

Chapter 6

Small is beautiful: Local governments

When you turn on a faucet, a local government makes sure clean water comes out of it.

When water and waste go down your drain, local governments make sure it doesn't pollute our environment.

When a new school is needed, a local government—your school board—gets it built.

A local government also makes sure your school, your home, and all the other buildings you go in and out of are safe.

And that's just a sample of what local governments do!



*WHAT DOES YOUR
KITCHEN WATER FAUCET
HAVE TO DO WITH
GOVERNMENT?*

Local governments are the smallest and closest governments to us. They are usually the first place we turn when we need help.

Changing a state or national law can take years of effort by a lot of people. Often it requires going to the state capitol, or even to our nation's capitol, to talk to elected representatives.

But if we want to change something at the local level, it's a lot easier. We can show up at a meeting that's close to where we live and tell our local elected leaders what we think. We can talk our neighbors into going with us. Sometimes we can even talk to a local elected official when we run into them at the grocery store or at a Little League game.



Local governments shape the communities we live in. If a community has nice parks, safe streets, and clean water, it's because its county and city governments and special districts are doing a good job. And when local governments are doing a good job, people take pride in their community and work together to make it even better.

What are social and health services?

Social and health services—sometimes also called human services—are a big part of what governments do for people.

People argue about how much the federal, state, and local governments should spend on these programs and what services people should get.

Health care is a big part of federal and state budgets, because many people don't have enough money to pay for a visit to the doctor or for a hospital bill. Health care costs a lot.

Here are some other examples of social and health services:



- Money for people who are too sick or disabled to work
- Mental health care
- Treatment to overcome addiction to drugs or alcohol
- Help for people who have been the victims of violence
- Help for people who are old and have low incomes
- Services to take care of children who are abused or neglected by their parents, or whose parents can't take care of them because of sickness or disability.
- Classes and support for parents who need to learn how to take better care of their children

Some of these services are provided by local governments, some by the state government, and some by the federal government.

Yikes! There's a bat in my house!

What would you do if a bat flew in your window and was flying around your house?

This happened in 1997 to Governor Gary Locke and his family when they were living in the Governor's Mansion. They couldn't catch the bat, and it finally flew back out of a window.

Bats are scary. Some bats have a disease called rabies, and if a bat bites or scratches you, you can get it too. Rabies can kill people if it's not treated right away. (Other animals sometimes get rabies, too. If you own a dog or cat, they should get shots to prevent rabies.)

If there is any chance at all that you've been bitten or scratched by a bat, you need to go to the doctor and get shots that will keep you from getting sick. That's what the governor, his wife, and their little daughter had to do.



If they had been able to catch the bat, they would have taken it to the local animal services department, where it would be packed in a special box and sent to a Washington State Department of Health laboratory in Seattle. They would test its brain to find out if it had rabies. If it did, people in the area where it was caught could be warned to be extra careful to keep bats out of their houses.

Thank goodness we have government animal services departments and health departments! Animal services departments take care of lost pets and pets whose owners can't keep them, and they help them find new homes. Health departments do many things to keep us safe and healthy—testing bats is just one of them. We have both a state department of health and local county health departments.

art by MWillowsIllustration

Special purpose districts: Your school district, for example

Even before Washington became a state, the territorial government created school districts. Today, Washington has 295 of them. The biggest school district in the state is Seattle, which has about 53,900 students in 103 schools. The smallest is Benge, in Adams County, which has 13 students in a two-room school.

Photo by Allison Shelley for American Education:
Images of Teachers and Students in Action.





The voters in each school district elect five (in a few cases seven) members to govern their public schools. This group of elected leaders is called a school board. School boards are responsible for the budgets and policies of local schools.

A lot of state laws set the basic rules for schools, but local school boards can add their own. For instance, your school board can add local graduation requirements to the ones the state sets. Each school board works with teachers' unions to agree on how much they will get paid. The school board also decides when and where to build new schools and what academic programs and sports to offer.

About 80 percent of the money for schools comes from the state government, but the rest has to come from the people who live in the school district. School boards figure out how much money the schools need, and then ask people in the district to vote to pay taxes for that amount. This is called a *school levy*.



For a school levy to be approved, a simple majority of the voters have to vote for it. The taxes for school levies come from property taxes on people's land, houses, and other buildings. If you own a house, the more your house is worth, the more you pay. If you rent a house or apartment, your landlord pays and includes the cost of the tax in your family's rent.



The school board also has to ask voters to help pay for building new schools or sports stadiums. When they put a proposal on the ballot to build something new, it's called a *school bond election*. Sixty percent of voters have to vote in favor of a school bond. This is also a property tax.



The Mariners' home field in Seattle is a special purpose district.



Libby is a sea otter who lives in Tacoma at the Point Defiance Zoo and Aquarium, which is a special purpose district.

So many different special purpose districts!

School districts are just one of many kinds of special purpose districts. Washington State has more than 1,700 special purpose districts, and they do an amazing variety of things

Water districts provide the clean water that comes out of your faucets. (People who live in rural areas often have their own wells, so they don't need a water district.)

Sewer districts take care of what goes down your drain. They filter out the bad stuff and make sure the water is cleaned up before releasing it back into our environment.

Fire departments put out fires and provide emergency medical help.

A special district in Tacoma, created in 1907, runs the **Point Defiance Zoo and Aquarium**.

Another one built the **baseball stadium** where the Seattle Mariners play.

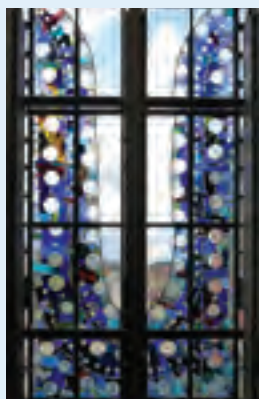
There are **cemetery districts, port districts, park districts, mosquito control districts, irrigation districts, library districts, and transit districts**.

In some cases, several counties band together to create a **multicounty transit district** (such as Sound Transit, which serves King, Pierce, and Snohomish Counties).

photo by Preston Hampton



Marita Dingus
Dancing Spirit 6, 2018
mixed media



Dick Weiss
El Rio: For L.G., 2002
stained glass



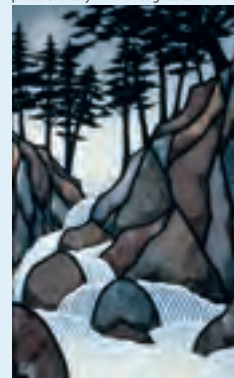
Susan Bennerstrom
Grain Elevator Near a Ravine, 1989
pastel on paper

All artworks in this section were acquired for the State Art Collection by the Washington State Arts Commission in partnership with (left to right): The Evergreen State College, Central Valley School District, Washington State Patrol, Yakima School District, and Nine Mile Falls School District.



Juan Alonso-Rodríguez,
To the Rhythm of the Conga Drum, 1990
acrylic and sequins on canvas

photo courtesy www.akisogabe.com



Aki Sogabe,
April Moon, 1994
kiri-e: cut paper

Art is part of a healthy society. That's why our governments support it.

In many countries around the world, governments give money to talented artists to help sustain a healthy culture, and to help them pass their skills and traditions on to the next generation. Here in Washington, our state government and many local governments do too.

This support helps young and struggling artists get a start on a career and helps artists of all ages make a decent living. Not all artists get government help. To get it, they usually have to compete for grants or sell their art to a government agency.

When Washington's state government builds a new building, one half of one percent of the state's cost for the building is spent on art. So, for instance, when a new school is built, that little fraction goes into a fund for the state to buy art.

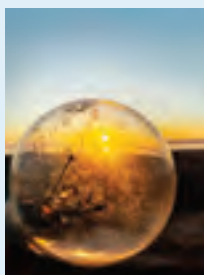
Schools can apply to get artwork from that fund. Your school might have one of those artworks.

Many local governments have programs like this too. Seattle was one of the first cities to do this when its program started in 1973. Its program takes a full one percent of a new government building's cost and spends it to buy art or to pay for an artist to perform.

Many other towns and cities have arts programs that use designs by local artists to decorate utility cabinets along streets, or to display the work of local artists in the windows of empty storefronts.

Government programs help poets, painters, sculptors, dancers, musicians, and other artists from many different traditions.

Since 1972, Washington's Superintendent of Public Instruction has sponsored an art show that celebrates visual artworks by high school students from across the state.



Art, left to right
Superintendent's Choice Award:
Lightbulb Sunset by Lauren Bridget King, J M Weatherwax High School, teacher: Tracy Ecklund
Jurors' Choice Award:
Pothos by Peyton S. Wood, Oak Harbor High School, teacher: Kit Christopherson
OSPI Staff Choice Award:
Boys Don't Cry by Rocío Arias, Davis High School, teacher: Carole Huls

Usually, special purpose districts are governed by elected boards, but sometimes they are governed by boards appointed by county commissioners.

Cities and towns

We call the place where we grow up our “hometown,” and most people really love their hometown, no matter how big or small it is.

People often have strong opinions about what town or city governments do. We know that when our town or city government makes an important decision, it will have a direct effect on the place we call home.

The largest city in Washington is Seattle, with a population of nearly 730,400 people ... and the smallest is Krupp, with 50 people. Washington's total population is now about 7.6 million people.

data from 2018 population.us

Pasco Mayor Saul Martinez

When Saul Martinez's father was a kid, he worked in the cotton fields of Texas with his dad. One day, he saw a yellow school bus go by and asked his dad, “Can I go to school on that bus?” His dad said, “No son, we're here to work.”



Photo courtesy Saul Martinez

But Saul Martinez knew that education was important. So when he grew up and had kids, he made sure they went to school, even though they traveled around the country working to harvest crops. Eventually, the family settled in Mesa, Washington. Even then, they would go to Minnesota in the summer to thin beets.

Today, Saul Martinez is a community college graduate and is now the mayor of Pasco. Pasco is a fast-growing city in the Columbia Basin. It's next to Richland and Kennewick, and the three together are often called the Tri-Cities.

When he and his wife moved to Pasco, he became active in his children's schools. He wanted to make sure the schools understood the needs of kids whose families were farmworkers and

who had moved around a lot. Martinez served on the Pasco school board from 2003 to 2008 and was elected its president.

In 2008, he became the first Latino to be elected to the Pasco City Council and has been reelected several times. He was

elected unanimously (that means everyone voted the same way) by the council to be mayor in 2020.

He is proud that there are now three Latino people on the city council, one woman of South Asian heritage, and three White people. The majority of people in Pasco are Latino.

His goals as mayor are “to increase the number of businesses in Pasco, and to help manage its growth.”

“I want to erase the lines of racism,” he said, “I'm in this for the whole community, not just for one race.” At the same time, he said, “I am an American of Mexican descent and proud of my heritage.”

Your parents' tax dollars at work . . . and play

A lot of towns and cities have built skate parks for kids who like to skateboard. In some places, kids have gone to city council meetings to convince local governments to build them—kids have even helped design them.

Sometimes local governments didn't want to build skate parks because they worried about kids getting hurt. Some places solved that problem by requiring kids to wear helmets and other safety gear.



Kingston's skate park

Also, finding the money to build a skate park can be hard when cities or towns have so many other services they have to pay for.

Creating cities and towns

Cities and towns are created by the people who live in them. When a group of people who live in a particular place decide that they want to be a city or a town, they can hold an election and vote to create one.

The difference between a city and a town is size. A town has a population of less than 1,500 at the time it is created. In 2010, there were 281 towns or cities in Washington, but people are still creating new ones.

There are three kinds of city or town governments. The two major ones are:

- **The mayor-council form of government** consists of an elected mayor, who serves as the leader of the executive branch of city government. An elected council serves as the legislative body. People call this the “strong mayor” form of government.
- **The council-manager form of government** has an elected council, and the council members hire someone to be the city manager. The city manager works for the council. The city manager hires the rest of the city employees and runs the day-to-day operations of the city or town. The council is not allowed to interfere in this work, but they can fire the city manager if they don’t like the job this person is doing. In this form of government, most of the work of the executive branch is done by the city manager, but the council (the legislative branch) has control over it.

The percentage of the state’s population living in cities and towns is now 65%—up from 52% in 1990.

Making every vote count

Yakima had a problem: Its Latino community kept growing, but no Latino people ever got elected to its city council.

Most Latino people lived on the east side of town, and they were still a minority of the city’s voters. But general city council elections were citywide, and the White majority candidates always won.

This problem ended up in court, and in 2014, the court case produced a solution: Yakima was divided into seven districts, and each district elected a city



photo courtesy Eliana Macias

Council Member Eliana Macias gets ready to visit people in her district.

council member. This meant that in the parts of town where Latino people are the majority, they were able to elect three Latina city council members.

Still, it’s been a struggle to keep Latino representation strong. Latino citizens are less likely to vote than White

people, and some are not citizens yet. Many don’t trust government or don’t think their vote will make a difference. Also, it’s often harder to find Latino candidates who have the resources, leadership experience, and willingness to run for office.

photo courtesy City of Vancouver Washington



The city of Vancouver has a council-manager form of government, which means they hire a city manager to run its day-to-day operations rather than paying the mayor to do that.

The council-manager form of government was invented early in the 20th century by people who thought that local government should be run more like a business.

In bigger cities with a strong mayor form of government, being the mayor is often a full-time, paid job. The mayor is the boss of city departments and can hire and fire department directors. The mayor can propose new laws or the city's annual budget, but the city council has to vote for them, and it can change the mayor's proposals if it doesn't agree with the mayor's ideas. Together, the mayor and the city council have to work out their differences.

In small towns, and in towns with the council-manager form of government, being mayor means something quite different. In these governments, the mayor is one of the city council members. He or she leads council meetings and represents the city at special events and ceremonies. Sometimes the mayor has a clear vision for what he or she wants the town to be like and is able to unite people to achieve that vision. In other cases, the mayor may be just a member of the council who holds the title of mayor.

Cities, towns, and county governments work together on many issues. For instance, in a county that has several towns, the elected officials of the county

government and the town governments might get together and decide to share an animal services department to deal with stray dogs and cats. Having one animal control agency for the whole county could save everybody money. Some counties also run public transit and other services that cross city and town lines.

County roads have to connect with city and town roads and streets, so cities, towns, and counties work together on this, too. They also collaborate (work together) to figure out how towns and cities should grow; where to build new neighborhoods, shopping centers, and businesses; and what land to leave open for forests, farming, parks, and other uses.

Counties

Washington has 39 counties.

Counties were created during the years when Washington was a territory (1853–1889), because people needed local services that the territorial government was just too far away to provide. At that time, there weren't very many cities or towns, so the county was the only local government for most people. After Washington became a state, the state government gradually took over some of the things counties had done. And as more cities and towns came into being, they also took over some of what the counties used to do.

King County, which has more residents than any other county, was originally named after William R. King, the vice president under President Franklin Pierce in 1853. In the 1980s, people realized William King was a slave owner, so they changed the county's name to honor Martin Luther King Jr. instead. It continues to be King County, but it's a different King!

Okanogan County

Named for an Indian tribe, the county was organized by the territorial legislature on February 1, 1888. The name is derived from the Indian word *okanagan*, meaning “rendezvous” (a meeting place), and was applied originally to the river's head at Osoyoos Lake, where Indians gathered annually to catch and cure fish, to trade, and to hold potlatches. The name was gradually applied to the river and to the tribe that lived along its banks.

County governments provide certain services to people who live inside the county, but outside of any town or city. (This is called an *unincorporated area*.) For instance, county sheriffs patrol the roads and respond to crimes committed in unincorporated areas.

Sometimes, counties provide some services to everyone in the county, regardless of whether they live in a town or city or an unincorporated area. These include:

- **Collecting property taxes and distributing** them to school districts, towns and cities, and special purpose districts.
- **Protecting public health** by checking to make sure water is clean and healthy, managing programs that help people who have very low incomes, and preventing the spread of diseases.
- **Providing help** for the elderly and for people who are mentally ill.
- **Conducting elections.**
- **Hiring judges** to run local courts.
- **Running the county jail.**



Chelan Fire and Rescue, established in 1926, is a fire protection district—another special purpose district. It covers 125 square miles around Lake Chelan and the surrounding areas.



photo courtesy Elizabeth Turner

Most counties have three elected commissioners. Together, these three elected commissioners are called the *county commission*. It is responsible for setting the county's budget and laws, and seeing that they are carried out.

Home rule counties

However, not all counties are organized like this. The state constitution was amended in 1948 to allow counties (and cities) more local control over the structure of their government. Local voters can write and adopt a mini-constitution for the county or city, called a *home rule charter*.

Under a home rule charter, counties can choose the number of county commissioners. Most have chosen to have an elected county executive and a county council.

They can also give local people the powers of the initiative and referendum. This means that if county citizens can get enough people to sign a proposed law, citizens can vote on it. If it's an initiative, that means it's something a citizen thought up; if it's a referendum, that means it's a law passed by the county council, but citizens want to vote on whether they agree with it.

Six counties have adopted home rule charters: Clallam, Clark, King, Pierce, Snohomish, and Whatcom. Taken together, these counties include about half of the state's population.

According to the original state constitution, counties are also supposed to have several other elected officials:

The County Assessor decides how much property (land, buildings, and business equipment) is worth. The value of the property determines how much tax the person who owns it has to pay; the more valuable the property, the more tax people pay.

The County Treasurer sends people bills for their property tax and makes sure they pay it. Then he or she distributes the money—some goes to the state government, some to schools, and some to local governments.

Jurisdiction:

power and control over a certain area. (For instance, if you ask a mayor of a city to solve a problem that is outside the city's borders, he or she might say, "That's not in my jurisdiction.")

photo courtesy Jack Brannon



The more a house is worth, the more property taxes its owner must pay.



The county auditor issues marriage licenses.

The County Auditor keeps records of who owns all the property (land, houses, and other buildings) in the county. He or she keeps records of all the registered voters and runs the elections. And if you want to get married, it's the county auditor who will issue your marriage license.

The County Sheriff is the chief law enforcement officer in the county. In most counties, the sheriff is also in charge of the county jail.

The County Coroner investigates suspicious deaths to find out whether someone was murdered or died of natural causes.

The County Clerk is in charge of keeping all the paperwork for the courts and for helping people who want to get divorced, sue someone, or deal with other legal matters.

The County Prosecuting Attorney is in charge of representing the government in court when someone is accused of a crime. The prosecutor also defends the county when it is sued and provides legal advice to all the agencies of county government.

Superior Court Judges are also elected county officials. They preside over superior courts, which handle all serious crimes, and also all civil cases, such as divorces, child custody, juvenile offenses, and lawsuits.

The cities of **Richland**, **Kennewick**, and **Pasco** are close to each other, so they are called the Tri-Cities. Richland and Kennewick are in Benton County. Pasco is in Franklin County.

The federal Hanford site, which is just north of Richland, was established in 1943 to produce plutonium for nuclear bombs. Now it has a lot of dangerous nuclear waste that is taking a very long time to clean up.

District Court Judges preside over the smaller courts that deal with minor crimes and traffic tickets. (Within cities and towns, there are similar small courts, called *municipal courts*.)

How we elect county commissioners—and some city council members

County commissioners are elected in an interesting way. The county is divided into districts. First, people in each district vote to nominate two people to represent their district. This is called a *primary election*. Then, in a second election, called a *general election*, everyone in the county gets to vote on all the candidates. In this way, every part of the county has someone to represent their area. But, everyone in the county votes for all the commissioners in the general election. This reminds the commissioners that they serve not just their own district but all the people in the county.

Some cities elect city council members this way too.



photo courtesy Barbara Linde

Barbara Linde served as a district court judge and later as a superior court judge.

