

## CHAPTER 7

### Local government: counties, cities, towns and special districts

Local governments provide services right up to the driveway and even inside most people's houses: the streets people travel on, the water that comes out of the faucets, the sewers that take away everything that goes down the drains, and the garbage and recycling service are all provided by local governments.



art by MW/illustration

Local governments also keep us safe in many ways. Building inspectors make sure that the houses we live in and the schools we attend are built properly, and won't fall down in an earthquake. Health departments make sure that restaurants are clean, and that they don't serve food that will make us sick. Local police and sheriffs protect us from crime; fire departments put out fires and promote fire prevention. These are just a few examples of important local government services.

Local governments are smallest, closest to us, and usually the first place we turn when we need help. Because they are so close to us, local governments are also the easiest for citizens to affect. If we want to change a state or national law, we might have to send letters or travel to the state or national capital. But if we want to change something at the local level, we might be able to talk to a local elected official when we run into them at the grocery store or at a Little League game.

**There are 281 cities and towns, 39 counties and 167 special purpose districts in Washington.**

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 government is doing a good job, people take pride in their community and work together to make it even better.

## 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, 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.

## 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 "okanagen," 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.



map courtesy of Washington State Department of Ecology

Today, county governments have two roles: First, they 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. Second, counties provide some services to everyone in the county, regardless of whether they live in a town or city or an unincorporated area. (This is explained more in the section on cities and towns.)

The services county governments provide for everyone in the county include collecting property taxes, protecting public health, providing human services (such as

## What are social services?

Social services – also sometimes called human services – are a big part of what government does. These services include:

- Health care for people who have very low incomes
- Care for people who can't work, such as people with disabilities and the elderly
- Help for people who are poor and need help finding a job, or job training
- Housing for people who are poor and/or homeless
- Mental health care – both in the community, and in mental hospitals
- Treatment to overcome addiction to drugs, alcohol, or gambling
- Services to take care of babies, children and teens who are abused or neglected by their parents, or whose parents are too ill to take care of them
- Help for young people who've been in trouble with the law and who need to turn their lives in a better direction

Providing these services gets very complicated, because governments at many levels are involved. For instance, the federal government and the state share responsibility for Medicaid, a huge program that provides health insurance to people who have low incomes. Many of those who receive



Medicaid are people who work full time, but don't make very much money. Others are people who can't work because of a disability, or because they are too old to work.

Many other social services are provided by complex partnerships between the state, county governments, and private and non-profit community organizations.

Nearly all social services are provided only to those who can't afford to buy them on their own. Governments have to decide how poor people should be before they get government help. At the same time, they have to figure out how much government can afford to spend on these services. People don't always get what they need, because sometimes the government doesn't have enough money.

## Bats in Your House

When a bat flies into someone's house, it's pretty scary, because bats sometimes have rabies – a very bad disease that must be diagnosed and treated quickly to prevent someone from getting sick. If this happens to you, you can call the county health department for advice. A person from the environmental health section will help decide

what to do. First, they will ask if anyone was bitten or scratched by the bat. Sometimes a bat bite is very small and cannot be seen, so they also ask if anyone was awakened or disturbed by the bat. If the answer is no, there is nothing to worry about. If the answer is yes, and the bat is still available, the health

department will test it to see if it has rabies. The bat most often is trapped by the homeowner and then delivered to the local Animal Services facility to be prepared for rabies testing. The bat body has to be put in a special shipping box and sent to

the virology laboratory at the Washington State Health Department in Seattle. They do special tests on the bat's brain to see if it had rabies. If it did, the person who was bitten or scratched has to have shots to prevent the illness.



art by MWillowsIllustration

help for the elderly and people who are mentally ill), and conducting elections. County governments are also responsible for the superior and district courts, and the county jail.

Counties usually 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.

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.

### **Other County Services**

*Air Pollution Control*  
*Animal Services*  
*Area Agency on Aging*  
*Washington State University Extension*  
*Courts*  
*Financial Services*  
*Transit*  
*Marriage License*  
*Medic One*  
*Parks and Recreation*  
*Public Health and Social Services*  
*Sheriff*  
*Waste Management*  
*Water*

*King County, the largest county in Washington, was originally named after William R. King, the vice president under Franklin Pierce. It was renamed in 1986 after civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*

**The County Auditor** keeps records of who owns all the property 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.



Kingston's skatepark

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

*A lot of towns and cities have built skateparks – in many cases because a lot of young people have lobbied local governments to get them built. In some communities, kids have also helped design skateparks.*

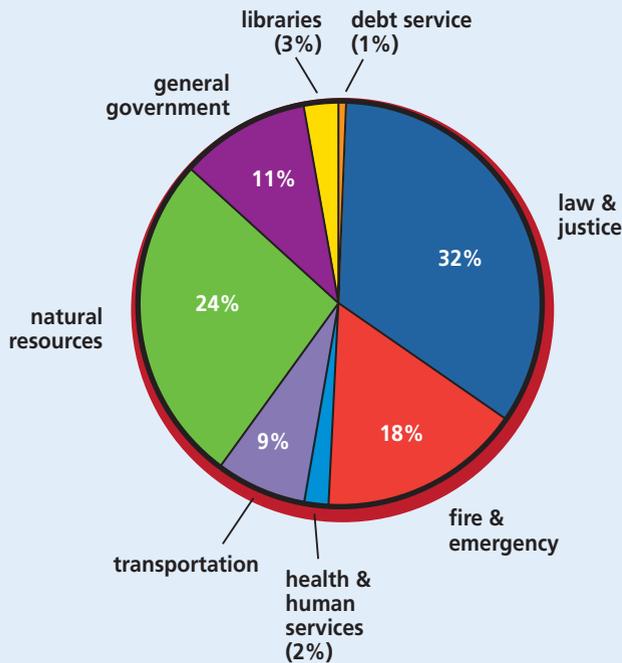
Building skateparks has been a difficult decision for many local governments, because people worry about kids getting hurt. Some parks require that kids use helmets and other safety gear. Also, finding the money to build a skatepark can be difficult when towns or cities have tight budgets.

Here's a web site that has information about how to plan a skatepark, and the regulations some local governments use in Washington:

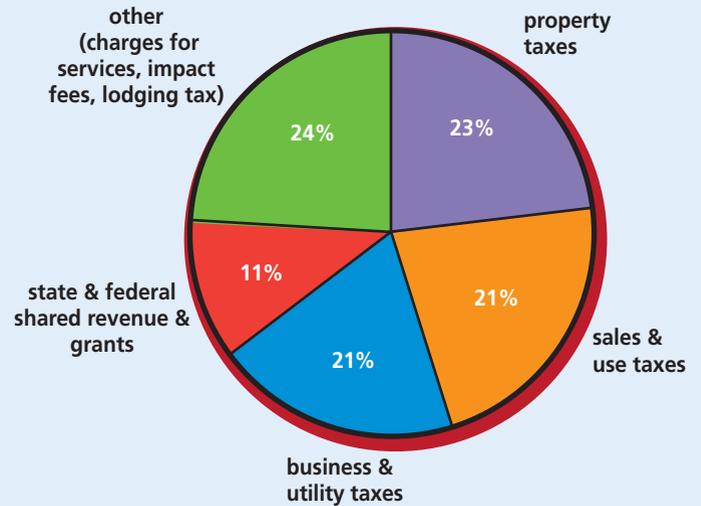
[www.mrsc.org/subjects/planning/sktboard.aspx](http://www.mrsc.org/subjects/planning/sktboard.aspx)

Cities vary in where they get money to provide public services, and on what services they spend it. These categories represent a typical city.

**How cities spend their money**



**Where city governments get their money**



**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 cases, juvenile offenses and lawsuits.

**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.)

*The Governor Albert D. Rosellini Bridge, which connects Seattle and Bellevue across Lake Washington, is the longest floating bridge in the world.*



Photo by @wiseknave, courtesy of 4Culture

*Escaping a Burning Culture (detail), 2017*  
© Baso Fibonacci and Jean Nagai

*A two-mile transit corridor in Seattle traveled by over 50,000 daily has been turned into an imaginative raceway of art in motion.*



photo by © Edie Everette, courtesy of 4Culture

*HazMatters, 2014*  
© Edie Everette

*The HazMatters comic book is an artist-designed public service announcement about hazardous materials. Available in English and Spanish, it shows many ways that household hazardous waste affects us in our everyday lives.*

## Art, government and controversy

Our national and state government – and many local governments – have commissions or agencies that support the arts. These agencies are usually a very small part of the budget, but people get very passionate about them. Supporters of the arts point out that art is vital to the health of our culture and our understanding of what it means to be human. They believe that government should actively support the arts with funding for local theater groups, dance troupes, painters, sculptors, museums and musicians. This is important in making art available to everyone, rather than just to those who can afford to buy art work. It helps communities produce and preserve art that is unique to their own culture, history and experience.

In some places, local governments require that one percent of the cost of any new government construction project be devoted to buying art that will be displayed in or around the new building or other facility. The new art that is purchased might be a piece of sculpture, or a mural, or a frieze that is part of the new building.

But people argue passionately about art, and when government supports artists or buys art, there can be disagreements about what is “good” art. Some people get angry when their tax dollars are spent on art they don’t personally like.

The federal agency that supports the arts – the National Endowment for the Arts – has long been a major focus of such debates. Politics and art don’t always mix well, but sometimes they are impossible to keep separate.

Here are website addresses for a few state and local government arts commissions:

[www.arts.wa.gov](http://www.arts.wa.gov) *The Washington State Arts Commission*

[www.4Culture.org](http://www.4Culture.org) *4Culture (The Cultural Development Authority of King County)*

[www.cityofseattle.net/arts](http://www.cityofseattle.net/arts) *Seattle Mayor’s Office of Arts and Cultural Affairs*

[www.spokanearts.org](http://www.spokanearts.org) *Spokane Arts Commission*

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 elected officials and their duties. 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. They cannot, however, change the job of the county prosecutor or the superior and district court judges, or the way the courts are organized.

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

**Did you know:**

**Seattle is home to the first revolving restaurant, which was built in 1961.**

**Everett is the site of the world’s largest building, Boeing’s final assembly plant.**

**When Spokane hosted the World’s Fair in 1974, it was the smallest city in size ever to do so.**

## Pasco Mayor Leads Diverse City

Matt Watkins grew up in the Tri-Cities – a group of three cities (Kennewick, Richland and Pasco) in southeast Washington.



Photo courtesy Matt Watkins

Mayor Watkins near the Cable Bridge in Pasco

in a more diverse community. In fact, Pasco is now a majority Latino community. Latinos old enough to vote are 30% of the electorate

and rising. There are also small percentages of African-American, Asian and Pacific Islander and Native Americans, many of whose families have lived in Pasco for several generations.

He’s an adventure motorcyclist who has completed three 11-day rides known as the “Iron Butt Rally.”

He was first elected to the Pasco city council in 2004, and became mayor in 2010. In Pasco, the seven-member city council elects one of its members to be mayor.

Watkins’s ideas about serving his community came from his mom, who worked for the Port of Kennewick, and rose to become the first woman to be Port Manager in the region. She was also an active community volunteer, and her example of community service stuck with her son.

Watkins says he moved from Kennewick to Pasco for the lower housing prices, but also because he wanted to live

Watkins is proud that Pasco has adopted a new city council district system that gives the Latino community greater voting power. In the past, all city council members were elected “at large,” which means they represented the whole city.

In the 2017 election, when people voted for 6 of the 7 city council positions by district, the city council went from having two Latinos to four.



photo courtesy Bill Wagner and The Daily News of Longview, WA

## The Cookie Mayor

As a Mom, Barbara Larsen got involved in her children's schools, and that led her to serve for thirteen years on the local school board in Castle Rock, a town of about 2,200 people. She enjoyed public service, so when there was an open seat on the city council, she ran for it – and won. After ten years on the city council, she ran for mayor, and was elected.

While her children were growing up, she and her husband ran a dairy. For forty years, she was also a foster mom who took care of sick babies when their parents couldn't care for them. She took care of them until their parents could take them back, or until the state's Child Protective Services office (a part of the Department of Social and Health Services) could find a permanent home for them. Over the years, she cared for hundreds of babies. She often took babies – and cookies – to meetings of the city council.

County commissioners are elected in an interesting way. The county is divided into districts, and people in each district vote for their own commissioner in the primary election. Then, in the general (final) election, everyone in the county gets to vote on all the commissioners. In this way, every part of the county is assured of having someone to represent their area. But, because everyone in the county votes for all the Commissioners in the final election, the commissioners are reminded that they must serve not just their own district, but all the people in the county.

## Cities and Towns

People have special feelings about their towns and cities. We call the place where we grow up our "home town." People often have strong opinions about what town or city governments do; it's almost as important to us as what our families 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.

Cities and towns are organized in a different way than counties. Counties are created by the state, and they can do only what the state says they can do. Cities and towns, however, 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. This means that they create a municipal corporation. We usually think of a corporation as a big company like Boeing or Microsoft, but the word corporation can also refer to "a group of people combining into or acting as one body." (The word municipal just means a local unit of government, such as a town, village, or city.) So a municipal corporation is a legal term for a town or city. And an unincorporated area is a part of a county that isn't in a town.

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 2008, there were 281 towns or cities in Washington, but people are still creating new ones.

The state constitution sets out rules for how to create a city or town, and how its government should be organized. However, the constitution was amended (as it was for counties) to allow home rule charters that enable cities more freedom about how they organize themselves.

There are three kinds of city or town governments. The differences have to do with how the legislative and executive functions are divided up. 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, and an elected council, which serves as the legislative body.

In some cities, the mayor can veto laws passed by the council, but, like the state legislature, the council can override the veto. People call this the “strong mayor” form of government. When the mayor has no veto power, and when there are several other city-wide elected officials such as a city auditor or prosecutor, it’s called a “weak 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

The percentage of the state’s population living in cities and towns is now 64%—up from 52% in 1990.

## A mayor’s life of public service

*As a child, Jesse Farias worked in the fields with his family. When he graduated from high school in 1963, he joined the army. Four years later in Vietnam, his group was ambushed while crossing a river. He was severely injured, and lost his legs. At the age of 22, Jesse began life in a wheel chair.*

*When he came back from Vietnam, he knew he would have to find work that used his brain – and for that, he would need a college degree. A friend helped him get a part-time job working for the state Employment Security Department to help support*



photo courtesy Trixanna Koch

*his family while he went to school. Farias graduated from college in 1973, and began working full time for the state. In 1989, Governor Booth Gardner appointed him Director of Veteran’s Affairs. Farias enjoyed the challenge of heading a state agency and was sorry to leave when Gardner’s term ended. But he came back to Olympia again in 1997, when Governor Gary Locke appointed him to serve a term on the State Liquor Board. After he retired, Farias wanted to continue to serve his community, so he ran for and was elected Mayor of Wapato.*

work, but they can fire the city manager if they don't like the job he or she 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 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.

***The third form of municipal government is only used by one town – Shelton.*** It has three elected commissioners who serve as city department directors. One is the Commissioner of Public Safety (who also serves as the mayor), one is the Commissioner of Finance and Accounting, and the third is Commissioner of Streets and Public Improvements.

In big cities and in cities with a strong mayor form of government, being the mayor is a full-time job. The mayor's role is similar to the governor's: he or she is the boss of city departments, and can hire and fire department directors. The mayor also has a relationship with the city council that is similar to the governor's relationship with the state legislature. The mayor can propose new laws or the city's annual budget, but the city council has to vote for it, and they can change it if they don't like 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 is a strong leader because he or she 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

The largest city in Washington is Seattle, with a population of nearly 704,352 people ... and the smallest is Krupp, with 49 people.

data from 2016 population.us

to deal with stray dogs and cats. Having one animal control agency for the whole county will save everybody money. Some counties also run public transit and other services that cross the lines of cities and towns.

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 to figure out how towns and cities should grow, where new neighborhoods, shopping centers, and businesses should be built, and what land should be left open for forests, farming, parks, and other uses.

## Special purpose districts

When Washington was a territory, the territorial government divided counties into school districts. Today, Washington has 295 school districts. The voters in each school district elect five (in a few cases seven) school board members to govern their public schools. The biggest school district in the state is Seattle, which has about 53,400 students in 103 schools. The smallest is Benge, in Adams County, which has 14 students in a two-room school.

School boards are responsible for the budgets and policies of local schools. There are a lot of state laws that set the basic rules for schools, but local school boards can add local graduation requirements, negotiate contracts with teachers, decide when and whether to build new schools, and what academic programs and sports will be offered.

About 80% of the money for schools comes from the state government, but the rest has to come from within the school district. To raise this money, school boards figure out how much money the schools need, and then ask people in the district to vote to

**Richland, Kennewick, and Pasco** comprise the entity commonly called the Tri-Cities. The first two, located in Benton County, were initially small agricultural communities, while Pasco was the Franklin County seat and site of railroad yards. In 1943 the Atomic Energy Commission constructed a plutonium-producing facility, the Hanford Works, north of Richland. The three towns boomed and grew into one crescent-shaped population center extending along both banks of the Columbia River.

tax themselves for that amount. This is called a school levy election. 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 tax on people's land, houses, and other buildings.

The school board also has to ask voters to tax themselves to help pay for building new schools or sports facilities. When they put a measure on the ballot to build something new, it's called a school bond election.

**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.")*

School districts are just one of many kinds of special purpose districts. Usually, a special purpose district has just one job – for example, running a port, providing sewage treatment, managing irrigation in a certain area, or building and maintaining a ball park.

There are over 1,700 special purpose districts in Washington, and they do an amazing variety of things. For instance, a Metropolitan Park District was set up in Tacoma in 1907 to create the Tacoma Zoo. There are cemetery districts, mosquito control districts, fire districts, library districts, and transit districts. In some cases, several counties might band together to create a multi-county transit district (such as Sound Transit, which serves King, Pierce, and Snohomish Counties).

Usually, special purpose districts are governed by elected boards, but sometimes they are governed by boards appointed by County Commissioners.

Probably the most famous special purpose district is the Washington State Major League Baseball Public Facilities District, which owns and manages Safeco Field in Seattle.



photo courtesy Ben VanHouten

Safeco Field, Seattle