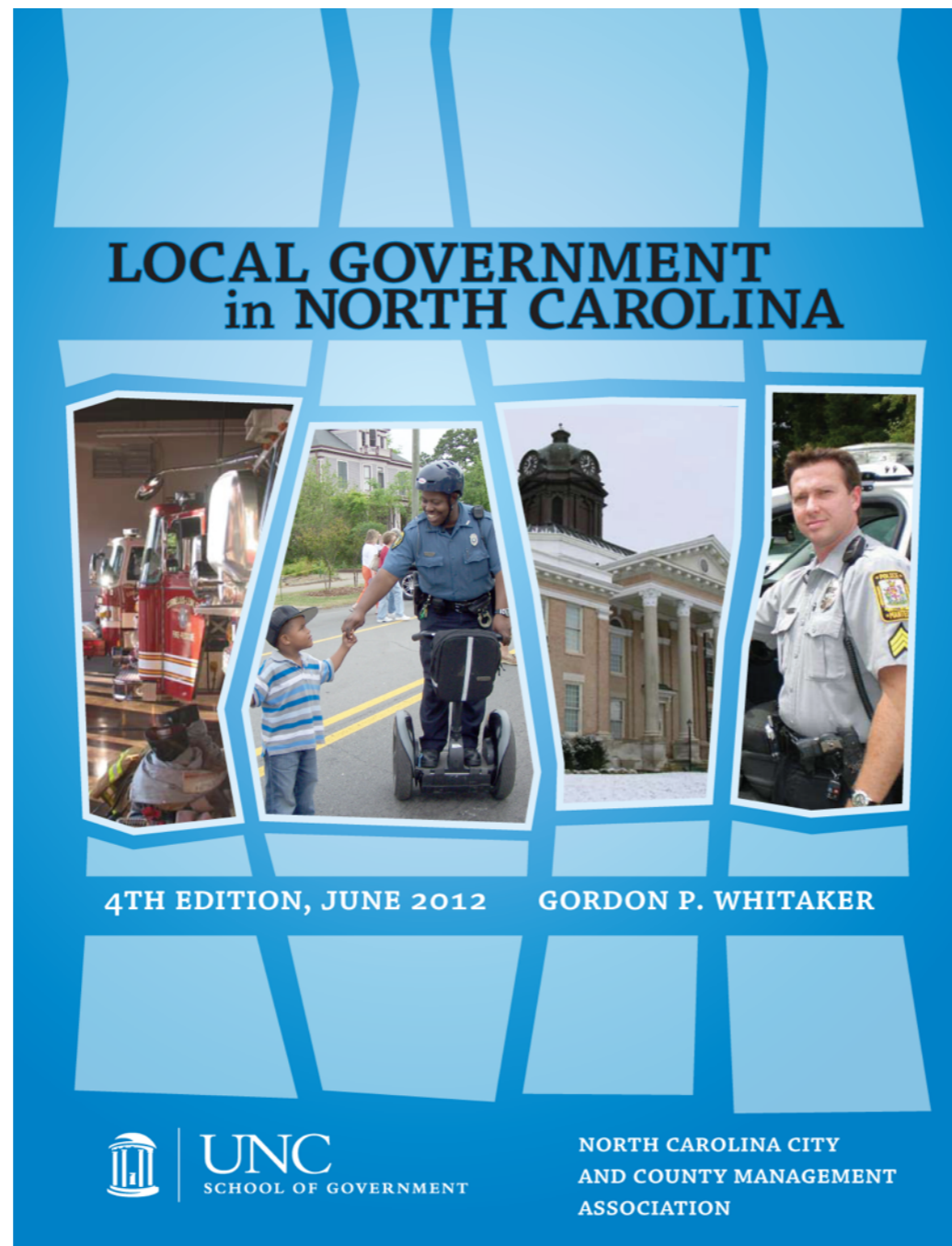


BY GORDON WHITAKER 4TH EDITION, JUNE 2012

Local Government in North Carolina



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 cities people address the “close to home” needs they have in common. These 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. National and state governments set the context for local government.

The national government in Washington, D.C., is responsible for dealing with problems 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 serv-

ices for everyone in the state. Counties and cities deal with local public issues.

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 is governed by elected officials. Each type of government provides certain services, regulates certain kinds of activity, and undertakes programs to improve public well-being.

Not all providers of drinking water, streets, or other local community services are governments. In some neighborhoods, for example, home owners associations (HOAs) supply water



Photo Credit: Town of Chapel Hill

and maintain the streets. Private associations like these are not governments, although they may seem like government in many ways.

Local Governments

In North Carolina we have two kinds of general purpose local governments: counties and municipalities. “City,” “town,” and “village” are all names for municipal governments. In this resource, we often use “city” to refer to all municipalities. The entire state is divided into 100 counties. Each municipality is located in one or more counties.



Photo Credit: City of Belmont

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.

In North Carolina, local governments can do only things the state government gives them authority to do. Thus, the state can also prevent local governments from doing things opposed to state policy.



Photo Credit: Town of Manteo

Often there is 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 local governments in North Carolina participate in one of the sixteen regional councils in the state. Local governments join together in the Council of Governments (COG) in their area. They pay dues to support the work of the regional council and

appoint representatives to meet to discuss problems they share and to work out ways to deal with those problems.

For more information about the regional councils, access the [North Carolina Association of Regional Councils website](#).

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 various ways, including building libraries or parks, setting up recycling or economic development programs, planning and controlling land use, and collecting taxes.

In the News:

[County commissioners approve beach nourishment interlocal agreement](#)

[Greene Sheriff's Office granted authority to give, receive aid](#)

State and Federal Governments

North Carolina state government creates local governments and gives them their authority. Both the state and national governments provide services to people and also influence local government services in a variety of ways.

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 recreation areas.

It helps people locate jobs and provides unemployment benefits to those who are unemployed. Among the state's programs to improve the general well-being are recruitment of industry to the state, conducting agricultural research, and promotion of the arts. The state government makes the laws that define most crimes and many family and business relationships. It regulates such matters as insurance rates, waste disposal, and development along the North Carolina coast.

The national (or "federal") government makes laws and carries out policies that affect the entire country. The United States Constitution, for example, 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 state and local governments provide "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 ar-



Photo Credit: City of Morganton

eas. 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 electrical generating plants.

Federal and state governments influence local governments in many ways. Through mandates, federal or state governments require local governments to provide a service or to carry out services in specified ways. 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.



Photo Credit: Credit: Town of Summerfield

In the News:

[County, state ready to defend military bases](#)

[In North Carolina, a reversal on municipal broadband](#)

People and Local Government

North Carolina local governments are supposed to be responsible to and responsive to the people. And all people are supposed to 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 its 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 yourself with your local government and feel some pride in it.

The community that your local government serves includes others besides residents, however. Your local government must also serve people who work, shop, visit, or own property there.

Any group of people who share common bonds can be thought of as a community, of course. You may think of yourself as belonging to other communities—a neighborhood, a region, or an ethnic or religious group, for example. However, these informal communities do not have governmental authority or responsibility. They play a very different part in your life than do local governments. Local governments have the authority and the 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 is responsible for obeying its local laws and paying local taxes. This includes not only the residents of the jurisdiction but also people who work, shop, or visit there, and people who 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 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 United States 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 permission from the U. S. government, so there are also many "undocumented" aliens here. Because all aliens – documented or not – do not have the rights of citizenship, they cannot vote or run for office. However, all aliens, whether they have documents or not, are responsible for paying taxes and obeying laws.

Although some government services are available only to citizens or documented aliens, all levels of government are responsible for providing basic public services and protection to

everyone in their jurisdiction. The wellbeing of the entire community is the concern of each local government.



Photo Credit: City of Morganton

It is often difficult to decide how best to meet the needs of all the people, however. People may disagree about where to locate a landfill or sewage treatment plant, for example. They may disagree about the need to increase local taxes to pay for public services. Local government provides the framework for discussing and deciding local public policies.

All those who live, work, shop, visit, own property, or otherwise have an interest in a community have the right to request public services from the local government and to let local government officials know about their concerns. There are several ways to share concerns. 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, like Facebook, to 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 means that people have access to most government documents.

In many communities, journalists attend many public meetings and report on them. Many local governments produce their own television programs and web pages, 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 by discussing issues with local government officials.

- **For a list of many North Carolina newspapers, visit the [NC Press Association](#).**
- **For a list of municipal web pages, visit [N.C. Cities and Towns](#).**
- **For a list of county web pages, visit [N.C. Counties](#).**
- **For selected municipal and county social media sites, visit [N.C. Social Media Sites](#).**

In the News:

Closed session is the law

Job market is shrinking for Hispanics in N.C.

Immigrants in North Carolina

Home Owners' Associations Are Not Governments

Many people in North Carolina today live in neighborhoods that are organized as home owners' 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 area have a different relationship with the HOA than they do with their local government. Here are some of the major differences:
- HOAs provide a way for residents of an area to have more or different services if they are willing and able to pay for them.
- All adult citizens who are residents of a local government can vote for that local government's governing board. Typically only people who own property in an HOA neighborhood can vote for HOA board members. Those who own more property often have more votes.
- Local governments must respect residents' Constitutional rights to 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, and the services and actions they can take. Those 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 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 home owners' 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.

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.

HOAs are, of course, always within a county, and they are also often inside a municipality. But if the HOA provides services in an area, the county or city does not provide the same services in that area. Nor do local governments typically regulate those services.

Each HOA has a governing board to oversee its services. HOA members—the people who own the property—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 plant flowers and trees and undertake various other sorts of neighborhood beautification. They can also limit where cars can be parked, what colors houses can be painted, whether residents may use clothes lines or plant gardens, how loudly resident 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 those arrangements when negotiating over subdivision approval, annexation, or the approval of public infrastructure, but otherwise local governments have little to say about the organization and operation of HOAs.

In the News:

[Grass must be green, HOA decrees](#)

[When paying the mortgage is not enough](#)

Counties

No matter where you live in North Carolina, you live in a county and have a county government. Counties provide some 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.





Photo Credit: Caswell County

When someone says “county government,” you might think about the courthouse. The county’s central offices are usually located in the courthouse. But county government does not stop at the courthouse steps. Counties operate facilities ranging from health care clinics to jails.

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 that every resident of North Carolina will have 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 to hold 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, counties are a special kind of corporation, with the power to own property, to enter into contracts, and to levy taxes.

Depending on the needs of the area and the requests of local citizens, county officials may choose to provide additional 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, waters and sewers, or 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. One early responsibility of county governments in North Carolina was the construction and maintenance of rural roads and bridges. During the 1930s, however, 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

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 wastes produced in the county. This new mandate put all 100 counties in the business of solid waste management.

Further Information:

To learn more about a specific county, see that county government's home page at [N.C. Counties](#).

For more information about the North Carolina General Assembly, which creates state laws and requires certain services of counties, access its [website](#).

Governing Counties

County government in North Carolina is complex. Counties are both local governments and divisions of state government. Thus, locally elected officials share responsibility for county services with others. State officials and several appointed boards all help set policies for county government and help di-



Earl McKee is sworn in on December 6, 2010 for his first term as an Orange County Commissioner. (Photo Credit: Orange County)

rect 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 special kind of corporation. Like private corporations, counties can own property, form contracts, and be sued.

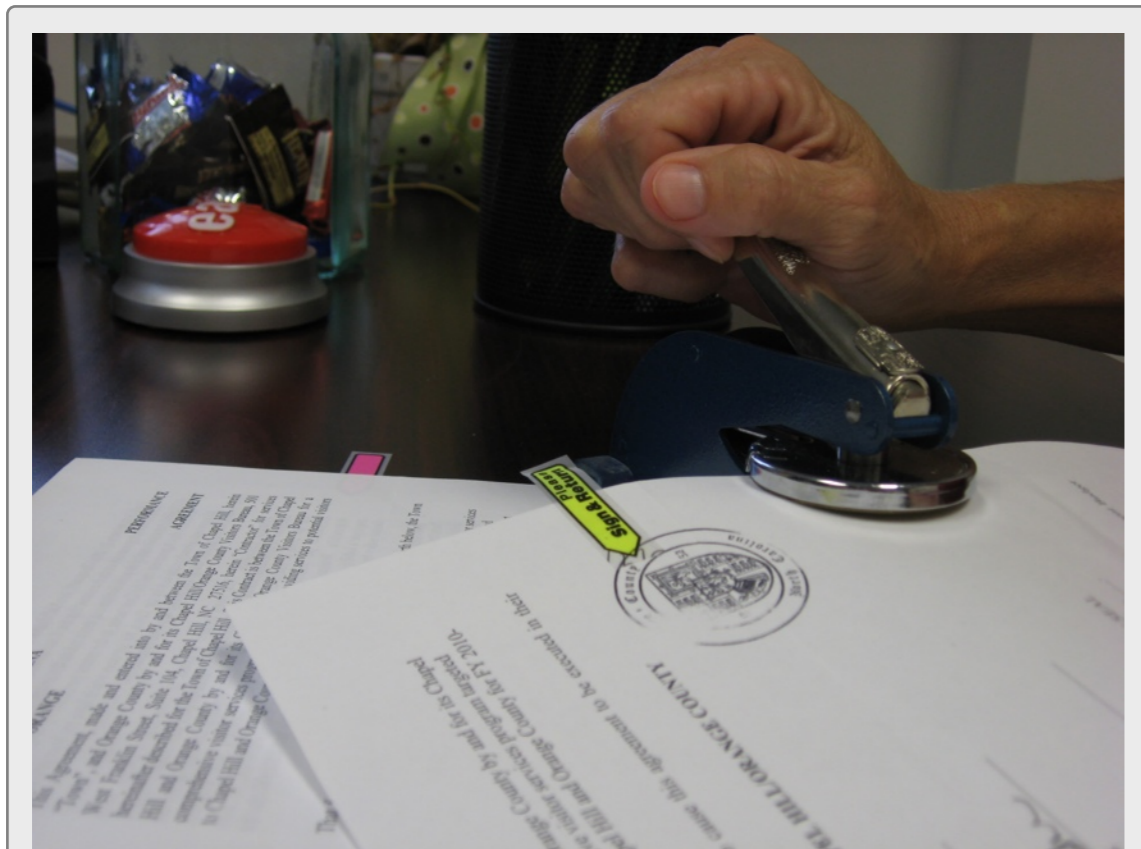


Photo Credit: Orange County

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. Because

a county is a corporation, a citizen's liability for municipal debts is limited to the amount of tax the citizen owes the county.

Counties differ from private corporations in important ways. For one thing, 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, unlike private corporations, counties are governments. Counties have authority to make and enforce laws and to levy taxes.

Voters in each North Carolina county elect a board of county commissioners, a sheriff, a register of deeds, and a clerk of court. The clerk of 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 courts. Judges and district attorneys are elected by

In the News:

County moves forward despite economic troubles

The Board of County Commissioners

The board of county commissioners has general responsibility for county government. It sets the local 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. He or she oversees county government operations and advises 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.

The board of county commissioners shares authority for setting county policy with others: 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, edu-

cation, elections, public health, mental health, and social services policy.

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

For more information and news about boards of county commissioners, access the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners' website.

In the News:

[Roberts ousted as chair of Mecklenburg County board](#)

[Lucas receives raise](#)

Independent Boards

Independent boards in North Carolina counties appoint directors for their agencies and make local policies regarding agency operations for several state-mandated county services.

State laws require that the board of county commissioners appoint members for independent boards for:

- Social services

- Public health
- Mental health, developmental disabilities, and substance abuse (MHDDSA)

The county social services board hires a director for the county department of social services and advises the director on program needs and budget requests. Because the United States government and/or state government fund many social service programs, federal and state regulations set much of the policy for social services delivered by counties.

Health services are also organized through independent boards. Many larger counties have their own health department, but smaller counties typically join together to form public health districts. Counties also join mental health “local management entities” (LMEs), with boards made up of representatives from each of the participating counties overseeing the delivery of public MHDDSA services.

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.

For more information about the State Board of Elections, visit its website.

In counties where alcoholic beverages may be sold, an Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) Board controls 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 have the authority to levy taxes. County funds to support these services must be raised



Each county’s board of elections is responsible for recruiting, training, and supervising precinct officials for each election. (Photo Credit: Catawba County)

by the board of county commissioners. All of the independent boards must also have their budgets approved by the board of county commissioners.

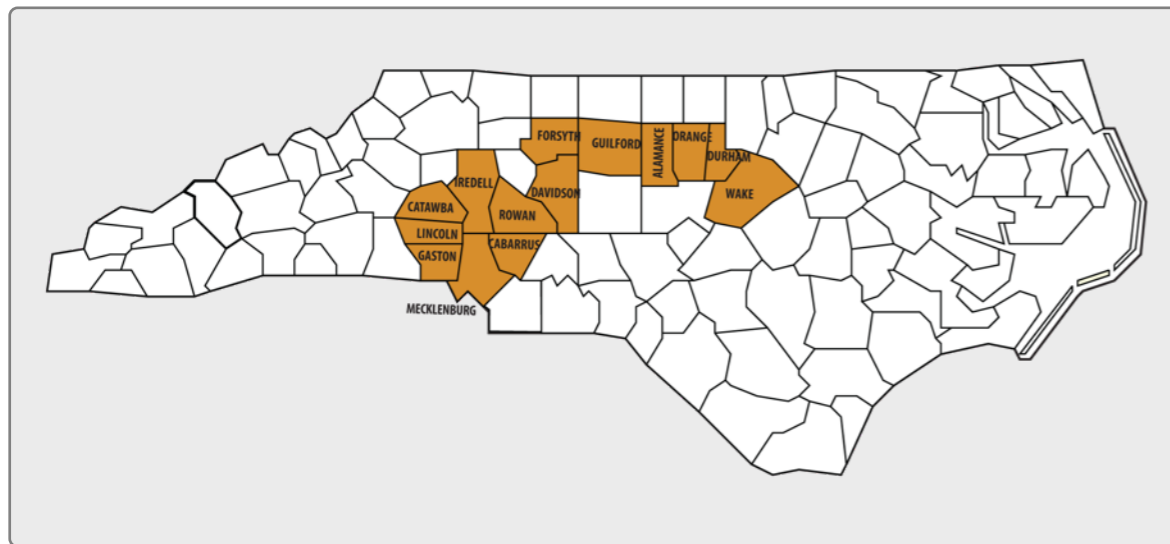
In the News:

Work First regulations baffle board members

ABC Board adds two members

Diversity of North Carolina Counties

There is no “typical” North Carolina county. In area, they range from Chowan County (173 square miles) to Robeson County (949 square miles). The population differences are even greater. In 2010, Tyrrell County had the smallest population with just over 4,400 residents, and Mecklenburg County had the largest population with almost 920,000 residents.



Population density varies widely across counties, too. Hyde County had only about 10 people per square mile, whereas Mecklenburg County had more than 1,750 people per square mile in 2010.

The piedmont counties, in the central part of the state, are an area of rolling hills. North Carolina’s biggest cities and their

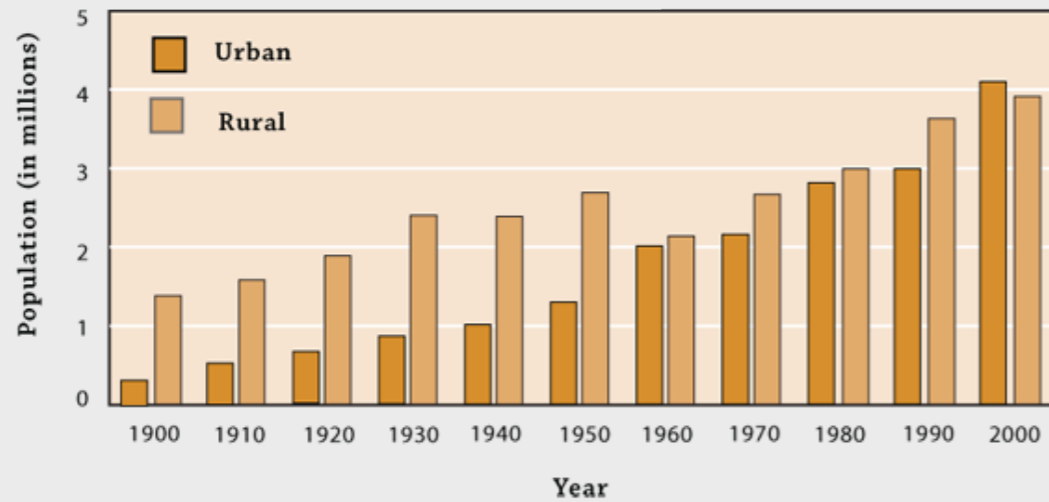
suburbs are in this region. They create a continuous band of fifteen largely urban counties centered along Interstate 85 from Charlotte to Raleigh, as shown on the map.

However, most counties in the piedmont are largely rural. Farming is a more important part of the economy in the eastern piedmont 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 the state, 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 many 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 along the coast.

Only a handful of mountain or coastal counties are largely urban (those with more than 250 people per square mile in 2010):

- Buncombe (Asheville) and Henderson (directly south of Asheville) in the mountains, and



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 2010, North Carolina's population passed 9.5 million people.

- Cumberland (Fayetteville), New Hanover (Wilmington), and Pitt (Greenville) on the coastal plain.

For county statistics click the county on the map on this site:
[U.S. Bureau of Census](#).

In the News:

[Can NC close the urban-rural gap?](#)

Population Changes and County Government

A change in the number of residents means a change in the demand for services, as well as a change 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 still others have experienced a decrease in population. Overall, the population of the state more than doubled from 1950 to 2010; the population grew from 4,061,929 to 9,535,483 in that period. But most of the increase was concentrated in about half of the state's counties. The map shows how each county's population changed during that time.

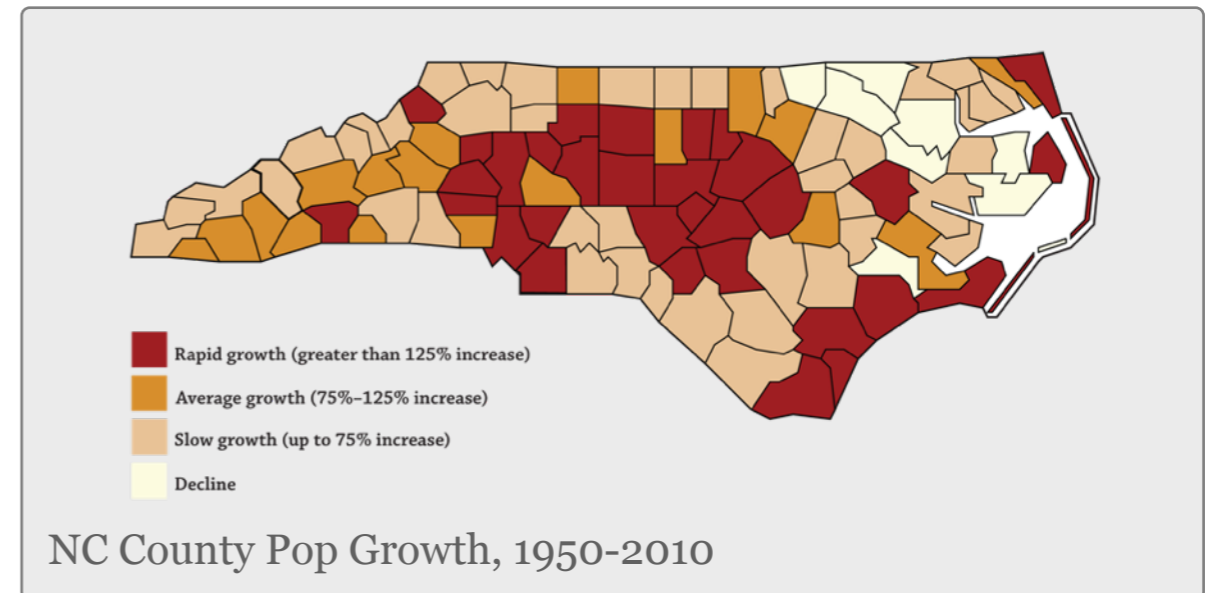
Three kinds of development have contributed most to population growth.

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). For more information about the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process that has contributed to the growth of Fort Bragg, Cumberland County, and the surrounding area since 2005, visit this website.
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 to 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 growth creates need for additional government services. Not only are there more people to be served, but the kinds of services needed may also change as the population increases. 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.

Not all counties gained population, however. In North Carolina, many counties that are primarily agricultural have had little population growth or even experienced a decrease in population since 1950. Machines replaced people for many farming operations during this period. In 1947, 42 percent of North Carolinians worked in agriculture. By 1987 only three percent of North Carolinians worked in agriculture. 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 the counties that lost popu-



lation or had little population growth. These are also usually the counties where per capita income is lowest.

Counties with 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. However, it is both more challenging and more urgent in counties that have not grown for many years.

In the News:

[Johnston Co. planning 2 new high schools](#)

[Rural towns wonder how to keep kids](#)



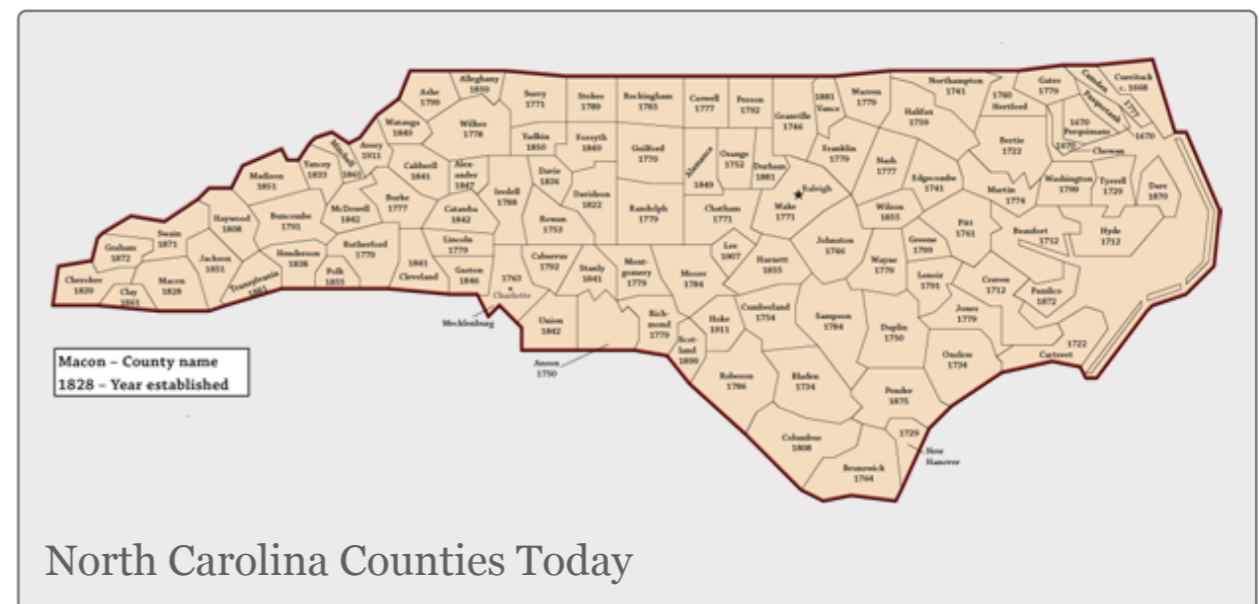
History of North Carolina Counties

Counties were a key part of colonial government in North Carolina. As British control and European settlement extended westward from the coast, the 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 court and the administrators for the county. The justices of the peace appointed constables to enforce the law. The justices appointed a sheriff to collect taxes, and they appointed wardens to care for the poor. The justices also 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.

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.

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. These boards of county commissioners were assigned responsibility for the county's finances, including setting its tax rates. Today, voters in each county elect a board of county commissioners, a sheriff, and a register of deeds.

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, for example. 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 by the state that is authorized 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 135,000 residents in 2010. In this resource, we often refer to all municipalities as “cities.”

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

Municipal corporations 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 municipality’s “owners”—the citizens of the municipality—elect a board, which is responsible for running the municipality. Because a municipality is a corporation, a citizen’s liability for municipal debts is limited to the amount of tax the citizen owes the municipality.

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. 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 taxicabs 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 have authority to make and enforce laws and to levy taxes.

In addition to following its own charter, each North Carolina municipality must also obey state laws and regulations. Some laws apply to all 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.

A new city is generally incorporated after the development of a settlement in the area. Some grew up around county courthouses and were then incorporated. Others, like Ahsokie, 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 at the end of the Civil War.

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 2011, annexation by ordinance can be overturned by a petition from the owners of sixty percent of parcels of property in the annexed area.

In the News:

11 votes bar Rougemont from incorporation



Caption: People whose houses are close to each other need a sufficient supply of safe water. Individual wells for each house are likely to become contaminated and may not provide enough water for fighting fires. Municipal governments solve these problems by providing public water systems and fire departments. (Photo Credit: Town of Matthews)

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 many North Carolina cities the governing board is called the 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 [8-F-1] 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.

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 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.



Photo Credit: City of Belmont

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 re-

cruit applicants for city jobs, screen job candidates, and hire new employees. Department heads organize and supervise the employees in their departments.

The people who live in a city also play an important role in providing municipal services. Volunteers help supervise 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 their community. They make and enforce laws to deal with public problems.

In the News:

Help wanted: Town manager and police chief

Town officials oppose Duke rate increase

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 established 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 offenses . . .”

“The watch will take up all suspicious and disorderly persons, who may be found in or strolling about the streets, after nine o’clock at night . . .”

“On 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 dan-

ger 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.

Population of Municipality	Number of Municipalities of This Size	Total Population in Municipalities of This Size
Fewer than 2,500	331	280,806
2,500 to 9,999	145	694,018
10,000 to 49,000	66	1,382,568
50,000 or more	16	2,913,183
All cities and towns	558	5,270,575

2010 Municipal Population Table



The Town of Cornelius honors its history. Like many North Carolina municipalities, it grew up around a cotton mill. (Photo Credit: Town of Cornelius)

In the mid-nineteenth century, the North Carolina General Assembly (the state legislature) 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, 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. More people 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 Nineteen 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 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 2010, Charlotte had more than 730,000 residents, Raleigh had more than 400,000, Greensboro had almost 270,000, and Durham and Winston-Salem each had over 225,000. Most North Carolina municipalities continue to be small places, however. As the table shows, nearly sixty percent of North Carolina had fewer than 2,500 residents in 2010.

Local Public Services

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.





Photo Credit: City of Lenoir

Safe drinking water, regular trash collection, recreational opportunities, and police protection are among the many services provided by local governments. You and your family may use 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.

What makes a service public?

Local governments provide services when public officials decide there are important community-wide benefits. These include the benefits of seeing that everyone has access to essential services, as well as improvements for the community as a whole. If only the direct user benefits from a service, private business can provide the service. People will buy a service because they want it. No public money or authority is needed. Some local public services benefit both the people who use them directly and the wider community. Other local public services have no direct users, but improve or protect the community in general.



Photo Credit: Town of Nags Head

The key to “public” service is who pays for—not who delivers—the service. Regardless of who produces public services,

government pays for them. Governments raise most of the money to pay for services through taxes. For some services, the local government charges users of the service to help cover the cost of providing the service. For example, most governments charge their customers for the water they use because they are the people who use it directly.

Local governments produce many services, but many public services are not delivered by government employees. Although local governments often set up departments to operate water supply facilities, to collect trash, or to police the community, in many cases the government may hire a private business, a nonprofit organization, or another government to produce a service. Rather than hiring government employees to produce the service, the government buys the service from a business or nonprofit organization. Government services are privatized when they are bought from a business.

Local governments provide both user-focused public services and community-focused public services.

Under state law, North Carolina municipalities and counties provide somewhat different public services.

Types of Public Services

People expect local government services to benefit the entire community. Some services, like safe drinking water, benefit the people who use them directly and also the broader community, by reducing threat of diseases carried by unclean water.



Photo Credit: City of Morganton

Others, like crime prevention, make everyone generally safer, but have no direct users.

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,



Photo Credit: City of Lenoir

- health services,
- public schools, and
- streets and sidewalks.

User- focused public services have both individual and community-wide benefits. 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 also supports firefighting. Safe, efficient waste collection and disposal help keep the community healthy and attractive. Public recreation also supports a healthier, happier community.

Community-focused public services have no individual users. Instead, community-focused public services involve building a stronger community or protecting the public from harm. This may involve a wide range of government programs: picking up litter, offering incentives for business relocation, or banning smoking in public buildings, for example.

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.

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 chart lists all the major services that North Carolina county and municipal governments have authority to provide under state law. No single government provides all of the services on this list.

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

- elections,

For more information about each county’s board of elections, access this [website](#).

- social services,
- public health and mental health,
- public schools,
- emergency medial services,
- custody of deeds and vital records,

Click here to access the website of the North Carolina Association Registers of Deeds.

- jails and support for the courts and juvenile detention facilities,

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

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------|
| 1. Community colleges | 8. Public health services |
| 2. Cooperative extension | 9. Public schools |
| 3. Court facilities (construction and maintenance only) | 10. Register of Deeds |
| 4. Elections | 11. Social services |
| 5. Emergency medical services | 12. Soil and water conservation |
| 6. Jails | 13. Tax assessment |
| 7. Mental health services | 14. Youth detention facilities |

Services Provided by Both Counties and Municipalities

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| 1. Airports | 18. Law enforcement |
| 2. Ambulance service | 19. Libraries |
| 3. Animal shelters | 20. Open space and parks |
| 4. Art galleries and museums | 21. Planning, land use regulation, and code enforcement |
| 5. Auditoriums/coliseums | 22. Property acquisition, sales, and disposition |
| 6. Building inspection | 23. Public housing |
| 7. Buses/public transit | 24. Recreation programs |
| 8. Cable television regulation | 25. Rescue squads |
| 9. Community and economic development | 26. Senior citizen programs |
| 10. Community appearance | 27. Sewer systems |
| 11. Emergency management | 28. Solid waste collection and disposal |
| 12. Environmental protection | 29. Storm drainage |
| 13. Fire protection | 30. Tax collection |
| 14. Historic preservation | 31. Veterans’ services |
| 15. Human relations | 32. Water supply and protection |
| 16. Industrial development | |
| 17. Job training | |

Services Usually Provided by Municipalities Only

- | | |
|---------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Cemeteries | 5. Street lighting |
| 2. Electric systems | 6. Streets |
| 3. Gas systems | 7. Traffic control |
| 4. Sidewalks | 8. Urban development |

Municipal and County Services List

For more information about the county sheriffs, visit the [website of the North Carolina Sheriffs' Association](#).

- cooperative extension, and

To learn more about the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, access [this website](#).

- soil and water conservation.

For more information about soil and water conservation districts, visit [this website](#).

Most counties also support community colleges.

You can learn more about the community colleges by clicking [here](#).

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

For links to each county's tax assessment office, visit [this website](#).

Municipal governments in North Carolina (but not counties) have authority to provide streets and sidewalks, electricity, natural gas, urban development, and cemeteries. These are optional services that cities and towns can choose to provide. Most do provide streets, sidewalks, and street lights [4-J], but fewer operate electric utilities and even fewer provide natural gas service.

More than thirty 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 pay for and carry out this broad set of public services. Local governing boards decide whether to provide these services, at what level to provide them, and how to deliver them to the public.

Water Supply

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.

Public water supplies provide safe drinking water and also 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 wastes.

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.

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. They continued to rely on unsanitary sources of water. However during the Twentieth Century, public water supply, like many other services, became a local government responsibility. 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. This arrangement places the cost of these services directly on the people who use them, rather than paying for them with 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.

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.

Water Supply Sources

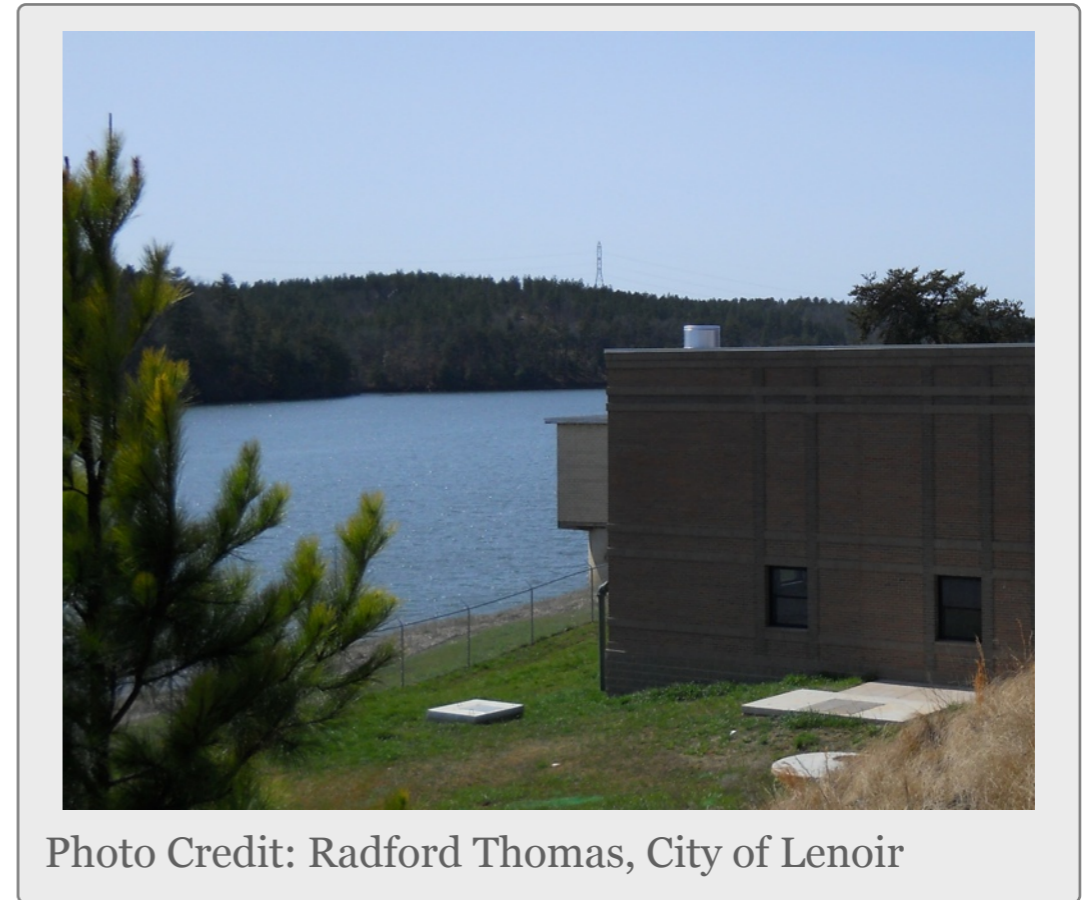
Wells are a major source of water in North Carolina, especially on the coast and coastal plain. Wells tap into underground water. They allow water to be pumped out of the layers of sand, gravel, or porous rock where it is trapped. In places where there are large pockets of underground water, wells can 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.

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 wells. In these places, local governments now have to take the salt out of 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. Where there is no convenient river with enough water, reservoirs must be built to catch and hold rainwater until it is needed. 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.

All of the 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.



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 has to build 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 that are able to get all the water they need from wells, rivers, or reservoirs that also serve other purposes.

In the News:

County's well project may be ready to bid by early spring

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.

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 put-

ting 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.



Water is treated and tested to be sure it is safe for drinking. (Photo Credit: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Utilities)

Surface water can also pick up many pollutants:

- 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.

Storm water 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.

In the News:

City doubled water treatment capacity

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 towers such as this one in Salisbury are vital for providing citizens with water. (Photo Credit: Karen Wilkinson, City of Salisbury)

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.

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.



Nags Head employee, Shane Baum, paints a fire hydrant. (Photo Credit: Town of Nags Head)

Public water systems need to deliver enough water for fire-fighting, as well as enough for residential, commercial, and industrial uses.

In the News:

The great debate about automatic water meters

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 should be 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 rain water 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.

Because building storm sewers and drainage systems, creating retention ponds, and protecting natural buffers along streams can all be expensive, some local government 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 the user has. This is be-

cause 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 bill for water and sanitary sewer services.

In the News:

[Development plans are under way in Richlands](#)

[Sewer project for Veterans Park moves forward](#)

Solid Waste Management

Everything people no longer want or need has to go somewhere. Solid wastes—old newspapers, food scraps, used packaging, grass clippings—have to 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 disposal of solid waste in three ways:

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



Credit: City of Morganton



Waste awaiting burial at the Orange County landfill. (Photo Credit: Orange County)

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. Cutting out the use of packaging and disposable items, for example, can reduce waste considerably. Recycling and safe disposal of waste depend on public participation.

In many communities, people also help reduce what governments have to 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. Waste paper can be recycled to make new paper, for instance, and old glass bottles can become new bottles. Some recycling can be done at home. Leaves can be



Residents bring hazardous materials to a Catawba County collection site for safe disposal. (Photo Credit: Catawba County)

turned into mulch; fruit and vegetable peels into compost. One problem is that many people are not used to sorting their trash or reusing it at home, but that is changing.

Local governments encourage recycling by urging people to separate materials that can be recycled and by telling people how they can reuse materials. Often residents are asked to sort materials for recycling, but recycling can also be done more expensively when materials have been mixed together. 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 is much less expensive and much more frequently done, but it requires active public support 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 with another kind of truck than for solid waste collection. 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. An alternative is for local governments to 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.

Some cities and counties are also actually making recycled products themselves. Several cities and counties have begun to use yard wastes (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 de-

mand for the 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 is an excellent way to save money because it reduces the amount of material going into landfills.



Photo Credit: City of Concord

In the News:

[Duplin saves money with recycling](#)

[Electronics recycling event to help students in need](#)

Solid Waste Collection



Catawba County workers collect harmful chemicals people have brought to a collection site for safe disposal. (Photo Credit: Catawba County)

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. (Usually, these are city crews and trucks. In some municipalities, however, the city hires private companies to collect solid wastes.) 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 or offices. Often, however, businesses and other users 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.

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 chemi-

icals, tires, and batteries) must be kept separate and cannot be collected through the regular collection system.



Photo Credit: Town of Black Mountain

You and all the other people in the community 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 wastes.

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 assure 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 finally full, it must be covered more deeply with 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, of constructing the landfill, and of operating it according to state and federal regulations are considerable.

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 wastes 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.

Some counties decide not to operate a landfill or incinerator. Instead, they pay another county or a private company to dis-

pose of the solid waste generated in the county. These counties typically build transfer stations where wastes collected in the county can be loaded onto very large trucks or railroad cars to be carried to a landfill in another county.



Photo Credit: Catawba County

To help pay the costs of solid waste disposal, many counties charge users tipping fees for all 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 of 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 by buying products made from recycled materials.

In the News:

[County, towns talk garbage](#)

[From liability to potential asset: the landfill gas to energy project](#)

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 to relax. 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 assure 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 of these operations and to plan and coordinate them. Many directors have studied recreation administration in college.



Photo Credit: City of Morganton

Not all of the people who help staff recreation programs are government employees, of course. 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 cen-

ters for their summer camps, afterschool programs, or activities for the elderly.

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

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 needs to be designed and built for public use. After all, a park or recreation center is a success only if people use it. But heavy use creates much wear and tear. Thus, parks also require constant maintenance. Equipment wears out and must be repaired or 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.

In the News:

Grant gives teen center some room to grow

Grant sought to update Legion Hall

Public Safety



Photo Credit: City of Havelock

Local governments provide the first responders who protect people's lives and property. Most communities have a separate department 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.

In many cities and counties, a special emergency telephone number, 911, reaches all these public safety agencies. Trained telephone operators ask the caller to describe the problem and its location. Tracking systems also often allow 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 will be ordered 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



Photo Credit: Catawba County

call may also serve as dispatcher. In larger centers, the work may be 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



Photo Credit: Town of Manteo

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 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. They learn how to gather information and evidence.

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, rather than having 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. In many cities

and counties, a special emergency telephone number, 911, reaches police and sheriff's departments. Trained telephone operators ask the caller to describe the problem and the location.

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.

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

In the News:

[Internet helps catch criminals](#)

[Police sgt. finds joy in the little things](#)

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



Photo Credit: Town of Chapel Hill

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, of course. Fire departments must be prepared to respond all the time. Both municipal and volunteer fire departments often pay firefighters to work shifts of several days at a time. One reason some volunteer fire department now also hire some firefighters is to have personnel at the fire station to respond immediately to a dispatch. In many places, volunteers' jobs are often many miles outside the area served by the volunteer department making it difficult for volunteers to respond quickly.

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 North Carolina Response Rating System (NCCRS) is a rating of fire departments that the State Fire Marshal conducts for homeowners insurance companies to use in setting rates for fire insurance premiums. Indeed, 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.



Credit: Town of Chapel Hill

A homebuyer's guide to NCCRS is available online at this website.

For more information about local fire departments, access the listing on this web page.

In the News:

Family camaraderie burns within them

In the line of 'fire'

Emergency Medical Response

People who suffer accidents or sudden illness often require prompt medical attention in order 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 their patients to hospitals for more 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



Photo Credit: Orange County

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 employees 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.



Photo Credit: Michael J. Legeros

You can learn more about emergency medical services by visiting this link.

For a county-by-county listing of emergency medical response or-

ganizations, access this PDF.

In the News:

County celebrates step toward improving medical response time

DSS preparing for future storm emergencies

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 the county has to deal with each sort 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.



Flooding at Kill Devil Hills following Hurricane Irene. (Photo Credit: Town of Kill Devil Hills)

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, 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.



Volunteers give displaced residents food and safe drinking water following a disaster in Martin County. (Photo Credit: The Williamston Enterprise, Martin County)

In the News:

[Fire marshal takes on emergency duties](#)

[What if Wednesday's tornado had hit Catawba County?](#)

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 must operate food stamps and Medicaid programs according to strict federal regulations. Counties must follow these regulations in determining who is eligible to receive assistance from these programs and in organizing and operating their departments of social services to carry out the programs. This is because a majority of 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 chose to assign administrative responsibility to counties. Still, the state (which also pays part of the cost) has to assure the U.S. government that federal requirements are being met. Strict regulation of county operations is one way to do this.

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 really 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 also drive up the cost for those who do receive benefits.

In order to provide greater flexibility in meeting people's needs for financial assistance, North Carolina counties also operate Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) programs. 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. TANF can provide families money for a limited period of time while the parents find new jobs. TANF also provides job training so that people can qualify for higher paying jobs and helps pay for childcare, transportation, or other services the parents may need in order to keep a job.

For more information about North Carolina's TANF program, access the state Department of Health and Human Services website.

Many counties have also established their own general assistance programs. These optional programs help people deal



Photo Credit: Orange County

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.

[For contact information for each of North Carolina's 100 county departments of social services, see this county directory \(PDF\).](#)

In the News:

[New Social Services director named](#)

[Wake to open benefits office: New social services hub off Capital will serve a needy and fast-growing population](#)

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.

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 af-

ford health care. County nurses also care for people in their homes and at school. They also give shots to prevent certain diseases.

Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, And Substance Abuse (MHDDSA)

County government's role in MHDDSA is to help support a Local Management Entity (LME). Most counties partner with a number of other counties to form an LME.

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. Some LMEs still provide a few services to help people facing these challenges. However, state policy requires that LMEs stop delivering services directly to clients. Instead, the LME role is to arrange for these services from a variety of nonprofit and for-profit organizations. The LME is supposed to see that each client gets an appropriate set of services and that costs for those services are kept low.

In the News:

[Health department gets seal of approval](#)

Public Schools

In North Carolina, the 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, how-



Photo Credit: City of Belmont

ever. Teachers are hired by local school boards, and local school boards are also responsible for deciding to keep 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 in all of their 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 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 some counties still have more than one. Each local school system has its own elected board.

In some 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 boards and operate independently of state and local policies for public schools. Typically, they are open to students through a lottery.

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, to select teachers and other school staff, to prepare and administer the budget, and to 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.

The 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 result in making students responsible citizens—people who take pride in their community and help make it a better place to live and work.

In the News:

[DPS seeks input on magnets, bond money](#)

[Schools: We need more money](#)

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 city or town 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.

This means that 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. This is to insure that the streets will be durable, as



Photo Credit: City of Lenoir

well as safe and convenient. Often they also require sidewalks and streetlights as a part of new construction. In some cases, do not take ownership of new streets, sidewalks, and streetlights. Instead, they leave ownership and responsibility for their maintenance with the home owners' association [1-D] 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.

Streets need to allow safe and convenient travel. 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 contribute to convenience by making it possible to walk, rather than drive for short trips. Streetlights contribute to the safety and convenience of both drivers and walkers.

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.

Why are so many streets the state's responsibility? Rural public roads in North Carolina are all part of the state highway system. 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 new areas, state-maintained roads in those areas remain part of the state highway system.

In the News:

[DOT bends on Alston widening](#)

[Cameras credited with cutting crashes](#)

Building a Stronger Community

Making the community a better place to live is a major goal of local governments. In one way, of course, all public services help improve the community. User-focused services (like solid waste collection and criminal investigation) help the people who use the service directly, their neighbors, and even people 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.



But some public services do not have direct users. Instead, these services are specifically intended to better the entire community. 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 for the benefit of an entire neighborhood or other community.

Governments support improvement of the general community by:

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

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 encouraging people not to throw trash away in public places. (“Keep Our City Beautiful” campaigns are an example.) Finally, governments can 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.



Photo Credit: Wayne County

People sometimes disagree about what local government should do to improve the community. One source of disagreement is differences about how much change is desirable.

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 concerns 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 important. People might also have differing opinions about the kinds of new industry that

government should encourage, or even whether 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 live and work. Volunteers or non-profit 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.

Counties throughout the state have programs to control potentially harmful animals. The public health department may spray for mosquitoes or poison rats. Many local governments also have an animal control office to deal with wild or abandoned animals. Voluntary animal protection societies often

contract with local government to operate shelters for stray animals and to encourage responsible pet ownership.



Residents and Town of Matthews employees complete landscaping for the town's new pocket park. (Photo Credit: Town of Matthews)

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. The programs also prevent old buildings and neighborhoods from becoming run-down and help renovate those that are run-down. 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 the inventory

may encourage 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 the deterioration or to encourage the 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.

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 convicted of driving while intoxicated or other offenses.

Local governments also encourage garden clubs or civic organizations to help with community beautification and litter control. The general public can be encouraged to help, too. Campaigns publicize the benefits of an attractive community and urge people to “pick up, paint up, fix up.” Contests to see who can pick up the most litter or produce the most beautiful flowerbeds provide a way to recognize outstanding efforts. Often, much of the work to improve the physical condition of a

community is done by volunteers who give their time and effort to making their neighborhoods safer and more attractive.

In the News:

[City earns EPA grant for cleanup](#)

[N.C. counties strain to fight Irene's mosquitoes](#)

Improving the Community’s Economic Condition

Local governments are interested in attracting and keeping businesses in their communities because businesses provide jobs and pay taxes. The people in a community need jobs to earn income. Taxes paid by businesses can help reduce the



Photo Credit: Town of Wilkesboro

taxes residents have to pay to support local government. For these reasons, many local governments seek to strengthen the 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.

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

More than 75 North Carolina counties and cities have formed economic development commissions. These commissions collect information about the local economy and work force, advertise the advantages of their communities, and help businesses organize support they may need from local government and others. For example, the economic development commis-

sion may work with businesses, local schools, and community colleges to help the schools and colleges develop training for jobs the businesses have available. Or the economic development commission may work with a business development corporation to create an industrial park or to renew downtown.

Cities often focus on economic development efforts on downtowns or other areas with empty buildings. They may work with counties or others. They may also work with other cities to encourage economic development. For example, more than 60 North Carolina cities that operate electric utilities have joined together in an association called **ElectriCities**.

[You can read more about the economic development activities of **ElectriCities** by visiting its website.](#)

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 mountains, the coast, and the sand hills in the south central piedmont. In addition, all of the largest cities in the state actively seek to host conventions, adding another aspect to the tourism industry. Local governments that belong to the Destination Marketing Association of North Carolina sponsor a web site and conduct other promotional activities to attract paying visitors to their communities.

[Click here to learn more about the work of the **Destination Marketing Association of North Carolina**.](#)

Special efforts to promote tourism include festivals, like Wilkesboro's "Merlefest," and outdoor dramas, like Manteo's "Lost Colony." Advertising is important, too. Brochures and maps identify interesting places and events to entice visitors. Coliseums, stadiums, museums, and arts centers also help to attract tourists. Cities and counties support these places, at least in part, for the tourist business they generate.

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 help attract tourists as well. These same features may also help attract new businesses and industries.

In addition, an abundant supply of safe water, adequate 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. Thus, good "user-focused" services also contribute to economic development.

In the News:

[City Council approves downtown improvements plan](#)

Improving Social Relationships in the Community

Local governments work to improve social relations in their communities. 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, through 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.



Photo Credit: Caswell County

Human relations commissions were established primarily to find ways to ease racial tensions and to eliminate racial discrimination. Even today, some racial stereotypes that began centuries ago [5-C-1] affect relationships among North Carolinians.

Human relations commissions hold public meetings to discuss potential problems among racial groups. Much of their work entails encouraging people of different races to talk and listen to one another. The commissions try to help people realize that cultural differences do not need to be threatening. An important step in eliminating racism involves getting past stereotypes and recognizing each person as an individual.

In recent years, 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, North Carolina was home to over 614,000 foreign-born people in 2006, making up 6.9 percent of the state's total population. Nearly 60 percent 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.

For more information about immigrants in North Carolina, see *Immigrants in North Carolina: A Fact Sheet*.

Human relations commissions also deal with problems of intolerance and discrimination based religion, or gender. For ex-

ample, 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 religions and 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.

A somewhat different social problem concerns relationships between women and men. Many deeply held attitudes about the roles of men and women developed when almost all women were married and worked full time at home. In recent years these social patterns have changed. Now most women work outside the home. Many women are single heads of households. Laws and social expectations about how men should treat women are changing. Married women now have the same property rights as their husbands, for example. Domestic violence is no longer treated as a "family" matter, but is now a crime of assault, which means the police and the courts are now responsible for domestic violence cases.

Controversies about marriage also arise. Domestic partnerships are increasingly common and some local governments and private employers provide insurance benefits to an employee's domestic partner. Human relations commissions help set up ways for men and women who are concerned about these changes to communicate with each other in order to understand the issues and each other better.

In the News:

Police chief reorganizes department

Human relations panel is proposed for Pender County

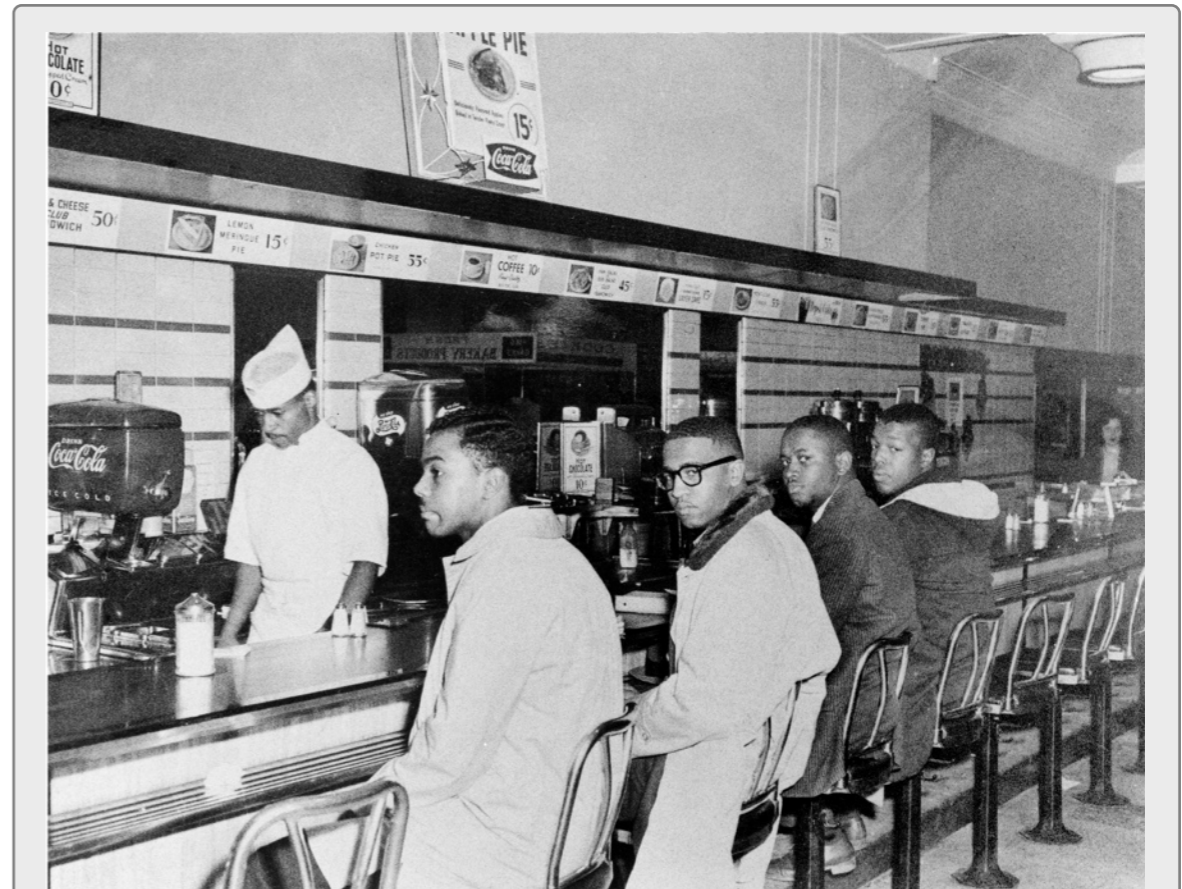
City named to top 20 in U.S. for its efforts to integrate Hispanics

History of Racial Stereotypes in North Carolina

European settlers fought with Native Americans (whom the English colonists called “Indians”) 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 Indian wars and during 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. By the end of the nineteenth century, the North Carolina General Assembly had devised means of keep-

ing most nonwhite men from voting, and the federal government refused to enforce the Constitution.



Four African American college students sit in protest at a whites-only lunch counter during the second day of protest at a Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina. From left: Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, Billy Smith, and Clarence Henderson. (Photo Credit: Jack Moebes, News & Record Staff Photographer)

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 was segregation ended and public facilities fully integrated.

NC Learn provides information about the Civil Rights Movement in North Carolina. Click these links to learn more about [the struggle for civil rights, 1946–1959](#), and [achieving civil rights, 1960–1965](#).

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.

NC Learn also provides information about on-going discord over racial and other social stereotypes. Find out more about [protest, change, and backlash: the 1960s](#), and [the limits of change: the 1970s](#).

Today some people still may hold stereotypes that demean others, but many have overcome those attitudes. In North Carolina, local government facilities and services are now open to all.



Photo Credit: City of Morganton

Preventing Crime in the Community

A large number of 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 non-violent ways 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. They



Photo Credit: Town of Matthews

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.

For example, Greensboro police set up Police Neighborhood Resource Centers in the city's public housing communities. Each of these police mini-stations had two officers permanently assigned there. The officers patrolled the housing communities on foot and got to know the residents. In addition to criminal investigations and emergency response services, these officers helped residents get the social services and

health services they needed. Some services were even provided right in the mini-station. The officers also organized recreation for neighborhood youth. As a result of the police officers' efforts, people began to trust each other and 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.



Photo Credit: Town of Matthews

Other local government departments and community organizations may also work with residents of a neighborhood 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.

In the News:

Kicking crime to the curb

Vigilante Grannies' are on the crime case

Deciding what is better for the community

Proposals for public programs to improve the community are usually presented long before any action 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 media and news media both play an important role in spreading word of a new proposal 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



Photo Credit: Downtown Goldsboro Development Corporation/City of Goldsboro

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.

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 Twitter 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 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 or not to approve the pro-

posal. 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.

Often, proposals are changed to reflect the concerns of opponents while continuing to meet the most important objectives of the proponents. Sometimes, however, 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, commu-

nity groups, schools, and other parts of the community is very important for many community improvement activities. For example, programs that are designed to encourage people to fix up their property, pick up litter, or work with their neighbors to improve community relations all depend on the people in a community to succeed.

In the News:

[North Topsail Beach to proceed with beach nourishment project](#)

[Wilmington mayoral candidates debate large business incentives](#)

Protecting the Public from Harm

One of the most powerful tools local governments have 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 set speed limits and other regulations for traffic on city streets.

To regulate an activity, the local governing board must first have the appropriate authority from the state. Local governments have been given authority to regulate many kinds of behavior. If 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. Next, the local governing board must adopt an ordinance—a legal description by the board of the behavior that is being regulated and the actions the government will take against people who do not follow the regulation.

[Download an example of a local ordinance regulating open burning for the Town of Wadesboro.](#)

Frequently people disagree about whether a particular activity is harmful enough to require regulation. Local governing boards often seek public comments and suggestions before passing regulations. 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. People also often speak directly to board members about proposed regula-

tions they particularly favor or oppose. However, the decision to regulate must be made by the local governing board. Unless a majority of the board thinks regulation is appropriate, no action will be taken. Except for a few cities (like Greensboro) that have initiative and referendum provisions in their charters, an ordinance can be adopted only by the board.

Governments regulate either by requiring certain actions or by 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.

Frequently, people who violate an ordinance 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 handicapped. Violations of some ordinances may also



Photo Credit: City of Morganton

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 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. Many of the laws against disruptive behavior are made by the state General Assembly. For example, state laws declare cer-

tain acts to be crimes. Crimes are offenses against all of 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.



Credit: City of Morganton

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 and threatens the 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. The city council itself can decide to put up stop signs or traffic signals or to set speed limits on most city streets, but not on some of the busiest. The city council must request state action to regulate traffic on thoroughfares. Because rural public roads are the state's responsibility, county governments must ask for state action to control traffic in unincorporated areas.

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 40 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). Not everyone agreed, however. Often, as change occurs, some people continue to hold on to their old views of an activity, while others

come to see its harmfulness quite differently. For another example see the controversy over regulation of smoking in public places.



Photo Credit: Seth Cutter

In the News:

Commissioners: Dog ban may be necessary

Truckers ask Trinity to delay ordinance enforcement

How Changing Views about Smoking Led to Regulation of Smoking

One example of how local government regulations change is the controversy over regulation of smoking in public places.

The old view was that smoking was not a public problem. In fact, the use of tobacco was even seen by some North Carolinians as a sort of patriotic duty. Tobacco was North Carolina's chief crop. Much of the state's economy depended on raising tobacco, wholesaling it, and manufacturing 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 non-smokers' health. This research increased the conviction among many people that smoking should be prohibited in public places. And as fewer and 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 the Greensboro City Council a petition asking the 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 tobacco companies and workers in Greensboro. (More than 2,300 people were employed in the tobacco industry there.) The city council held a public hearing on the request and then appointed a committee to study the issue. The com-

mittee was made up of representatives from the council, the county commission, the county health department, and business owners and managers. It finally held its first meeting in July 1989.

Ms. Foley 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 provisions for initiative and referendum.)

The GASP petition called for the council to vote on the ordinance regulating smoking in public places. It also called for a referendum 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. Still, that was more than the number necessary to require a vote. The council refused to adopt the ordinance, and 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.

That did not end the controversy, however. Tobacco workers in Greensboro began an initiative petition of their own. This time, the petition called for a referendum to repeal the smoking regulation ordinance, which the voters adopted in 1989. The petitioners collected the required number of signatures, and another election was held in 1991. In this 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.

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

In the News:

[Health board tables tobacco ban](#)

Regulating the Use of Property

Local governments regulate the use of property to protect people's health and safety, to protect property values and encourage economic development, and to protect the physical envi-

ronment. Several different kinds of property regulation are commonly used. Through zoning ordinances local government specify the kinds of uses allowed in various parts 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.



Photo Credit: Catawba County

Other local regulations also help protect the physical environment or community appearance. Local housing codes establish basic requirements for a place to be adequate for someone's living place. 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 which 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.



Photo Credit: Town of Aberdeen

Local governments may regulate activities that cause soil erosion or regulate building in flood plains or in reservoir watersheds. Local governments can pro-

hibit signs they decide are too large or disturbing. They can

regulate changes to the outside appearance of buildings in historic districts.

In the News:

[Council OKs rental inspections](#)

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?)

On the basis of 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 narrative

become the official land use plan for the community, called a Comprehensive Plan. [For an example see the Land Use Plan-CAMA County 2012 \(PDF\).](#)



Photo Credit: Town of Summerfield

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 have authority to regulate land use only over the parts of the county not subject to city planning. Because of cities' ETJ, the county land use planning area is usually smaller than the unincorporated area of the county. By 2010, all but five North Carolina counties had adopted land use plans.

North Carolina's Coastal Area Management Act (CAMA) imposes state land use regulations in coastal counties.

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 non-regulatory 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 [6-B-2] and subdivision regulation [6-B-3] are systems of regulation based on a land use plan.

Because of improved computing capabilities, many governments have set up geographic information systems (GIS) to visually map and store 'layers' of data about streets, water lines, neighborhoods, and other geographic features of their communities. Most North Carolina counties and many large municipalities upload GIS maps and data to their websites for public viewing.

In the News:

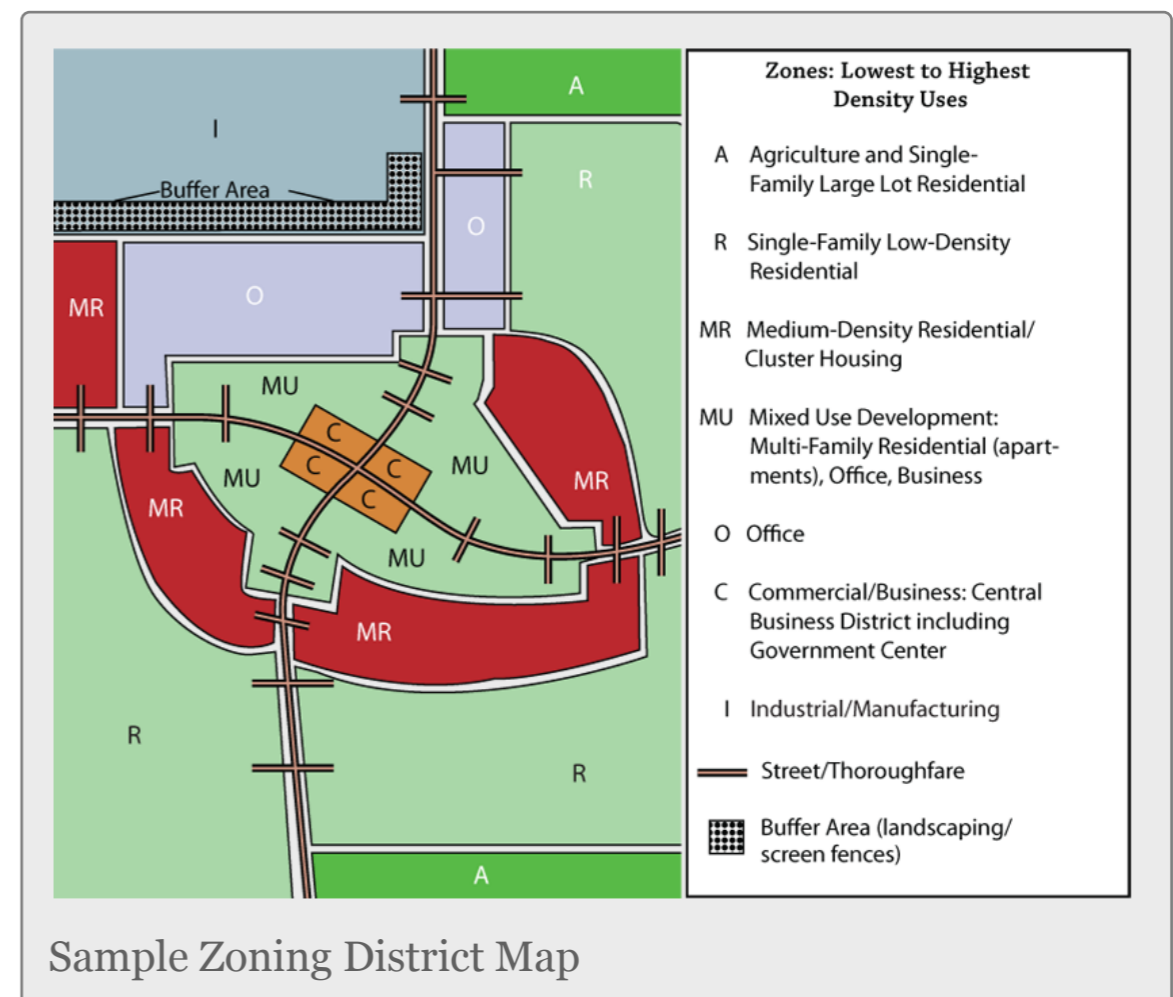
Big-picture plans at council retreat

Currituck says no to island living—But approves wind energy ordinance

Zoning

Zoning sets up restrictions on the use of land. The local governing board establishes categories of land use. Then the categories are applied to specific areas of the jurisdiction, creating zones for different kinds of development. The categories specify the kinds of activities the land can and cannot be used for and various requirements for developing and using the land.

For example, one residential category might be for single-family homes. That category might prohibit any apartments, office buildings, or industrial plants in the zone. It might also



require that each lot must have a minimum size and that buildings be constructed a specified distance from the boundaries of the lot and under a maximum building height. Another zoning category might be commercial. It might prohibit industrial activity in the zone and require a certain number of parking spaces be built for every 1,000 square feet of commercial floor space built. Districts allowing mixed-use developments, such as apartments, offices, and low intensity business uses that are compatible in the same area, can also be regulated by the zoning code.

To develop property that has been zoned, the builder must obtain a zoning certificate 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 the local and state building codes.

Zoning applies to both existing and new uses of property. For example, 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 non-conforming use. However, expanding the store or changing its use to a factory might be prohibited by the zoning ordinance.

Minor exceptions to the zoning regulations can be made by the board of adjustment. This board is appointed by the council or commission. Boards of adjustment for cities with extra-

territorial 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.

Because major land use and zoning decisions can affect property values, traffic levels, noise levels, and many other aspects of life in a community, they are frequently controversial. To ensure opportunities for public discussion, all zone 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 primarily agricultural, although popular resistance to having local government regulate land use has also prevented the adoption of zoning in some more densely populated counties.

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.



Photo Credit: Town of Morrisville

Subdivision regulation is intended to prevent developments on land that cannot support them (because it floods, for example, or because the soil does not allow septic tanks, and no sewers were provided). Subdivision regulation is intended to ensure that adequate streets 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 subdivisions, subdivision regulation is being used more and more. Rural counties where little development is occurring are least likely to have subdivision regulation.

In the News:

Housing development The Retreat sees opposition

Paying for Local Government

Local government services and programs cost money. Cities and counties have to pay the people who work for them. Local governments must also provide the buildings, equipment, and supplies for conducting public business. They must pay for services they buy from businesses or community groups. In North Carolina, local government services and programs cost billions of dollars each year.



In 2010, North Carolina county governments spent more than \$12.5 billion, and North Carolina cities and towns spent about \$10.3 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 very strict requirements that local governments must follow in managing their money. This was not always so. During the 1920s, many cities and counties in the state borrowed 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, with the School of Government of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, provides training and advice to local government budget and finance officers.

For more information about the Local Government Commission, visit its website.

You can learn more about the School of Government and how it helps local governments achieve their goals by accessing its homepage.



Concord Mayor Scott Padgett presents the Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting by the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) to Accounting Manager Jessica Jones. Concord has received the designation for more than 22 consecutive years. (Photo Credit: L.J. Weslowsk, City of Concord)

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 dollars.

At the end of each fiscal year, every local government in North Carolina prepares an annual financial report. This document summarizes all of 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.

In the News:

County budget includes salary, fee increases

Local Government Budgets

A budget is a plan for raising and spending money. North Carolina law requires each city and each county to adopt an annual budget every year, including planned revenue and expenditure for the following 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 the budgeted 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:

$$\text{Expenditures} = \text{Revenues} + \text{Change in Fund Balance}$$

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 fund balance is like the local government's savings account. It helps the government deal with unexpected situations. Local government revenues come from property taxes, sales taxes and other local taxes, and user fees and other sources. However, the budget is based on revenue estimates—educated guesses 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 estimated revenues. Then if actual revenues are less than expected, they 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.



Budget office personnel (like these in Wayne County) gather information from department heads to assist their manager in developing a budget to propose to the governing board. (Photo Credit: Wayne County)

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. (“Fisc” is an old word for treasury.) “Fiscal year” is often abbreviated “FY.” FY 2013, for example, means the fiscal year from July 1, 2012, to June 30, 2013. 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 choice of services the local governing board has made. Local government budg-

ets 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 streets. Counties spend a majority of their money on education and human services.

Both revenue and expenditure patterns differ between cities and counties. [See these statewide summaries for FY 2011.](#) The circle graphs show how North Carolina local governments raised and spent their money in the 2010–2011 fiscal year. [\(The most recent figures and additional detail can be found on the state treasurer’s website.\)](#)

In the News:

[Sagging economy evident in county budgets](#)

[State is wild card in local budgets](#)

Deciding What to Fund

Several months before a new fiscal year begins in July, each local government department estimates 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 waste 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 should 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 the city plans to annex several neighborhoods, the department may need to add trucks and crews to collect solid waste there. These new expenses for additional service will add to estimated expenditures for the department.

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, employees' salaries may have to be increased in order for the local government to stay competitive with private employers. Salary increases and other city-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 beginning new 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.



UNC School of Government trainers lead a discussion on government budgeting in Morganton. (Photo Credit: City of Morganton)

The governing board reviews the proposed budget. The manager also provides the board information about the current year's budget, expenditures, and revenues. 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 at-

tention 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 should be adopted before the end of the current fiscal year on June 30.

In adopting the budget, the governing board appropriates the expenditures. That is, the board authorizes the amount to be spent for each department during 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 budgeted appropriation to pay that bill. Expenditure records also help the manager coordinate government operations and help in planning the next year's budget. If the government needs to spend more than the amount listed in the budget for a particular purpose, the council (or commission) 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.

In the News:

Clayton fire and EMS funding questioned

Dipping into reserve funds

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 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 fund balance may be sufficient for small projects.



This architect's model shows the expansion to Chapel Hill's public library, which was funded through general obligation (G.O.) bonds. (Photo Credit: Town of Chapel Hill)

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

Borrowing has several disadvantages. Borrowing money 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 money to pay for the project. Another advantage to starting the project right away is that the costs of land and construction may go up while the government waits for funds to become available. While costs go up, the value of the dollar may go down due to inflation. Inflation helps the borrower, however. Because of inflation, the dollars the government pays back may be worth quite a bit less than the dollars the government borrowed several years earlier.

Borrowing for capital projects also places responsibility for paying for the project on those who will use it. Capital projects

have many years of useful life. Borrowing spreads out paying for the project over many of those years.

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 that is necessary to pay the debt. Revenue bonds are repaid from revenues the project itself generates. Thus, if a parking deck is built with revenue bonds, the debt is repaid with fees paid by those who park there.

Under the North Carolina constitution, G.O. bonds cannot be issued unless a majority of the voters approve. A referendum must be held to allow voters to approve or reject any G.O. bonds proposed by city councils or boards of commissioners. G.O. bonds are typically used for non-revenue-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.

The installment-purchase agreement is an alternative to borrowing. Under this arrangement, someone else (a business or a civic group) builds or buys the facility the government

needs. The government then gets to use the facility in return for an annual payment. Unlike rental agreements, however, in this kind of contract, the government is actually buying the property through its payments. Governments cannot pledge their taxing power when entering into installment-purchase agreements. The debt is backed by the property being purchased. If the government fails to complete its payments, the facility still belongs to those who are leasing it to the government.

In the News:

[Archdale prepares for Creekside expansion](#)

[Voters OK \\$20M bond for street paving](#)

[Commish approve re-fi deal, bond sale](#)

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.

Both city and county governments levy property taxes based on the assessed value of property. Assessing establishes the value of property for tax purposes. 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 are supposed to 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.”



Photo Credit: Town of Chapel Hill



The assessed value of commercial property contributes to a city's property tax base. (Photo Credit: Bobby Williams, Town of Huntersville)

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 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.

$$\text{\$100,000} / \text{\$100} = 1,000 \quad \text{\$.50} \times 1,000 = \text{\$500}$$

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. That gives the

amount of tax that needs to be raised for each dollar of assessed value. To get the tax rate per \$100 of assessed value, multiply by 100.

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.

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

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. Many people are quite aware of the property tax. 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. Most people lose track of how much they pay in sales tax.) Also, the connection between the property tax and the services government provides may be difficult to see. After all, people receive pub-

lic services all year long, but the property tax bill comes only once a year.

Most property owners pay their taxes. In North Carolina, more than 97 percent of all property taxes are typically 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.

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.

In the News:

Property reveals likely to show reduced values

Tax increase? Tax hike on the table in budget

County to put 'teeth' in tax collection

Sales and Other Local Taxes

Sales taxes provide a substantial part of most local governments' revenues. The state legislature 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 too.



Photo Credit: Town of Wilkesboro

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 through a referendum, counties may add an additional \$.0025 for a total of \$.0225. (The state levies an additional \$.045 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.

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 on the basis of a population formula or on the basis of the amount of property taxes collected in each jurisdiction. City councils have no control over how much sales tax revenue the city receives.

Other Local Taxes

Local governments have authority to levy taxes within their jurisdiction 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



Photo Credit: City of Belmont

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.

In the News:

Why'd you do that?

Towns, Orange County discuss sales tax split

User Fees

Local governments charge customers for many of the services they use. These charges are called user fees. 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 the local electric service and charge customers for the electricity they use. Local governments charge a fee to swim at the public pool or play golf at the public park. Cities charge a fare to ride on the city bus. 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.

In many cases, the users do not pay the entire cost of providing the service, however. 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



Photo Credit: City of Morganton

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, local officials in many jurisdictions have begun to increase fees to raise the necessary revenue. Fees for collecting solid waste have been established. Fees for building inspections and other regulations have also been increased to cover more of the costs of conducting these 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, and so 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 the cost 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.

In the News:

Water rates rising

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 2010, more than \$124 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 removed some property from the local tax base. Local officials have no control over these revenues, however. The General Assembly sets these tax rates and determines how the funds will be distributed.

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. Similarly, cities usually charge property owners along a street for paving the street or building sidewalks.

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. (Remember: local officials have little control over most of their revenues and cannot change the property tax rate until they adopt the next annual budget.) Until the funds are needed, the fund balance is invested and the interest added to government revenues.



Photo Credit: Town of Nags Head

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 (often abbreviated to “CDBG”) help cities and counties improve housing, public facilities, and economic opportunities in low-income areas. Pro-

jects 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 to Needy Families, Medicaid, and food stamps are paid largely with federal funds. State grants also help to pay for some social service programs. County employees administer these programs. They determine who is eligible and see that appropriate benefits get to those who qualify.

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

In the News:

[ABC Board seeks support in closing store](#)

People Working Together

Good government does not just happen. Good government is the result of people working together to decide what needs to be done for the community and then working 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 – all influence local government decisions through how we live our daily lives. It is important to understand the unintended ways people influence policy.



Photo Credit: City of Lenoir

Because local government services and policies are so important to daily living, people also sometimes try very hard to change local government policies. If you want to help shape



Photo Credit: Town of Chapel Hill

what local government does, you also need to understand how people work to intentionally change public policy.

In addition to the general public (which includes everyone!), later sections of this chapter consider four other groups: voters, elected officials, local government employees, and volunteers, including members of appointed boards.

People may 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 through the use of 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.



Photo Credit: City of Morganton

For example, the more often people use a ball 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 could play at the same time. These are examples of adding more service in response to increased use. But the local governing board might decide it could not afford to add lights or new fields. Instead, officials might decide to limit use of the existing field. They might require 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 the service.

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 do 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 have to respond. The officials may decide that the action is so harmful that it should be regulated.

In the News:

Bottle ban helps boost recycling, but officials seek more effort

Intentional Public Influence on Policy

Talking directly to public officials is one very important way to influence policy. People call officials or visit them in person to



Photo Credit: City of Morganton

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 a proposal or galvanize opposition to a proposal. Officials are frequently persuaded by the reasons people provide in arguing for or against a proposal, but they can also be persuaded when large numbers of people agree. 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 hold news conferences or demon-

strations to get the attention of news media. They may also write letters to the editor.



Photo Credit: City of Henderson

People can and do seek to use government for their own personal purposes. But many people are also interested in helping make the entire community a better place to live and work. People may disagree about whether a particular proposal is in the public interest, and 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.

Good government depends on the public being aware of the problems and opportunities facing the community. Good government requires that many people learn about public issues and try to influence public policy.

In the News:

Chilton landfill proposal draws ire

Neighbors oppose Pittsboro park

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 also 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 the 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 look down on the former slaves (and on 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. Non-white 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 kept from voting until the 1960s. A major accomplishment of the civil right 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.

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. Regis-



Photo Credit: Gina Childress, Forsyth County

tered voters may cast their ballots in person at the polling place on Election Day. Many 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 are unable to get to a polling place because of illness or travel 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.

In the News:

So what was your excuse for not voting?

Young voters highly motivated

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 (or “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. This section describes local elected offices and officials. A later section discussed elections for these offices.

The governing board is the local government’s legislature. The members discuss and debate policy proposals. Under state law, the board has the authority 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 manager. All of these are group decisions. Board members vote, and a majority must approve any action.

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 chairman of the board of county commissioners. In most North Carolina counties, the board elects one of its members as chairman. In a few counties, the voters elect the chairman of the board of county commissioners.

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 on the basis of merit, although their employees must meet basic requirements set by the state.



Photo Credit: Town of Chapel Hill

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 superinten-

dent to manage the schools, but they cannot set tax rates or appropriate funds. The county commissioners determine 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.

In the News:

[Gwyn legacy honored by state award](#)

[Register of Deeds receives awards](#)

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 candidates 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 represent them better.

Elections are held every two or four years, depending on the term of office 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.)



Photo Credit: Catawba County

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. Because of a history of denying African American citizens the right to vote, federal courts have required district elections in some counties and municipalities that have substantial African American populations but failed to elect African American board members.

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 elected then, too. In practice, the sheriff and register of deeds are often reelected, term after term. Often, sheriffs and registers of deeds serve until they choose to retire. Frequently their successors have served as their deputies. Sometimes, however, these elections are highly contested—especially the 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 politi-

cal party can choose to vote in any one party's primary. Candidates may also be placed on the ballot by filing petitions.

Elections for city council members (or aldermen) are held in odd-numbered years. Election for mayor is 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.

In the News:

[Early voting setting records in Alamance County](#)

[All 9 Fayetteville City Council districts to be redrawn](#)

Local Government Employees

Counties and municipalities hire many different 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. In addition, 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.



City of Lenoir employees explain city services at a customer service open house. (Photo Credit: City of Lenoir)

North Carolina local governments employed nearly 403,000 people in 2010. Local governments thus employed, on average, about 42 people for every 1,000 residents of the state.

Most North Carolina local governments have well-established systems for hiring employees on the basis of their qualifications for the job. In some 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. Instead, 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 on the basis of 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 on the basis of 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 [8-F-1] who is responsible for hiring, promoting, and dismissing government employees. The manager serves at the pleasure of the board. That means the board can fire the manager if they decide to do so. The board evaluates the manager on how well services are provided and how well 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 resources (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.

In the News:

Good salaries help retain employees

Effort to balance Halifax County budget testament to hard work

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).

Each city or county manager:

- prepares a draft budget for the local government,
- manages the government's expenditures,
- hires and fires other em-



Morehead City Manager Randy Martin retired in 2012 after 16 years as the city's manager. "When you get in it and you're in that groove and it's working, it is a very fulfilling thing from a career standpoint and a public service standpoint," Martin said. (Photo Credit: The Daily News, Jacksonville, NC)

ployees 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. 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.



City Manager Wayne Bowers gives a presentation during the City Council's special session to discuss the process of replacing the outgoing city manager on Monday, Jan. 30, 2012. (Photo Credit: Aileen Devlin, The Daily Reflector, Greenville, NC)

In the News:

Former county manager reflects on career, future of Ashe

Manager search gears up

City manager retires after 16 years

Bowers' departure opens new era

Volunteers

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

Local government committees, boards, or 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



Photo Credit: City of Lenoir

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, and many hundreds of citizens may serve on the boards of a large local government.

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, two people with financial expertise, a person with management or business expertise, and a person representing the interests of children. 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 particular 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 a particular 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.

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 help local governments make policies and carry 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 community.

In the News:

[Guilford volunteers get help with travel expenses](#)

[Wake County's Big Sweep starts Saturday at Lake Wheeler](#)

Appendix



Glossary

A

absentee ballot: an official list of candidates on which voters who cannot get to the polling place on elected day indicate their votes

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: to assign government funds to a particular purpose or use

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

B

ballot: the list of candidates on which people cast their votes

bond: 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

C

capital improvement: enhancement performed on land, buildings, and other equipment used to make other goods and services

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 a legal right to full rights in a country because he or she was born there or has been given those rights by the country

civil: concerns government's role in relations among citizens

coastal plain counties: 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; includes 41 counties

compost: decayed material that is used as fertilizer

community: people who share important interests, such as living in the same area or identifying with each other

contract: an 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 for local government in which the elected legislature hires a professional executive to direct government activities

Council of Governments (COG): an organization of local governments established to deal with mutual challenges; 16 exist in North Carolina (also referred to as regional councils)

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

D

debt service: payments of principal and interest on a loan

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

E

economic development: activities to create new jobs and additional sales and other business

expenditures: 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)

F

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 year

G

gasoline tax: a per gallon tax placed on purchases of gasoline

General Assembly: North Carolina's state legislature that 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

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

green box sites: a large receptacle for trash, usually painted green, that often emits a foul odor if solid waste is not regularly collected

greenspace: an area that is kept undeveloped to provide more open land in or near a city

ground water: water that collects underground

H

home owners association (HOA): a group of homes organized into a neighborhood by a real estate developer and maintained as a private, nonprofit corporation

I

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

impurities: materials that pollute

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

incineration: the safe burning of wastes

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

inflation: a continuing rise in prices

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 this

installment-purchase agreement: an arrangement to buy something in which the buyer gets to use the item while paying for it in regularly scheduled payments

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

J

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

K

L

levy: to impose a tax by law

liability: something for which one is obligated according to law

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

M

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

N

nepotism: hiring or giving favorable treatment to someone based on kinship

nonpartisan: not affiliated with a political party

O

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

P

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: things people own other than land and buildings

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

primary election: an election in which voters select candidates for a general election

principal: the amount of money borrowed

privatization: government buying a service from a business instead of producing the service itself

property tax: a tax placed on the assessed value of property to be paid by the owner of that 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 Records law: a state law (G.S. 132) declaring that most government records (emails, documents, maps, etc.) belong to the people and must be freely available and accessible to the public

public utilities: 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

Q

R

rationing: controlled distribution of scarce resources

real property: land and buildings, and improvements to either

references: people who know 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

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 estimate: the income projection a government makes for a subsequent fiscal year

revenue bond: a loan that a government pays off with fees collected through operating the facility built with that loan

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

S

sales tax: tax levied on a product at the time of sale

septic tank: a container in which wastes are broken down by bacteria

sludge: the solid material separated from sewage

special assessment: a charge imposed on property owners for building streets, sidewalks, water lines, sewers, or other improvements that government makes adjacent to the owners' property

subdivision regulation: rules for dividing land for development

subsidize: to reduce the amount users pay for a service by funding some of the cost from another source

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

T

tax base: the assessed value of the property, sales, or income being taxed

Temporary Assistance to 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

U

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

V

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

volunteers: people who donate their time and effort

W

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

watershed: an area that drains water into a stream or lake

X

Y

Z

zoning: rules designating different areas of land for different uses

Additional Resources

Books

The Big Click: Photographs of One Day in North Carolina, April 21, 1989, Mobility, Inc., Richmond, VA, 1989. This collection of color photographs taken by numerous photographers shows different activities that people in North Carolina undertake at similar times in a single day.

Bledsoe, Jerry, Carolina Curiosities—Jerry Bledsoe’s Outlandish Guide to the Dadblamedest Things to See and Do in North Carolina, Fast and McMillan Publishers, Inc., Charlotte, NC, 1984. This funny guidebook of places to see and things to do in North Carolina includes the site of Babe Ruth’s first home run, Hog Day, the home of the man with the world’s strongest teeth, and other oddities.

Corbitt, David Leroy, The Formation of the North Carolina Counties, 1663–1943, State Department of Archives, Raleigh, NC, 1969. This history of North Carolina counties includes how they evolved and how their geographical boundaries have changed.

Couch, Ernie, and Jill Couch, North Carolina Trivia, Rutledge Hill Press, Nashville, TN, 1986. This fun trivia book about North Carolina includes questions on geography, history, sports, and science.

Crutchfield, James, The North Carolina Almanac and Book of Facts, Rutledge Hill Press, Nashville, TN, 1988. This extensive

collection of facts about North Carolina discusses prominent North Carolinians and the history of the state.

Fleer, Jack D., North Carolina Government and Politics, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE, 1994. This overview of state government and politics examines the context of local government in North Carolina.

Gade, Ole, and H. Daniel Stillwell, North Carolina: People and Environment, Geo-APP, Boone, NC, 1986. This compilation of geographical information and other data about cities, counties, and rural areas in North Carolina includes predictions about the future of each region.

Jones, H.G., North Carolina Illustrated 1524–1984, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, 1983. This book is an extensive collection of historical photos from North Carolina with explanations of the significance of each photo.

Lawrence, David, County and Municipal Government in North Carolina, University of North Carolina School of Government, 2006. (online at <http://www.sog.unc.edu/pubs/cmgs/>). Written for county officials to use as a reference, this book includes information about administering county and city governments, elections, government finance, property taxes, and the many services counties and cities conduct.

Luebke, Paul, Tarheel Politics 2000, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, 1998. This is a revised and updated version of Luebke’s earlier Tarheel Politics: Myths and

Realities. The author is a college professor who also serves as a representative in the North Carolina General Assembly.

Massengill, Steven, and Robert Topkins, *A North Carolina Postcard Album, 1905–1925*, Division of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, Raleigh, NC, 1988. This collection of picture postcards depicts North Carolina people and scenes in the early years of this century.

Orr, Douglas M., Jr., and Alfred W. Stuart, *The North Carolina Atlas*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, 2000. This collection of maps, pictures, and articles includes information about North Carolina's land, people, economy, government, and society. It also contains considerable details about the state's counties and municipalities.

Powell, William S., *Dictionary of North Carolina Biographies*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, 1979. This four-volume set of biographies includes prominent North Carolina citizens who have made a difference in the state.

Powell, William S., *North Carolina: A Bicentennial History*, Norton, New York, NY, 1977. This history of North Carolina from the colonial period to the 1970s gives readers a thorough background of the state.

Powell, William S., *The North Carolina Gazetteer*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, 1968. This geographical dictionary of North Carolina discusses how land for-

mations, lakes, mountains, rivers, towns, and counties in the state were named.

Schumann, Marguerite, *The Living Land: An Outdoor Guide to North Carolina*, Dale Press of Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, 1977. This guide to natural resources in North Carolina includes listings of lakes, forests, mountains, and beaches that are accessible to the public.

Periodicals

County Lines, Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Association of County Commissioners. This newsletter discusses information and issues about counties in North Carolina and the people who work for those counties.

NC Insight, Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research. Written by the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research, this journal presents North Carolina policy issues and makes recommendations for improving public policies.

North Carolina Historical Review, Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Historical Commission. This compilation of articles about the history of North Carolina includes important people, events, and anecdotes.

Popular Government, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina School of Government. This journal contains articles about North Carolina government and current concerns of its citizens.

Southern Cities, Raleigh, NC: North Carolina League of Municipalities. This newsletter includes stories about the people in city and town government, issues facing municipal government, and innovative programs for dealing with these problems.

Websites

www.sog.unc.edu is the website of the School of Government at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This site provides access to North Carolina local governments' websites and to the websites of newspapers throughout the state, as well as to the publications, resources, and programs of the School of Government.

<http://www.sog.unc.edu/node/724> provides links to the websites of North Carolina counties.

<http://www.sog.unc.edu/node/723> provides links to the websites of North Carolina municipalities.

www.civics.org is the website of the North Carolina Civic Education Consortium. This site provides access to resources for teaching and learning about government and public policy in North Carolina and other states.

www.ncgov.com is the official website of the state of North Carolina. This site provides access to official state agencies and to many other sources of information about government and public policy in North Carolina.

www.ncpress.com/ncpa/newspaperonline.html provides links to North Carolina newspapers.

<http://censtats.census.gov/usa/usa.shtml> contains demographic, economic, and governmental statistics from the Census Bureau and several federal agencies. This site allows users to compare county-level data and includes statistics from the 2005-2009 American Community Survey for economic and housing characteristics and 2010 federal spending.

<http://factfinder2.census.gov/main.html> provides Census Bureau data that includes the most recent 2010 decennial statistics.