

LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN NORTH CAROLINA

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5TH EDITION

GORDON WHITAKER AND RICARDO MORSE

SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL
CHAPEL HILL



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Since the early 1990s, the North Carolina City County Management Association's (NCCCMA) Civic Education Project has supported the creation and dissemination of *Local Government in North Carolina*, working with author Dr. Gordon Whitaker. The first edition was published and made available free of charge to classrooms across North Carolina in 1993. Dr. Whitaker updated the text as a second edition in 2003, and again, thanks to funding from the Civic Education Project, the text was made available to classrooms across the state.

In 2009 a third edition was published, with support from NCCCMA and funding from the International City/County Management Association. Unlike previous hard-copy editions, this third edition brought the text into the digital age and was designed for online viewing. In 2012, a fourth online-only edition was published, again with support from NCCCMA. Shortly after the fourth edition was published, Dr. Whitaker retired after 40 years of service at UNC Chapel Hill.

In 2018 the time had come to do another update to the text, and Dr. Whitaker entrusted his colleague at the School of Government, Dr. Rick Morse to take the lead on the effort. Again, with funding support from NCCCMA, the work to update the text commenced with a focus not only on updating content, but also in modernizing the format even more and expanding the scope of the book's audience.

In past decade or so, local governments across the United States have become more innovative in their approaches to civic engagement, with many of them investing in civic education programs often called citizens academies. These programs educate residents on virtually all aspects of local government to improve participants' ability to effectively engage with their local government. Further, many community leadership programs include content on local government, and civic groups often look for informal learning opportunities for their members. This fifth edition of *Local Government in North Carolina* remains a great resource for K-12 education, particularly civics classes that often have very little information on local government. But this edition is also appropriate and useful as a resource for adult education programs of various kinds and has been designed to be adaptable to a variety of different uses.

The fifth edition of *Local Government in North Carolina* is an interactive textbook that can be used at the K-12 level, by informal learners, adult education programs, and as a supplement for civic education programs such as local government citizens academies. The e-book is enhanced with multimedia features, such as augmented reality, videos, podcast and interactive data charts.

The book showcases the role, form, structure and functions of local government through multimedia storytelling and fosters civic engagement in a technology-rich learning environment:

- The [podcast channel](#) is intended to house a growing number of episodes that showcase the people behind local government.
- The augmented reality features in this book were developed with [Metaverse](#).
- All data charts for this book have been created with [Tableau Public](#) for interactive exploration.

Local Government in North Carolina is published under the creative commons license as an Open Educational Resource (OER). The term Open Educational Resources was

coined in 2002 during a forum held by the UNESCO as the open provision of educational resources, enabled by information and communication technologies, for consultation, use and adaptation by a community of users for non-commercial purposes.

Local Government in North Carolina has been updated periodically since 1993. Offering the 2020 edition under a creative commons license makes it easy to contextualize, translate and repurpose the material. We intend the textbook (or versions of it) to be used in a variety of civic education contexts within the state of North Carolina and beyond. Educators can generate versions for different states, specific age groups, educational purposes or settings.

Learn more at: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people contributed to the implementation of this vision, but none more so than Stefanie Panke, PhD, instructional analyst at the UNC School of Government. Having worked on the fourth edition with Dr. Whitaker, Dr. Panke has a passion for the book and its mission, and combined with her deep knowledge of emerging learning technologies, she envisioned many of the substantial updates for this edition, including the new publishing platform, interactive features and “augmented reality” content, and the Creative Commons license to expand the book’s reach and impact. Dr. Panke (with Dr. Morse) secured a Lenovo Innovation grant to support the transition to a new platform and new interactive design elements.

Between the Lenovo grant and NCCCMA support, several students were able to work on various aspects of the update, in addition to School of Government staff. We would like to acknowledge Aaron Brown’s work in assisting with some of the content update, including identifying some new case studies and recording the first interviews in the podcast series. Mahnoor Siddiqui, Mistyre Bonds (UX designer at the School of Government) and Ally Fiets developed the textbook design. Oleg Drozdowski and Jacob Szymura implemented the website, PDF and e-pub versions of the textbook. Spencer Stone created the interactive tableau data visualizations and outlined the first season of the podcast. Jennifer Henderson (School of Government editor) provided timely and helpful copy-editing.

We would also like to thank several faculty colleagues at the School of Government who assisted by reviewing sections related to their areas of expertise: Trey Allen, Frayda Bluestein, Mark Botts, Adam Lovelady, David Owens, and Aimee Wall. We also thank the many local governments that graciously contributed images for this book.

We are very grateful for Dr. Panke’s enthusiasm, vision and substantial contributions to this project, as well as her supervision of many talented UNC work study students. We are also grateful for other School of Government staff members who further assisted in various aspects of this update. We also gratefully acknowledge the NCCCMA’s Civic Education Committee, led by Mary Furtado, for their assistance not only in providing financial support, but for reviewing chapters for updating and being cheerleaders for this project.

As you can see, many people have helped make this fifth edition and new format possible. We thank all those contributors, named and unnamed, as well as the many

individuals who assisted in the production of earlier editions of the book. Like local government, this book is the product of many people working together.

We hope this book will help you see the many ways local governments support your life and the lives of your family and friends. Perhaps you will be inspired to get more involved in your community. We hope you will take advantage of the opportunity to help make your community a better place. Follow your local government on social media, let public officials know your views, volunteer, or get involved in a local campaign. Local government has a tremendous influence on people's quality of life. If you choose, you can help make a positive difference in your community.

Gordon P. Whitaker

Ricardo S. Morse

Chapel Hill, N.C.

December, 2020

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS ARE CLOSE TO YOU

The water we drink, the streets we drive on, the police and fire protection we rely on – local governments provide these and other services every day. Through counties and city government, people address the “close to home” needs they have in common. Local governments shape our daily lives.

Often when people speak about “the government,” they mean the United States government. But we have three distinct levels of government in this country: national, state, and local. In our **federal system** of government, national, state, and local governments each have their areas of responsibility and authority. Generally, national and state governments set the context for local government.

The national government in Washington, D.C., is responsible for dealing with issues that affect the entire country. We often call our national government the “federal” government because it is made up of states. North Carolina is one of 50 states that make up the United States of America.

Each state government is responsible for making laws and providing services for everyone in the state. Counties and cities deal with local public issues and seek to improve quality of life for the community.

Each government has

- the responsibility to serve the best interests of the people within its **jurisdiction**,
- the authority to make and enforce laws and to provide services to all those people, and
- the authority to tax to raise funds to support its work.

Each government has elected officials who are chosen by its citizens and responsible for its work. Each type of government provides certain services, regulates certain kinds of activity, and undertakes programs to improve public well-being.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Differentiate the purpose and roles of federal, state, and local governments

Appreciate how local government serves your community

Understand the difference between homeowners' associations (HOAs) and local governments

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

There are two kinds of general purpose governments in North Carolina: [counties](#) and [municipalities](#). “City,” “town,” and “village” are terms used for municipal governments. In this resource, we often use “city” to refer to all municipalities. The state is divided into 100 counties. Each municipality is located within one or more counties.

Local governments focus on local issues. Like other governments, they provide services, make and enforce laws, and collect taxes to support their work. Local governments also have the responsibility to serve and protect everyone in their jurisdiction. They also often undertake programs to improve the local community.

Local governments are created, or authorized, by state governments. In North Carolina, local governments can do only the things authorized by the state government. Some states allow local governments more leeway to do things so long as they are not prohibited by the state. The state can also specifically prevent local governments from doing things that may contradict the policy or priorities of state government.

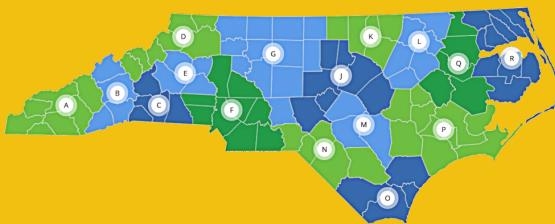


Alamance County Courthouse, Graham, N.C.

There is often considerable overlap between local issues and broader interests. For example, one city’s use of a river to carry away its wastewater can interfere with the use of that same river as a source of drinking water by cities downstream. Local governments often work closely together to deal with such problems. Most North Carolina local governments participate in one of 16 regional councils of government in the state. Often, individual local governments join the regional council in their areas to facilitate interjurisdictional and regional efforts. Member governments pay dues to support the work of the regional council and appoint representatives to discuss problems they share and to work out ways to deal with those problems.

Regional Council Map

To learn more about the North Carolina regional councils, visit their [website](#). Scan this code with the [Metaverse App](#) to open an AR experience.



Scan the code with your phone to open this experience



Local governments also cooperate directly with each other. They usually have **mutual aid agreements** to help each other fight fires or deal with other emergencies. Often a county and the municipalities within it work together in other ways, including building libraries or parks, setting up recycling or economic development programs, planning and controlling land use, and collecting taxes.

STATE AND FEDERAL GOVERNMENTS

State programs to improve the lives of citizens include recruiting industry to the state, conducting agricultural research, and promoting the arts, among other activities. The state government makes the laws that define most crimes and many family and business relationships. It also regulates other issues such as insurance rates, waste disposal, and development along the North Carolina coast. North Carolina state government creates local governments and gives them their authority. State government provides many services that affect people directly. It is responsible for building, maintaining, and policing the state's highways. State government provides recreation opportunities in state parks, forests, and other recreation areas. It helps people locate jobs and provides unemployment benefits to those who are unemployed.

N.C. COMMERCE PARK AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT COLLABORATION

The [N.C. Commerce Park](#) in Alamance County, North Carolina, is an economic development success story and a great example of how local governments work together to create significant public value. The Park is an 1,100-acre economic development zone, located in the Hawfields area of eastern Alamance County. Site development involved \$12 million for infrastructure, jointly funded by the three local governments (Alamance County and the cities of Graham and Mebane) and the N.C. Department of Transportation.

Later, the three local governments also each contributed an additional \$100,000 to the Alamance County Chamber of Commerce to oversee the Park's certification as an industrial site. Other partners in the project included several state agencies (including the Department of Commerce and Department of Transportation) and dozens of private landowners. So how did this partnership come to be? There was a long history of collaboration amongst the local governments and between the local governments and the Chamber of Commerce. The local governments and the Chamber had worked well together in the past and had developed a certain amount of trust between them. The city manager of Graham noted at the time that "Our cities have long understood the value of partnership and have established seamless operations to ensure continued cooperation." So when an opportunity arose to develop unused commercial property to attract a Wal-Mart distribution facility, those existing relationships were leveraged to take advantage of that first opportunity.

Each partner contributed in significant ways to the project, which could not have been accomplished by any one of the local governments, acting alone. The first few years of the development of the park saw over \$220 million in private investment and a total of 750 new jobs between the three entities that originally located there (Wal-Mart and Lidl distribution centers and Prescient Corporation).

CASE STUDY

The national (or “federal”) government makes laws and carries out policies that affect the entire country. The United States Constitution applies to all residents of the United States and to all governments in the United States. State and local governments may not pass or enforce laws that contradict the Constitution. For example, the Constitution requires that the national government, as well as state and local governments, ensure “equal protection under the law” to all people.

Among the services operated by the federal government are mail delivery, Social Security benefit payments, and recreation opportunities in national parks, forests, and recreation areas. National government programs for the general well-being include defense, research, and transportation. The Army, Navy, and Air Force provide national defense. The National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, and other agencies support studies of diseases and possible cures. Federal government grants support highway and airport construction. The national government regulates activities such as the manufacture and sale of medicines, the sale of stocks and bonds, and the operation of nuclear power plants.



Forest Trail, Person County, N.C.

The national and state governments influence local governments in many ways. Through **mandates**, federal or state governments require local governments to provide or carry out services in specified ways. For example, mandates say how counties should operate programs of assistance like **Medicaid** and food stamps. Federal and state governments also provide **grants** to help fund some local government programs like police services or housing repairs.

In some parts of North Carolina, federal and state governments greatly influence local governments through their decisions about the location and operation of facilities like hospitals, prisons, parks and forests, and military bases. Closing a hospital or military base, expanding a prison, or changing policies on timber harvest or tourism on state or federal land often has a major impact on the local economy. Local governments near those facilities are directly affected by these decisions.

PEOPLE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

North Carolina local governments should be responsible and responsive to the people. And all people should be responsible for and supportive of government. But who are “the people” local governments should serve? And which people are responsible for what local government does?

You and the other people who live in your county, city, town, or village make up your local government’s **population**. These **residents** are among the people who most regularly use the services your local government provides. If you have lived in your **community** for some time, you probably identify with your local government and feel some pride in it.

The community that your local government serves includes others besides residents.

Your local government also serves people who work, shop, visit, or own property within its boundaries.



Ribbon Cutting, Garner, N.C.

Any group of people who share common bonds can be thought of as a community. For example, you may think of yourself as belonging to other communities—a neighborhood, a region, or an ethnic or religious group. However, these informal communities do not have governmental authority or responsibility. They play a very different part in your life than local governments do. Local governments have the authority and responsibility to regulate what people do and also the authority to make people pay to support and protect the community.

Everyone in a local government's jurisdiction must obey its local laws and pay local taxes. This includes not only the residents of the jurisdiction but also people who work, shop, visit, or own property there. Everyone, regardless of place of residence or citizenship, has the right to be treated fairly by officials of every local government in the United States.

Anyone who is born in the United States or whose parent was a United States **citizen** is automatically a U.S. citizen. People who are not U. S. citizens by birth can become citizens by meeting requirements set by the U.S. government.

Citizens of the United States are also citizens of the state in which they live. Citizens of North Carolina are also citizens of the county in which they live. Those who live within a **municipality** are also citizens of that municipality. Of course, there are also many people in each jurisdiction who are not citizens of that particular governmental unit. For example, when you travel to another state you do not automatically become a citizen of that state. Many people live in and remain citizens of South Carolina although their jobs are in Charlotte, North Carolina, for instance.

Some people who are citizens of other countries also travel, work, or live in North Carolina. The U.S. government issues documents that regulate how long citizens of other countries (**aliens**) may stay and what they may do here. But not everyone who comes to the United States is able to get these permissions from the U.S. government, so there are also many "undocumented" aliens here. All aliens—documented or not—do not have the rights of citizenship; they cannot vote or run for office. However, all aliens, documented or otherwise, must pay taxes and obey laws.

Although some government services are available only to citizens or documented aliens, all levels of government must provide basic public services and protection to everyone in their jurisdiction. The well-being of the entire community is the concern of each local government.



U.S. Flag, Roxboro, N.C.

It is difficult to decide how best to meet the needs of all the people. People may disagree about where to locate a landfill or sewage treatment plant, or they may disagree about increasing local taxes to pay for public services. Local government provides the framework for discussing and deciding local public policies and creating programs that shape the community's future.

All those who reside, work, shop, own property, or otherwise have an interest in, or visit a city or county have the right to request public services from the local government and express their concerns to local government officials. There are several ways to do this. You can call city or county offices, talk to local elected officials, write letters to the local newspaper, or attend public meetings. Many cities and counties use social media tools—such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram—to share information with and listen to citizens directly.

To help make local governments work, people need information about what the governments are doing. In North Carolina, most local government meetings must be open to the public. The state **Open Meetings Law** provides only a few special conditions in which local government officials can meet in private to conduct government business. Similarly, North Carolina's **Public Records Law** provides that people have access to most government documents.

In some cities and counties, journalists attend many public meetings and report on them. Many local governments produce their own television programs and host web pages and have Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites. You can expand your knowledge of public issues and programs by reading materials from newspapers and government web sites and social media sites, and by discussing issues with local government officials.



The EMS Department of Durham, N.C., uses its Instagram page to announce emergencies (left) and notify citizens of various programs (right).

For a list of many North Carolina newspapers, visit this [link](#) to the N.C. Press Association.

For a list of all N.C. municipalities with population and webpage links, visit the [NCLM Municipal Directory](#).

For a list of all N.C. counties with webpage links, visit the [NCACC Links to Counties](#).

HOMEOWNERS' ASSOCIATIONS (HOAS) ARE NOT GOVERNMENTS

Today many people in North Carolina live in neighborhoods that are organized as **homeowners' associations** (HOAs). HOAs are *not* governments, although they do many of the things that local governments do. Instead, HOAs are private, nonprofit corporations.

Residents of an HOA have a different relationship with the HOA than they do with local government. Here are some of the major differences.

- HOAs provide a way for their residents to have more or different services if they are willing and able to pay for them.
- All adult citizens who are constituents of a local government can vote for that local government's governing board. Typically, only people who own property in an HOA can vote for HOA board members. Those who own more property often have more votes.
- Local governments must respect residents' Constitutional rights to free speech, petition, equal treatment, and due process. As private organizations, HOAs are not subject to those restrictions.
- Local governments must follow state laws regarding public access to their meetings and records, the handling of public money, the services they can provide, and the actions they can take. The laws do not apply to HOAs, which are private **corporations**.

Developers create HOAs when they subdivide land. They place **covenants** and other restrictions on the land when they record the new lots at the county's **register of deeds** office. Whoever buys one of those lots becomes a member of the HOA and agrees to abide by the HOA's rules.

Developers also often deed some of the land to the HOA: streets and sidewalks, parks and greenways, and other spaces the residents use together. These are not public streets or parks or other places, however. They are the private property of the homeowners' association, although the HOA may permit public use. Similarly, developers may install private water or sewer systems that become the property of the HOA. The HOA may be responsible for solid waste collection, as well as for maintenance of the streets and other HOA property.



Playground, Mount Pleasant, N.C.

Local governments often encourage or support HOAs because an HOA may reduce the local government's financial responsibility for building and maintaining public facilities or providing services in the HOA neighborhood.

Each HOA has a governing board to enforce the covenants and restrictions and oversee the neighborhood. HOA members—the people who own the property within it—elect the HOA board. The HOA board develops policies for HOA services and either oversees service delivery or hires staff to do it. The board also sets the assessments each HOA member must pay. To keep the HOA in business, these assessments must cover the costs of providing HOA services. The HOA board can enforce payment because in buying a lot, each HOA member pledges the value of the property to support the HOA. The board can file foreclosure proceedings against the lot owner to collect an assessment, if necessary.

HOA boards can also authorize projects to improve the HOA area and can restrict both personal behavior and the use of property within it. For example, HOAs often plant flowers and trees and undertake various other sorts of neighborhood beautification.

HOAS: THE GRASS ISN'T ALWAYS GREENER

HOAs can and do operate like mini governments within local governments (cities and counties), and while they are not governments, they certainly can be controversial. Consider the situation that occurred during a record drought in North Carolina.

One municipal water department enacted severe water conservation measures, yet residents of a neighborhood in the city were told by their HOA to keep their grass green. The HOA's letter to residents said "While the Board is aware of the inconvenience presented by the heat and water restrictions, we believe that having neatly landscaped lawns of grass is of the utmost importance to our community."

While other local homeowners' associations temporarily relaxed restrictive covenants requiring green grass and manicured lawns, this particular HOA would not give its residents a break. At one point a member of the HOA's landscaping committee expressed concern about the situation on the local news, which prompted her removal from the landscape committee. So what were residents to do? Keep the grass green and face penalties from the city, or let it go brown and face penalties from the HOA?

After more residents voiced concern over the conflict, the HOA board eventually met and acknowledged the "unfortunate timing" of the letter, which was sent shortly before city water restrictions were formally announced. The board eventually backed off mandating green grass and avoided escalating the conflict. Despite the authority that the HOA had to require green grass in the neighborhood, it was the city's decision to restrict water usage during the drought that ultimately prevailed.

Local governments must consider what is good for the broader community. In times of drought, they must make difficult decisions—like restricting water use, for example—to ensure essential services such as drinking water and fire protection for everyone. HOAs have their place in providing community services, but ultimately local governments establish the parameters within which HOAs must operate.

CASE STUDY

Neighborhood covenants and restrictions may limit where cars can be parked, what colors houses can be painted, whether residents may use clotheslines or plant gardens, how loudly residents can play music, and so on. HOA boards can enforce their policies by assessing fines or imposing sanctions on violators. For instance, they might prohibit a resident who did not follow HOA policies from using the HOA swimming pool.

HOA covenants and bylaws differ from one HOA to another. Sometimes local governments may help shape these arrangements when negotiating subdivision approval, annexation, or the approval of public infrastructure, but otherwise local governments have little to say about the organization and operation of HOAs.



TAKE ACTION

- ✓ Explore the websites for the county and municipality (if applicable) where you live.
- ✓ Find information about the elected officials that represent you and the services your local governments provide.
- ✓ Do you live within an HOA? If so, learn about the HOA. Who serves on the board? What services does the HOA provide?
- ✓ Find social media sites for the local government jurisdictions in which you reside. What kind of information do you find there?
- ✓ Find out which newspapers report on the actions of your local governments. What are some stories about local government actions? How might those actions affect you?

COUNTIES

No matter where you live in North Carolina, you live in a county and have a county government. Counties provide many basic public services that are important to people wherever they live. Every part of North Carolina is in one of the state's 100 counties.

When you hear “county government,” you might think about the courthouse, but county government does not stop at the courthouse steps. While the county's central offices are usually located in the courthouse, county governments provide services and operate facilities, ranging from health care clinics to jails, throughout the entire county.

Counties provide both standard and **optional services**. Because the state requires them, the standard services are often called **mandated services**. One reason the **General Assembly** has divided the state into counties is to ensure every resident of North Carolina has local access to these services. In this way, you might think of your county as a “branch office” of the state government.

For example, the county **register of deeds** maintains legal records of all property transactions and of all marriages, births, and deaths. The county **board of elections** registers voters and conducts elections. The county **sheriff** operates a jail for people awaiting trial and people convicted of minor crimes.

All counties must provide [emergency medical services](#) either through county departments or by supporting volunteer emergency medical service squads. [Social services](#), [public health and mental health services](#), and [public school funding](#) are also mandated county responsibilities.

But counties do more than carry out state requirements. As local governments,

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Identify services you use every day that counties provide

Understand the role of counties as both local governments and divisions of state government

Appreciate how demographic changes affect counties throughout North Carolina



North Carolina State Legislative Building, Raleigh, N.C. Image by [Jayron32](#) of [English Wikipedia](#).

counties are a special kind of corporation, with the power to own property, to enter into **contracts**, and to **levy** taxes.

County Government

Learn more about county government in the U.S by watching the video '[Counties Matter](#)' produced by the National Association of Counties. Scan this code with the [Metaverse App](#) to open an AR experience.



Scan the code with your phone to open this experience



To respond to the needs of the area and the requests of local **citizens**, county officials may choose to provide optional services. Counties have authority to [regulate certain behavior](#), to [encourage county improvement](#), and even to provide many of the same [services cities and towns provide](#). For example, [water and sewers](#) and [parks and recreation](#) are becoming more popular services for counties to provide.

Most county services are available to all county residents, whether they live inside or outside a city or town. However, some services may be provided only to the **unincorporated** part of the county (the area outside city or town limits). For example, because most **municipalities** have their own police department, the county sheriff's department usually provides [police patrol and criminal investigation](#) only in unincorporated areas.

Counties must also provide certain public facilities. Each county is required by the state to pay for building and maintaining a jail and for providing adequate office space for other mandated services. In addition, the county is responsible for providing suitable space and equipment for the state's district and superior courts.

The **General Assembly** has changed counties' service responsibilities many times over the years. For example, one early responsibility of North Carolina county governments was the construction and maintenance of rural roads and bridges. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, when many counties went bankrupt, the General Assembly transferred all responsibility for rural roads and bridges to the state highway department, now the North Carolina Department of Transportation.



Downtown, Gastonia, N.C.

Counties get new mandates, too. In the late 1980s, the General Assembly passed laws requiring all counties to provide for the safe disposal of solid waste produced in the county. This new mandate put all 100 counties in the business of solid [waste management](#).

To learn more about a specific county, visit that [county government's home page](#) or read about it on [Wikipedia](#).

GOVERNING COUNTIES

County government in North Carolina is complex. Because counties are subdivisions of state government, county officials share responsibility for county services with others. State officials and several appointed boards all help set some policies for county government and help direct some of the public employees who carry out county programs and services.

Counties have to carry out many state-created programs, but they can also create programs and policies through county government, a type of public **corporation**. Like private corporations, counties can own property, form contracts, and be **sued**. The owners of a corporation give the responsibility of running the corporation to a **board**. The board acts on behalf of the owners in deciding what the corporation should do. A county's "owners"—the citizens of the county—elect a board and other officials who are responsible for running the county.



Courthouse, Wayne County, N.C.

Counties differ from private corporations in important ways. For one, citizens become the "owners" of a county simply by living there. They do not buy the corporation's stock the way owners of a private, for-profit corporation do. Counties also have different powers than private corporations. Private corporations can engage in any legal activity they choose. North Carolina counties can engage only in those activities for which the General Assembly has given its permission, and the General Assembly may change

county authority as it wishes. On the other hand, counties are still governments and have the authority to make and enforce laws and **levy** taxes.

Voters in each North Carolina county elect a [board of county commissioners](#), a **sheriff**, a **register of deeds**, and a clerk of superior court. The **clerk of superior court** is no longer an office of county government, however. The General Assembly consolidated all county courts into a statewide court system, and the clerk, although elected by the county's voters, is an employee of the state court system. Judges and district attorneys are elected by judicial districts. Some judicial districts include only a single county, but in many cases they include several counties. Regardless of the size of the judicial district, however, judges and district attorneys are state officials, not county officials.

Voters also elect members of the local school board, which usually covers an entire county, but sometimes includes only part of a county. Thus, the county commissioners, sheriff, and register of deeds are the only county officials elected by voters in each of the 100 counties.

THE BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

The board of county commissioners has general responsibility for county government. It sets the **property tax rate** and adopts the county **budget**. It passes **ordinances**, **resolutions**, and **orders** to establish county policies. The members of the board elect one of the commissioners as chair and another as vice-chair of the board. The chair of the board presides at board meetings and often speaks for the county as head of county government.

Each board of county commissioners appoints a [county manager](#) to be the county's chief executive to oversee the county government's day-to-day operations and advise the board. Each board also appoints a clerk to keep official records of the board's meetings and decisions, to publish notices, to conduct research, and to carry out other duties, such as providing information to citizens about their county government.

CHILDCARE PUBLIC FORUM IN TRANSYLVANIA COUNTY

County officials often go beyond providing standard services to proactively address critical public issues. Take, for example, the work Transylvania County has done to address the needs of its youngest residents.

In response to a report citing Transylvania County as having the sixth-highest childcare costs in North Carolina, its board of commissioners hosted a public forum to engage county residents in considering the issue. The forum held discussions about costs, availability, quality, and long-term impacts of childcare in the county. The discussions were spearheaded by commissioners Page Lemel and Mike Hawkins, two strong childcare advocates. Commissioner Lemel spoke at the forum, saying, "We must develop opportunities for our young children so that every child has the opportunity to reach his or her potential in life."

Over 100 citizens attended the forum and the response was overwhelmingly positive. Attendees noted in a survey distributed at the forum that they felt heard. The county got the desired citizen input, and the citizens felt part of the problem-solving process. The forum was part of a larger, county-wide initiative around improving early childhood resources. This initiative has grown into a county-wide partnership called "[Get Set Transylvania](#)," which in turn helped the county be selected as the first U.S. rural county in the Sesame Street in Communities program.

Transylvania County's efforts around early childhood development illustrate how county government plays an important role in addressing public problems as well as the value of community engagement and partnerships in identifying and implementing solutions.

CASE STUDY

Boards of county commissioners share authority for setting county policy with other state officials, the sheriff, the register of deeds, and [independent county boards](#). Various state agencies and the General Assembly often set policy for county governments through mandates that require the county to provide certain services or follow specific procedures. As locally elected officials, the sheriff and the register of deeds have authority independent of the board of county commissioners and may set policies for their departments. Furthermore, state law provides for separate independent boards with responsibility for alcoholic beverage control, education, elections, public health, mental health, and social services policy.

Only the board of commissioners, however, can levy taxes and appropriate county funds. The responsibility for financing county operations and the power to control **expenditures** give a board of county commissioners the ability to coordinate county policy for services with independent boards. Because it raises and **allocates** county funds, the board of county commissioners can influence all government programs that depend on county money, even schools, although they operate as separate administrative units.

North Carolina Association of County Commissioners (NCACC)

For more information and news about boards of county commissioners, access the [North Carolina Association of County Commissioners' website](#). Scan this code with the [Metaverse App](#) to open an AR experience.



NORTH CAROLINA ASSOCIATION
OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Scan the code with your phone to
open this experience



INDEPENDENT BOARDS

State laws require that counties provide both public health and social services. In some cases, these services are provided by single county agencies governed by appointed, independent boards. For public health, the members of the board are appointed by the board of county commissioners. For social services, some of the members are appointed by the board of county commissioners.



Emergency Medical Services, Wilson County, N.C.

Appointed boards for social services and public health are responsible both for hiring their agency's director and for advising the director on policy and budget matters. Local boards of health also have the authority to adopt local laws, called "rules," which apply throughout the entire county. Social services boards do not have the authority to adopt rules. They actually play a relatively limited role in setting local policy because so many of the programs their agencies administer are funded and governed by federal and state law and policy.

Counties have several other options for [health](#) and [social services](#) agency organization and board governance. They may organize public health and social services by joining together to create multi-county agencies that are governed by independent, appointed boards. In addition, counties can choose to create **consolidated human services agencies** that are governed by a consolidated human services board. Members of a consolidated board are appointed by the board of county commissioners. Finally, the board of county commissioners has the option of abolishing the independent governing boards for public health and social services and assuming the powers and duties of the abolished boards. This flexibility in organization and governance has resulted in a wide variety of human services agency structures and boards across the state.

BATTLE FOR CONTROL OF HUMAN SERVICES IN JACKSON COUNTY

How we manage human services in our communities is often a source of political conflict in local governments. In 2012, the N.C. General Assembly gave county boards of commissioners additional options for governing public health and social services: they could appoint a separate board to govern each (the norm prior to passage of this bill), they could appoint a consolidated board to govern both, or they could directly govern public health and social services themselves.

In a 15-month span, Jackson County cycled through all three of these choices as the board of commissioners initially fought with the health and social services boards, and then later among themselves. In the first of several 3-2 split votes, the board of commissioners voted to consolidate their existing public health and social services boards in early 2018. The newly combined board, unsure about why the consolidation occurred, reached out to the board of commissioners for clarification on the decision. In response, the board of commissioners voted to abolish the consolidated board altogether and made themselves responsible for overseeing health and human services. The abolition quickly became an issue in the next election cycle, and the majority of commissioners [flipped in favor](#) of supporting the county's traditional two independent board model. The new county board promptly [voted in March 2019](#) to re-establish separate health and social service boards, bringing Jackson County back to where it began.

Jackson County's saga with its health and social services boards shows what can happen when local governments are given new authority by the state. Even though Jackson County didn't make the change right away, the N.C. General Assembly's decision to let counties change how health and social services are managed allowed the county to experiment with how it governed its health and social service functions. That new authority became politicized and two factions on the board of commissioners were continuously at odds over what would be best for the county. The conflict was as much about where power would reside as it was how the services would be delivered, and similar conflicts occurred in many North Carolina counties since the 2012 decision by the General Assembly.

CASE STUDY

Counties also establish regional mental health **authorities** called "local management entities" (LMEs). Each LME has a board appointed by the counties it includes. The LME boards oversee delivery of public mental health, developmental disabilities, and substance abuse (MHDDSA) services in those counties.

Each county's **board of elections** sets policies for operations of local voter registration and elections and selects an elections supervisor to manage these operations. The State Board of Elections appoints these boards and regulates their work.

State Board of Elections

Visit the [State Board of Elections website](#) to learn more about voting, campaign finance, and the work of election officials. Scan this code with the [Metaverse App](#) to open an AR experience.



Scan the code with your phone to open this experience



In counties where alcoholic beverages are sold, an alcoholic beverage control (ABC) board oversees ABC stores in the county.

Most North Carolina counties have a single, [countywide public school](#) system, although some counties have more than one. Unlike the other independent county boards, voters in each school district elect the members of the local board of education.

None of the independent boards has the authority to **levy** taxes. The board of county commissioners is responsible for raising and allocating local funding for these services.

DIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA COUNTIES

There is no “typical” North Carolina county. In area, they range from 173 square miles (Chowan County) to 949 square miles (Robeson County). The population differences are even greater. In 2019, Tyrrell County had the smallest population with just over 4,300 residents, and Mecklenburg County had the largest population with more than 1,075,000 residents.

Population density varies widely across counties, too. As of 2019, Hyde County had only about nine people per square mile, whereas Mecklenburg County had more than 2,000 people per square mile.

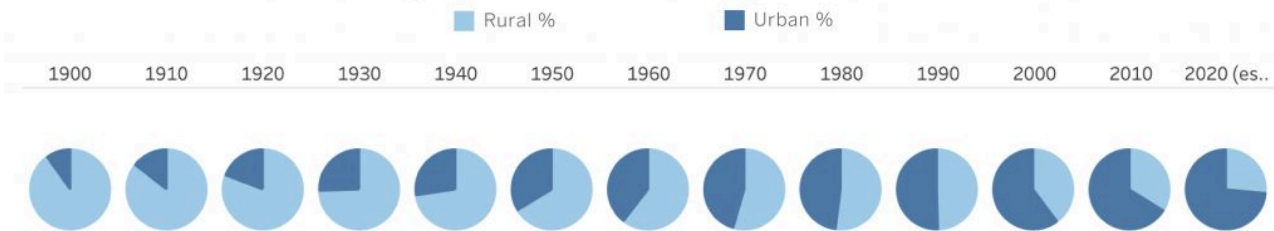


Charlotte, N.C. Image by [James Willamor](#) used under [CC BY-SA 2.0](#).

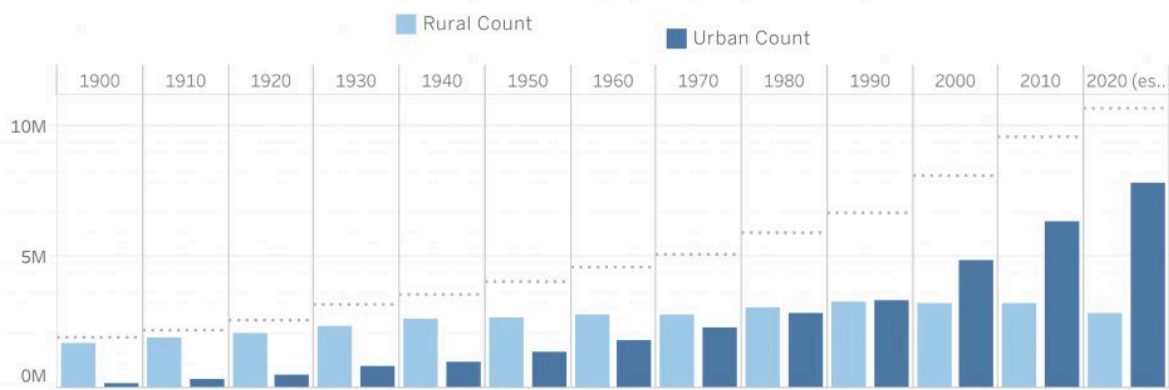
Local Government in North Carolina

Urban vs. Rural Population

Percentage of Statewide Population, Urban vs. Rural



Statewide Urban vs. Rural Population Totals



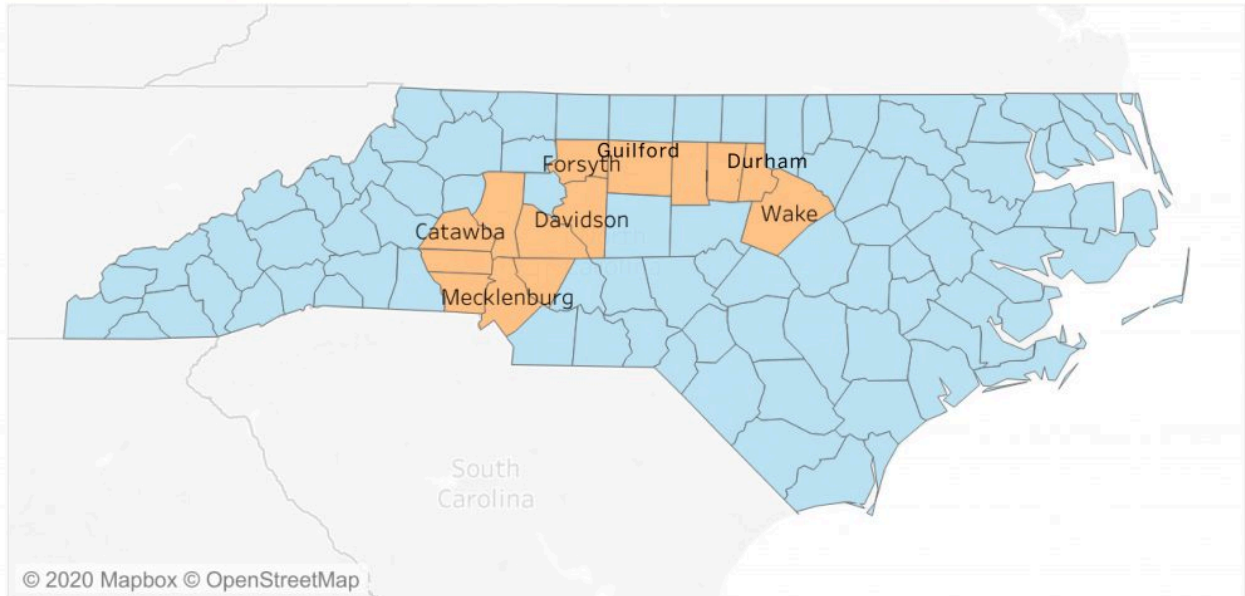
Percentage of Statewide Population, Urban vs. Rural: Urban Percentage of the Population for States, Historical. Retrieved August 31, 2019, from <https://www.icip.iastate.edu/tables/population/urban-pct-states>
 Total State Population: Urban Percentage of the Population for States, Historical. Retrieved August 31, 2019, from <https://www.icip.iastate.edu/tables/population/urban-pct-states>
 2020: County/State Population Projections. Retrieved August 31, 2019, from <https://www.osbm.nc.gov/demog/county-projections>

Throughout the twentieth century, North Carolina’s urban population grew more rapidly than the rural population. Over half of the state’s eight million people lived in cities, towns, or villages in 2000. Rapid growth has continued in several of the state’s urban centers, and by 2017, North Carolina’s population exceeded 10.2 million people. Interactive infographic available on [Tableau Public](#)

The **Piedmont counties**, in the central part of the state, are an area of rolling hills. North Carolina’s biggest cities and their suburbs are in this region. They create a continuous band of 15 largely **urban** counties centered along Interstate 85 from Charlotte to Raleigh, as shown on the map below. This population pattern of counties is sometimes referred to as the “Piedmont urban crescent” of North Carolina.

Local Government in North Carolina

The Urban Crescent



SOURCE: for counties:

County Population (2018): United States Census Bureau, Population Division, Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin for the United States, States, and Counties: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2018 (June 2019)

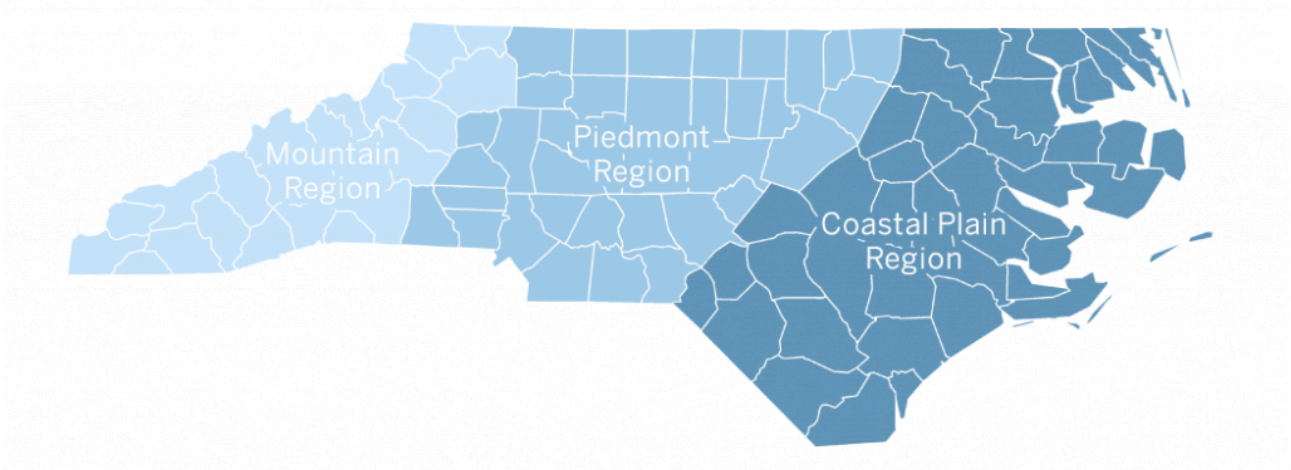
Map of urban crescent population density, interactive version available on [Tableau Public](#). For an additional interactive map of large cities in N.C., visit '[Municipalities over 50K Population](#)' on [Tableau Public](#).

Most counties in the Piedmont, however, are largely **rural**. Farming is a more important part of the economy in the eastern than in the western Piedmont. Manufacturing has been particularly important in the western Piedmont, even in many rural counties. Since 2000, however, many of the traditional industries (textiles, clothing, and furniture) have left North Carolina, creating considerable economic hardship and change as the state economy shifts to new industries.

The land in the western part of the state is mountainous. Many of the **mountain counties** are heavily forested. In the eastern part of the state, the land is a flat **coastal plain**. Some counties in the east are also heavily forested, but many are rich agricultural areas with highly productive farms. In both the east and west, most of the counties are rural. Agriculture and forestry are important economic activities in those parts of the state. Tourism is also especially important to the economy of the mountains and the coast. Fishing remains important in coastal areas.



AB Beach Music Festival, Atlantic Beach, N.C.



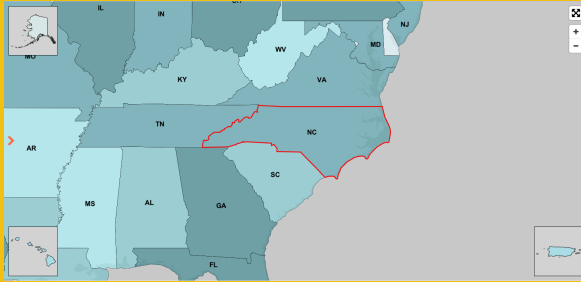
North Carolina is divided into three distinct regions: Mountain, Piedmont, and Coastal Plain region.

Only a handful of mountain and coastal counties are largely urban (having more than 250 people per square mile in 2017):

- Buncombe (Asheville) and Henderson (directly south of Asheville) in the mountains, and
- Cumberland (Fayetteville), New Hanover (Wilmington), Pitt (Greenville), and Onslow (Jacksonville) on the coastal plain.

County Level Statistics

For county-level statistics visit the [Census website](#), click on North Carolina, then select “counties”. Scan this code with the [Metaverse App](#) to open an AR experience.



Scan the code with your phone to open this experience



POPULATION CHANGES AND COUNTY GOVERNMENT

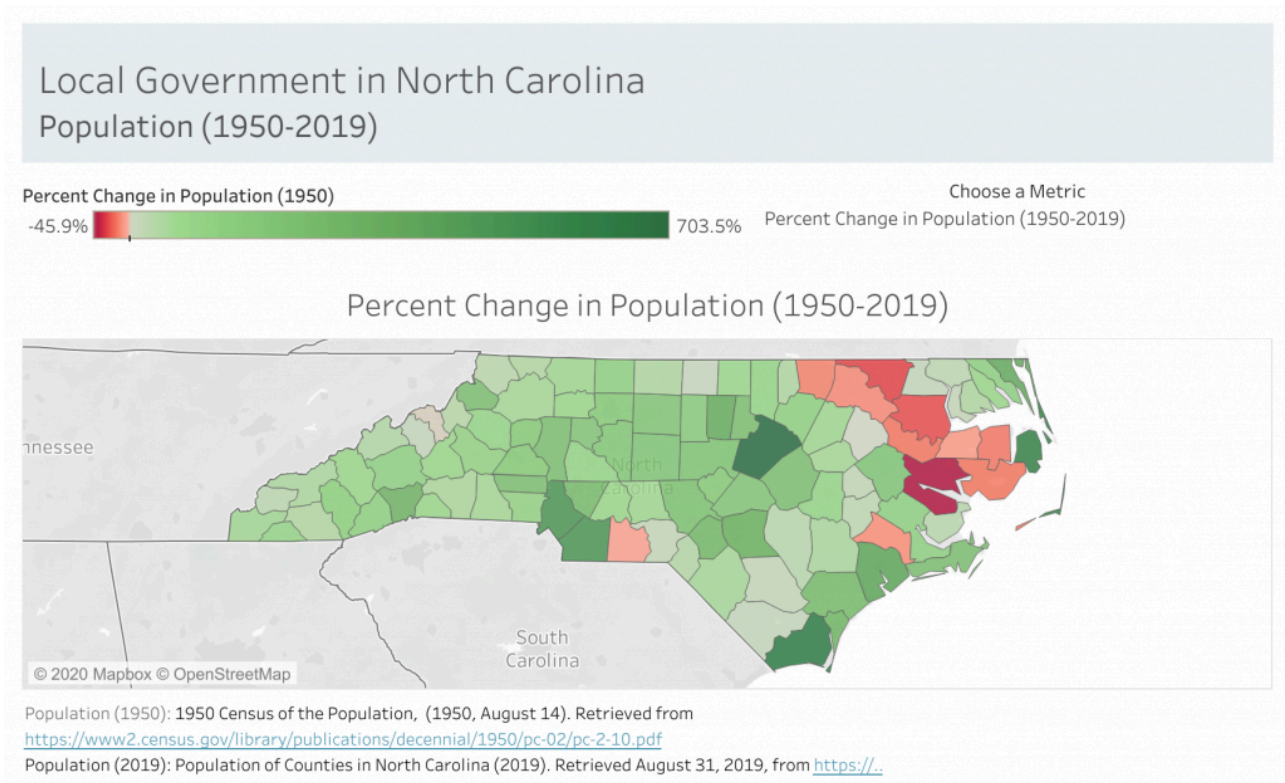
Changes in the population mean changes in service demand as well as in the amount of tax **revenue** needed to pay for those services. Since 1950, some North Carolina counties have become more densely populated, others have maintained their population, and others have experienced a decrease in population. Overall, the population of the state more than doubled from 1950 to 2010, from 4 million to 9.5 million (exceeding 10.5 million in 2020). But most of the increase was concentrated in about half of the state’s counties. Some counties actually lost population over that time. The map below shows the percentage each county’s population changed during that time span.

Three kinds of development have contributed most to population growth.

1. New and rapidly expanding businesses created jobs and led to increased population in some counties. Much of this kind of growth occurred in the Piedmont, with Mecklenburg and Wake counties having the greatest population increases.
2. Military base development contributed much to the population growth in some coastal plain counties, especially Cumberland (Fort Bragg) and Onslow (Camp LeJeune).
3. Resort and retirement community developments also contributed to major population growth in several counties, particularly in the mountains (Henderson, Watauga) and at the beach (Brunswick, Currituck, Dare).

Whether they came to take jobs created by expanding businesses, to serve on military bases, or to retire, new residents needed housing, food, clothing, banking, and other goods and services. This need led to the expansion of other businesses, to the creation of additional jobs, and additional population growth. As a result of the new jobs, people

in counties with population growth generally have higher incomes than those who live in counties with little or no population growth.



Population change in North Carolina, interactive infographic available on [Tableau Public](#)

Population growth creates a need for additional government services. Not only are there more people to be served, but the kinds of services needed may also change. For example, housing developments outside city limits may require public water and sewer systems to protect the public health. New school buildings and other public facilities are also needed as the population increases. County governments must pay for these new facilities and hire new employees to serve their larger population.

As mentioned, not all counties gained population. In North Carolina, many counties that are primarily agricultural have had little population growth or even experienced a decrease in population since the mid-twentieth century. Machines replaced people for many farming operations during this period. In some rural counties, manufacturing or tourist jobs replaced agricultural jobs. In other counties, however, there were few new jobs to replace those lost on the farms. Often the jobs that are available pay low wages. These are also usually the counties where **per capita** income is lowest.

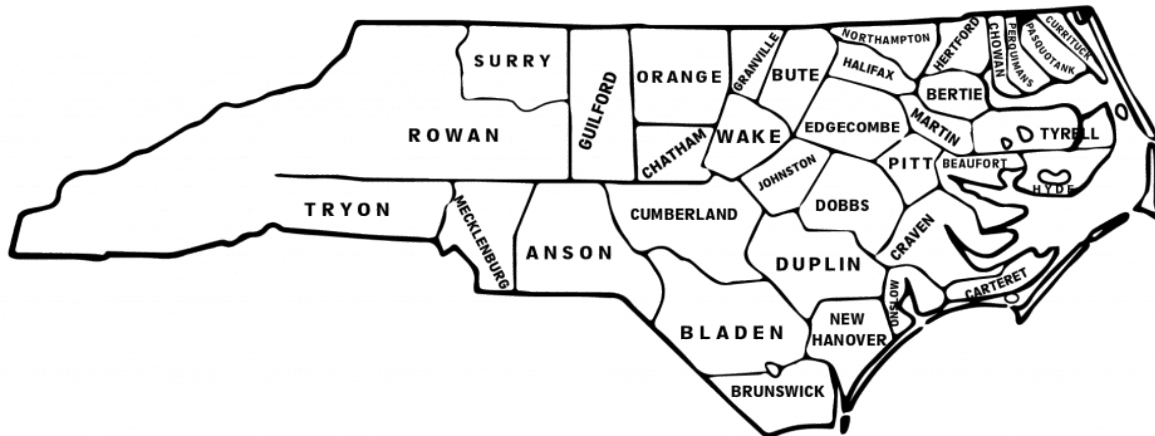


Family walking down a sidewalk, Rockingham County, N.C.

Counties with a constant or declining population have special problems. High unemployment and low wages mean that a larger proportion of the population needs financial assistance and health care from county government. At the same time, poorer people pay less in taxes. A county with a low per capita income may have trouble raising funds to assist its needy residents. Government programs to create new jobs may be particularly important in such counties. [Economic development](#) is a priority for many counties but is both more challenging and urgent in counties that have not grown for many years.

HISTORY OF NORTH CAROLINA COUNTIES

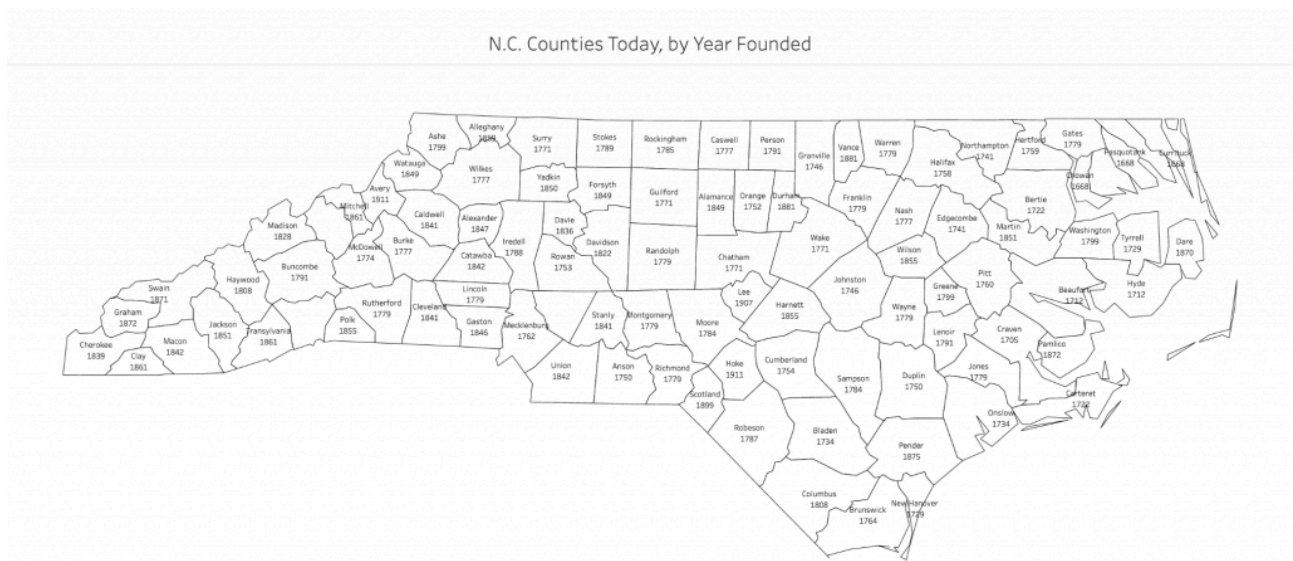
Counties were a key part of colonial government in North Carolina. As British control and European settlement extended westward from the coast, British authorities set up new counties to provide government for the colonists. The colonial governor appointed justices of the peace in each county. The justices served as both the courts and county administrators. The justices of the peace appointed constables to enforce the law. They also appointed a sheriff to collect taxes and wardens to care for the poor. The justices appointed a surveyor to mark land boundaries and a register of deeds to keep property records. Establishing land boundaries and maintaining records of property were very important to the farmers and planters who settled the colony. Having government officials nearby was especially important before the development of modern transportation because it could take many hours to travel only a few miles.



Historic map, North Carolina counties, 1775-1776

There were 35 counties in North Carolina when the state declared its independence from Great Britain in 1776. After independence, North Carolina state government continued to use counties to organize local citizens and provide basic government throughout the state. The General Assembly continued to create new counties and sometimes abolished others. By 1800, there were 65 counties, and by 1900, there were 97.

In the twentieth century, three additional counties were created to bring the total number of counties to 100, the number we have today.



Visit an interactive version of this map on [Tableau Public](#).

Voters in North Carolina could not select their own county officials until after the Civil War. Up until that time, the state appointed county officials. The North Carolina Constitution of 1868 provided for the election of the sheriff, coroner, register of deeds, clerk of court, surveyor, and treasurer. Under the 1868 constitution, voters in each county also began to elect a board of county commissioners. The board of county commissioners replaced appointed justices of the peace as officers of general government for the county.

TAKE ACTION

- ✓ Find your county's **GIS** website to determine where you live in relation to municipalities (incorporated areas).
- ✓ Identify services your county government provides. Which of these services do you regularly use? Which would you like to know more about?
- ✓ Determine how many cities and towns (incorporated municipalities) are located in your county.
- ✓ Find out who serves on your county board of commissioners. By using the website or by contacting them, find out about their background, how long they have they served, and what issues they are most passionate about.
- ✓ Search local media or records of county board meetings to find out what issues are at the forefront for your county government right now.

MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENTS: CITIES, TOWNS, AND VILLAGES

People live near one another for many reasons: to conduct business, to live near their workplaces, and to enjoy the company of others. There are many advantages to living near others, but there are also disadvantages—issues that affect the community at large. To help people live close together safely and productively, people create **municipalities**.

In North Carolina, municipal governments are called cities, towns, or villages. These terms carry no special legal meaning in North Carolina. All three terms refer to a municipality created and authorized by the state to make decisions for a community and to carry out the policies and programs that have been approved. In common usage, “towns” are often thought of as smaller than “cities,” but this is not always true. The Town of Cary, for example, is the seventh largest municipality in North Carolina. It had more than 170,000 residents in 2019. In this resource, we generally refer to all municipalities as “cities.”

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Identify municipal government services and facilities that affect your daily life.

Understand how the N.C. General Assembly influences what municipalities can and cannot do.

Understand how municipalities are created through incorporation, and how they may expand through annexation.

Cities must be **incorporated** by the **General Assembly**. The General Assembly may require the approval of the voters of the new municipality, but it is not required to do so. An incorporated municipality has jurisdiction within its defined geographic boundaries. The General Assembly also approves a municipality's **charter**, the rules under which it conducts its business.

Municipal **corporations** can own property, enter contracts, and be sued. The owners of a corporation give the responsibility of running the corporation to a board. The board acts on behalf of the owners in deciding what the corporation should do. A municipality's "owners"—the citizens of the municipality—elect the board, which is responsible for running the municipality.



Cary Arts Center, Town of Cary, N.C. Image by [Doug Kerr](#) used under [CC BY-SA 2.0](#).



City Hall, City of Gastonia, N.C.

Municipal corporations differ from private corporations in important ways. For one thing, citizens become the "owners" of a municipal corporation simply by living within the municipality's jurisdiction. They do not buy the corporation's stock the way owners of a private, for-profit corporation do.

Municipal corporations also have different powers than private corporations. Private corporations can engage in any legal activity they choose. In North Carolina, municipalities can engage only in those activities for which the General Assembly

has given its permission, and the General Assembly may change municipal authority as it wishes. For example, the legislature might remove a city's authority to license taxis or to operate swimming pools, and that city could then no longer carry out the activity. On the other hand, unlike private corporations, municipal corporations are governments. Therefore, municipal corporations are authorized to make and enforce laws and to **levy** taxes.

CHARLOTTE AIRPORT DISPUTE: STATE VS. LOCAL CONTROL

The 2013-2014 dispute over control of Charlotte Douglas International Airport (CLT) demonstrates how municipalities are “creatures of the state” as well as how significant conflict between state and local governments can be. In July 2013, members of the majority party in the North Carolina General Assembly passed a bill to create a special commission to govern the airport. Much to the dismay of City of Charlotte’s leadership, the new commission was designed to remove the city’s involvement in how the airport would operate moving forward. Leaders in the General Assembly justified the move by saying they hoped to prevent to protect the airport from meddling by the city. Conversely, city leaders claimed that the move was no more than a power grab by the General Assembly.

The City of Charlotte and the newly created Charlotte Airport Commission went to court to settle which institution would run the airport. After months in court and legal fees exceeding \$1 million, the [North Carolina Superior Court placed a permanent injunction on the issue](#), effectively ruling that the City of Charlotte would continue to operate the airport as it has had for decades. The court order further provided that the injunction could only be lifted if the commission was granted operating authority by the Federal Aviation Administration. In the [summer of 2016, the FAA ruled out that possibility](#), putting the final nail into the Charlotte Airport Commission’s hopes of running Charlotte Douglas Airport.

The battle over control of the airport was a clash between local, state, and national governments. North Carolina’s General Assembly can and often does preempt the authority of county and municipal governments it has created to do things such as standardize practices across the state or address policy issues that require statewide coordination. But sometimes the General Assembly simply passes local acts to make a political point and remind local governments that they are so-called “creatures of the state.”

CASE STUDY

In addition to following its own charter, each North Carolina municipality must also obey federal and state laws and regulations. The General Assembly has passed some laws that apply to all cities, while others only apply to cities of a certain size. These general laws provide most of the authority for North Carolina municipalities. However, sometimes a city wants to do something not authorized by general law or by its charter. Often in such cases the city asks the General Assembly to approve a **local act**. By custom, the General Assembly approves local acts that are favored by all of the representatives to the General Assembly from the jurisdiction that requests the local act.

Local bills (or acts) of the North Carolina General Assembly are common and are necessary because the state charters local governments. For example, House Bill 993 from the 2017 session involved changing the charter of the City of Bessemer City to transfer the power to appoint the city clerk and deputy city clerks from the city council to the city manager. Because the authority was originally granted to the city council, the only way that practice could be changed was to change the charter, something only the General Assembly can do. For more information on local acts, see <https://canons.sog.unc.edu/what-is-a-local-act>.

A new city is generally incorporated after the development of a settlement in the area.

Some cities grew up around county courthouses and were then incorporated. Others, like Ahoskie, Carrboro, and Durham, developed around mills or railway stations. The Town of Princeville was incorporated by the General Assembly in 1885, 20 years after former slaves settled it as a freedmen’s camp called “Freedom Hill” at the end of the Civil War. It is the oldest town incorporated by African Americans in the United States.

People ask for their city to be incorporated because they want to have a local government. They want public services, a means for providing public order and improving the community, and the right to participate in making local decisions.

The extension of municipal boundaries is called **annexation**. When territory is annexed to a city, that territory comes within the municipality’s jurisdiction and its residents become part of the town’s population. Voters in the annexed territory automatically become eligible to vote in city elections, and the city must provide services to the new residents.

Cities may annex territory through an act of the General Assembly, by petition of the owners of the property to be annexed, or by ordinance. Annexation by ordinance requires the city to provide services to the annexed territory. Following a change in state law in 2012, annexation by ordinance must be approved in a **referendum** of the voters in the area to be annexed.



Opening of Public Service Center, Fuquay-Varina, N.C.

ROUGEMONT (UN)INCORPORATED

Creating a new town is an unpredictable process, and the voters of the Rougemont community learned that when they held a special election to become Durham County's second incorporated municipality. Rougemont is a rural community located in the northwest corner of the county. It is home to just under 1,000 total residents. Some of them had been petitioning for the opportunity to become a municipality for decades. In 2011 they finally got approval from the General Assembly to vote on incorporation.

Those in favor of becoming a municipality wanted a stronger voice in decision-making for their remote corner of the county. Some argued incorporating would spur economic development within their community. Pro-incorporation residents also cited the need for a public water system. Dozens of private wells were contaminated with benzene, a chemical that causes cancer. Incorporating, supporters said, would make it easier for the community to negotiate water prices with nearby municipalities, such as the Town of Roxboro.

Residents opposed to incorporation raised concerns over paying property taxes to support a municipal government. They said they had no desire for more public services. Some people outside the community had concerns as well. Leaders in the City of Durham had long resisted Rougemont's incorporation. They worried adding a new town would complicate the long-discussed idea of consolidating Durham city and county governments. In response to their objections the General Assembly had blocked incorporation of Rougemont. However, after a compromise where pro-incorporation residents promised to void incorporation if the city and county governments merged, the state legislature allowed the citizens of Rougemont to finally vote on incorporation in 2011.

Rougemont residents defeated incorporation by a 52% to 48% margin. It was a low turnout election. A margin of only ten votes prevented Rougemont from becoming a municipality.

CASE STUDY

GOVERNING MUNICIPALITIES

Each municipality has its own governing board, elected by citizens of that city, town, or village. Like the state legislature, a local governing board represents the people of the jurisdiction and has the authority to act for them. In most North Carolina cities the governing board is called a council, although "board of commissioners" and "board of aldermen" are also names for municipal governing boards.

Regardless of whether they are called council members, commissioners, or aldermen, the members of the governing board make official decisions for the city. The governing board establishes local tax rates and adopts a budget that indicates how the city will spend its money. The governing board sets policies for municipal services, passes ordinances to regulate behavior, and enters into agreements on behalf of the municipality.

The voters also elect a mayor in most North Carolina cities. In a few places, however, the governing board elects the mayor. The mayor presides over the governing board and is typically the chief spokesperson for the municipality. In some other states, the mayor is also the chief administrator for the municipality, but this is not the case in North Carolina.

Except for some of the smallest, most North Carolina municipalities hire a professional manager to serve as chief executive. Under the **council-manager plan**, the manager is responsible for carrying out the council's policies and for running city government. A manager must work closely with the council in developing policies for the city and with city employees in seeing that city policies are carried out.



Council Meeting, Morrisville, N.C.

Each municipality also has a clerk. In some cities, the manager appoints the clerk. In others, the council appoints the clerk. Regardless of who makes the appointment, the municipal clerk reports directly to the governing board. The clerk keeps official records of the board's meetings and decisions. The clerk may also publish notices, keep other municipal records, conduct research for the governing board, and carry out a wide variety of other duties, as assigned by the board. The clerk is usually a key source of information for citizens about their municipal government.

Many small municipalities do not have a manager. Where there is no manager, the governing board is responsible for the administration of the town's business. The board hires and directs town employees and manages the town's affairs together, as a committee, or assigns day-to-day oversight responsibilities for different departments to different board members. Instead of a manager, some smaller municipalities hire an administrator who helps the governing board direct town business, but who does not have all the powers of a manager. In towns that have no administrator, the clerk often "wears many hats," in effect holding several different jobs to carry out town business.

Municipal employees do much of the work of city government. City **personnel** include police officers, firefighters, water treatment plant operators, recreation supervisors, or others who provide services directly to city residents. Their work is supported by other city personnel: accountants, analysts, engineers, lawyers, secretaries, and a variety of other staff. These personnel provide expert advice, train employees, pay bills, prepare reports, and do the many other things it takes to conduct a city's business.

City personnel are organized into departments. Each department specializes in a particular service, such as police work, fire protection, water supply, or recreation. Typically, the city manager selects department heads. They work with the city manager in planning and coordinating the activities of employees in their departments. In many cities, the manager relies on department heads and/or a personnel department to recruit applicants for city jobs, screen job candidates, and hire new employees. Department heads organize and supervise the employees in their departments.



Fire department extinguishes a fire, Pinehurst, N.C.

The people who live in a city also play an important role in providing municipal services. Volunteers help supervise and staff recreation programs, organize recycling, and even fight fires. Citizen **advisory committees**, boards, and commissions help city councils and city employees review and plan programs. Individual citizens influence city policies through petitions, public hearings, and conversations with city officials. Residents also help carry out city programs. They sort their trash for recycling. They call police or fire departments to report dangerous situations. Many municipal services cannot be provided effectively without the active cooperation of residents.

Municipal governments help people make their communities better places to live. They provide services to make life safer, healthier, and happier for the people who live there. They offer incentives for improving the community. They make and enforce laws to deal with public problems.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MUNICIPALITIES IN NORTH CAROLINA

European settlers established the first municipal governments in North Carolina in the early 1700s. Although they encountered Native American villages and sometimes built their own towns on the same sites, the Europeans created municipal governments based on English models. Each town was an independent municipality authorized under English, and later North Carolina, law.

Early North Carolina towns maintained public wells, established volunteer fire departments, and set up town watches to keep the peace. For example, the commissioners of Newbern (as it was then spelled) detailed the duties of the town watch in 1794 as follows:

“The gentlemen on watch are to use their best endeavors to prevent house breaking, and thieving, of every kind, and to seize and secure every person found committing, or attempting to commit any such offensesThe watch will take up all suspicious and disorderly persons, who may be

found in or strolling about the streets, after nine o'clock at nightOn discovering any danger by fire, one of the watch will immediately ring the church bell, one other of them will then inform the person, who has care of the water engine, and the others are to alarm the persons near where the greatest danger appears, and use their utmost endeavors, to assist those in distress."

By 1800, there were more than a dozen municipalities in North Carolina, but only four—Edenton, Fayetteville, New Bern, and Wilmington—had populations of 1,000 or more. North Carolina was a rural, agricultural state, and few people lived in municipalities. The state remained largely rural throughout the nineteenth century. In 1850, Wilmington, the state's major port, was the only municipality in the state with more than 5,000 residents. Wilmington's population reached 10,000 in 1870. By 1880, Asheville, Charlotte, and Raleigh also each had more than 10,000 residents.



City Hall, City of New Bern, N.C. Image by [Gerry Dincher](#) used under [CC-BY-2.0](#).

In the mid-nineteenth century, the North Carolina General Assembly revised the laws regarding municipalities. Under an act passed in 1855, all municipalities were given the same powers. They could tax real estate, liquor dealers, tickets to shows, dogs, and freely roaming hogs, horses, and cattle. They could appoint a town constable (law enforcement officer), regulate public markets, prevent public nuisances, protect public health, keep streets and bridges in repair, and regulate the quality and weight of loaves of bread baked for sale. As time passed, the General Assembly took away some authority and gave additional authority to individual municipalities and groups of municipalities. As a result, each North Carolina municipality may now have a somewhat different set of powers and responsibilities.

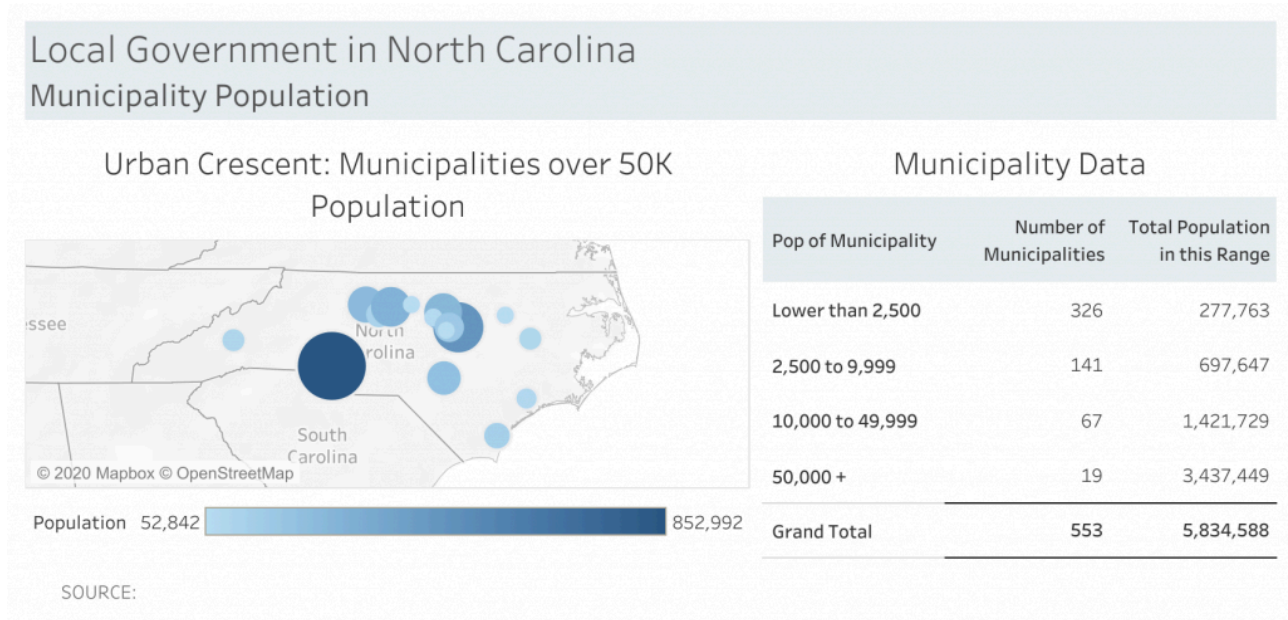
Population growth brought the need for new municipal powers and responsibilities. A larger population created new problems for municipal governments. For example, each family getting its own water from public wells became a problem as cities grew and became more crowded. Some cities like Asheville began to provide safe water to residents in the nineteenth century, but in most municipalities water supply and many other services continued to be privately provided.

During the early years of the twentieth century, North Carolina cities grew rapidly. By 1920, 20 percent of the state's 2.5 million people lived in municipalities. Cities paved their streets as automobiles became common. They also set up full-time police and fire departments and adopted building codes to regulate construction and reduce hazards to health and safety. Cities bought private water and sewer companies during this period or started their own systems to make these services more widely available to their

residents. A number of cities even started their own electric utilities to bring electricity to their communities.

Urban growth continued throughout the twentieth century. Municipal services continued to expand to meet the needs of the state’s growing urban population. By the end of the twentieth century, almost all municipalities had public water and sewer systems, paved streets, and police and fire protection. Most municipalities adopted [land use regulations](#). Other services such as garbage collection, parks, and recreation programs also became common in municipalities throughout the state during the twentieth century.

By 2019, Charlotte was estimated at almost 900,000 residents, Raleigh almost 475,000, Greensboro about 270,000, Durham about 275,000, and Winston-Salem nearly 250,000. Most North Carolina municipalities continue to be small places, however. As the table below shows, nearly sixty percent of North Carolina municipalities had fewer than 2,500 residents in 2018.



Large municipalities in North Carolina. For an interactive version of this map visit [Tableau Public](#).

TAKE ACTION

- ✓ Do you live within a municipality? If so, find out the history of it. When was it incorporated? How has the population changed over time?
- ✓ Attend a municipal council meeting in your community. Take note of the issues discussed and voted on. Who is in the audience? Did any citizens address the council during the meeting?
- ✓ See if your local government has a social media page or pages and, if it does, start following it/them.
- ✓ Does your municipality have a manager? If so, find out about them. What is their background? How long have they been serving as your municipal manager?
- ✓ Find out about volunteer opportunities in your municipality. Are there citizen advisory committees or boards in your city? If so, find out how one would go about applying to serve on one.

LOCAL PUBLIC SERVICES

Consider some of these everyday activities:

- You turn the handle on the faucet, and water flows into your glass.
- You put your trash out, and it is picked up and carried away.
- You swim in the pool or play ball at the park.
- You call the police or sheriff about a break-in at your house, and an officer comes to investigate.

Safe drinking water, regular trash collection, recreational opportunities, and police protection are among the many services provided by local governments. You and your family likely utilize some of these services—water, for example—many times each day. Other services, such as trash collection or recreation, may be used only once or twice a week. Still other services—criminal investigations, for instance—may be used only rarely but are available when you need them.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Recognize the many services local governments provide that you depend on

Understand how public services differ from private services people buy for themselves

Describe how you can influence what happens in your community

WHAT MAKES A SERVICE PUBLIC?

Public services are the activities, products, and facilities that benefit the community at large. Many services are private: the person who uses the service is the only one who benefits from it. Think of a haircut, for example. The person getting the haircut gets the benefit of it. In these cases, there is no need for public money or authority because people are willing to purchase the service for themselves. Some local public services, such as maintaining community parks, benefit both the people who use them directly and the wider community. Other services, such as stormwater collection, may have no direct users, but improve or protect the community in general. The key to what makes a service “public” is who benefits from that service. Think of streets and roads. Everyone in a community benefits from their availability, whether they use a particular street or not.

Many public services have both public benefits and direct users. For example, students are the direct users of the public schools. However, the entire community benefits from

the education that prepares students to be good citizens and to earn a living. That is why government gets involved in providing the service.

We say that governments provide public services because they arrange to have the service produced and paid for. Local governments arrange for many services through government employees. In other cases, the government hires a private business, a nonprofit organization, or another government to deliver the service. When a public service is purchased from a business it is said to be **privatized**.

Many public services are paid for by a government from taxes the government collects for that purpose. For some services, local government charges users of the service a fee to help cover the cost of the service. For example, most governments charge their customers for the water they use because they get a direct benefit.

TYPES OF PUBLIC SERVICES

Regardless of whether public services are paid for from tax money or from user charges, it is helpful to distinguish between “user-focused public services” and “community-focused public services.”

User-focused public services provided by local government include:

- water supply;
- solid waste management;
- parks and recreation;
- police, fire, and emergency medical services;
- social services;
- health services;
- public schools; and
- streets and sidewalks.



Dog park, Wake Forest, N.C.

User-focused public services have both individual and community-wide benefits. For example, you benefit directly when you draw water from your faucet, get rid of your trash, or swim in the pool. But these user-focused public services also benefit the community at large. Having a safe, abundant water supply protects everyone in the community from diseases spread by contaminated water and supports firefighting. Safe, efficient waste collection and disposal helps keep the community clean and attractive. Public recreation also supports community quality of life.

Community-focused public services have no direct users. Instead, the purpose of community-focused public services is to build stronger communities or protect the public from harm. This may involve a wide range of government programs such as

picking up litter, offering incentives for business relocation, or banning smoking in public buildings.

Local governments often undertake projects to improve the community's

- physical condition,
- economic condition,
- social relationships, and
- safety from crime.

To protect the public, local governments regulate

- people's personal behavior and
- their use of property.

Often, people have more difficulty seeing the ways community-focused public services help them because they do not directly request the service or see how it affects them.



Law enforcement officer and service dog, Morrisville, N.C.

WHAT SERVICES DO CITIES AND COUNTIES PROVIDE?

Municipalities and counties provide some of the same services, but each type of local government also provides some services the other does not. The table below lists all the major services that North Carolina county and municipal governments are authorized to provide under state law. No single government provides all the services on this list.

Major Services Provided by Counties and Municipalities in North Carolina

This chart shows a general listing of the services local governments are authorized to provide. Counties and municipalities may choose to contract for many of these services rather than operate them directly.

Services Usually Provided by Counties Only

- Community colleges
- Cooperative extension
- Court facilities (construction and maintenance)
- Elections
- Emergency medical services
- Jails
- Mental health services
- Public health services
- Public schools
- Register of deeds
- Social services
- Soil and water conservation
- Tax assessment
- Youth detention facilities

Services Usually Provided by Municipalities Only

- Cemeteries
- Electric systems
- Gas systems
- Sidewalks
- Street lighting
- Streets
- Traffic control
- Urban development

Services Provided by Both Counties and Municipalities

- Airports
- Ambulance service
- Animal shelters
- Art galleries and museums
- Auditoriums/coliseums
- Building inspection
- Buses/public transit
- Cable television regulation
- Community and economic development
- Community appearance
- Emergency management
- Environmental protection
- Fire protection
- Historic preservation
- Human relations
- Industrial development
- Job training
- Law enforcement
- Libraries
- Open space and parks
- Planning, land use regulation, and enforcement
- Property acquisition, sales, and disposition
- Public housing
- Recreation programs
- Rescue squads
- Senior citizen programs
- Sewer systems
- Solid waste collection and disposal
- Storm drainage
- Tax collection
- Veterans' services
- Water supply and protection

This chart shows a general listing of the services local governments are authorized to provide. Counties and municipalities may choose to contract for many of these services rather than operate them directly. Interactive version available in [Tableau Public](#).

Counties are required by state mandate to provide most of the services on the “county only” list:

- elections,
- social services,
- public health and mental health,
- public schools,
- emergency medical services,
- custody of deeds and vital records,
- jails and support for the courts and juvenile detention facilities,
- cooperative extension, and
- soil and water conservation.

Most counties also support community colleges.

Each county government is also responsible for assessing the value of property on which local governments levy taxes.

Municipal governments in North Carolina (but not counties) are authorized to provide streets and sidewalks, electricity, natural gas, urban development, and cemeteries. These services are optional for cities and towns to provide. Most municipalities do provide streets, sidewalks, and street lights, but few operate electric utilities and even fewer provide natural gas service.

More than 30 other local government services can be provided by either counties or municipalities. The General Assembly has given both kinds of local government the authority to arrange and pay for this broad set of public services. Local governing boards decide whether to provide these services, at what level to provide them, how to deliver them to the public, and how to pay for them.



Public Park, City Gastonia, N.C.

This chapter addresses user-focused public services provided by local governments. Community-focused services are discussed in later chapters.

WATER SUPPLY AND WASTEWATER TREATMENT

Supplying safe, readily available water is a key service of many local governments. Most cities and towns operate their own water supply and wastewater systems. An increasing number of counties have also begun to operate water distribution and sewage treatment facilities in unincorporated areas where wells cannot provide safe and abundant water or septic tanks are inadequate for safe disposal of wastewater.



Water tower, Bostic, N.C.

Public water supplies provide safe drinking water and serve as a ready source of water for fighting fires and for supporting industries that require water in their production processes.

Public concern for safe water supplies dates from the late nineteenth century. In 1877, the General Assembly established the State Board of Health. One of its initial concerns was the threat of waterborne diseases in the state's cities and towns. Intestinal diseases like typhoid are caused by bacteria that live in water. These diseases are spread by water that has been contaminated with human waste.

To help prevent disease, Asheville built a system to supply filtered water to its residents in 1884. Water from the Swannanoa River was pumped four miles from the filtration plant to the city. The year after it was built, the State Board of Health reported that Asheville's new municipal water supply was the safest in the state and that there had been "a marked decrease in typhoid" in Asheville.



Downtown, Asheville, N.C. Image by [Doug Kerr](#) used under [CC BY-SA 2.0](#).

Not everyone in Asheville benefited from the new system, however. Although the city owned and operated the water-supply system, it charged 25 cents per thousand gallons of water. This was expensive for workers who supported their families on \$300 per year. Asheville city water was, therefore, "not in general use among the poorer classes," according to the Board of Health report.

In fact, Asheville's water rates were lower than those in many other cities. Unlike Asheville, most North Carolina city governments did not operate water systems. Instead, private companies supplied water to city residents. In Raleigh, the private water company charged 40 cents per thousand gallons, and in Charlotte, the water company charged 50 cents per thousand gallons. Many people could not afford to buy water at these rates, so they continued to rely on unsanitary sources of water. During the twentieth century, public water supply, and many other services, became the responsibility of local governments. By 2000, almost all municipalities and many

counties provided safe drinking water, water for fighting fires, and water for industrial uses.

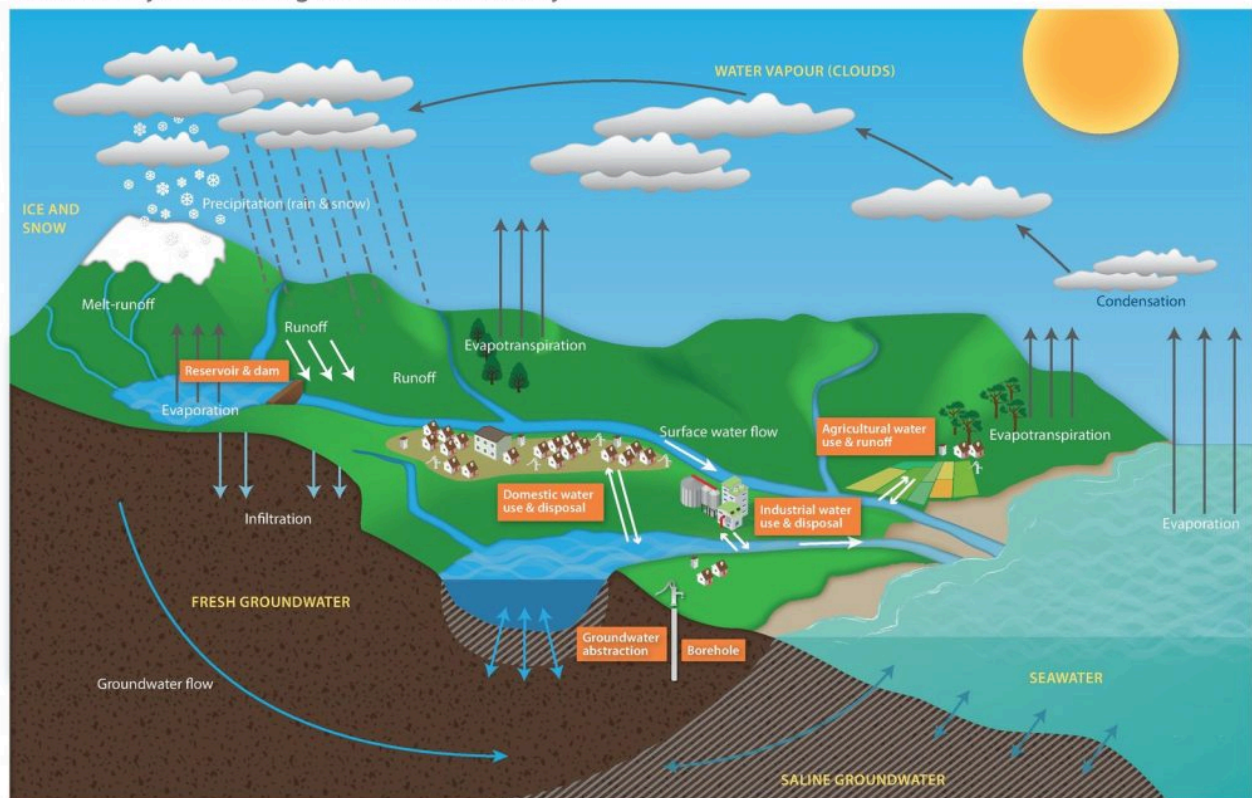
Typically, local governments provide water and sewer services by setting up **public utilities**. In this arrangement, these services are paid for directly by the people who use them rather than by tax revenues. In recent years, some local governments have also set up utilities for storm water management.

Some cities and counties cooperate with one another in producing water or sewage services. Other counties, such as Catawba, loan money to local municipalities so that they can extend water service to unincorporated areas. In a few places, special water and sewer agencies or partnerships have been created by local governments to operate water and sewer facilities for the entire area. Examples include the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Utility and the Orange Water and Sewer Authority (OWASA).

The water supply cycle involves several steps:

- developing a reliable source of sufficient water,
- treating the water to make it safe to drink,
- distributing the water through pipes to the places it is used, and
- controlling water pollution by collecting and treating wastewater (sewage) and managing storm water runoff.

The water cycle including some human activity



Saskia Nowicki, Nancy Gladstone, Jacob Katuva, Heloise Greeff, Achut Manandhar, Geoffrey Wekesa and Geoffrey Mwanja / CC BY-SA (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>)

WATER SUPPLY SOURCES

Wells are a major source of water in North Carolina, especially on the coast and coastal plain. Wells tap into underground water, allowing water to be pumped out of the layers of sand, gravel, or porous rock where it is trapped. In places where there are large pockets of underground water, wells can provide a steady source of water for public water systems. Rain and other water on the surface of the earth are filtered as they seep down to replace the water that is pumped out. In rural areas where there is no public water system, each house may have its own well.

In areas where **ground water** is abundant, local governments use wells to supply public water systems. At some places along the coast, sea water has seeped in because so much water has been pumped from the wells. In these places, local governments remove the salt from their well water through a process called **desalinization**.

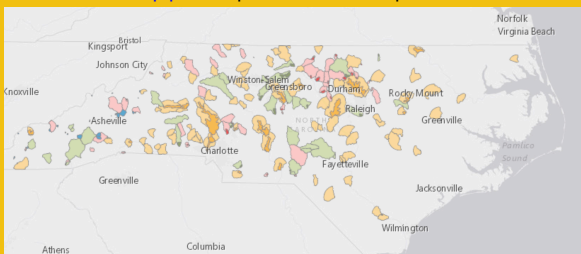
Rivers and reservoirs are also important water sources for public water systems. North Carolina has many rivers. Rainfall ensures that they flow all year long, although sometimes a severe drought can cut the flow to a trickle. Some cities located near a river simply pump their water from the river. Sometimes rivers are dammed to create reservoirs from which water is pumped for treatment. Most of North Carolina's larger cities, and many smaller ones, depend on water from reservoirs. Water from rivers, reservoirs, and lakes is called **surface water**.

Land that drains into a stream is called the **watershed** for that stream. Watershed protection can reduce contamination of surface water. Many local governments now have storm water management programs to catch the dirty water that runs off streets, roofs, and bare ground so that the pollution does not go into rivers and reservoirs. However, surface water is still likely to be more contaminated than ground water.

Water Supply Watershed Map

Where does your drinking water come from?

Consult the interactive [Water Supply Watershed Map](#) to find out. Scan this code with the [Metaverse App](#) to open an AR experience.



Scan the code with your phone to open this experience



Reservoirs are much more expensive water sources than rivers. Building a reservoir requires buying the land that will be flooded by the new lake and constructing a dam to contain the water. Engineers must first design a dam and map out the area the new

lake will cover. Then the agency building the reservoir can begin to buy the land. Many reservoirs are built specifically to supply water. Some dams that provide water are built for other purposes, however. The federal government, working through the Army Corps of Engineers, builds reservoirs for flood control. Some private companies build reservoirs for electric power generation. If a city builds its own reservoir, the cost of the reservoir is paid by the customers who use the water. Thus, cities that must build reservoirs to ensure an adequate supply of water usually have higher water rates than cities able to get all the water they need from wells, rivers, or reservoirs that also serve other purposes.



The 3,000 acre Randleman Lake was created in the early 2000s by damming the Deep River. The lake and new water treatment facility on the lake was a project of the Piedmont Triad Regional Water Authority (PTRWA), a **special purpose local government** created by Randolph County and municipalities Archdale, Greensboro, High Point, Jamestown, and Randleman. The reservoir produces 48 million gallons of water per day, helping the region meet its water supply needs for an estimated 30-50 years into the future.

WATER TREATMENT

The kind of treatment water needs to make it safe to drink depends on how clean it is. Water from wells sometimes has almost no **impurities**. It has been filtered naturally as it collects underground. However, water can become contaminated underground if harmful substances are buried nearby.



Water treatment plant, Durham, N.C. Image by [Ildar Sagdejev](#) used under [GFDL version 1.2 or later](#).

To help prevent contamination of ground water, federal and state governments have passed several environmental protection regulations. One outlaws the discharge of dangerous chemicals into a stream or into the soil. Another prohibits putting toxic chemicals into landfills and requires landfills to be lined so that water cannot seep out of them and carry materials into the water. Still another requires underground storage tanks (such as those for gasoline) to be rustproof so they will not leak.

Surface water can also pick up many **pollutants** such as

- oil and grit from streets and parking lots,
- fertilizer and pesticides from fields,
- chemicals from trash or waste that is left exposed, and
- soil particles from bare ground.

Stormwater management can keep some of these out of rivers and reservoirs. Even so, surface water generally requires more treatment than well water.

The first step in treating surface water is to filter it. At the water treatment plant, filtering and sedimentation remove solid particles from the water. (Sedimentation involves adding chemicals to the water that cause the suspended solids to clump together and sink.) The water must next be treated chemically to kill harmful bacteria. Chlorine compounds are typically added to the water for this purpose. In many places, fluorine compounds are also added to the water to reduce tooth decay. Water plant operators must constantly monitor the water through each stage of treatment to be sure they are adding just the right amount of each of the chemicals they use.

All this costs money, so the cost of building treatment facilities and treating water is also a part of the fee a local government charges its water customers.

WATER DISTRIBUTION

Getting water to the places where people can use it conveniently requires a network of pumps, tanks, and pipes. Treated water is pumped into elevated storage tanks so that it can flow through underground pipes to all the places it will be used. Keeping the water under pressure ensures that it will flow through the distribution system whenever a faucet or fire hydrant is opened. Each house, school, office building, store, or factory using water from the public water system is connected to the water distribution lines.



Water line repair, Gastonia, N.C.

In addition to the costs of obtaining and treating water, another expense of a public water supply is the construction and maintenance of the pumps, tanks, and water lines. These costs are also included in setting the fee people pay a public utility for the water they use.

A meter at the point of connection measures how much water flows out of the line and into each customer's property. These meters are read periodically, and the customer is billed for the water that has passed through the meter. Some water utilities use automatic meter reading technology that eliminates the need for physical meter reading.

Besides distributing water to users, the water lines provide another benefit. Fire hydrants connected to the lines give firefighters ready access to water to fight fires. Public water systems need to deliver enough water for firefighting, as well as enough for residential, commercial, and industrial uses.

PREVENTING WATER POLLUTION

Liquid wastes from houses, schools, stores, offices, and factories are potentially dangerous. If they are not treated, these wastes can contaminate water with the chemicals or bacteria they carry. Similarly, rainwater can wash oil, fertilizers, and other chemicals from streets and roads, fields, lawns, and other outdoor locations into the sources of drinking water.

Many local governments operate sanitary sewers and sewage treatment plants to control water pollution from household, commercial, and industrial sewage. In areas where houses are far apart, household drains can go into septic tanks in which harmful bacteria are killed by natural processes. In these areas each house usually has its own **septic tank**. However, these cannot be used in densely populated areas or in areas where the soil will not readily absorb the water that has been treated in the tank. In these areas, wastewater is collected in sewers, which deliver it to a sewage treatment plant.

At the sewage treatment plant, chemical and biological processes eliminate bacteria from the wastewater and separate solids from the liquid wastes. The solid material separated from sewage is called sludge. Properly treated **sludge** is safe to use for fertilizer and is often recycled in that way. Properly treated water from sewage is safe to release into rivers or lakes and becomes a part of the water supply for residents farther downstream.

The costs of building and operating the sewage collection system of pipes and pumps and the sewage treatment plant are included in the sewage utility fee charged to customers. Typically, users pay for sewer services along with their regular water bill and the amount of the charge depends on the amount of water used.

To avoid contaminating water, hazardous chemicals, such as oil and many industrial and cleaning products, should not be poured down the drain where they might interfere with sewage treatment processes. Nor should oil and other harmful chemicals be

poured on the ground where they can wash into streams and rivers. Storm water runoff picks up these and other harmful chemicals like fertilizers as it runs along the surface and into streams and rivers. These chemicals, as well as large amounts of human or animal waste, pollute the water and make it unsafe to drink.

Federal environmental protection regulations require local governments in densely populated areas to control storm water. Storm sewers and drainage systems can keep rainwater from entering the sanitary sewers and overflowing sewage treatment plants. Holding ponds that slow down the flow of runoff and allow the storm water to soak into the ground can filter the harmful chemicals out of storm water. Permanent borders of plants along stream banks also help catch pollutants before they wash into streams.

Building storm sewers and drainage systems, creating retention ponds, and protecting natural buffers along streams is expensive, so some local governments have created storm water utilities, in addition to their water and sewer utilities. Storm water fees are often based on the amount of paved ground or other hard surface area a property owner has, because water is much more likely to run off hard surfaces directly into streams, rather than soak into the ground. Storm water fees are often included in bills for water and sanitary sewer services.

SOLID WASTE MANAGEMENT

Everything people no longer want or need must go somewhere. Solid waste—old newspapers, food scraps, used packaging, grass clippings—must be disposed of safely. Chemicals from casually discarded trash can contaminate water. Garbage and trash also create a health hazard by providing a home for rats and other disease-bearing pests. Burning trash does not solve the problem of safe disposal because the smoke can pollute the air unless special incinerators are used.

Local governments help solve the problem of safe solid waste disposal in three ways.

- They support recycling.
- They help collect trash and garbage.
- They provide sanitary landfills or incinerators so that waste that cannot be recycled is safely buried or burned.

Safe (and low-cost) solid waste disposal depends on the cooperation of everyone in the community.

The least expensive way to deal with waste is simply not to create it in the first place. Reducing packaging and use of disposable items, for



Eagle in landfill, Rockingham County, N.C.

example, can reduce waste considerably. In many communities, people help reduce what governments pay for collecting recycling and solid waste by taking these materials to collection centers or by putting their recycling or trash collection bins at the curbside for collection.

RECYCLING

Recycling wastes means using them as a resource to make new products. For example, wastepaper can be recycled to make new paper and old glass bottles can become new bottles. Some recycling can be done at home. Leaves can be turned into **mulch**, fruit and vegetable peels into **compost**. Many people are not used to sorting their trash or reusing it at home, but that is changing. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), recycling rates have increased from just over 6 percent of municipal solid waste in 1960 to about 10 percent in 1980, to 16 percent in 1990, to about 29 percent in 2000, and to over 35 percent by 2017.

Local governments encourage recycling by urging people to separate materials that can be recycled and by telling people how they can reuse materials. In a materials recovery operation, workers sort through the solid wastes that have been collected and pick out things such as glass and cardboard. Then the remaining wastes can be passed through magnets to remove iron and through another process to remove aluminum. Separation at the source (by residents in their homes) is less expensive and is done in some communities, but it requires active participation to be effective.

Most larger municipalities and some counties have door-to-door recycling collections. Recycling collections are usually made on a different day and a different truck than solid waste collection. In communities where residents pre-sort their recyclables, the recycling truck has bins for different sorts of material. As the recycling crew empties the containers of recyclables left outside each house, they separate the different kinds of materials. Many other recycling programs are “single stream,” meaning residents do not sort different materials. They are collected together and sorted off site. Some local governments also operate recycling centers where people can deliver their recyclable materials.

Most of the manufacturing of new products from discarded materials is done by private industry. Paper companies use wastepaper to make new paper; glass companies use discarded bottles to make new bottles. Local governments that collect these recyclables sell them to the manufacturing companies. The money the governments receive from these sales helps pay for the cost of collecting the materials.

RECYCLING CHALLENGES

A November 2019 report on recycling in North Carolina found that recycling operations here and across the United States were struggling with what to do with recyclable waste. Most U.S. recyclables had historically been purchased by overseas businesses, primarily in Asia, but those countries began to limit importation of raw recyclable materials. Further, the report said that not enough U.S. manufacturers were using recycled materials. Local governments have used the money they received for those materials to help pay their costs of collecting and sorting them. If no one buys recyclable materials, they wind up in a landfill. Some local government recycling programs have been discontinued or scaled back because of the weak market for the waste they collect through recycling.

As recycling becomes more expensive, local governments face the problem of what to do. Should they stop paying for recycling and send more waste directly to the landfill? Or can they encourage people to create less waste? What kinds of things could you do to reduce the amount of waste you produce?

CASE STUDY

Some cities and counties are making recycled products themselves. Many local governments have begun to use yard waste (grass clippings, leaves, chipped wood) to make compost or mulch. Local governments also support recycling by buying products made of recycled materials. By using recycled paper, for example, governments create a greater demand for old newspapers to sell to the companies that make recycled paper.

Governments support recycling to protect natural resources. Government officials also have a more direct interest in recycling: saving money. Burying trash in a sanitary landfill is very expensive. Burning solid wastes safely is even more expensive. Recycling can save money because it reduces the amount of material going into landfills.

SOLID WASTE COLLECTION

Most cities and towns provide for house-to-house collection of solid waste. Once or twice a week, the “garbage truck” comes down each street and the crew empties the trash from the cans outside each house. Some cities have their own trucks and crews while others contract with private companies to collect solid waste. The truck, called a “packer,” is specially designed to crush the waste and press it together tightly so that it takes up as little space as possible.

In some municipalities, the city also collects solid waste from apartments, stores, and offices. Oftentimes, however, these non-single-family property owners are required by local government to hire private contractors to collect their solid waste.

Most counties and some small towns do not provide house-to-house solid waste collection. Instead, these residents either hire a private company to collect their trash, or they take it to a waste collection site themselves. Bins for recyclable materials are also often placed at waste collection sites. Most counties operate several waste collection sites. Sometimes the waste collection site consists of a large (usually green) box into which people put their trash. The box is emptied regularly into a very large packer truck. But if the box is not emptied often enough, or if people are not careful how they handle their trash, waste can spill out of the box. **Green box sites** can become very smelly trash-covered places and create health hazards.



Trash collection, Gastonia, N.C.

An alternative is the supervised waste collection site. Supervised sites have a packer right on the site. The packer operator sees that people put their trash into the packer, which immediately crushes the trash. Both the supervision and the immediate packing of the waste help prevent the mess and hazard of green box sites.

Some dangerous materials require special handling. State and federal regulations prohibit radioactive wastes and hazardous chemicals from being mixed with other solid wastes. These materials (including motor oil, paints, other household chemicals, tires, and batteries) must be kept separate and cannot be collected through the regular collection system. People who discard them are responsible for sorting out these materials and making sure that they are collected appropriately.

SOLID WASTE DISPOSAL

In North Carolina, each county is responsible for making sure solid wastes produced in the county are disposed of safely. Wastes can be buried or burned. Each of these disposal methods requires special equipment and techniques to assure public safety. Many counties operate their own **landfills**. Others hire private businesses or contract with another local government to dispose of their solid waste.



In 2018, Americans generated over 292 million tons of municipal solid waste with 98 million of that recycled or composted ([EPA](#)).

The most common way to dispose of solid waste is to bury it. Safe burial of wastes requires the construction and operation of a sanitary landfill. State and federal regulations set requirements for sanitary landfills to ensure that the landfill does not pollute the water or air. The landfill pit must be lined with plastic so that rainwater will not carry chemicals from the waste into the ground water. Any liquids or gases that do escape from a landfill must be captured and treated before being released. Each day's waste must be covered with soil so that animals that might spread diseases are not attracted to the site. No fires are allowed. When the landfill is full, it must be covered with more soil, planted with grass

or trees, and monitored to make sure that any leaking liquids or gases are properly treated. Landfill operators direct the unloading of waste and see that it is properly covered. They must be specially trained to ensure safe handling of the wastes.

The costs of the land, constructing the landfill, and operating it in accordance with state and federal regulations are considerable. Some counties decide not to operate a landfill or incinerator. In these cases, they either pay another county or a private company to dispose of the solid waste generated in the county or they help operate a regional (multi-county) landfill. In either case, these counties typically build transfer stations where waste collected in the county can be loaded onto very large trucks or railroad cars to be carried to a landfill in another county, or even another state.

The safe burning of wastes is even more expensive. This process is called **incineration** and requires very special equipment. First, materials that will not burn (glass, metal, and rock, for example) must be sorted out. Then the burnable materials must be shredded. Special furnaces are required to burn the waste at very high temperatures so that as many harmful chemicals as possible are destroyed by the fire. There is some smoke, however, even from a very hot, clean-burning fire. This smoke must be filtered and treated carefully to prevent air pollution.

To help pay the costs of solid waste disposal, many counties charge users **tipping fees** for the waste unloaded into the landfill, incinerator, or transfer station. Some cities and counties charge individual households or businesses for the costs of collecting and disposing their solid waste. The more waste they produce, the more they pay. Other local governments finance solid waste collection and disposal with taxes. The public can help keep these costs as low as possible by cutting down on what they throw away, by sorting out recyclable materials from the rest of the trash, and buying products made from recycled materials.



Waste collection, Wake Forest, N.C.

PARKS AND RECREATION

Many local governments provide recreational opportunities for their residents. Municipalities and counties build and maintain parks, which may have picnic tables, swing sets, ball fields, basketball and tennis courts, swimming pools, or other facilities. They operate recreation programs, which may include organized sports leagues, supervised swimming, instruction in crafts or games, and physical fitness programs. Parks provide safe, attractive places for people to enjoy themselves and relax, and recreation programs extend opportunities for healthful exercise and relaxation.

Parks and recreation programs are staffed by people with many different specialties. A supervised swimming program, for example, requires a staff of qualified lifeguards. Not only must they know lifesaving techniques, but they must also know how to operate the pool's filtering system and how and when to add chemicals to keep the water safe for swimming. They also need to know how to communicate well with pool users to ensure safe use of the pool.

Similarly, the recreation assistants who referee games, teach sports, or lead crafts sessions need to know not only the rules and techniques specific to that activity, but also how to communicate effectively and to treat everyone fairly. Park maintenance workers use a range of skills to keep parks safe and clean. Park and recreation directors need to know about all these operations and how to plan and coordinate them. Many directors have studied recreation administration in college.

Not all the people who help staff recreation programs are government employees. In many places, volunteers from the community coach sports teams, referee games, and teach people crafts in the public parks or recreation centers. Nonprofit organizations use public parks and recreation centers for their summer camps, after-school programs, or activities for the elderly.

Buying the land for a park, landscaping it, and building park facilities are major investments for local government.



Worker cutting grass, Pinehurst, N.C.

Many city and county parks include playgrounds and basketball courts. Some have swimming pools, ball fields, golf courses, stadiums, or other large facilities. Large parks often have hiking trails and some local governments have built trails through greenways along streams or abandoned railroad lines. Many parks include picnic shelters and some have recreation centers.

Each park and recreation facility should be designed and built for public use. While a park or recreation center is a success only if people use it, overuse creates wear and tear. Thus, parks require constant maintenance. Lawns must be mowed. Equipment must be repaired and sometimes replaced.

Keeping a park clean and in good repair costs money. Vandalism—the purposeful destruction of property—creates an even greater need for maintenance. Often a city or county does not have enough money to repair or replace park equipment that is broken before it would normally wear out.

People contribute to the success of a park by using it and doing so in ways that do not destroy the facilities or others' use and enjoyment of the park. Public cooperation is an essential part of every park and recreation program.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Local governments provide the first responders who protect people's lives and property. Most communities have separate departments to deal with crime, fire, and medical emergency, the three most common threats to public safety. A few municipalities have departments that combine police, fire, and emergency medical services functions, but typically separate departments provide

- police protection (including sheriff's and municipal police departments),
- fire protection, and
- emergency medical services (EMS).

All counties and some cities also have emergency management plans for dealing with large-scale disasters.

Public safety agencies can be reached through a special emergency telephone number, 9-1-1. Trained operators ask callers to describe the problem and its location. Tracking systems usually enable the operator to know the exact location of the caller. Based on the information the caller provides, the operator decides what to do. Each 911 call center has a set of rules for deciding which public safety units to dispatch under what circumstances.

When a crime is in progress, a suspect is still on the scene, a fire is reported, or a victim is injured or ill, the appropriate units are dispatched to respond immediately. The caller will usually be asked to stay on the line to inform responding police, firefighters, and/or paramedics about changes in the situation and help direct them to the location.

In smaller 911 call centers, the telephone operator who answers the call may also serve as **dispatcher**. In larger centers, the work is divided. Operators receive calls, get information from the caller, and then transfer the call to a dispatcher who coordinates the responding units. Sophisticated radio and electronic communications systems and well-trained personnel enable swift and effective responses to emergencies.

POLICE PROTECTION

Local law enforcement officers are available to help every North Carolina resident. Most crime prevention and criminal investigation in North Carolina is done by local police departments and sheriff's departments, even though crimes are defined by the state legislature. Local police also control traffic and investigate traffic accidents.

Except for some of the smallest towns, each municipality in the state has its own police department. Gaston County also has a police department, and Mecklenburg County gets police protection from the Charlotte police department. In the other 98 counties, sheriff's deputies provide police protection in unincorporated areas of the county and in

small towns without their own police department. Police officers and sheriff's deputies have similar duties and authority. In this section, we will often refer to them collectively as "police."

Police officers are required to go through specialized training. They study both criminal law (which defines illegal behavior) and constitutional law (which defines your rights). They learn how and when to use weapons and other self-defense measures and to de-escalate violent situations. They learn how to gather information and evidence.



Cops, Kids, & Coloring Books event, Roxboro, N.C.

Police officers also study ways to communicate clearly and to understand, respect, and deal with the differences among people. In fact, communicating with people and responding to their concerns for safety are essential parts of police work. Most police officers realize that they need the respect and trust of the public to do their jobs well. The people and the police must work together to have safe communities.

Crime prevention and traffic control are public services that benefit communities as a whole rather than individual users. Investigations of crimes and traffic accidents, however, typically help individual victims, as well as the broader community.

Investigation of a crime or traffic accident typically begins when the victim or a witness calls the police, usually through dialing 9-1-1.

If the situation requires immediate police action, a dispatcher will radio police to respond at once. The caller will usually be asked to stay on the line to inform responding officers about changes in the situation and help direct them to the location. If the situation is less urgent, the 911 operator will record information about the incident and police may respond later.

Responding officers will stop any additional injury from happening and will make sure that emergency medical services are provided. The police will interview the victim and witnesses about what happened and inspect the scene. They will also arrest any criminal suspects still at the scene.

After the responding officer interviews victims and witnesses and inspects the scene, he or she will write an **incident report** describing the accident or the crime and any suspects. Responding officers turn in their incident reports before they leave work each day. Their supervisors review these reports and decide which crimes should be investigated further. The most serious crimes are usually assigned to detectives who specialize in criminal investigation.

POLICE – COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Wherever anyone lives in the United States, there are local government law enforcement officers (LEOs) who work for municipal police departments or county sheriff's offices. Their job is to enforce the laws and respond directly to people who request protection. In many communities, LEOs and the people they serve respect each other and work together to keep the community safe and secure. But for too many people across America, the relationship between LEOs and the community has been tense. Cases of excessive use of force by police have eroded public trust. For example, high-profile cases of police shootings of unarmed persons of color, other perceived racially motivated use of excessive force, and inequitable treatment in the justice system motivated the nationwide Black Lives Matter movement, focused on racial justice in law enforcement and the court system.

To rebuild community trust and support, many police and sheriff's departments have enacted reforms such as requiring officers to wear body cameras and creating community (or civilian) review boards composed of residents to provide oversight. They have trained officers to respond by using tools other than force, helping people calm down and listen to each other. Community policing programs have put LEOs in neighborhoods where they can build personal relationships with residents. Neighborhood watch programs include residents who volunteer to help the police by monitoring neighborhood conditions and reporting suspicious activities.

But the fight for equal justice continues, and efforts to build trust within their communities are one of the key tasks of law enforcement leaders in cities and counties across North Carolina and the United States.

CASE STUDY

Criminal investigations seek to identify the person(s) suspected of the crime, to arrest the suspect, to gather evidence that can be used in court to convict the suspect, and to recover any stolen property.

Public cooperation is essential to effective criminal investigations. In the first place, police rely on victims and witnesses to report crimes. Unless people are willing to tell police about incidents that appear to involve a crime, most crimes will never come to police attention. Moreover, most suspects are identified from witness accounts. Much of the work of criminal investigation is interviewing victims and witnesses to obtain as complete an account of the incident as possible. People must be willing and able to tell police what they saw if police investigations are to be successful.

FIRE PROTECTION

Fire departments protect lives and property in several ways. In addition to fighting fires, firefighters are also often the first responders to accidents and medical emergencies. They help prevent fires by educating people about fire hazards and conducting fire inspections. They also investigate the causes of fires.

Many larger municipalities have fire departments staffed by city employees. In many smaller municipalities and in counties, local governments help fund volunteer fire departments. Alternatively, some volunteer fire departments receive funds from a special property tax set by the county commissioners and collected by the county for the volunteer department. Still other local governments contract with a nearby fire department to provide fire protection within their jurisdiction. Local governments are not required by law to provide fire protection, but most do.

Fires can occur at any time. Fire departments must always be prepared to respond. Fire departments often pay firefighters to work shifts of several days at a time. Although they are often staffed by volunteers, some volunteer fire department also hire full-time firefighters to have personnel at the fire station ready to respond immediately to a dispatch. Often, emergency calls answered by volunteers are many miles outside the area served by the volunteer department, making it difficult for volunteers to respond quickly.



Scouts visiting a fire department, Huntersville, N.C.

Firefighting involves using specialized equipment and techniques. It can also be dangerous and requires strength, agility, and discipline. Both paid and volunteer firefighters need training to do the work. The State Fire and Rescue Commission establishes training standards for various firefighting specializations. Many departments augment these standards, as well.

The quality and availability of fire protection directly influences what people pay for fire insurance. The Public Protection Classification (PPCTM) is a rating of fire departments that the State Fire Marshal conducts for homeowner's insurance companies to use in setting rates for fire insurance premiums. Fire protection is so important to insurance that both the State Fire Marshal and the State Fire and Rescue Commission are part of the North Carolina Department of Insurance.

EMERGENCY MEDICAL RESPONSE

People who suffer accidents or sudden illness may require emergency medical attention to survive and regain their health. State law requires all North Carolina counties to make emergency medical services (EMS) available to everyone in the county 24 hours a day. EMS personnel respond quickly to reports of medical emergencies. They evaluate injuries and symptoms and provide immediate, short-term care to those who need it. They operate ambulances to take patients to hospitals for additional medical evaluation and care.

County government responsibilities include arranging for at least one licensed EMS agency, ambulance service, and dispatching system to serve the county. The state Office of Emergency Medical Services oversees local EMS systems and licenses individual EMS agencies.

To qualify for an EMS license, an agency must have a licensed physician as its medical director and a staff of credentialed emergency medical technicians. Training standards indicate what skills each category of technician must have. The Office of Emergency Medical Services issues credentials based on the mastery of the required skills.

Most EMS agencies are county departments. Others are units of hospitals or independent nonprofit organizations, often called "rescue squads." Some EMS personnel are volunteers, although most are paid because of the extent of training required for the work. Not all rescue squads are licensed as EMS agencies, however. Only those that meet state requirements qualify as EMS agencies.

DISASTER RESPONSE

Natural or man-made disasters involve police, fire, and EMS cooperation, but also require even more complex systems and additional training. Every county in North Carolina has an emergency management director. If a disaster occurs, this person coordinates government and private responses to restore public safety. County and municipal departments of public works, public information, finance, public health, and social services may be involved, in addition to police, fire, and EMS. Private agencies—including hospitals, the Red Cross and other nonprofit organizations—as well as grocery stores, building supply stores, and other businesses may also participate.

Each county prepares an emergency management plan for approval by the state Division of Emergency Management. The plan lists potential disaster risks the county might face, the resources available to deal with each type of disaster, and the arrangements for coordinating the responses. The emergency management director oversees development of the plans with cooperation from representatives of the various agencies that may be involved in responding to a disaster. Through training exercises these partners test and refine the plan and experience working together. The partnerships for dealing with disasters also include **mutual aid agreements** with neighboring local governments and arrangements with state agencies.

In larger counties, the emergency management director is a full-time job, but in most counties, those duties are part of the work assigned to someone who has other responsibilities as well. Some cities and towns also have emergency management directors and develop their own plans for responding to disasters in their municipalities.

SOCIAL SERVICES

North Carolina counties have important responsibilities for assisting people with low incomes and other social problems. County departments of social services help children through programs like foster care, adoption, and family counseling. They investigate suspected abuse of children and disabled adults. They offer services to help the elderly and the disabled live at home, as well as programs to help people prepare for new jobs. County departments of social services often work closely with religious and other charitable organizations in providing these services.

In providing some services, the county must follow very specific regulations. For example, counties administer the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (often called by the historical name of **food stamps**) and **Medicaid** (medical insurance for low-income families) in accordance with federal regulations. Counties must follow these regulations in determining who is eligible to receive assistance and in organizing and operating their departments of social services to carry out the programs because most of the funding for these programs comes from the U.S. government. To be eligible for these federal funds, states must have programs that meet federal requirements. Most of the 50 states use a department of state government to administer public assistance, but North Carolina is one of a few states that assign administrative responsibility to counties. Still, the state (which also pays part of the cost) must assure the U.S. government that federal requirements are being met. Strict regulation of county operations is one way to do this.



Public transportation system, Person County, N.C.

Another reason for strict regulation of public assistance programs is concern about welfare fraud. Many people believe that having very strict regulations will help ensure that only those who most need public assistance will receive these benefits. Others argue that too many regulations make it difficult for people to get the public assistance they need and that it drives up the cost for those who do receive benefits.

To provide greater flexibility in meeting people's needs for financial assistance, North Carolina counties also operate **Temporary Assistance to Needy Families** (TANF) programs, called Work First. Under TANF, local departments of social services use federal, state, and local funds to provide support to families that do not earn enough money for basic living expenses. Work First can provide families money for a limited period while the parents find new jobs. Work First also provides job training and helps pay for childcare, transportation, or other services the parents may need to keep a job.

Many counties have also established their own general assistance programs. These optional programs help people deal with emergencies and situations not covered by federal and state programs. The county social services board establishes the rules for general assistance in its county, and the board of county commissioners allocates county funds to pay for general assistance.

Government programs do not cover all basic needs, however. Religious groups and other charitable organizations operate shelters for the homeless and for battered women, food banks and hot meals programs, clothing distribution centers, and other projects to meet the basic needs of those who cannot earn enough to provide for themselves. Some of these agencies also receive funding from county government to help them deliver specific social services. County social services departments often work closely with these nonprofit charitable organizations to assist people in need.

HEALTH SERVICES

County governments in North Carolina have important responsibilities for the health of the people in their communities. State government assigns most of these responsibilities and provides some of the funding for carrying them out. State laws separate these responsibilities into two broad categories:

- public health, and
- mental health, developmental disabilities, and substance abuse (MHDDSA).

PUBLIC HEALTH

In North Carolina, local public health departments remove health hazards from the environment, educate people and give shots to prevent illness, and provide care for those who are physically ill and cannot afford to pay for care. The public health department may be organized for a single county or for two or more counties.

Each public health department must provide certain state-mandated services. It must inspect restaurants, hotels, and other public accommodations in the county to be sure that the facilities and the food are safe. It must also collect information and report to the state about births, deaths, and communicable diseases in the county.

COVID-19: HOW LOCAL PUBLIC HEALTH DEPARTMENTS FIGHT DISEASE

The COVID-19 (also known as coronavirus) global pandemic that made its way to United States shores in early 2020, highlights one of the important roles local public health departments play in their communities. They combat infectious disease by educating the public about diseases like the measles, tuberculosis, and seasonal flu. They provide immunizations to help prevent local outbreaks. In rare cases where a dangerous disease like tuberculosis or COVID -19 is reported, they use contact tracing to help contain it.

In contact tracing, public health workers track down persons that have been in close contact with an infected person to help them take precautions to avoid spreading the disease. Once someone tests positive for the disease, they are interviewed to find out where they have been and with who they have been in close contact. That information is then used to notify others who might have been infected through that contact. Those people are asked to get tested, quarantine at home, or take other steps to avoid community spread. Contact tracing work done by local public health departments is a critical component of worldwide efforts to reduce the spread of infectious diseases. Contact tracing helped eliminate the deadly disease of smallpox and greatly reduced the spread of other diseases like polio.

CASE STUDY

Local public health departments also typically provide many other services. They have programs to prevent animals, such as mosquitoes and rats, from spreading human diseases. Many public health departments also enforce local sanitation ordinances for septic tanks or swimming pools and local animal-control ordinances. County nurses and

health educators teach people about good nutrition and how to prevent illness. Most public health departments operate clinics to diagnose and treat illnesses and to provide health care for expectant mothers, infants, and children who cannot otherwise afford health care. County nurses also care for people in their homes and at school and they also give shots to prevent certain diseases.

MENTAL HEALTH, DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES, AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE (MHDDSA)

County government's role in MHDDSA is to establish, jointly with one or more other counties, a local management entity (LME) responsible for delivering publicly funded, community-based MHDDSA services in the county.

State and federal governments provide much of the funding for community-based treatment of mental illnesses, mental disabilities, and the abuse of alcohol and other drugs. However, counties must appropriate funds as well, although not at any particular level. State policy requires LMEs to develop a network of service providers who deliver services directly to clients. These service providers may be public or private entities. The LME role is to authorize the expenditure of public funds for services to qualifying individuals and to monitor the cost, quality, and effectiveness of these services for individual clients.

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In North Carolina, public schools are both a state and a local responsibility. The state pays teachers' basic salaries and establishes qualifications for teachers. Teachers are considered state employees. The state does not hire teachers, however. Teachers are hired by local school boards, and local school boards are also responsible for deciding to retain or dismiss teachers.

The North Carolina State Board of Education establishes overall policies for the schools, including the minimum length of the school year, the content of the curriculum, and the textbooks that may be used. Local boards of education must meet the state's guidelines for school policy when making decisions about how the local schools will operate. Local school boards hire all local school personnel: teachers, staff, and administrators, including principals, superintendents, and their assistants. Local school boards decide what texts to use and what courses to offer. They set the calendar for the local schools and decide on school attendance policies.

Local school boards also adopt a budget for operating the schools. Teachers' basic salaries and some of the costs for school buses are paid by the state. Money for school lunches and support for some educational programs comes from the federal government. Most other costs of the schools are a local responsibility. These include funds for buildings, furniture, equipment, books and other supplies, maintenance, and utilities. Many local school systems also pay teachers a salary bonus. The local school board decides how much money it needs to support the local schools. Then it presents this budget to the board of county commissioners. The school board has no authority to tax.

Most counties have a single local school system ("local school administrative unit"), although a few counties still have more than one. Each local school system has its own elected board.

In many counties there are also public charter schools. These schools receive a share of the state and local funding for public school instruction. Charter schools do not receive government funding for building construction and maintenance, school lunches, or school buses. They have their own governing boards and operate somewhat independently of state and local policies for public schools. They are open to students through a lottery and most often enrollment is not connected to county of residence as it is in traditional public schools.

The county commissioners decide how much county money to spend to support local schools. In most counties, schools receive the largest share of county money. Sometimes there is considerable discussion between the school board and the commissioners about how much money the schools should receive.

Each local school board hires a superintendent to coordinate planning for the schools, select teachers and other school staff, prepare and administer the budget, and provide general administrative direction for the schools. Each school has a principal who has similar responsibilities for that school. In many parts of the state, schools are also beginning to involve teachers and parents more directly in helping plan for the school and in making decisions about how the school is run. Some schools also have advisory committees of people from local businesses and other members of the community.

Public schools have the responsibility of helping their students prepare for life. Some public-school programs help prepare students directly for work. Other programs help students prepare for college. All public-school programs should help make students responsible citizens—people who take pride in their community and help make it a better place to live and work.



The North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics is a two-year, public residential high school in Durham, North Carolina that focuses on science, mathematics, and technology

MUNICIPAL STREETS

Providing for safe and efficient traffic flow in cities and towns involves both state and

local governments. Most streets inside municipal boundaries are the responsibility of the municipal government. However, the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) has responsibility for most thoroughfares that pass through cities and towns. Many major streets, as well as interstate and state highways inside city limits, are built, maintained, and regulated by state government.

So while city officials have sole responsibility for most streets, they must work with NCDOT on changes to many of the key streets that carry heavy traffic. Cities and towns can build new streets. They can widen, repair, or repave only those streets that are not part of the state system. They can install speed bumps, lane markings, traffic signs, and traffic lights on city-maintained streets but not on state-maintained streets. City officials must ask NCDOT to make changes on any street that is part of the state highway system.

Cities can build and maintain sidewalks and street lighting on both city-maintained and state-maintained streets within their boundaries.

New streets are needed when land is developed. Often municipalities require the company developing the land to build streets to provide access to the new buildings. They often specify that these streets must meet the same design and construction standards the city would use if it were building the streets to ensure that the streets will be durable, safe, and convenient. Often new sidewalks and streetlights are required as a part of new construction. In some cases, cities take ownership of the new streets, sidewalks, and streetlights, but in other cases ownership and responsibility remains with the business or for residential neighborhoods, the **homeowners' association** created by the developer.

Both municipal and county governments advise NCDOT on highway construction in metropolitan areas. Each of the state's urban areas with a population of 50,000 or more has a metropolitan transportation planning organization (MPO). Through each MPO's Transportation Advisory Committee, elected officials from the municipalities and counties in an area plan changes in the state highway system in their area. These plans include both new construction and repair priorities for NCDOT's consideration.

Streets should make safe and convenient travel possible. They need to be wide enough to handle the traffic they carry. Sometimes this means having multiple, well-marked lanes (including bicycle lanes in some places).

Safety also requires that streets not have potholes, standing water, or other hazards that might cause drivers to lose control of their vehicles. Busy intersections need traffic signs or signals to prevent collisions. Street signs provide directions to drivers. Municipal public works or street departments carry out city policies to make streets safe and convenient.

Street cleaning also contributes to the safety of travel, as well as to the cleanliness of the city. Removing debris from streets, operating mechanical street sweepers, and plowing snow from the streets are other responsibilities of city public works or street departments.

Sidewalks help keep pedestrians safe by separating them from traffic and providing a smooth walking surface. They also make it convenient to walk, rather than drive, for short trips. Streetlights also contribute to the safety and convenience of both drivers and walkers.

Why are so many streets and roads the state's responsibility? While North Carolina's municipalities have authority to build and maintain streets and traffic control devices, the state's counties do not have similar authority. North Carolina state government took over responsibility for all county-maintained roads during the 1930s when many county governments faced bankruptcy. When a municipality annexes

Each city's network of streets and sidewalks is a public service used directly by all those who go from place to place within the city. All drivers pay a special tax on gasoline and diesel fuel they buy. A part of this state motor fuels tax goes to municipalities for the construction, maintenance, and cleaning of city streets. These "**Powell Bill**" funds cover much of the cost of these city services.

Rural public roads in North Carolina are all part of the state highway system. Unlike many states, North Carolina has no roads maintained by county government. As of 2019, NCDOT maintains over 107,000 miles of roads and North Carolina municipalities maintain over 23,000 miles of streets and roads.

new area, state-maintained roads in those areas remain part of the state highway system.



TAKE ACTION

- ✓ If your home receives public water, find out more about your local water system. What is the water source? Where is the treatment plant located?
- ✓ Find the latest water quality report for your water system. If you are on a well, what do you know about the quality of the water coming from your tap?
- ✓ Find out which watershed you live in and learn more about the volunteer watershed group that works to help improve the health of the watershed (see <http://ncwatershednetwork.org>). See what volunteer opportunities exist.
- ✓ Learn more about how the community you live in manages stormwater. Where does stormwater go in your community?
- ✓ Find out more about recycling in your community. What can you do to reduce the amount of trash that goes to landfills?
- ✓ Visit your local parks and recreation department. What recreational opportunities are provided by your local government? Are there opportunities for you to get involved in some way?
- ✓ Learn more about your local law enforcement. Is there a citizens' police academy that you could attend? Are there "ride-along" opportunities for residents? Are there community policing programs in your area?
- ✓ Where is the nearest fire station? Is it a volunteer fire department or a city department?
- ✓ Find out more about your local social services and public health departments. Are there opportunities for volunteer service?
- ✓ Learn how you can help inform your city about street repairs that need to be made. Is there an easy way to report problems? Some local governments have smartphone apps where you can take a picture of a problem and send it to the public works department so they know a repair is needed. Does your local government utilize a reporting system like that?

BUILDING A STRONGER COMMUNITY

Making the community a better place to live is a primary goal of local governments. In some way, all public services help improve the community. User-focused services (from solid waste collection to criminal investigation) help the people who use the service directly as well as their neighbors, and even those who only work, shop, or travel through the community. Most public services help both the people who use them directly and the community at large.

Some public services do not have direct users. Instead, these services are specifically intended to make the entire community better. Planting flowers in public areas, encouraging economic development, and improving human relations are examples of these “community-focused” services. They are intended to improve the physical, economic, or social setting in which people live and work. These services are designed to benefit the community broadly.

Governments support improvement of the general community by

- delivering community-focused public services,
- encouraging private action, and
- regulating private behavior.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Identify the many ways local governments help improve conditions in the community

Reflect on the history of racism in North Carolina and how people are working against racial discrimination

Consider your own role in improving your community

Consider the example of eliminating litter. In the public service approach, a government finds people to pick up the litter, either by hiring them or by recruiting **volunteers**. Alternatively, governments can help control litter by providing plenty of public trash cans. Governments can also [regulate private behavior](#) by making littering illegal and imposing fines on those who litter.

Government services and encouragement of private action include programs to

- [improve physical conditions in the community](#),
- [improve economic conditions in the community](#),
- [improve social conditions in the community](#), and
- [prevent crime in the community](#).



Volunteers picking up litter, Gastonia, N.C.

People sometimes disagree about what local governments should do to improve the community. One source of disagreement is over how much government intervention is desirable. For example, some people might want more drainage ditches or beach erosion-control efforts, but others might want to limit human interference with natural drainage or beach movement.

Another source of disagreement involves the relative importance of various public programs. Some people place high value on an attractive community and want to see public funds spent on improving community appearance. Others may argue that public funds should be spent on other public services that they consider more basic, such as law enforcement. People might also have differing opinions about the kinds of new industry that government should encourage, or even if additional economic development is good for their community. People can have different views about desirable social relations in the community as well.

Making choices about what their local government should do to improve the community is one of the most important responsibilities for city councils and boards of county commissioners.

IMPROVING THE COMMUNITY'S PHYSICAL CONDITION

Local governments protect people and property from natural hazards and pests. They also work to make their communities more attractive places to work and live. Volunteers and nonprofit organizations often partner with local governments to improve the physical condition of the community.

In many places, local governments build and maintain drainage ditches or levees to help prevent flooding. Coastal towns have programs to replenish the sand on eroded

beaches. These services are typically carried out by the local government's public works department or a dedicated **stormwater management** department.

Counties throughout the state have programs to control potentially harmful animals. The public health department may spray for mosquitoes or poison rats. Many cities and counties also have animal control departments to deal with wild or abandoned animals. Voluntary animal protection societies often partner with local government to operate shelters for stray animals and to encourage responsible pet ownership.



Children visiting an animal shelter, Rockingham County, N.C.

Historic preservation programs identify and protect buildings and areas that have special significance in a community. These programs encourage pride in the community and its heritage. These programs also prevent old buildings and neighborhoods from becoming run-down and help renovate those that are decaying. Local governments support historic preservation in several ways. Many governments have sponsored building inventories to identify and describe buildings of historic or architectural interest. Publication of such inventories encourages the owners of listed buildings to maintain them or even restore them to their original appearance.

Local governments can also provide incentives for maintaining and restoring historic buildings. Banks or other local companies join with local governments in support of historic preservation or other efforts to prevent deterioration or to encourage restoration of neighborhoods. Sometimes buildings are in such poor condition that they are beyond repair and unsafe to use. Local governments can buy these buildings and demolish them to remove the hazard.

HICKORY HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Many local governments create historic preservation commissions, which are made up of citizen volunteers appointed by city council, to help oversee historic preservation efforts. Hickory's 12-member Historic Preservation Commission is made up of a variety of residents that fill specific roles—such as owners of historic properties, building trades professionals, and a youth council representative—as well as “at large” members (residents that are simply interested in serving but don't fill one of the designated membership categories). The commission meets monthly and oversees ongoing programs such as a [downtown walking tour](#) and historic district plaque program, as well special projects such as a historic properties survey conducted in 2015. Volunteers serving in this way can greatly expand or enhance local government's efforts around historic preservation. Other community-improving efforts headed up by similar volunteer bodies include greenway preservation and downtown beautification.

CASE STUDY



In 1984 the former Claremont High School was designated as a local landmark by the City of Hickory, N.C. and the following year listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Take a [walking tour of the Hickory Historic District online](#).

Government beautification programs include planting trees and flowers and installing public art displays, flags, and holiday decorations. Efforts like these are often paid for by counties or municipalities and carried out by government employees or volunteers. Sometimes, however, the government might hire a private company to do the work or assign the work to people who have been ordered by the courts to perform community service.

Local governments also encourage garden clubs and other civic organizations to help with community beautification and litter control. The general public can be encouraged to help

through campaigns that publicize the benefits of an attractive community and urge people to “pick up, paint up, fix up.” Much of the work to improve the physical condition of a community is done by volunteers who give their time and effort to make their neighborhoods safer and more attractive. Contests to see who can pick up the most litter or produce the most beautiful flowerbeds provide a way to recognize outstanding efforts.

IMPROVING THE COMMUNITY’S ECONOMIC CONDITION

Local governments are interested in attracting and keeping businesses in their communities because businesses pay taxes and provide jobs for residents. The people in a community need jobs to earn income and taxes paid by businesses can help reduce the taxes residents have to pay to support local government. For these reasons, many local governments seek to strengthen their community’s economy.

To make a community more attractive to businesses and industry, local governments use a wide range of techniques, including

- preparing property for development by installing water lines, sewers, and roads;
- constructing buildings;
- offering low-interest loans; and
- coordinating job training with schools and colleges.

Many cities and counties support **economic development** by helping fund the local **chamber of commerce**. Chambers of commerce provide information about communities to people who may be interested in doing business there.

Cities often focus economic development efforts on downtowns or other areas with empty buildings, and in so doing they may seek partnerships with counties, other cities, or local business or nonprofit groups. More than 75 North Carolina counties and cities have formed **economic development**

Chamber of commerce web sites for cities and counties throughout North Carolina can be accessed through this [website](#).

commissions. These commissions collect information about the local economy and workforce, advertise the advantages of their communities, and help businesses organize the support they may need from local government and others. For example, the economic development commission may work with businesses, local schools, and community colleges to help the schools and colleges develop training for jobs the businesses have available. Sometimes economic development commissions work with a **business development corporation** to create an industrial park or to revitalize the downtown.

Because tourism is a major part of the economy in many parts of North Carolina, some cities and counties dedicate considerable efforts to make their communities more attractive to tourists. Tourism is especially important to the economy of the mountain and coastal regions of North Carolina. Additionally, all of the largest cities in the state actively seek to host conventions, adding another aspect to the tourism industry.

Special efforts to promote tourism include festivals, like Wilkesboro's "Merlefest," and outdoor dramas, like Manteo's "Lost Colony." Advertising is important, too. Websites, brochures, and tourist-oriented maps identifying interesting places and events are often used to entice visitors. Most communities support a local visitors bureau, which promotes local tourism. These organizations tend to represent multiple jurisdictions, such as the Chapel Hill/Orange County **Visitor's Bureau**, which also includes information about Carrboro and Hillsborough. Coliseums, stadiums, museums, and arts centers also attract tourists. Cities and counties support these places, at least in part, for the tourist business they generate.



Depot Park, Sanford, N.C., a joint project of the City of Sanford and Downtown Sanford Inc. to create a relaxing park that reflects the city's history.

Historic sites are major tourist attractions throughout North Carolina. One benefit of historic preservation programs is that they help develop and maintain areas of historic interest to tourists. Similarly, community beautification, recreation, and arts programs that local governments support for the benefit of their own residents frequently attract tourists as well. These same features may also help attract new businesses and industries.

Quality user-focused services also contribute to economic development. An abundant supply of clean water, sewage disposal capacity, good police and fire protection, good schools, and other public services that support a high quality of life are important to business and industry leaders who are looking for new locations for facilities.

DOWNTOWN RENOVATION IN SANFORD

Because downtown Sanford had many empty and dilapidated stores, Sanford City Council approved a plan that included \$400,000 of investment in improving the downtown area. The investments funded parking upgrades, streetscaping, road improvements, and new signs. The city worked with Downtown Sanford Incorporated (DSI), a nonprofit organization created in 1984 as part of the Main Street program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. In 1997, with the city's support, the DSI volunteer board created a plan to encourage businesses to locate downtown. The combined efforts of the city and DSI volunteers, which included the construction of Depot Park in 2001, helped the downtown flourish as businesses located there. In 2018 downtown Sanford won the North Carolina Main Street Center's Best Outdoor Space Improvement Award. This is one of many examples of municipal governments investing in renovations to downtown areas to spur economic development. Programs such as the North Carolina Main Street Center, created by the N.C. Department of Commerce, help local governments work with community members to make their downtowns more vibrant, lively, and attractive to business development.

CASE STUDY

IMPROVING SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN THE COMMUNITY

Local governments also work to improve social relations in their jurisdictions. Some have countywide or citywide programs to promote understanding among different racial, ethnic, or religious groups and to encourage fair treatment of all people in the community. These efforts are often organized through a **human relations commission**. Another approach concentrates on improving relations among people in a particular neighborhood. Local governments support these efforts through community action agencies, neighborhood or residents' associations, or even through police community-relations offices. Cities and counties also sponsor street fairs, concerts, and other opportunities for people from throughout the community to gather and interact with each other.

Human relations commissions were established primarily to find ways to ease racial tensions and to eliminate racial discrimination. Even though civil rights have been greatly expanded throughout the United States, the reality is that racial and other forms of discrimination and prejudice continue to affect relationships among North Carolinians today.

Human relations commissions hold public meetings to discuss potential problems among different racial and ethnic groups. Much of their work entails encouraging people of different races or even different points of view to talk and listen to one another. These volunteer committees of residents can help people realize that cultural differences do not need to be threatening or divisive and can play an important role in promoting community harmony and cohesion.

In recent decades, new **immigrants** have come to North Carolina, especially from Latin America and Asia. In fact, since 2000, North Carolina has had one of the fastest-growing Spanish-speaking populations in the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, as of 2017, North Carolina was home to over 800,000 foreign-born people, nearly eight percent of the state's total population. About half of the foreign-born population living in North Carolina emigrated from Latin America. Sometimes immigrants are the

subject of discrimination or abuse by others who fear or resent them because of their race, origin, or language.

Human relations commissions also deal with problems of intolerance and discrimination based on religion, gender identity, or sexual orientation. For example, there is a growing variety of religious affiliations in North Carolina. Protestants remain the largest group, but there are also Catholics and people of other Christian denominations, as well as Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and those of other or no religious affiliation living in the state. Human relations commissions try to help promote people's understanding of religions other than their own and to prevent acts of religious discrimination.

HISTORY OF RACISM IN NORTH CAROLINA

The history of North Carolina involves European settlers fighting with Native Americans for control of the land. Some Europeans began to bring captive Africans here as slaves. Myths about differences between races and attitudes about European superiority began during the Native American wars and during times of slavery.

The Civil War ended slavery, and in 1870 the Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution extended voting rights to all male citizens 21 and older, regardless of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude." For the next few years, African Americans were able to vote as the Constitution permitted. In 1890, more than 1,000 black North Carolinians held office, but some white leaders feared an alliance between black voters and poor white voters. To prevent that alliance, some white leaders stirred up racial fears among whites and pushed racial segregation. The segregation laws were called "Jim Crow" laws (named after a negative caricature of African Americans popular at the time). By the end of the nineteenth century, the North Carolina General Assembly had devised means of keeping most nonwhite men from voting, and the federal government refused to enforce the Constitution.

Public facilities—schools, parks, even water fountains—were segregated. Whites and non-whites were not allowed to use them together, and the facilities available to non-whites were often greatly inferior to those local governments provided for white people.

Not until the 1960s did African American and Native American North Carolinians regain their basic civil rights, including the right to vote. Federal voting-rights laws ended **poll taxes** and other practices used to keep people from voting. Only then did segregation end and public facilities become racially integrated.

[NCPedia](#) provides information about the history of the Civil Rights Movement in North Carolina. To learn more about the struggle for civil rights, visit a destination within North Carolina on the [Civil Rights Trail](#).

Many white North Carolinians supported ending segregation and assuring civil rights and equal access to public facilities for all North Carolinians. However, some whites continued to fear African Americans and Native Americans and felt superior to them. At the same time, some African Americans and Native Americans continued to resent whites because of a long history of discrimination and mistreatment.

Native Land Map

North Carolina is home to eight Indian tribes and four urban Indian organizations. The website of the [UNC American Indian Center](#) offers information about these communities. The [Native Land Map](#) is an interactive online resource to find out more about local indigenous territories and languages. Scan this code with the [Metaverse App](#) to open an AR experience.



Scan the code with your phone to open this experience



The history of racism and prejudice in North Carolina is part of the larger American story, and certainly these issues have not been resolved. While local government facilities and services are open to all, many local governments still grapple with racial tensions and the legacy of segregation. These struggles manifest themselves in issues of housing and economic development but perhaps most acutely in law enforcement – community relations.

PREVENTING CRIME IN THE COMMUNITY



Police car, Roxboro, N.C.

Crime prevention and remediation are two of the primary functions of local governments. Many police activities are intended to help prevent crime. Police patrols (usually by car; sometimes on foot, bike, or horse) help discourage crime by making police visible throughout the community. Police sometimes concentrate their patrols in areas where there have been frequent reports of crime. In addition to patrols, police attempt to prevent crime by informing people about ways to protect their property and themselves. Police also help people learn nonviolent means to solve arguments and find ways to avoid getting involved in criminal activities. After all, police cannot be everywhere at once. Crime prevention depends on the entire community.

Police can also encourage neighborhood cooperation. Many police departments have community policing programs, in which they meet with neighborhood groups to discuss public safety. Police officers introduce themselves to residents and store owners. They ask what they can do to help make the neighborhood safer.

GREENSBORO POLICE NEIGHBORHOOD RESOURCE CENTERS

In 1989, Greensboro's police department established Police Neighborhood Resource Centers in the city's public housing communities. Each of these police mini-stations have officers permanently assigned there. The officers patrol the housing communities on foot and get to know the residents. In addition to criminal investigations and emergency response services, these officers help residents get the social services and health services they need. Some services are even provided right in the mini-station. The officers also organize recreational opportunities for neighborhood youth. These efforts by the police department help build residents' trust of each other and with the police, increasing residents' willingness to report crimes, ask for police assistance, and assist the police. Increased cooperation with the police reduces crime and makes the neighborhoods safer for all the residents.

CASE STUDY

Other local government departments and community organizations may also work with neighborhood residents to help build trust and a sense of responsibility. Crime and other social problems are often greatest in areas where people do not trust their neighbors or do not believe that they can or should do anything for each other. Community Action Programs and other neighborhood-based organizations help people work together on projects to benefit the neighborhood. Residents' councils can promote cooperation and improvement in public housing or help fight youth drug abuse.



Police Department Resource Center Program, Greensboro, N.C.

While local law enforcement agencies work hard to keep communities safe, often with positive collaboration with residents, high-profile national cases of racially-based police misconduct, combined with the state's history of racial injustice, create a difficult environment for trust-building. Many police and sheriff departments are proactively working in their communities to promote better law enforcement-community relations and specifically to enhance trust with minority residents. Working to build trust community-wide is a major effort of modern local law enforcement agencies across the state.

DECIDING WHAT IS BETTER FOR THE COMMUNITY

Proposals for public programs to improve the community are usually presented long

before any action on them is taken. Often, an initial discussion at a meeting of the city council or board of county commissioners introduces a proposal to both elected officials and the public. Proposals may be developed by the city or county manager, by other staff members, by appointed advisory boards, by elected officials, or by private citizens.

Social and news media both play an important role in spreading word about new proposals to the public. A citizen's blog or reporter's story can inform large numbers of people about an issue or proposal for government action. Groups of people with similar interests may also pay particular attention to the topics discussed by the governing board and alert their members when an issue of particular concern comes up. For example, the local real estate agents' association and environmental protection groups, like the Sierra Club, might both be interested in a proposed change in drainage ditches, although for different reasons. The real estate agents might support the plan in order to protect buildings or to create more building sites. On the other hand, the environmental protection groups might oppose the plan because they fear it would harm wildlife or water quality.



Public meeting to discuss a comprehensive plan, Pinehurst, N.C.

People who favor or oppose a proposal can express their concerns about it in various ways. They may write blogs, send letters to the editor of their local newspaper, or give interviews to television reporters. They may speak to, text message, or use Twitter to interact with friends and others with whom they share common interests. They may speak at public meetings or talk to the city or county manager or other government staff members. Most importantly, however, they must communicate their concerns to members of the local government's governing board.

The elected representatives on the governing board have the authority and the responsibility to decide whether to approve the proposal. People call or write their elected representatives and present **petitions** signed by many voters to express their opinions about a proposal. Social media make it possible to contact many people quickly and mobilize them to attend a meeting or send emails to public officials.

According to North Carolina's Open Meetings Law, the governing board's meetings must be open to the public. Thus, reporters can cover the debates and publicize the arguments for and against proposed programs. **Proponents** and **opponents** can attend these meetings and express their opinions to elected officials during the **public comment period**.

Often, proposals are changed to reflect the concerns of opponents while continuing to meet the most important objectives of the proponents. Sometimes elected officials are unable or unwilling to adopt a program that pleases everyone. Opponents who feel strongly about a planned program may continue to try to prevent it even after it has been adopted. They might file a lawsuit, asking the courts to stop work on the program. Or they might campaign against elected board members who voted for the program, hoping to elect others who will vote to stop the program. Those who championed the proposal are likely to continue their interest in it and support the members of the board who voted for the plan.

Once the governing board has authorized a program, local government employees

begin to carry it out. Many approaches to community betterment also require active public cooperation to succeed. The organized cooperation of businesses, community groups, schools, and other parts of the community is very important for many community improvement activities. For example, programs designed to encourage people to fix up their property, pick up litter, or work with their neighbors to improve community relations all depend on community member participation to succeed.

TAKE ACTION

- ✓ Identify volunteer opportunities through your local government. Is there information on county and municipal websites about volunteer opportunities?
- ✓ Find other ways you can learn about volunteer opportunities with local nonprofit organizations.
- ✓ Identify ways in which your local government(s) are beautifying your community. Can you find public art installations? Landscaping? Community gardens? Streetscape improvements?
- ✓ Does your community have a historic district? If so, take a walking tour and find out more about historic buildings in your community.
- ✓ Find out about organizations involved with economic development in your community. Is there a chamber of commerce? Are there economic development officers that work for your municipality and/or county? Is there a downtown business organization? What can you find out about economic development efforts in your community?
- ✓ Find out about efforts in your community to combat discrimination based on race or other differences. How might you and your friends become involved in their work?
- ✓ In what ways are your local police departments and/or sheriff's office working to build positive relationships in the community? Is there a formal community policing program? A citizens police academy you could attend?
- ✓ Attend a county or municipal board meeting and note how the public comment period is conducted. How many people spoke? What topics did they speak about?

PROTECTING THE PUBLIC FROM HARM

One of the most powerful tools local governments use to improve their communities is the authority to regulate harmful behavior within their jurisdictions. North Carolina state law gives counties and municipalities authority to regulate various activities to protect people from harm. For example, local governments can pass “leash laws” requiring owners to control their dogs, thereby reducing the danger of people being bitten. Local governments can adopt building restrictions to prevent people from constructing buildings in areas that are likely to be flooded. City governments can set speed limits and other regulations for traffic on city streets.

To regulate behavior, the local governing board must adopt an ordinance—a legal description by the board of the behavior being regulated and the actions the government will take against people who do not follow the regulation. Where state law does not already permit local government regulation of an activity, local officials must ask the General Assembly to pass a bill granting that authority.

People often disagree about whether a given activity is harmful enough to require regulation. Local governing boards often seek public comments and suggestions before passing ordinances. They may hold public hearings to encourage full discussion of the arguments for and against a proposal to regulate. Sometimes an **advisory board** or a committee of residents also reviews the arguments about a proposed regulation and presents these to the governing board. Residents also often speak directly to board members about proposed regulations they favor or oppose. But the decision to regulate must be made by the local governing board.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Understand how local governments regulate behavior through ordinances

Consider how zoning laws shape your community

Understand and appreciate civic responsibility and your public participation options



Can you find this “leash law” in [the Town Code of Carrboro, N.C.](#) or the [Orange County, N.C. Animal Ordinance](#)?

Unless a majority of the board thinks regulation is appropriate, no action will be taken. Except for a few cities (such as Greensboro, N.C.) that have **initiative** and **referendum** provisions in their charters, an ordinance can be adopted only by the board.

Government regulation involves requiring or prohibiting certain actions. If someone fails to act according to the requirements of the ordinance, the government can either refuse them specified public services or impose penalties on them. The ordinance specifies what service may be withheld or what penalties may be imposed. Some regulations are enforced by withholding public services until the person acts as the regulation requires. For example, a person who wants to connect his or her home to the public water supply must get permission from the water department. To protect the water supply, local regulations specify the kind of plumbing the owner must install. Then, before the water department turns on the water, an inspector checks the plumbing to be sure it meets specifications.



Courthouse, Cherokee County, N.C.

People who violate an ordinance often must pay a **civil penalty** of a specified amount of money. When an official enforcing the ordinance determines that a violation has occurred, the official issues a **citation** to the violator, assessing the civil penalty. Sometimes there are other penalties, too. For example, the ordinance regulating parking may include a provision for towing cars parked in parking places reserved for the disabled. Violations of some ordinances may also carry a fine or time in the county jail. People charged with violating these ordinances have a hearing at which a magistrate or district court judge determines whether they are guilty of the violation and, if so, what their sentence will be.

Police officers are given responsibility for enforcing many local ordinances, but other local officials are also responsible for enforcing specific ordinances.

These include building inspectors and zoning inspectors. Often these same local officials are also responsible for enforcing state laws and regulations. Local police enforce North Carolina's criminal laws, as well as local ordinances. Local building inspectors enforce the state building code in addition to any local building ordinances. Local ordinances must not conflict with state laws and regulations.

Many regulations require popular support to achieve their purposes. For example, most people must cooperate with restrictions on smoking in public places or requirements to keep dogs under control in order for these ordinances to be effective. Police enforcement can help make people aware of the law, but the police cannot be everywhere at once and cannot deal with widespread violations. Fortunately, most people see the need to regulate some behaviors and accept their **civic responsibility** to obey laws, even when they disagree with them. This is the basis for the success of most government regulations.

REGULATING PERSONAL BEHAVIOR

Governments regulate personal behavior that threatens people's ability to live and work together in safety and security. Much harmful behavior is regulated by laws passed by the North Carolina General Assembly. For example, state laws declare certain acts to be **crimes**. Crimes are offenses against all the people of North Carolina, not just the victim who is harmed directly by the act. State laws also provide rules for the safe operation of cars and trucks on the state's highways. State laws apply to the entire state. Similarly, Congress passes laws regulating behavior throughout the entire nation.

Local governments also regulate disruptive behavior within their jurisdictions and adopt ordinances setting up rules for the use of parks or other facilities open to the public. Local government regulations must not violate either the state or federal constitution, and local governments must have authority for their regulations from the state of North Carolina. Local governments in North Carolina have broad authority to regulate behavior that creates a public nuisance or threatens public health, safety, or welfare. Other kinds of local regulation require special acts of authorization by the General Assembly.

Cities and towns regulate traffic on their streets. For major thoroughfares (streets that carry traffic into and out of the city) the city or town shares this authority with the state. A city council can decide to put up stop signs or traffic signals or to set speed limits on most city streets, but for major thoroughfares, the council must request state action. Because rural public roads are the state's responsibility, county governments must ask for state action to control traffic in unincorporated areas.

HOW CHANGING VIEWS ABOUT SMOKING LED TO REGULATION OF SMOKING

One example of how local ordinances change over time involves the controversy over regulation of smoking in public places. Historically, smoking was not viewed as a public problem. In fact, at one time the use of tobacco was considered by some North Carolinians as an almost patriotic duty. Tobacco was North Carolina's chief crop. Much of the state's economy depended on raising tobacco, selling it, and making cigarettes and other tobacco products.

This traditional view began to be challenged as medical researchers linked tobacco smoke to cancer, heart disease, and breathing disorders. Studies showed that breathing others' second-hand smoke could harm nonsmokers' health. This research increased the conviction among many people that smoking should be prohibited in public places. And now that significantly fewer people in the United States smoke, tobacco has also become a smaller part of the state's economy.

In June 1988, Greensboro resident Lori Faley presented a petition to the Greensboro City Council to regulate smoking in public places. Ms. Faley started the petition after someone blew smoke in her face while she stood in a supermarket checkout lane. The petition she brought to the city council had more than 500 signatures and called for an ordinance regulating smoking in stores and restaurants, as well as in publicly owned buildings.

There was immediate opposition to the ordinance, especially from Greensboro tobacco companies and workers. More than 2,300 people were employed in the tobacco industry there at that time. The city council held a public hearing and then appointed a committee to study the issue. The committee was made up of representatives from the council, the county commission, and the county health department and business owners and managers. The committee held its first meeting in July 1989.

Ms. Faley and her group, which became known as GASP (Greensboro against Smoking Pollution), were frustrated at the council's response and did not wait for the study committee to meet. GASP began to collect signatures on another petition. This petition took advantage of a provision in the Greensboro Charter for procedures called initiative and referendum. (Greensboro is one of only a few North Carolina cities with these provisions.)

The GASP petition called for the council to vote on the ordinance regulating smoking in public places. It also called for a referendum (public vote) on the ordinance if the council failed to adopt it. The initiative petition required the valid signatures of 7,247 Greensboro voters to force a referendum.

In August 1989, GASP submitted its petition. Although more than 10,000 people had signed the petition, only 7,306 signatures were certified as those of registered Greensboro voters. That was still more than the number necessary to require a vote. So after the city council refused to adopt the ordinance, the referendum was placed on the ballot for the November election.

Greensboro tobacco companies spent tens of thousands of dollars urging voters to defeat the ordinance. GASP did not have similar financial resources, but the group did have the names of those who had signed the petition. GASP members called those people to urge them to vote for the ordinance. The ordinance passed by a very narrow margin: 14,991 votes for and 14,818 against.

The controversy, however, did not end there. Tobacco workers in Greensboro started an initiative petition of their own. This time, the petition called for a referendum to repeal the smoking regulation ordinance adopted in 1989. The petitioners collected the required number of signatures, and another election was held in 1991. In that election, voters rejected repealing the ordinance by more than two to one. Although thousands of people in Greensboro were still unhappy with the city's regulation of smoking in public places, Greensboro voters overwhelmingly supported keeping the ordinance.

Regulation of smoking in public places has become much less controversial. In 2007, the North Carolina General Assembly banned smoking in all state-owned buildings, effective January 1, 2008. By 2020, most local governments had banned smoking in their buildings and in restaurants, stores, and other public places.

CASE STUDY

Behavior that is acceptable in one community may be regulated as a nuisance in another community. For example, while some local governments have ordinances that require dog owners to keep their dogs penned or on a leash, some do not. Some cities and towns have ordinances regulating the loudness and/or the time of noisy behavior in residential areas. Views about the seriousness of the harm caused by an activity often vary from place to place across North Carolina.

Views about the harmfulness of an activity also change over time. For example, many cities and towns in North Carolina used to require stores to be closed all day on Sunday. Over the past 50 years, most of those ordinances have been repealed. In many parts of the state, more people wanted to shop on Sunday, and more merchants wanted to sell on Sunday. Fewer people believed it was wrong to conduct business on Sunday (or, even if they believed it was wrong, that the government should keep others from shopping on Sunday).

REGULATING THE USE OF PROPERTY

Local governments regulate the use of property to protect people's health and safety, the environment, and property values, as well as to encourage economic development. Several different kinds of property regulations are commonly used. Through [zoning ordinances](#) local governments specify the kinds of uses allowed in various geographic divisions of their jurisdiction. [Subdivision regulation](#) guides how large blocks of land can be developed for new houses. These are usually based on a [land use plan](#).

Other local regulations also help protect the physical environment or community appearance. Local housing codes establish basic requirements for a structure to be adequate for someone's permanent residence. Typical requirements include structural soundness (to prevent the collapse of walls or floors), adequate ventilation (to provide the occupants with fresh air), and a safe water supply and toilet facilities (to prevent the spread of disease). If an inspector finds that a building does not meet minimum standards, the inspector can order it to be repaired or closed. A local governing board can adopt an ordinance ordering that a building that is beyond repair be demolished. Most of North Carolina's larger cities and counties have minimum housing codes.

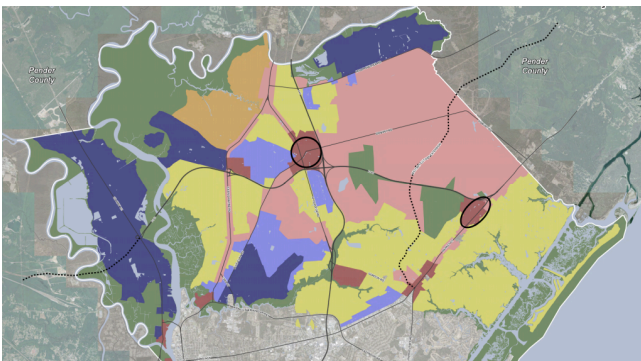
Local inspectors also enforce the state building code to protect against unsafe construction. As building proceeds, inspectors check to see that construction meets legal requirements. Building codes set standards for safe construction, including plumbing and electrical systems. Inspectors also check to make sure the **zoning** requirements are being followed. Before the new building can be occupied, inspectors must certify that it meets all state and local requirements, including the zoning regulations. An occupancy permit is then issued.

Local governments may regulate activities that cause soil erosion or regulate building in flood plains or in reservoir watersheds. Local governments can prohibit signs they decide are too large or disturbing. They can regulate changes to the outside appearance of buildings in historic districts.

LAND USE PLANS

In many jurisdictions, a **land use plan** serves as the basis for much of the regulation of property use. City or county planners (or outside consultants) study the physical characteristics of the land. Where are the steep slopes? What areas are subject to flooding? They map existing streets, rail lines, water lines, sewers, schools, parks, fire stations, and other facilities that can support development. They also note current uses of the land. Where are the factories, the warehouses, the stores and offices, the residential neighborhoods?

Based on their studies, the planners prepare maps showing how various areas might be developed to make use of existing public facilities and to avoid mixing incompatible uses (keeping factories and junkyards separate from houses, for instance). The maps may also indicate where new water lines and sewers might be built most easily. These maps are then presented to the public for comment. After the public has reviewed the maps, the planners prepare a detailed set of maps showing current and possible future uses of the land. The local governing board may review and vote on this final set of maps itself or delegate planning authority to an appointed planning board. The approved maps and supporting text outlining future growth and development becomes the official land use plan for the community, usually called a comprehensive plan.



[New Hanover County, N.C. comprehensive plan map](#) adopted in 2016. Visit the [New Hanover Comprehensive plan website](#) for more details.

All except the smallest North Carolina cities and towns have land use plans. Municipal land use plans typically cover an area one mile beyond the municipal boundaries. The area outside the city limits, but under the city's planning authority, is called the **extraterritorial land use planning jurisdiction (ETJ)**. With the approval of the county commissioners, a city may extend its ETJ even farther.

Counties are authorized to regulate land use only over the parts of the county not subject to city planning. Because of cities' ETJ, a county's land use planning area is usually smaller than the unincorporated area of the county. All but a few rural counties in North Carolina have land use plans. The twenty coastal counties and municipalities are also subject to land use regulations imposed by North Carolina's Coastal Area Management Act ([CAMA](#)).

Local officials can use land use plans to guide their decisions about where to locate new public facilities—new parks, schools, or other government buildings. Some governments use them only for these nonregulatory purposes. A land use plan also establishes a basis for regulation of property uses. However, the plan itself does not set up a system of regulation. Zoning and subdivision regulation are systems of regulation based on a land use plan. A bill passed by the General Assembly in 2019 requires all North Carolina local governments that use zoning to have a land use plan by 2022.

from the planning department. The planning department staff checks the building plans for the property to see that all zoning requirements are met. The department then issues a zoning certificate. The building department can then issue a building permit to allow construction to begin if the building plans conform to local and state building codes.

ZONING VS. AFFORDABLE HOUSING?

Regulating land-use is one of the most important powers local governments exercise. Decisions about the regulation of land use can also be controversial. For example, the Raleigh City Council created a “Neighborhood Conservation Overlay District” for the North Ridge West neighborhood to support residents’ desire to protect the character of the well-established neighborhood. Although one council member noted that it went against the city’s stated commitment to creating more affordable housing, the council approved the overlay district which was supported by neighborhood residents.

Overlay districts are additional layers of regulation on top of an overall zoning ordinance intended to preserve the unique characteristics of a specific neighborhood. The overlay district for North Ridge West placed restrictions on the types of homes that could be built and cut the number of new homes that can be constructed in half.

Thus, the zoning decision met one local priority (preserving a neighborhood’s character) while limiting another citywide priority (addressing affordable housing). Zoning issues often involve this kind of tension between the needs of specific neighborhoods versus the needs of the community at large. How local government boards manage that tension can impact the character and dynamic of communities for decades to come.

CASE STUDY

Zoning applies to both existing and new uses of property. An existing store in an area zoned residential would not be forced to close if it was constructed before the zoning took effect; it would be considered a legal, nonconforming use. However, expanding the store or changing its use to a factory might be prohibited by the zoning ordinance.

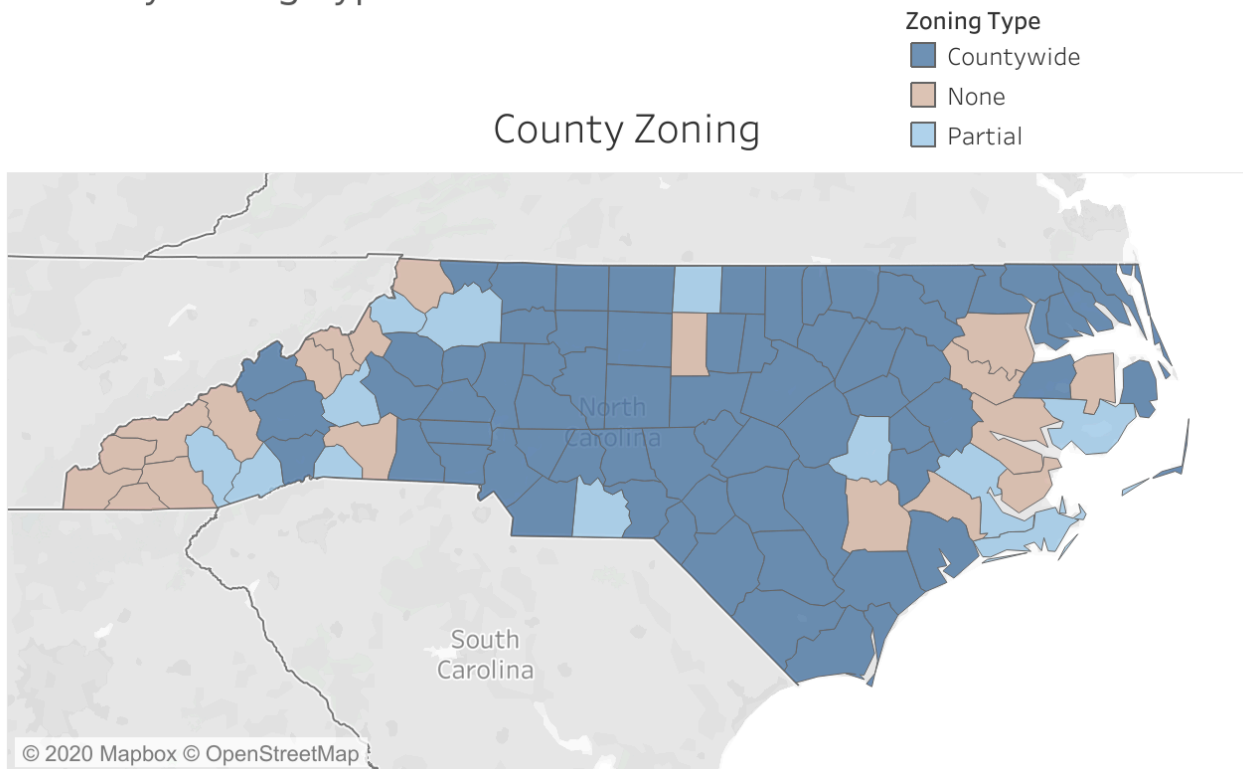
Minor exceptions to zoning regulations can be approved by a **board of adjustment**. This board is made up of resident volunteers appointed by the local governing board. Boards of adjustment for cities with extraterritorial planning jurisdictions must include representatives from that area. The board of adjustment hears appeals about the decisions of the planning staff. It also hears requests for exceptions to the zoning regulations, called **variances**. Board of adjustment decisions usually cannot be appealed to the local governing board. Instead, appeals are made to the courts. This procedure is intended to keep political pressures from influencing land use decisions.

Major land use and zoning decisions can affect property values, traffic, noise levels, and many other aspects of life in a community, often making them controversial. To ensure opportunities for public input, all zoning change requests require **public hearings**. Also, major developments such as shopping centers require “special-use permits,” which can be granted only after a formal public hearing on the project.

All of North Carolina’s larger cities and towns have zoning regulations that the city council has adopted by ordinance. A municipality’s zoning authority also covers the extraterritorial planning jurisdiction, as well as the area within the municipality. Eighty percent of counties also have zoning for at least some of their area not under municipal

jurisdiction. Most of the areas of North Carolina that are not covered by zoning regulations are rural and primarily agricultural, although popular resistance to having local government regulate land use has also prevented the adoption of zoning in a few more densely populated counties.

Local Government in North Carolina County Zoning Types



The School of Government (2019), The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

County zoning types in North Carolina. Access an interactive version of this map on [Tableau Public](#).

SUBDIVISION REGULATION

Subdivision regulation establishes a process for reviewing a landowner's request to divide a piece of land into building lots. With subdivision regulation, the local government will not approve dividing land into lots for houses until the landowner satisfies certain conditions. These conditions typically include building adequate streets and providing appropriate drainage. The conditions might also include laying water and sewer lines if the new development is to be served by public water supply and sewers. In addition, each lot must be checked to see that it includes a safe building site. The

landowner may also be asked to donate land for a park or **greenspace**. If the local government has established subdivision regulation, the register of deeds cannot record the boundaries of the new lots without approval of the local government. This assures that all regulations are followed.

PROTECTING NORTH CAROLINA'S COASTAL COMMUNITIES

Hurricane Florence, which slammed into North Carolina's coast in 2018, damaged an estimated 75,000 homes and other buildings in the state, mostly due to flooding. Rising sea levels increase the likelihood of flood damage all along the coast. Land use plans and zoning can minimize flood damage by shaping choices about where and how to build. North Carolina's coastline is made up mostly of small local governments that lack the resources to develop and implement the kinds of land use plans that would make the most difference. The state helps through its Office of Recovery and Resiliency (NCORR) and the North Carolina Sea Grant program.

Swansboro, in Onslow County, received assistance from N.C. Sea Grant to conduct a vulnerability assessment as it was updating its land use plan. The plan identifies flood-prone areas and requires rebuilding flooded buildings much higher than they were before. The Swansboro town plan also specifies that flood risk be considered in making decisions about building streets and water or sewer lines. Swansboro public officials and residents now know ways to minimize future flood damage.

CASE STUDY

Subdivision regulation is intended to prevent developments on land that cannot support them. For example, some land may be prone to flooding. Some properties may not have access to sewer lines and have soil unsuitable for septic tanks. Subdivision regulation ensures adequate street access and drainage are provided by the **developer**, so that residents (or the local government) are not left with the expense of building adequate roads or drains. Because many of these problems developed in earlier unregulated subdivisions, subdivision regulation is being used more and more. Rural counties where little development is occurring are least likely to have subdivision regulation.



TAKE ACTION

- ✓ Look up the local ordinances for your county and/or town, usually called the county or municipal code. Does anything surprise you in terms of ordinances that exist or ones you think should exist but do not?
- ✓ See if your county has an interactive GIS website, and if it does, look up the property where you live and see what information you can find out about it.
- ✓ Find the land use plan for your county and/or municipality. When was it adopted? When was it last amended? What does it tell you about future land use in your community?
- ✓ Find out when your local planning board or board of adjustment meetings are held and attend one. What kinds of issues do these boards deal with? What kind of information is used to help the board make decisions?

PAYING FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local government services and programs cost money. Cities and counties must pay the people who work for them and provide the buildings, equipment, and supplies for conducting the public's business.

In North Carolina, local government services and programs cost billions of dollars each year. In **fiscal year** 2018, North Carolina county governments spent almost \$15 billion, and North Carolina municipalities spent about \$11.2 billion, to provide services for the people of North Carolina. Within limits set by the state, local officials are responsible for deciding what to spend for local government and how to raise the money to cover those expenses.

The State of North Carolina sets strict requirements that local governments must follow in managing their money. However, this was not always so. During the 1920s, many cities and counties in the state borrowed money heavily. When the stock market crashed in 1929 and thousands of people lost their jobs, many local governments went even more heavily into debt.

By 1931 the state's local governments were spending half of their property tax revenue each year on debt payments. More than half of the state's cities and counties were unable to pay their debts at some time during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

To restore sound money management to local government, the General Assembly created the North Carolina [Local Government Commission](#) and passed a series of laws regulating local government budgeting and finance. The Local Government Commission enforces those laws and, along with the School of Government at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, provides training and advice to local government budget and finance officers.

State regulation provides a strong framework for sound money management, but local officials still have primary responsibility for using city and county funds wisely and well. Each year they must adopt a [balanced budget](#) for the coming **fiscal year**. During the past 70 years, North Carolina local governments have established a national reputation for managing public money carefully and providing the public with good value for their tax dollars.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Understand how the North Carolina Local Government Commission oversees municipal and county finances

Describe the revenue streams for local governments

Discuss different expenditures local governments make

Consider how local government budgets shape your community

At the end of each fiscal year, every local government in North Carolina prepares an annual financial report. This document summarizes all the government's financial activity: what it has received, what it has borrowed, what it has spent, what it is obligated to spend, and what it has in the **fund balance**. Each local government publishes its annual financial report, has it audited by an independent accounting firm, and files a financial summary with the Local Government Commission.

The report helps local officials better understand the financial situation of their government. The independent audit and the report to the Local Government Commission serve as checks on the accuracy of the report and the legality of the government's financial dealings. The publication of the report also informs citizens about their local government's financial condition.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT BUDGETS

A budget is a plan for raising and spending money. North Carolina law requires each city and county to adopt an annual budget every year, including planned **revenues** and **expenditures** for the coming year.

In North Carolina, local government budgets must be balanced. That is, the budget must indicate that the local government will have enough money during the year to pay for all planned expenditures. Expenditures can be paid either from money received during the year (revenue) or from money already on hand at the beginning of the year (**fund balance**). A balanced budget can be represented by the following equation:

Expenditures = Revenues + Withdrawals from Fund Balance

Thus, if a local government plans to spend \$1 million, it must have a total of \$1 million in revenues and fund balance withdrawals. If it plans to raise only \$900,000 in revenue, it needs to be able to withdraw \$100,000 from the fund balance. If it plans to raise \$950,000, it will need to draw only \$50,000 from the fund balance. If it plans to raise \$1,050,000 and plans to spend \$1,000,000, it will be able to add \$50,000 to its fund balance.

The City of Concord, N.C. regularly wins awards for its annual budget presentation. Explore their [budget plan online](#)



Town Hall, Concord, N.C. Image by [Scott Ritchie](#) used under [CC BY 2.0](#).

Local government revenues come from [property taxes](#), [sales and other local taxes](#), and [user fees and other sources](#). A budget is based on revenue *estimates*—educated forecasts about how much money the city or county will receive during the coming year. To be safe, local officials often plan to spend nothing from the fund balance. That is, they budget **expenditures** equal to or slightly less than estimated revenues.

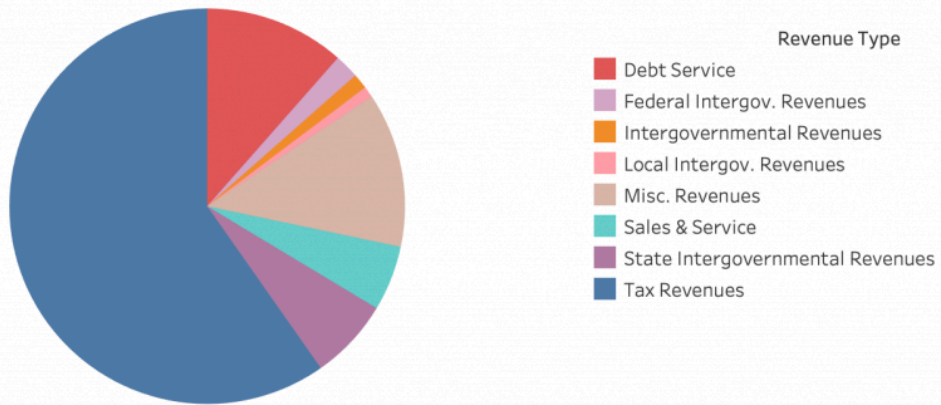
The fund balance is like the local government's savings account and helps the government deal with unexpected situations. If actual revenues are less than expected, the government can withdraw from the fund balance to make up the difference. If revenues exceed actual expenditures, the money is added to the fund balance. If a government regularly withdraws from its fund balance, it will eventually use its entire savings and have no “rainy day” money left.

In North Carolina, annual budgets run from July 1 of one calendar year to June 30 of the following calendar year. This period is called the government's fiscal year because it is the year used in accounting for money. “Fiscal year” is often abbreviated “FY.” FY 2020, for example, means the fiscal year from July 1, 2019, to June 30, 2020. Each year the local governing board must adopt the next annual budget before the new fiscal year begins on July 1.

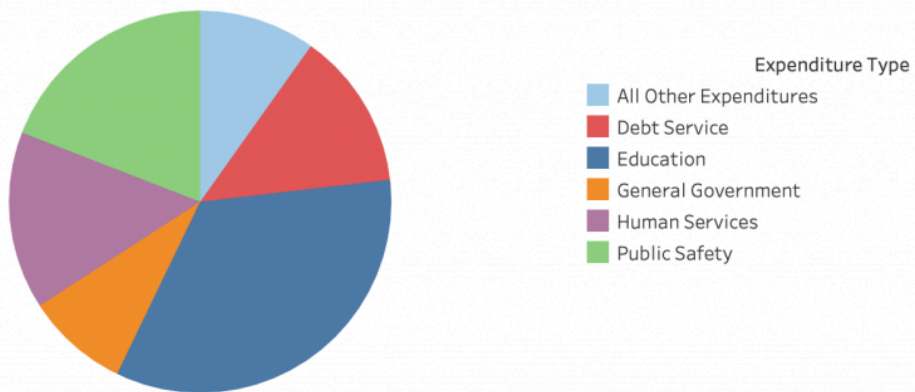
Each local government's budget reflects the priorities chosen by the local governing board. Local government budgets also reflect the way the General Assembly has allocated service responsibilities. In North Carolina, municipalities spend much of their money on utilities, public safety, and transportation, including streets. Counties spend most on education, public safety, and human services.

Local Government in North Carolina County Finances

NC Counties Revenue by Source (2019)



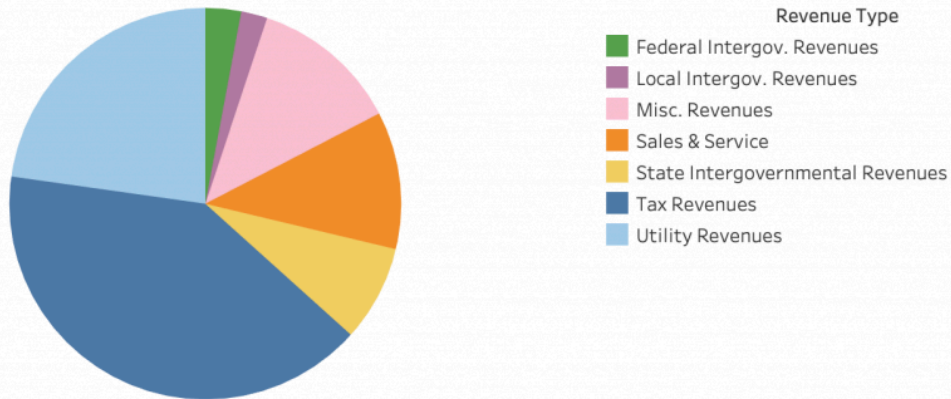
NC Counties Expenditures by Function (2019)



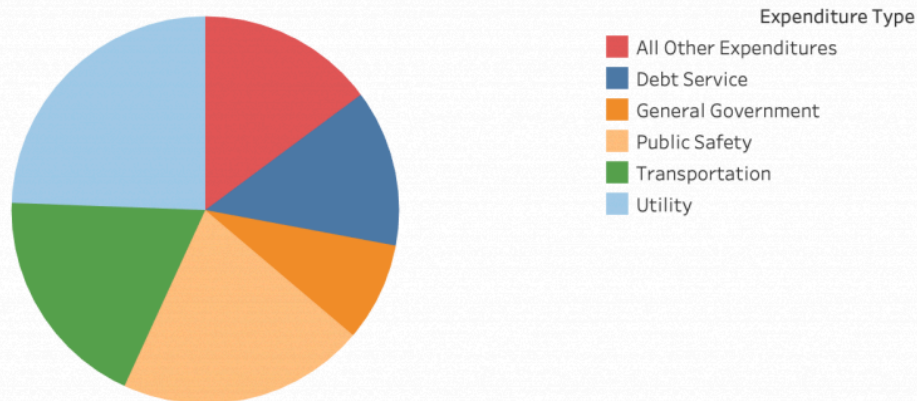
N.C. local government revenue and expenditure data. Access the interactive data visualization on [Tableau Public](#).

Local Government in North Carolina Municipality Finances

NC Municipality Revenue by Source (2019)



NC Municipality Expenditure by Function (2019)



N.C. local government revenue and expenditure data. Access the interactive data visualization on [Tableau Public](#).

DECIDING WHAT TO FUND

Several months before a new **fiscal year** begins in July, local government departments estimate how much more or less their services will cost in the coming year. For example, if a solid waste collection department is going to continue collecting the same amount of trash from the same number of places at the same frequency, its costs will be about the same. Fuel for the trucks may cost a little more, but if services do not change, next year's expenditures would be similar to this year's expenditures. If, however, the city council decides to reduce the number of trash collections from twice a week to once a week, the department can reduce the number of employees and the number of miles driven by the trucks. The department will pay less for salaries and fuel bills. Perhaps the

city will not have to buy new trucks as often, too. The change in services will therefore reduce estimated expenditures for the department.

On the other hand, if in the coming year there will be many new households due to new construction, or the city decides to increase how often it collects garbage, the department may need to add trucks and crews to collect trash. These new expenses for additional service will add to estimated expenditures for the department.



Trash collection truck, Pinehurst, N.C.

After department heads determine how much money they think they will need for the next fiscal year, they discuss these estimates with the manager. The manager also looks at expected changes in the other expenditures. For example, employee salaries may have to be increased for the local government to stay competitive with private employers. Salary increases and other government-wide expenditure changes are usually not included in departmental budget estimates. In addition to the department requests, the manager must add these increases to the projected expenditures.

At the same time, the manager also prepares **revenue estimates** for the coming year. After all the estimates for both expenditures and revenues are complete, the manager compares the totals. If estimated revenues exceed estimated expenditures, the manager may recommend lowering local tax rates, adding to the fund balance, or expanding programs and services. If estimated expenditures exceed revenues, the manager may recommend cutting expenditures, raising taxes or fees, or making withdrawals from the fund balance. It is the manager's responsibility to propose a [balanced budget](#) to the governing board.

The governing board reviews the manager's proposed budget. The manager also provides the board information about the current year's expenditures and revenues compared to the budget for that year. Board members usually pay particularly close attention to proposed changes in spending to decide whether the services their government provides are the best use of public funds. They also pay careful attention to proposals to raise tax rates or the fees people pay for services. The budget they adopt must be balanced, too.

Before the governing board adopts the budget, it must hold a public hearing. This provides people in the community an opportunity to express their views about the proposed budget. At any point in its review, the board can change the proposed budget. The annual budget must be adopted by a majority of the board. The coming fiscal year's annual budget must be adopted before the end of the current fiscal year on June 30.

In adopting the budget, the governing board **appropriates** (authorizes) the expenditures for each department for the coming the coming fiscal year. The finance officer keeps records of all expenditures. Before each bill is paid during the year, the finance officer checks to see that there is enough money left in the department's budget appropriation to pay that bill. Expenditure records also help the manager coordinate government operations and plan the next year's budget. If the government needs to spend more than the amount listed in the budget for a particular purpose, the governing board must pass a budget amendment.

When it adopts the budget, the governing board also sets the **property tax rate** and adjusts **user fees** to provide sufficient revenue to balance the budget.

CAPITAL PROJECTS

When a city buys land for a new park or a county builds a new jail or landfill, the project usually costs too much to be paid for from current revenues or from the fund balance. Major purchases like land, buildings, or very expensive equipment are called **capital improvements**. Local governments usually borrow money to finance these projects, although annual revenues or the fund balance may provide enough for smaller projects.

Local governments that borrow money must repay what they have borrowed—the **principal**—plus **interest**. Typically, these payments are spread over several years and are called **debt service payments**.

Borrowing money has several disadvantages. First, it is expensive. The borrower (in this case, the city or county) must pay interest to the lender. Borrowing also commits the government to payments on the debt for a period of years, often 20 or more. Debt service payments will need to be included as expenses in each annual budget until the debt is paid off. For these reasons, North Carolina state law prohibits borrowing money to pay for local government operating expenses.

However, borrowing for capital projects also has advantages. One advantage is that by borrowing, the government can do the project right away. A new landfill or jail may be needed very soon—much sooner than the government would be able to save enough to pay for the project. Another advantage to starting the project right away and borrowing money to pay for it is that the costs of land and construction may go up while the government waits for funds to become available. So while there is a cost in terms of interest to borrowing, there can also be savings due to avoiding **inflation**, meaning higher costs in the future. Debt-financing capital projects also means the residents who benefit from the capital investment pay for it while it is being used. If a local government saves for many years to fund a future capital project, that means current residents are paying for a benefit for future residents. For these reasons it is quite common for local governments to borrow funds to debt-finance capital improvements for their communities.

Governments borrow money by issuing **bonds**. Two kinds of bonds are used by North Carolina cities and counties. **General obligation (G.O.) bonds** pledge the “faith and credit” of the government. That is, the local government agrees to use tax money if necessary to repay the debt. Bondholders can even require local governments to raise taxes if necessary to pay the debt. **Revenue bonds** are repaid from revenues the funded capital project itself generates. For example, revenue bonds could be used to pay for a new parking deck, with the debt service being paid with fees charged to those who park there.

Under the North Carolina constitution, G.O. bonds cannot be issued unless a majority of the voters approve them by **referendum**. G.O. bonds are typically used for nonrevenue producing projects like schools, courthouses, parks, or jails. Sometimes government officials also prefer to use G.O. bonds for revenue-producing projects like sewer plants, parking decks, or convention centers. This is because G.O. bonds usually have a lower **interest rate** than revenue bonds. Investors feel more secure about the repayment of their money when a bond is backed by local government's power to tax.



Madison County Courthouse, Marshall, N.C.

The [County and Municipal Fiscal Analysis Tool](#), developed by the N.C. Local Government Commission, allows local governments to create fiscal reports for the county or municipality and compare fiscal benchmarks for different units of government.

PROPERTY TAXES

Property taxes are usually the largest single source of revenue for a local government, sometimes providing more than half of all revenues. Additional sources of local government revenue include [other local taxes](#), [user fees](#), and [funding from other sources, including state and federal governments](#). The pie charts above show the overall breakdown of revenue sources for municipalities and counties in North Carolina.

Both city and county governments levy property taxes based on the **assessed value** of property. County government is responsible for assessing property. **Real property** must be reassessed every eight years, although some counties reassess more often. **Personal property** (cars, trucks, business equipment) is reassessed each year. According to North Carolina law, tax assessments should be at the fair market value of the property. That is, the assessed value should equal the likely sale price of the property. If a property owner thinks an assessed value is too high, he or she may appeal it to the county commissioners when they meet as the board of equalization and review.



House under construction, Gastonia, N.C.

Economic development increases the value of property in a city or county, thereby increasing its **property tax base**. New real estate developments are assessed as they are completed, so they immediately add to a jurisdiction's **total assessed value**. Unless there is new construction, however, real property is reassessed only every eight years in most counties. The market value of property may change a great deal during the eight years between reassessments. When real estate prices are rising, reassessment results

in a larger property tax base. When real estate prices fall, as happened after the great recession of 2008, reassessment decreases the property tax base.

The property tax rate is the amount of tax due for each \$100 of assessed value. If a house and lot are valued at \$100,000 and the rate is \$.50 per \$100, the tax due on the property will be \$500.

The property tax is one of the few sources of revenue that the local governing board can influence directly. For this reason, setting the property tax rate is often the last part of budget review and approval. To set the rate, local officials must first determine how much the city or county needs to raise in property taxes to balance the budget. All other estimated revenues are added together. Then the desired change in fund balance is added (or subtracted) from those revenue estimates. The resulting figure is subtracted from the total expenses the local government plans to have. The remainder is the amount that must be raised through property taxes.

To set the property tax rate, the amount that the government must raise through property taxes is divided by the total assessed value of property in the jurisdiction. The result is the amount of tax that needs to be raised for each dollar of assessed value. For example, if a city has a total assessed value of \$500 million and needs to raise \$3 million from property taxes, its property tax rate would be \$.60 per \$100 of assessed valuation.

$$\mathbf{\$3,000,000/\$500,000,000 = .006 \quad .006 \times \$100 = \$.60}$$

The higher the assessed value of taxable property, the lower the tax rate needed to produce a given amount of revenue. If the assessed value of property in our last example were \$600 million, the city could raise \$3 million from property taxes with a property tax rate of only \$.50 per \$100 of assessed value.

The property tax rate for the next fiscal year is set by the local governing board when it adopts the annual budget. Sometimes there is considerable controversy over raising the property tax rate, as homeowners are naturally well aware of their property tax bill. Property owners get a bill from the local tax collector for the entire amount each year. Thus, people know exactly how much they pay in local property tax. In contrast, the sales tax is collected a few pennies or a few dollars at a time. Few people have any idea how much they pay in sales tax over the course of a year.

Most property owners pay their taxes. In North Carolina, more than 97 percent of all property taxes are paid each year. When taxes on property are not paid, the government can go to court to take the property and have it sold to pay the tax bill.

RAISING PROPERTY TAXES 10 PERCENT IN WAKE COUNTY

No one likes raising taxes, and across North Carolina, raising the local property tax is a very politically unpopular decision. Yet when newly hired Wake County Manager David Ellis closely analyzed the demand for critical public services and the revenue needed to meet that demand, he and his staff concluded that a 10 percent property tax increase was needed. Despite the unpopularity of raising taxes, especially of such a large increase, Mr. Ellis recommended the 10 percent tax increase for the FY 2020 Wake County budget. "My budget recommendation reflects the priority needs we must address to deliver those services at the level our growing population expects and as state regulations require," he said in a news release accompanying the recommendation.

After much public input and deliberation, the Wake County Board of Commissioners voted 6-1 to adopt Mr. Ellis' proposed budget, including the 10 percent increase in the property tax rate (from 65.44 cents per \$100 valuation to 72.07 cents). The tax increase means an extra \$66.30 for every \$100,000 of assessed value. So someone owning a \$300,000 home would expect to pay about \$200 more per year in property taxes.

While most of the additional revenue would go to \$45 million in increased appropriations to Wake County Public Schools, it also provides for 14 new positions in the Child Welfare Division, more funding for the board of elections, technology upgrades and security improvements, and expansion of library services. Budget decisions ultimately reflect the values of a community, and for rapidly growing Wake County, raising the property tax to improve and expand services was seen by many (including a 6-1 majority of the board) as part of the county's growth and progress.

CASE STUDY

Property tax bills are sent out in August, early in the new fiscal year, yet no penalties for late payment are imposed until January. Therefore, most people wait until December to pay their property taxes. Local governments must pay their bills each month. They cannot wait until they have received property tax payments to pay their employees and suppliers. This is another reason the fund balance is important. Local governments need to have money on hand to pay their bills while they wait for property taxes to be paid.

SALES AND OTHER LOCAL TAXES

Sales taxes provide a substantial part of most local governments' revenues. The General Assembly limits local government sales tax rates. Many counties have already reached those limits, so local officials have little control over how much money the sales tax produces for local government. The amount of revenue from this source in any year depends on economic conditions. The more people spend on purchases, the more local government will receive from sales taxes. When the economy slows down and people buy less, sales tax revenues go down as well.

State law permits each county to levy a tax of \$.02 on each dollar of sales in the county, and all the counties do so. If voters approve by referendum, counties may add an additional \$.0025 for a total of \$.0225. The state levies an additional \$.0475 on all sales except food. The county tax is applied to food, as well as other purchases. Some counties have special authority to levy an additional half-cent tax on sales to fund mass transit.

Businesses collect the state and county taxes from their customers at the time of sale. The state then collects these tax receipts from businesses throughout North Carolina and returns the local portion to local governments in the county where the sales were made.



Merchandise sold to customers can be subject to sales taxes.

Sales tax revenues are divided between county and municipal governments according to formulas established by the General Assembly. Each board of county commissioners decides whether sales tax revenues will be divided with that county's municipalities based on a population formula or by the amount of property taxes collected in each jurisdiction. Municipal boards have no control over how much sales tax revenue the municipality receives.

OTHER LOCAL TAXES

Local governments are authorized to levy taxes within their jurisdictions for the privilege of doing business or for keeping a dog or other pet. Cities can levy a motor vehicle license tax. More than 85 counties and a few cities have authority from the General Assembly to levy occupancy taxes on hotel and motel rooms. A smaller number of local governments have authority to levy a tax on the price of restaurant meals. The General Assembly limits the amount of each of these taxes.

USER FEES

Local governments also raise revenue by charging fees for some of the services they provide. Cities and counties with public water supplies and sewer systems charge water and sewer customers based on the amount of water used. Some North Carolina cities also operate electric utilities and charge customers for the electricity they use. Local governments charge a fee to swim at a public pool or play golf at a public course. Cities may charge a fare to ride public transportation. These charges are all based on the cost of providing the service. The people who use these services help to pay for the direct benefits they get from them.



Public buses, Charlotte, N.C. Image by [Jarrett Stewart](#) used under [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#).

In many cases, users do not pay the entire cost of providing the public service. Governments **subsidize** some services because the public also benefits from the service. For example, city bus fares are usually heavily subsidized because if people ride buses, fewer cars are on the streets. Bus riders help reduce traffic congestion and parking problems, so people who drive their own cars benefit from city buses, too.

Local governing boards have the authority to set user fees. Next to the property tax, fees are the largest source of local government revenue that local officials can control. As local governments have been asked to do more, officials in many jurisdictions have begun to increase fees to raise needed revenue. Fees for collecting solid waste have been established, for example, and fees for building inspections and other regulations have been increased to cover more of the costs of conducting regulatory activities.

Increased reliance on fees means that more and more of the cost of public service is paid directly by the customer who gets the service. Less is paid as a **subsidy** from other sources, meaning the cost for each user goes up. When the public has a great interest in seeing that everyone gets the service, regardless of ability to pay, user fees are kept low, and taxpayers subsidize more of the costs of the service. Fees set at the full cost of service may mean that public benefits are lost. For example, if bus riders have to pay the full cost of buying and operating the buses, fares may be so high that most riders choose to have their own cars, adding to traffic congestion and the need for more streets and parking.

OTHER LOCAL GOVERNMENT REVENUES

Motor fuels taxes are key revenues for most municipalities. North Carolina has a separate tax on the sale of gasoline and diesel fuel. A part of this tax is distributed to each municipality in the state. Also called Powell Bill funds, these revenues can be used only for the construction and maintenance of city streets. In FY 2018, more than \$147 million in Powell Bill funds were transferred from the state to cities and towns. Counties have no responsibility for building and maintaining roads, so they get no Powell Bill funding.

Because the **gasoline tax** is a tax on each gallon of gasoline purchased, when gasoline prices go up and people buy less gasoline, Powell Bill funds go down. This leaves cities with less money for streets.

Cities and counties also receive money from the state for taxes on such things as beer and wine sales. The state also pays local governments money to replace some of the revenue lost when the state removes some property from the local **tax base**. The General Assembly sets these tax rates and determines how the funds will be distributed, meaning local officials have no control over these revenues.



Gas station, Durham, N.C. Image by [Ildar Sagdejev](#) used under [GFDL version 1.2 or later](#).

OTHER LOCAL REVENUES

When a city or county extends water and sewer lines to new areas, the owners of the property getting the new lines typically pay the local government a **special assessment**. This payment helps cover the cost of constructing the new lines. Having public water supplies and sewer service available to the property increases its market value, so the owner is charged for the improvement.

FEES FOR EXPANDING WATER AND SEWER SERVICE

Developing new subdivisions or other urban uses often depends on local governments increasing the capacity of their water and sewer systems. To pay for expanding their utility systems, local governments have charged special assessments or upfront fees to the companies developing the land. Real estate developers have long opposed these impact fees. In 2016 a case between a developer and the Town of Carthage went all the way to the North Carolina Supreme Court. The court invalidated certain types of upfront charges. The court found that local governments did not have the authority from the state legislature to impose these fees.

The next year the North Carolina General Assembly passed a new law called the “Public Water and Sewer System Development Fee Act” that authorized local governments to assess upfront charges, under specific guidelines. That law was further amended in 2018 and local governments updated their fee schedules. They followed very specific steps to adopt new system development fees.

System development fees thus continue to be an important source of revenue local governments utilize for expanding infrastructure. These fees remain unpopular with developers who must pay the fees or pass them on to customers. But they remain popular with local governments as a way to place the cost of expensive capital projects on those that directly benefit from them.

CASE STUDY

Interest earned on the fund balance can be another important revenue source. Most

local governments try to maintain a fund balance equal to 15 to 20 percent of annual expenditures. This provides a ready source of funding for months when tax collections are slow. A sizable fund balance can also help cover an unexpected decrease in revenues. Until the funds are needed, the fund balance is invested, and the interest earned is added to government revenues.

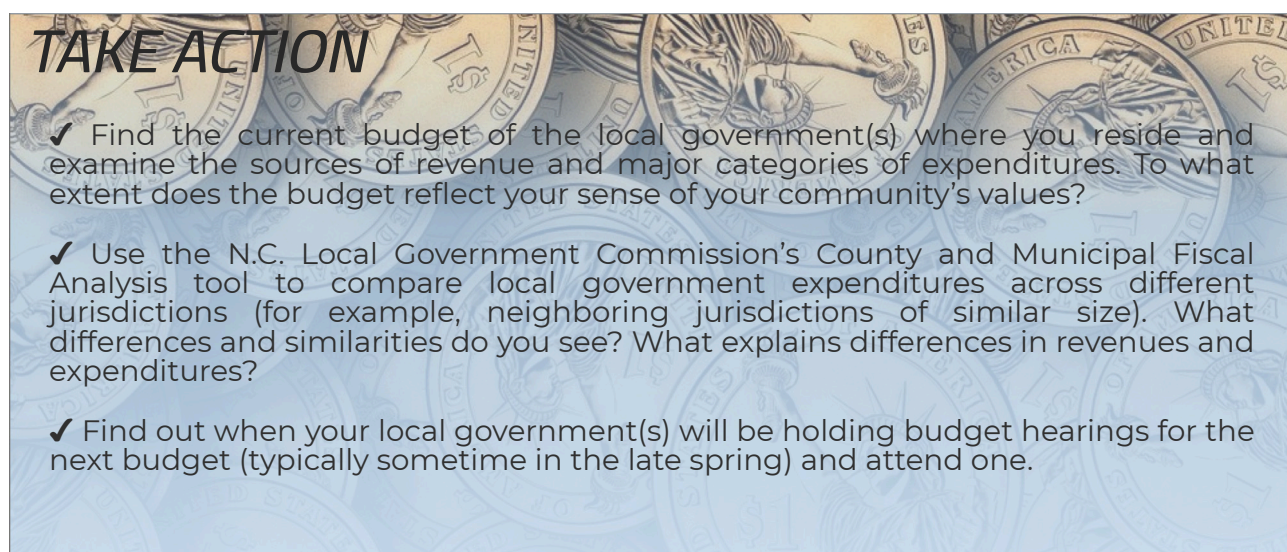
STATE AND FEDERAL AID

Local governments get some of their revenue from state and federal governments. Grants and other aid programs help local governments meet specific needs. During the 1960s and 1970s, **intergovernmental assistance** was a major source of local revenue. During the 1980s, many federal grant programs were abolished or greatly reduced and intergovernmental assistance became a much smaller part of local government revenues. Still, several important aid programs remain.

Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) help cities and counties improve housing, public facilities, and economic opportunities in low-income areas. Projects funded under this federal program include installation of water and sewer lines, street paving, housing rehabilitation, and other community improvements.

Many social service benefits, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Medicaid, and Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP, commonly known as food stamps) are paid largely with federal funds. State grants also help to pay for some social service programs, but county departments are the ones who administer them. Counties are responsible for determining who is eligible and seeing that appropriate benefits get to those who qualify.

State and federal funds also help support public and mental health services. A complex set of programs and regulations governs how these funds are used.



TAKE ACTION

- ✓ Find the current budget of the local government(s) where you reside and examine the sources of revenue and major categories of expenditures. To what extent does the budget reflect your sense of your community's values?
- ✓ Use the N.C. Local Government Commission's County and Municipal Fiscal Analysis tool to compare local government expenditures across different jurisdictions (for example, neighboring jurisdictions of similar size). What differences and similarities do you see? What explains differences in revenues and expenditures?
- ✓ Find out when your local government(s) will be holding budget hearings for the next budget (typically sometime in the late spring) and attend one.

PEOPLE WORKING TOGETHER

Good government does not just happen. Rather, it is the result of people deciding what needs to be done for the community and then working together to carry out those decisions. People make government work. Who are the people involved in local government?

Many people may be unaware of how they shape local government policies and services. Residents, shoppers, workers, travelers, visitors—everyone uses local government services. And we—the general public—influence local government decisions through how we live our daily lives. It is important to understand the deliberate, as well as [unintended ways, people influence public policy](#).

Because local government services and policies are so important to daily living, people sometimes try very hard to change them. If you want to help shape what local government does, you also need to understand [how people work to intentionally change public policies](#).

In



Residents at a public input session, Morrisville, N.C.

addition to the general public, later sections of this chapter describe four specific groups involved in the development and modification of public policy: [voters](#), [elected officials](#), [local government employees](#), and [volunteers, including members of appointed boards](#).

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Appreciate the people who make local government work

Describe the roles of city and county managers

Understand the importance of voting in local elections

Identify ways in which you can engage with your local government(s)

One person can be in several of these groups at once. For example, all elected officials are also voters. Government employees may also be volunteers in other public agencies. They are almost always voters, too. And of course, voters, elected officials, public employees, and volunteers are also part of the general public. We discuss the groups separately to indicate the different ways people help shape the way government works.

UNINTENTIONAL PUBLIC INFLUENCE ON POLICY

People unintentionally influence local government policies as they use government services, through active cooperation with (or resistance to) government programs, and through public behavior that helps or harms others. Government officials often consider use of services to indicate the public's wants or needs. According to this view, the more people use a service, the more of that service the government should try to provide.

Of course, local governments may sometimes be unable to provide more of a service, or officials may decide they cannot afford to do so. In such a situation, officials may try to limit use, but limiting use is also a government policy. For example, the more often one group of people uses a recreation field, the fewer hours it is available for other users. Government officials might respond to this increase in use by putting up lights so the field could also be used at night. They might also build additional fields so that more teams can play at the same time. These are examples of adding more services in response to increased use. But the local governing board might decide it cannot afford to add lights or new fields. It might decide to limit use of the existing field by requiring people who want to use the field to reserve it in advance, pay a fee, or join a league that schedules games on the field. These are all ways of **rationing** a service so it is not overused.



Recycle bins on the street, Durham, N.C. Image by [Ildar Sagdejev](#) used under [GFDL version 1.2 or later](#).

Cooperating or failing to cooperate with government programs also influences public policy in important ways. Many programs can succeed only if people cooperate. Consider solid waste disposal, for example. Many local governments have recycling programs to reduce the amount of waste that goes into landfills. Most of these recycling programs depend on people sorting their own trash so that recyclable materials can be collected separately from waste for the landfill. If people sort their trash, the program succeeds. If they do not, the program will not work, and officials will have to find other ways to get rid of the trash people produce.

Behavior that helps people may reduce the need for public programs. For example, if people help look after their elderly neighbors, there may be less need for county social services to provide visiting nurse services. Behavior that harms people helps shape public policy because it can create a problem that local government attempts to reduce through regulation. When some people in a community indicate that they are offended, annoyed, or hurt by dogs running loose, for example, local officials may decide that the action is so harmful that it should be regulated.

INTENTIONAL PUBLIC INFLUENCE ON POLICY

Talking directly to public officials is one very important way to directly influence policy. People call officials or visit them in person to discuss problems they think require government attention. They also speak at public hearings or other meetings attended by public officials. Letters to public officials or petitions signed by large numbers of people are also ways people communicate their views about what government should do.

People often organize public support for or galvanize opposition against local policy proposals. Officials are frequently persuaded by the reasons people provide in arguing for or against a proposal, but they can also be influenced by the number of people who join to support or oppose. To organize support or opposition, people publicize the problem and the response they think government should make. They often use social media to share their views with others. They may also write letters to the editors of local newspapers. They may gather petitions or organize demonstrations to get the attention of news media.

People can and do seek to use government for their own personal purposes, but many others are also interested in helping make the entire community a better place to live and work. People may disagree about whether a proposal is in the public interest, and that type of debate is important. It is helpful to ask how the community would be better off if a proposal is adopted. This question focuses attention on the public benefits of government action. People who want the government to act should be able to explain how they think the proposed action will help improve conditions in the community.

ORANGE COUNTY FOOD COUNCIL

In 2015, a group of about 15 Orange County residents came together to create the [Orange County Food Council \(OCFC\)](#). The group included farmers, elected officials, chefs, and faith leaders, among others. They wanted to encourage local production of food that would be bought and eaten by people right in the county. The council determined that a “single point person” was needed to help the group achieve its goals. In 2017 the OCFC decided that a paid, full-time Food Council Coordinator position would make connections across the community and coordinate the council’s projects. Representatives from OCFC shared their ideas with Hillsborough, Chapel Hill, Carrboro, and Orange County governments. The four governments agreed to fund the position. The first OCFC coordinator was hired in 2019.

In just a few years the council accomplished a lot. It created a community food resource guide so people could find where to buy locally grown food. It established a composting program in Orange County schools. It created new partnerships to help people overcome barriers to getting locally produced food. And it served as a hub of communication and coordination for food distribution issues during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Food councils like the OCFC are being organized across North Carolina and the United States. Sometimes the impetus for these volunteer groups comes from local government leaders. More often it comes from passionate residents who find that they can work with local government to achieve goals that benefit the whole community.

CASE STUDY

Good government depends on the public being aware of the problems and

opportunities facing the community. It requires that many people learn about public issues and try to influence public policy.

VOTERS

The voters in each jurisdiction choose the members of their local governing boards. The voters in each county also elect a sheriff and a register of deeds. The voters must also approve any agreement by their local government to borrow money that will be repaid with tax receipts. Through voting, the people determine who their government leaders will be and give the officials they elect the authority to govern. Voting is, thus, an essential part of representative democracy. Voting is both a very special responsibility and a very important civil right.

Struggles over the right to vote have continued ever since the United States gained independence from Great Britain. At independence, only free male citizens who were 21 years of age or older and paid taxes could vote for members of the lower house of the North Carolina General Assembly. Only men who met all these qualifications and owned at least 50 acres of land could vote for members of the state senate. (There were no local elected officials.) Most African Americans were held as slaves and could not vote at all. In 1835, the General Assembly prohibited even free men of African descent from voting in North Carolina.

After the Civil War, slavery was abolished and former slaves became full citizens. During the last third of the nineteenth century, African American men participated actively in North Carolina politics and were elected to state and local public offices, as well as to Congress. However, many whites in North Carolina continued to fear and disdain the former slaves (and the few Native Americans still living in the state). Near the end of the nineteenth century, a white majority in the General Assembly passed laws requiring segregation of the races. Nonwhite citizens were denied basic civil rights, and government officials even overlooked violence against them. By 1900, few of North Carolina's African American or Native American men were able to vote or hold public office.

Women could not vote in North Carolina at the beginning of the twentieth century either, even though some people had long been seeking voting rights (or "suffrage") for women. Finally, in 1920, the women's suffrage movement was successful. That year the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution extended the right to vote to female citizens 21 and older.

Although white women began to vote in North Carolina in the 1920s, most African American and Native American citizens of North Carolina were prevented from voting until the 1960s. A major accomplishment of the [civil rights movement](#), which also ended racial segregation in North Carolina, was the guarantee of voting rights for all adult citizens, enacted into law through the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The last extension of voting rights came in 1971 when the Twenty-Sixth Amendment to the United States Constitution guaranteed the right to vote to younger citizens. Now, all citizens who are at least 18 years old are eligible to vote.

Being eligible to vote does not make you a voter, however. To be a voter, you must first register with the local board of elections in the county where you live. Seventeen-year-old citizens may register if they will be eighteen years old by the next **general election**.

Thus, you can register and vote in a **primary election** when you are seventeen if your eighteenth birthday comes before the November general election.



Board of Elections, Durham, N.C. Image by [Ildar Sagdejev](#) used under [GFDL version 1.2 or later](#).

To vote, you must also cast your **ballot**. Each county is divided into voting **precincts**. The county board of elections establishes a place to vote—a **polling place**—in each precinct. Registered voters may cast their ballots in person at the polling place on Election Day. Most county boards of elections also establish special “early voting” polling places where any voter registered in the county may vote during a period set by the state board of elections. Voters who find it necessary or more convenient may vote by **absentee ballot**.

People vote because they want to exercise their rights. They vote to support candidates, parties, or issues. They vote to oppose candidates, parties, or issues. They vote to make their communities better. They vote to show that the government belongs to them and because they feel responsible for helping to select public leaders.

ELECTED OFFICIALS

The elected leaders of local governments are the members of their governing boards. For counties, these are the county commissioners. For municipalities, they are the council members (sometimes called “aldermen” or “commissioners”) and mayor. These officials have the authority to adopt policies for local government and are responsible to the people for seeing that local government responds to public needs and works well to meet those needs.

The governing board is the local government’s legislature. The members discuss and debate policy proposals. Under state law, the board is authorized to determine what local public services to provide, what community improvements to pursue, and what kinds of behavior and land use to regulate as harmful. The local governing board also sets local tax rates and user fees and adopts a budget for spending the local government’s funds. In all counties and all but the smallest cities, the board appoints a professional manager. All of these are group decisions. Board members vote, and a majority must approve for an action to pass.

Each local governing board has a presiding officer—someone who conducts the meetings of the governing board, speaks officially for the local government, and represents the government at ceremonies and celebrations. In cities and towns, this is the mayor. Voters elect the mayor in most North Carolina cities and towns. In a few of the state’s municipalities, however, members of the local governing board elect a mayor from among the members of the board. The presiding officer for a county is the chair of the board of county commissioners. In most North Carolina counties, the board elects one of its members as chair. In a few counties, the voters elect the chair of the board directly.

The sheriff and the register of deeds are elected to head their respective departments of county government. The sheriff's department operates the county jail, patrols and investigates crimes in areas of the county not served by other local police departments, and serves court orders and subpoenas. The register of deeds office maintains official records of land and of births, deaths, and marriages. Both the sheriff and the register of deeds hire their own staffs. They are not required to hire based on merit, although their employees must meet basic requirements set by the state.



Sheriff's Office, Davidson County, N.C. Image by [Amaryllis Gardener](#) used under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#).

School board members are also local elected officials. School boards are like city and county governing boards, except their authority is more limited. They are responsible for policies regarding the local public schools and they hire a superintendent to manage the schools, but they cannot set tax rates or appropriate funds. The board of county commissioners determines how much money the county will spend to support local public schools.

All local elected officials represent the people of their jurisdiction. People often contact these elected officials to suggest policy changes or to express their opinions on policy proposals that are being considered by the board. Boards hold public hearings on particularly controversial issues to provide additional opportunities for people to tell the board their views on policy proposals.

Altogether, more than 700 elected officials serve the state's county governments and more than 3,200 serve in North Carolina municipalities.

Why do people run for a seat on the local governing board? They may be interested in getting local government to adopt a particular policy proposal. They may want to help shape the future of the community more generally. They may feel an obligation to serve the public. They may want to explore politics and perhaps prepare for seeking state or federal office. They may enjoy exercising public responsibility or being recognized as a public leader.

ELECTIONS FOR LOCAL OFFICES

Elected officials get their authority from the people. Campaigning for office gives candidates an opportunity to express their views about local issues and to hear what citizens want from their elected officials. Elections give voters the opportunity to choose leaders who share their views on issues. Through elections, voters give elected officials the authority to make decisions that everyone will have to obey. Through elections, voters also hold elected officials accountable. People can vote against an elected official in the next election if they decide someone else will better represent them.

Elections are held every two or four years, depending on the term established for each office. In jurisdictions where board members are elected by district or **ward**, each voter votes only for the candidate from his or her own district. In jurisdictions where members

are elected at large, each voter may vote for as many candidates as there are positions to be filled. Some jurisdictions have at-large elections for board members but require that candidates live in and run for seats representing specific districts.

Election by district may produce a more diverse governing board if minority groups are concentrated in some parts of the jurisdiction. Districts can be drawn around those population concentrations so that a group, which is a minority in the total population, is a majority within the district.

Voting in Local Elections

The right to vote is central to democratic self-governance, yet voting rates in local elections are almost always very low. For example, only 13 percent of eligible voters cast ballots in 2019 municipal elections in North Carolina. Nationwide voter turnout in local elections is usually around 20 percent.

- **Why do you think voter turnout is so low in local elections?**
- **Given what you have learned about how local governments impact your quality of life, what reasons can you offer for voting in local elections?**

Elections for county commissioners are held on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November in even-numbered years, along with elections for state officials and members of Congress. The county sheriff and register of deeds are also elected on this cycle. In practice, the sheriff and register of deeds are often reelected; it is common for them to serve until they choose to retire. Frequently their successors have served as their deputies. Sometimes, however, these elections are highly contested—especially elections for sheriff.

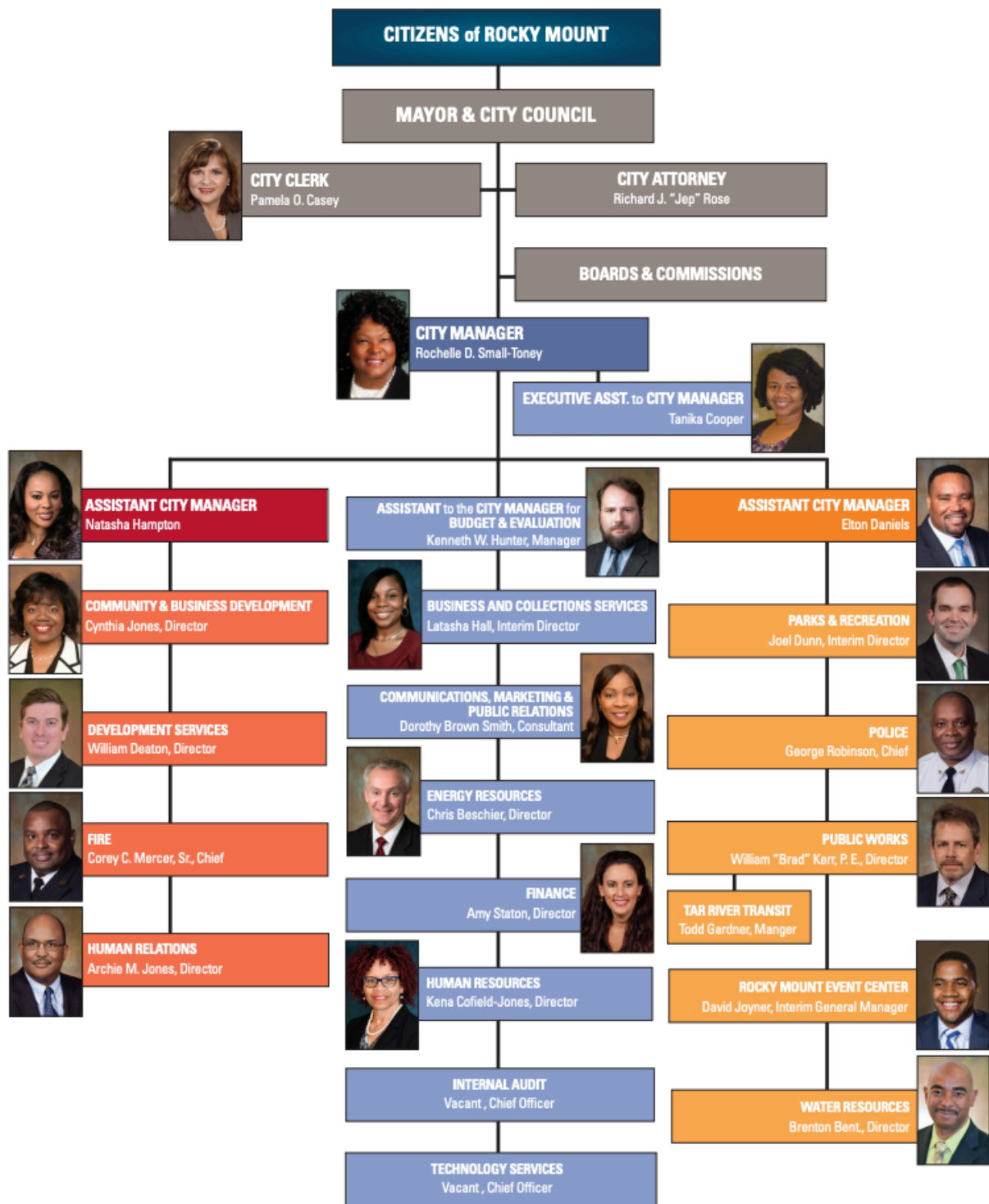
County elections are **partisan**. That is, candidates run under **political party** labels. Primary elections are held several months before the November general election. Primary elections are elections among the candidates of a party to choose the party's candidates for the general election. In the primary election, members of each party vote only for their party's candidate. Voters who have registered without indicating a political party can choose to vote in any one party's primary. Candidates may also be placed on the ballot by filing petitions.

Elections for municipal boards are held in odd-numbered years. Election for mayors are held at the same time in those cities and towns where the voters elect the mayor. Most cities and towns have **nonpartisan** elections. That is, candidates do not run under party labels. These municipalities may have local voters' organizations that support candidates, but parties are not permitted to run candidates in most North Carolina municipalities. Only a few cities and towns hold primary elections.

Most school board elections are also nonpartisan. School board elections can be in even-numbered years or odd-numbered years; this varies by county. Some counties have school board elections at the time of the general election, some at the time of the primary election, and some on special election dates.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES

Counties and municipalities hire many kinds of workers. Counties hire teachers, nurses, social workers, sanitation inspectors, librarians, and many other specialists to carry out county services. Similarly, cities hire police officers, engineers, machinery operators, recreation supervisors, and a wide variety of other specialists to carry out their services. Both city and county governments hire accountants, clerks, maintenance workers, administrators, and other staff to support the work of the government. These employees organize government activities, keep government records and accounts of public money, clean and repair government property, and pay the government's bills.



Example of a local government organization chart, [Rocky Mount, N.C.](#)

Most North Carolina local governments have well-established systems for hiring employees based on their qualifications for the job. In some local governments in other states, people who work for local government get their jobs because of personal or political connections. Hiring based on kinship is called **nepotism**, hiring based on friendship is called **favoritism**, and hiring based on political support is called **patronage**.

Most North Carolina local governments have and enforce rules against nepotism, favoritism, and patronage.

Local governments in North Carolina usually hire people who have the training and experience to do the job they are being hired for. This is known as hiring based on merit. Local governments in North Carolina hire people based on merit because their primary concern is having employees who can provide the best government services for the lowest cost. In a **merit system**, people are also promoted or dismissed based on their job performance, rather than for personal or political reasons.

Except in the smallest North Carolina municipalities, the governing board appoints a city or county manager who is responsible for hiring, promoting, and dismissing government employees. The manager serves at the pleasure of the board, meaning the board can fire the manager at any time should they decide to do so. The board evaluates the manager on how well services are provided and government funds are used. Thus, the manager wants to be sure local government employees are doing their jobs well.

In larger counties and cities, the manager assigns much of the work of hiring and supporting the government's employees to a human resource (or personnel) department. To guide its work, the human resources department prepares job descriptions for all employees.

An employee's job description lists the duties of the job. When a job becomes vacant, the local government uses the job description to advertise the position. The human resources department accepts job applications from people who would like to be hired for the vacant position. In filling out the job application, the applicant lists his or her education, job training, skills, and previous work experience.

The human resources department reviews the applications and selects the applicants who appear to be best qualified for the job. Applicants are often asked to provide the names of **references**. References are often asked about the applicant's performance or work ethic. The final set of applicants is then selected and interviewed by people who would supervise their work if they were hired. Usually, the head of the department in which the new employee will work recommends who to hire.

Most local government employees enjoy their jobs and working for the public. They are honest, hard-working people who care about making their community a better place.

CITY AND COUNTY MANAGERS

City and county managers are hired by their elected boards to serve as the chief executives of the local government. In North Carolina, all counties and most cities with at least 2,500 residents employ a manager as chief executive of the local government.

A city or county manager is typically a professional who has studied public administration and belongs to the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) and the North Carolina City County Management Association (NCCCMA).

Watch the video series [Life, Well Run](#) to discover the value that professional local government management provides. Scan this code with the [Metaverse App](#) to open an AR experience.



Scan the code with your phone to open this experience



Each city or county manager:

- prepares a draft budget for the local government,
- manages the government's expenditures,
- hires and fires other employees of the government,
- directs staff to carry out the policies the elected board adopts,
- reports to the board on government operations, and
- alerts the board to problems and opportunities facing the local government.

To assure democratic accountability, the elected board has ultimate responsibility for government policies and operation. The board hires the manager and the board can dismiss the manager by a majority vote at any time and for any reason. To provide some job protection to the manager, however, many managers and boards sign employment contracts. These typically require several months' severance pay if the board fires the manager without a cause such as disobeying laws or policies.

VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers serve on many local government advisory boards and help carry out important public services. Volunteers fight fires, provide emergency rescue services, and assist in programs for children, youth, the elderly, homeless people, and other groups with special needs. Volunteers may be organized through a city or county's fire department, recreation department, social services department, or other division of government. They may also be organized through a nonprofit organization that works in cooperation with local government.

Local government committees, boards, and commissions provide opportunities for many citizens to assist the elected governing board in shaping public policy. State law

requires that alcoholic beverage control boards and boards of elections, health, mental health, and social services play a direct role in selecting agency heads and setting operating policies for the agency. Other boards are established by the local government to provide policy direction for airports, civic centers, public housing, stadiums, or other public facilities. Still other boards advise elected officials directly on matters ranging from the environment to human relations, from recreation to job training, and from open space to transportation, among others. Large cities and counties may have more than 30 appointed boards and commissions, with many hundreds of citizens serving in a volunteer capacity on those boards.

On some boards, at least some of the members must be appointed from specific groups in the community. For example, a mental health local management entity board must include, among others, a person representing the general public; a person with financial expertise; a person with health care expertise; and a family member of a person with mental illness, intellectual or developmental disabilities, or substance use disorder. Other boards or commissions may require that members be residents of various parts of the jurisdiction to provide broad geographic representation. County boards of elections must include both Democrats and Republicans, with the party of the governor having the majority of members.

People volunteer to serve on appointed committees, boards, and commissions for many reasons. Having a concern for the subject the board deals with is especially important for many volunteers. Appointed boards have a narrower range of concerns than city councils or county commissions. Appointed boards provide an opportunity for people with an interest in historic preservation, nursing homes, or another public policy area to work on policy for that particular concern.

Most of the unincorporated areas of the state and most small municipalities depend on volunteers for firefighting. Also, many counties rely on volunteer emergency rescue squads to provide medical assistance and rescue work. Like their full-time, paid counterparts, volunteer firefighters and emergency medical service technicians are required to have extensive training.



Volunteer fire department, Swepsonville, N.C.

Many volunteer fire departments and rescue squads are organized as nonprofit corporations. They have contracts with a local government to provide fire protection to a specific area. The volunteer fire department receives public funds to buy equipment and supplies needed in fighting fires. Similarly, municipal and county governments often provide buildings or funding for emergency shelters, senior citizens' centers, hot lunch programs, youth recreation leagues, and other services operated by nonprofit organizations and staffed by volunteers.

Volunteers assist local governments in making policies and carrying out services that help people and make their cities and counties better places to live and work. The wide variety of volunteer opportunities provides ways for everyone to contribute to the community.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT – HELPING IMPROVE YOUR COMMUNITY

At the heart of the notion of people—within and outside of government—working together to help make their community better is **civic engagement**.

Former President of Indiana University Thomas Ehrlich

explained that “civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes.”

All of the people this chapter has discussed—elected officials, local government employees, and community volunteers, along with local businesses, churches, and other civic organizations—help make a difference in the overall quality of life through their actions (or inaction).

To be civically engaged means deliberately taking positive steps to make a difference. That could be as simple as remembering to sort your recycling and take it to the curb instead of throwing all your trash in the trash bin. But it could also mean volunteering to serve on an advisory committee or as a little league baseball coach. Civic engagement also involves learning about local government and knowing what is going on in your community. Attending public meetings, following your local governments’ social media accounts, and even talking to your neighbors about how you might improve your community, are all forms of civic engagement.

Local governments often reach out to residents in the community in efforts to help them be more engaged. Investing staff time to update social media accounts, for example, keeps the community informed and encourages participation in local government projects. Many local governments regularly survey residents to learn their satisfaction with service delivery or to solicit opinions on potential service changes. Some local governments offer free civic education programs, often called **citizens academies**, to their residents that cover all the main functions of the local government.

Citizens academies go by different names such as “[Concord 101](#),” “[Civics 101](#)” or “[Durham Neighborhood College](#).” Multiple sessions are taught by government staff. They often involve field trips to facilities like water treatment plants or recreation centers and tend to be hands-on and fun. Participants find that they not only learn a lot about their community and local government, but they also enjoy getting to know staff and making new friends. Many participants of citizens academies are inspired enough by their experience that they go on to volunteer for advisory committees or otherwise step-up their own levels of civic engagement.

Law enforcement agencies also run citizens academy programs focused on public safety. Many sheriff’s offices and municipal police departments have programs that offer not only an opportunity to interact with officers, participate in “ride-alongs” and visit the county jail, but also encourage civic engagement through community policing or neighborhood watch programs.

Many local government leaders recognize the importance of youth civic participation and have developed specific engagement opportunities for middle and high school aged



Hear a participant’s

youth. Some communities, for example, have developed citizens academies specifically for youth, such as "[Teen Morrisville 101](#)." Some municipal mayors have created mayor's youth councils where a panel of (usually) high school students advise the mayor on youth issues and oversee youth-related projects. It is also not uncommon to find youth advisory boards or councils in counties and municipalities where youth can provide elected leaders their perspectives on issues and otherwise be directly involved in the governance of their communities.

experience attending the Fayetteville, N.C. Citizens Academy in this video on [YouTube](#).

Wherever you are, you live within the jurisdiction of a local government. You can engage with that local government as a voter, a volunteer, perhaps even as an employee or elected official, or just as a resident—someone who cares about the community—to improve the community and make it a better place to live. You will find many opportunities to engage if you look around. How will you make a positive in difference in your neighborhood, city, and county?

TAKE ACTION

- ✓ Find out who your local government elected leaders are. How long have they been serving? What are their backgrounds? How well do you think they represent your community? Why?
- ✓ Learn about city and/or county manager. What are their backgrounds and experience? How long have they served your community?
- ✓ Research the board of elections in your county. Who serves on that board? What can you find out about recent elections?
- ✓ Where can you find out about volunteer opportunities in your community? What opportunities to volunteer are most appealing to you?
- ✓ Does your county or municipal government offer a citizens academy? What about a public safety academy by the sheriff or municipal police department? If so, consider applying to participate if possible.

GLOSSARY TERMS

Absentee Ballot

an official list of candidates on which voters can indicate their votes without going to an official polling place

Advisory Board

a group of residents appointed to provide oversight and advice to a department or to consider a project or issue (also known as an advisory committee or commission)

Advisory Committee

a group of residents appointed to provide oversight and advice to a department or to consider a project or issue (also known as an advisory board)

Alien

a person living in a country where he or she is not a citizen

Allocate

to set aside money for a specific purpose

Annexation

the legal process of extending municipal boundaries and adding territory to a city or town

Appropriate

authorizing expenditure of government funds to a particular purpose or use

Assessed Value

the value assigned to property by government to establish its worth for tax purposes

Assessment

evaluate, measure, or judge something

Authority

(also known as special purpose local government) unit of local government created by the General Assembly to deliver a specific service, usually with territorial boundaries larger than a single jurisdiction and often encompassing several jurisdictions

Ballot

the list of candidates on which people cast their votes

Board

a group of people responsible for the governance of an enterprise

Board Of Adjustment

quasi-judicial body that hears requests for exceptions to zoning ordinance

Board of Elections

Bi-partisan board tasked with overseeing elections, voter registration, and maintaining voting records

Bonds

a contract to repay borrowed money with interest at a specific time in the future

Budget

a plan for raising and spending money

Business Development Corporation

a group of people legally organized as a corporation to encourage economic development

Capital Improvements

acquiring, expanding, or substantively improving major tangible items like land, buildings, or expensive equipment

Chamber of Commerce

a group of business people formed to promote business interests in the community

Charter

the document defining how a city or town is to be governed and giving it legal authority to act as a local government

Citation

an official summons to appear before a court to answer a charge of violating a government regulation

Citizen

a person who has full rights in a country because he or she was born there or has been given those rights by the country

Citizens Academy

civic education program facilitated by local government(s) for the purpose of informing and building positive relationships with residents and encouraging civic engagement

Civic Engagement

learning how and working to make a positive difference in the civic life of your community through political and nonpolitical efforts

Civic Responsibility

responsibilities or obligations associated with being a citizen, such as voting and obeying laws

Civil Penalty

fine or other financial penalty imposed by courts as restitution for being found guilty of a violation of law

Clerk of Superior Court

a state official elected in each N.C. county in a partisan election to a four-year term; responsible for all clerical and record-keeping functions of the superior court and district court in addition to various other responsibilities

Coastal Plain

the eastern region of North Carolina, extending approximately 150 miles inland from the coast; the western border of the region is usually defined as the western boundaries of Northampton, Halifax, Nash, Johnston, Harnett, Hoke, and Scotland counties (41 counties in all)

Community

a grouping of individuals and families connected through some shared characteristic; people who live in the same government jurisdiction

Compost

decayed material that is used as fertilizer

Consolidated Human Services Agency

as provided under a 2012 law, an agency created by counties in North Carolina that is a combination of public health and social services agencies

Contract

a legally binding agreement made between two or more people or organizations

corporation

a group of persons formed by law to act as a single body

Council-Manager Plan

an arrangement in some local governments in which the elected legislature hires a professional executive to direct government activities

Covenant

a restriction on the use of property, land, money, and so forth agreed upon by two parties

Crime

an act that is forbidden by law; an offense against all of the people of the state, not just the victim of the act

Debt Service Payments

payments of principal and interest on a loan

Deed

legal document regarding the ownership of property

Desalinization

the process by which the salt is taken out of water

Developer

a person or business that builds houses or prepares land for building

Dispatcher

a person who gives emergency workers information so that those workers can respond to emergencies

Economic Development

activities to create new jobs and additional sales and other business

Economic Development Commission

a committee created to advise and assist local governments in economic development efforts; sometimes set up as a nonprofit organization while other times they serve in an advisory capacity to government departments

Expenditure

money spent

Extraterritorial Land Use Planning Jurisdiction

the area outside city limits over which a city has authority for planning and regulating use of the land (often abbreviated as ETJ)

Favoritism

showing partiality; favoring someone over others

Federal System

the division of authority between national and state governments

Fiscal Year

the 12-month period used by the government for record keeping, budgeting, taxing, and other aspects of financial management

Food Stamps

a program to help people with financial need buy food; vouchers to be used like money for purchasing food; federal program, but administered by county departments of social services in North Carolina

Fund Balance

money a government has not spent at the end of the fiscal year

Gasoline Tax

a per gallon tax placed on purchases of gasoline

General Assembly

North Carolina's state legislature, which consists of a House of Representatives of 120 members and a Senate of 50 members

General Election

a regularly held election for public offices

General obligation (G.O.) bond

a loan that a government agrees to repay using tax money, even if the tax rate must be raised

GIS

(Geographic Information Systems) software that combines layers of geographic data for the purpose of managing, analyzing, and presenting it

Grant

money given by state or federal government to local governments to fund local projects

Green Box Site

an area in which is located a large receptacle for trash, usually painted green, that often emits a foul odor if solid waste is not regularly collected

Greenspace

public area with grass, trees, or other vegetation set apart for recreational purposes, or simply to beautify the community, in otherwise urbanized areas.

Ground Water

water that collects underground

Homeowners' Association (HOA)

a group of residential properties organized into a neighborhood by a real estate developer and maintained as a private, nonprofit corporation

Human Relations Commission

an advisory group of resident volunteers, appointed by a city or county governing board, whose mission is to promote human relations within a community; these efforts include promoting human rights, equal opportunities, mutual respect, and understanding within a given community

Immigrant

a person who comes to live in a country from another country

Impurity

a material that pollutes

Incident Report

a report that a police officer writes describing a crime or other problem situation

Incineration

the safe burning of wastes

Incorporated

to receive a state charter, officially recognizing the government of a municipality

Industrial Site

property set aside for industrial uses such as manufacturing and distribution facilities

Inflation

the rate of increase of commonly purchased goods, indicating declining purchasing power of currency over time

Infrastructure

facilities, services, and installations needed for the functioning of a community, such as streets, water lines, and public buildings like schools and community centers

Initiative

a way in which the citizens propose laws by gathering voter signatures on a petition; only a few cities and no counties in North Carolina have provisions for initiatives

Interest

a charge for borrowed money that the borrower agrees to pay the lender

Interest Rate

a percentage of the amount borrowed that the borrower agrees to pay to the lender as a charge for use of the lender's money

Intergovernmental Assistance

money given to local governments by state and federal governments to help meet specific needs

Jurisdiction

the right to use legal authority, or the territory over which a government can use its authority

Land Use Plan

a document created to guide future land use decisions in a community, including a long-term vision and goals and guidelines for future development and other public investments (also known as a comprehensive plan)

Landfill

a site built into or on top of the ground in which trash is stored for permanent disposal and isolated from the surrounding environment (groundwater, air, rain); also known as sanitary landfill

Levy

to impose a tax by law

Local Act

a state law that applies to only those local governments specified in the law

Mandate

a legal order by which one government requires actions by another government

Mandated Service

a program which local governments must provide because of requirements from state or federal government

Medicaid

a program designed to pay for medical care for people in financial need; federal program, but administered by county departments of social services in North Carolina

Merit System

hiring or promoting based on a person's qualifications, ability, and performance

Mountain Counties

the western region of North Carolina, extending eastward from the Tennessee

border to the eastern boundaries of Alleghany, Wilkes, Caldwell, Burke, and Rutherford counties; includes 23 counties

Mulch

material spread around plants that prevents the growth of weeds and protects the soil from drying out

Municipality

a city, town, or village that has an organized government with authority to make laws, provide services, and collect and spend taxes and other public funds

Mutual Aid Agreement

commitment by local governments to assist each other in times of need

Nepotism

hiring or giving favorable treatment to someone based on kinship

Nonpartisan

not affiliated with a political party

Open Meetings Law

a state law (G.S. 143-318) requiring most meetings of local governments to be held with advanced notice and open to the public

Opponent

one who is against something

Optional Service

a program that a government decides to provide to meet the needs or requests of its residents

Order

a directive from a local governing board instructing action by the government

Ordinance

a law, usually of a city or county

Partisan

involving political parties

Patronage

hiring or giving favorable treatment to an employee because he or she is a member of one's political party

Per Capita

by or for each person

Personal Property

tangible property that is not part of land or buildings, such as cars, boats, and expensive business equipment

Personnel

the people who work for a government, company, or other organization

Petition

a request for government action signed by a number of voters who support the same request

Piedmont Counties

the central region of North Carolina including Surry, Yadkin, Alexander, Catawba, and Cleveland counties on the west to Warren, Franklin, Wake, Chatham, Lee, Moore, and Richmond counties on the east; includes 36 counties

Political Party

an association of voters with broad common interests who want to influence or control decision making in government by electing the party's candidates to public office

Poll Tax

tax people had to pay in order to be allowed to vote

Polling Place

an official place for voting

Pollutant

anything that harms the quality of air, water, or other materials it mixes with

Population

the total number of people living in a designated area such as a city or county

Powell Bill

a North Carolina state law that allocates part of the state's gasoline tax to municipal governments to build and repair city streets

Precinct

a geographic area that contains a specific number of voters

Preempt

to take the place of or take precedence over

Primary Election

an election in which voters select candidates for a general election

Principal

the amount of money borrowed

Privatize

government purchase of a service from a business instead of producing the service itself

Property Tax

a tax based on a portion of the assessed value of real (buildings and land) or personal (all other tangible) property

Property Tax Base

the total assessed value of all taxable property

Property Tax Rate

a percentage of the assessed value of property that determines how much tax is due for that property

Proponent

one who is in favor of something

Proposal

a suggestion put forward for consideration or approval

Public Comment Period

a time period set aside in public meetings of government bodies where residents can speak to the governing body and contribute to the public record; legally required for local government governing boards in North Carolina

Public Hearing

a meeting designed for government officials to receive public comment on a specific issue before decisions are made; in some cases, such as passing a budget, a public hearing is legally required

Public Records Law

a state law (G.S. 132) declaring that most government records (emails, documents, maps, and so forth) belong to the people and must be freely available and accessible to the public

Public Utility

an organization (such as a city or county department or private provider) that builds,

maintains, and operates infrastructure (and its associated system) for public services like gas, electricity, water, and sewage

Rationing

controlled distribution of scarce resources

Real Property

land and buildings, and improvements to either

Reference

a person who knows how well someone did on a previous job or about that person's other qualifications for a job

Referendum

a way for citizens to vote on state or local government decisions; an election in which citizens vote directly on a public policy question

Register of Deeds

an elected county office tasked with managing public records such as property records, birth and death certificates, and marriage licenses

Resident

a person who lives in a designated area such as a city or county

Resolution

an adopted policy of a local governing board expressing its sentiments on a particular issue

Revenue

the income that a government collects for public use

Revenue Bond

a specific type of government bond where payback of the debt comes from revenues of the project the borrowed money paid for

Revenue Estimate

estimations of future revenue used for planning and budgeting future expenditures

Rural

of or relating to the countryside; area where fewer people live

Sales Tax

tax levied on a product at the time of sale

Septic Tank

a container in which wastes are broken down by bacteria

Sheriff

elected county official responsible for law enforcement, jails and courtroom security

Sludge

the solid material separated from sewage

Special Purpose Local Government

(also known as public authority) unit of local government created by the General Assembly to deliver a specific service, usually with territorial boundaries larger than a single jurisdiction and often encompassing several jurisdictions

Stormwater Management

efforts to reduce runoff of rainwater or melted snow into streets, yards, and other locations in order to protect or improve water quality; an important environmental service of many local governments that contributes to community well being

Subdivision Regulation

rules for dividing land for development

Subsidize

support financially

Subsidy

a payment which reduces the cost to the user

Sue

to ask a court to act against a person or organization to prevent or pay for damage by that person or organization

Surface Water

all waters on the surface of the Earth found in rivers, streams, lakes, ponds, and so on

Tax Base

total amount of assets or income that can be taxed

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)

federal government program of support for families in need but administered by counties in North Carolina; provides small payments to cover basic living expenses and assistance to help adults find and keep jobs

Tipping Fee

a charge imposed on a user based on how much solid waste they bring for disposal at a landfill

Total Assessed Value

the sum of the assessed value of all the property a city or county can tax

Unincorporated

the part of a county outside the cities and towns in that county

Urban

area where people live close together; most are incorporated as municipalities

User Fee

a charge levied to use a public service

Variance

permission to do something different from what is allowed by current regulations

Visitor's Bureau

organizations—usually nonprofit—that promote or market specific destinations; usually funded primarily by local governments through tourism-related tax revenues (lodging and restaurant taxes)

Volunteer

people who donate their time and effort

Ward

a section of a jurisdiction for voting, representative, or administrative purposes

Watershed

an area that drains water into a stream or lake

Zoning

rules designating different areas of land for different uses

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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