voters. The village board has the power to collect taxes. It may spend this money on projects that benefit the community, such as taking care of streets, sewer and water systems, or libraries.

Some villages also elect an executive. The title of this official may be chief burgess, president of the board, or mayor. Like many cities, a large village might hire a city manager who has training in particular skills.

Becoming a village has many benefits. The people of the village usually receive better services than they had before. A community also has an improved standing when it becomes a village. This step can make the community more attractive to visitors and to possible new residents and businesses. It also gives the people of the village more control over local affairs than they had before they formed a village government.

Becoming a village does have a major drawback, however. The residents of the village might have to pay higher taxes to support this extra layer of government. The people in many village communities believe that this cost is worth it for the other benefits they enjoy.

Explaining What is an advantage of setting up a village government?

Why It MATTERS
Addressing Local Concerns

Sometimes communities establish villages to address local concerns. In a similar way, students can form committees to serve certain functions. For example, students can form committees to organize dances or other events. Find out the rules for forming and serving on a committee in your school.

LESSON 3 REVIEW

Review Vocabulary

1. What is a town meeting, and in what part of the nation are they typically held?

LAFS.68.RH.2.4

2. What is a village? What is its relationship to a township?

LAFS.68.RH.2.4

Answer the Guiding Questions

3. Describing How did town government develop in the United States?

SS.7.C.3.9

4. Summarizing How are townships governed?

SS.7.C.3.14

5. ARGUMENT Suppose you are living in a small community that has no government. Some residents want to convert the community into a village. Write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper to convince the newspaper's readers to support or oppose this plan.

SS.7.C.3.14