

## Municipal Government: High School

**Time Needed:** One to Two Class Periods

**Materials Needed:**

Student worksheets

Access to Internet for template research

**Copy Instructions:**

Reading (4 pages; class set)

Activities (3 pages; class set)

**Learning Objectives.** Students will be able to:

- Identify the organizational structures and duties of municipal government
- Describe the types of services municipalities provide
- Compare municipality revenue sources including grants, block grants, and bonds
- Identify the purpose and benefits of special districts
- Differentiate between weak and strong mayor plans of municipal government
- Identify local government as an ideal opportunity for citizen engagement

### STEP BY STEP

- DISTRIBUTE** the reading pages to each student.
- READ** through the sections on each page as a class. Address any questions or confusion as you work through the reading.
- ASSIGN** students to address the questions that come at the end of the Getting Involved section on Reading— Side D. Discuss student responses as a class.
- DISTRIBUTE** the Spotlight page to each student. Allow time to read and answer questions. Discuss responses as a class.
- DISTRIBUTE** the Comparison Activity page to each student (you may pair students to complete this brainstorming activity.) Allow time to read through and complete the activity.
- REVIEW** the student responses to the Comparison Activity and discuss how they came to their contributions. Use the teacher guide to help fill in any blanks.
- DISTRIBUTE** the My Municipality template and assign students to complete the fact sheet based on research efforts from their local municipal site and other internet sources like [www.city-data.com](http://www.city-data.com).
- OPTIONAL** Dig deeper into local zoning regulations by obtaining a zoning map for the neighborhood around the school or other well-known area. Review as a class and discuss the regulations in place. Why are some types of buildings allowed, while others are not? How do the restrictions benefit the immediate neighborhood? What changes might the students suggest at a future zoning review board meeting?

#### MEDIA LITERACY MOMENT

Have the students research the water crisis in the city of Flint, Michigan. Ask them to explain the decisions made by the city government and the impact those decisions had on the residents of Flint. Discussion opportunities: What is the current state of the water supply? What is Flint doing about it presently? What other levels of government have stepped in? What's next for Flint residents? How has the media covered this crisis locally and nationally?

# Municipal Government

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## Keeping it Local

From the largest cities to the smallest towns and villages, municipal governments in the U.S. serve as the closest form of government to the people. Across municipal governments, you will find great variety in their structures, functions, and in the services they provide. But, big to small, these examples of local government have much in common and provide their residents with the greatest opportunities for engagement.

**Municipality** is often used as an umbrella term for the level of local government that includes cities, towns, and villages. All of these forms of municipalities get their powers and boundaries from the state. In some cases, the state creates the town and dictates its structure and plan of government. In other cases, the town will create a **charter**, or legal document that establishes a municipality, and seek approval from the state before it can be officially formed. Communities without charters are **unincorporated**, lack a local government of their own, and fall under the administration of a larger unit like a nearby town or the county.



Belleview (pop. 283) is an unincorporated rural community in Illinois. It is run as a division of Calhoun County government.

## Cities, Towns, Villages, and Incorporations



What distinguishes a city from a town from a village really depends on its location and regional traditions. States tend to set up their own definitions of each type of municipality. These definitions are based on population, type of government structure, whether the municipality is urban or rural, and the amount of services it offers its citizens.

**Boom Town/Ghost Town**—The population of a municipality is always in flux. Some towns start small, but over the years can grow to rival the size of many cities. Other towns or villages may decline due to economic or environmental factors, empty out, and turn into ghost towns.

## Structures and Functions

Each municipality has a charter that defines the format, organizational structure, powers, functions, and basic procedures of the government. Even with the variety found from one municipality to the next, there are five basic forms of government: Council-Manager, Mayor-Council, Commission, Town Meeting, and Representative Town Meeting. The Council-Manager form looks like a business, while the Mayor-Council is more reflective of how Congress and the president work with each other. If your locality doesn't fit into one of these categories, it's likely to have a blend of the two.



**The Weak and The Strong Mayor**—It may not sound like the nicest way to identify the two types of Mayor-Council governments, but it works.

The **weak-mayor plan** gives the role of the mayor little executive power, leaving the majority of legislative and executive powers to the council. In the weak-mayor plan, the mayor is often chosen by the council rather than the people.

The **strong-mayor plan** looks more like what we see with the president and Congress. Here, the mayor is elected by the people, has executive responsibilities, and appoints city officials to serve in the government.

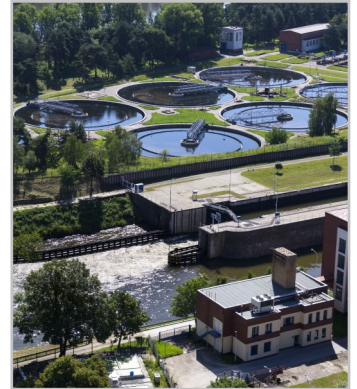
# Municipal Government

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## Municipal Services

Since municipalities act as the closest form of government to residents, it's not surprising that they are the ones tasked with carrying out many of the services you enjoy on a daily basis. These services can be chunked into five general areas: utilities, education, public safety, health and public welfare, and land use management.

**Utilities** include services like gas, electric, water, waste water treatment, and garbage removal. Some of these utilities, like a waste water treatment plant, may be owned and operated by the municipality while others, like garbage collection, are offered as a service through private companies. In most cases, these services are provided at a cost to the residents through fees or usage bills.



City waste water treatment plant

**Education** services cover public schools from pre-K through high school and, in some cases, community colleges. These services usually make up the largest portion of municipal spending. Local school boards run school districts and work closely with state and federal education departments to make sure that the laws at all levels of government are addressed.



**Public safety** includes the kinds of services that protect residents of a municipality. Police, fire protection, 911 services, emergency responders, and code enforcement all fall under this category. These services do much more than address emergencies—they work to avert them through education, prevention, and enforcement activities.

**Health and public welfare** services support resident health and wellness and provide relief in times of need. Programs in this category may be driven by state or federal laws and funding sources, but municipalities are usually tasked with carrying out the programs. Job training programs and **subsidized**, or discounted, housing for those in need are offered at the local level. Public health services like health code inspections of restaurants and hotels or water quality checks keep the community in good health.



Notice of a zoning hearing in Virginia.

**Land use management** is another service that municipalities offer, but you may not notice it at first. Also called city planning, this service aims to manage the growth of a community by regulating how the land is used. This is done through zoning regulations which divide a community into zones that allow for certain kinds of land use. For example, new factories aren't found in the middle of residential subdivisions because residential zoning rules restrict the kind of buildings developed in an area.



This 1939 map of an area of L.A. shows zoning through color plots.

Eminent Domain—Drawing maps for land use sounds simple enough, but these kind of decisions can be very controversial and highly contested because they impact whole communities. One way a government can settle disputes over land issues is the use of **eminent domain**, where it takes over private property and provides some compensation in return. That land could then be used for government or business use.

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## Municipal Revenues

All of the services communities provide cost money. Taxes provide about a quarter of most local government **revenue**, or income. Property taxes are focused on collecting funds from people who live within the community, while local sales taxes or income taxes pull from anyone who participates in the local economy. Municipal revenue can also come from the fees and money charged for services like utilities, building code inspections, or use of local facilities like city-owned parking garages or event spaces.

Municipalities also rely on money from state and federal government sources. When local governments carry out federal or state laws and programs, they usually receive funding to do so. Communities can also receive federal or state funding through **grants**. These can be for a specific local project, like upgrading the power plant to align with new federal pollution standards. **Block grants** are for more general efforts, like public health, and allow for local governments to decide how best to spend the money.

When taxes, fees, and state and federal funding fail to meet the needs of a municipal budget, communities may need to borrow money. Smaller loans may be made through banks, while larger funding needs may be acquired by selling **bonds** to residents and investors. These bonds act as a loan paid by a lot of different people. When it comes time for the local government to pay back the loan, bond holders get their money back with some interest added.



## Special Districts

Does everyone in your school district live in the same town? Unless you live in a large town or city, the answer is probably no. Often, school districts will cover an area larger than just one individual municipality. They will locate their service area based on population and need rather than stick to strict borders between towns and communities. School districts are examples of a special district in local government.

**Special districts** are units of government that focus on providing a single service, like education, in one municipality or across multiple communities. They are often run by elected boards and pull board members from across the areas that the special district covers. The goal is to serve people living in a general area with a shared need. In larger urban areas, a subway system may stretch across a number of different communities, like in the greater New York City area. In more rural areas where people are spread out, you may find a water supply system that serves a collection of municipalities in a region. Special districts are funded through the collection of fees, like subway passes or your water bill, as well as through a portion of property taxes collected by the participating communities.



## Getting Involved

Local governments provide the greatest access and opportunities for citizenship engagement. Resident participation can include everything from just showing up to running for local office. Here are some ways to get involved:



**Show Up.** Community meetings can range from large and raucous town hall meetings to smaller focus groups, all held with the intent of hearing from the community on a range of issues. Opinions are offered from elected officials and residents alike. Why not join the conversation and have your voice be heard? You're likely to learn more about your municipality and your neighbors in the process.



**Talk to Your Local Officials.** Few of us can travel to the state capitol or to D.C. to have a chat with our representatives in the state or federal government. But it's very likely that members of your town council, school board, or even the staff at the mayor's office are only a short drive away. Set up an appointment, introduce yourself as a constituent, and have a conversation about the issues that matter to you.



**Head to the Ballot Box.** Local elections tend to receive very low voter turnout when compared to the more publicized federal and state elections. Some people don't even bother to look "down ballot" at the local offices. But it is here where your vote can make major impact.

**Run for Office or Get Hired.** Local government is full of career options, some elected some not. Learn more about the positions that make up your government and see how you can get involved. Most municipalities let you run for office as soon as you turn 18! If you want to volunteer or apply for a job, you may be able to start even sooner.

**Which approach suits *you* best?** After reading through the methods on this page, which would you feel most comfortable participating in? Explain your choice.

**Scale of Impact.** Any time citizens get involved, impact can be made. Rank the four methods above from most impactful (1) to least impactful (4).

- 1-
- 2-
- 3-
- 4-

Explain your pick for #1.

Explain your pick for #4.

# Municipal Government

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## Spotlight On: Boom & Bust in Williston, ND

### First the Boom...

Like many boom towns, Williston grew because of a technological advancement. For Williston, that development was in the oil industry, with the discovery and application of fracking and horizontal drilling innovations. All of a sudden, billions of barrels of oil in western North Dakota became available for drilling. Between 2010 and 2014, thousands moved to Williston to work in the oil industry, as well as to support the needs of a new population.



Chain stores and new smaller businesses moved in to take advantage of the new population flush with cash. The city built a massive recreation center and a new high school. Pay was high but so was rent, groceries, and other day-to-day items. The new (and old) residents were able to afford these prices as long as the drilling work continued, and that depended on the health of the oil market. At the height of the boom, oil was selling at over \$100 a barrel.

	2000	2014
Population	12,512	24,562
Median Household Income	\$29,962	\$95,495
New Houses Built	17 buildings	333 buildings

### ...Then the Bust

Due to a number of market factors, oil slipped to about \$40 a barrel by mid 2014. This caused the drilling companies to decrease or end production, since the method used in Williston was much more expensive than traditional approaches. Less production meant less need for workers, so the new residents found themselves getting laid off right and left. Some residents left to find jobs elsewhere, while others stayed and now rely on city services to assist with finding new employment and to address their other needs in these leaner times. Vacancy rates in newly built housing complexes have grown, and some businesses have shut their doors. But those who plan to stay in Williston say they are committed to seeing the city over this hump.

- City revenue in 2016 dipped 23% from 2014.
- Williston area hotels are now averaging 50% empty rooms.
- In 2014, there were 190 drilling rigs in operation across the state, compared to 46 in 2016.

**Supporting the Ups and Downs.** The city of Williston had to work quickly to adapt to the influx of residents and money and is having to work just as hard to address the needs during less lucrative times. *From the point of view of the municipal government,* brainstorm responses to the questions in each square.


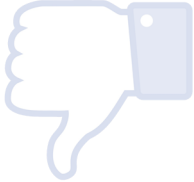

Growing Pains: Rapid growth in population/income	The Big Slow Down: Loss of population/income
What are some benefits/opportunities for the city?	What are some benefits/opportunities for the city?
What are some challenges/drawbacks for the city?	What are some challenges/drawbacks for the city?

# Municipal Government

Name: \_\_\_\_\_



**Comparing Municipalities.** Review each type of municipal government structure and identify strengths and weaknesses that may present themselves in day-to-day governing.

Type	Features	Strengths	Weaknesses
<p><b>Council-Manager</b></p> <p>Most common form of municipal government (over 50%)</p> <p>Popular in cities with over 10,000 people and in the West and Southwest</p>	<p>Council oversees the general administration, makes policy, and sets budget</p> <p>Council appoints a professional city manager to carry out day-to-day administrative operations</p> <p>Mayor is chosen from among the council on a rotating basis</p>		
<p><b>Mayor-Council</b></p> <p>Second most common form of government (35%)</p> <p>Found in older cities, popular in the Mid-Atlantic and Midwest</p>	<p>Strong Mayor Plan: Mayor elected by the people, is often full-time and paid, and has significant executive authority</p> <p>Weak Mayor Plan: Mayor is selected by the council and has less executive powers</p> <p>Council is elected and maintains legislative powers</p>		
<p><b>Town Meeting</b></p> <p>Considered the purest form of democracy (5% of municipalities)</p>	<p>All voters meet to decide basic policy and elect officials to carry out those policies</p>		
<p><b>Commission</b></p> <p>Oldest form of government in the U.S but not widely used (less than 1%)</p>	<p>Voters elect individual commissioners to a small governing board</p> <p>Each commissioner is responsible for one aspect, such as fire, police, public works, etc.</p> <p>One commissioner is designated as chairman or mayor and presides over meetings</p> <p>The commission has both legislative and executive functions</p>		
<p><b>Representative Town Meeting</b></p> <p>Found almost exclusively in small New England communities (less than 1%)</p>	<p>Voters select a large number of citizens to represent them at town meetings where only they can vote</p> <p>Each town meeting must be announced with a warrant that provides the date, time, and location of the meeting and specifies the items to be discussed</p> <p>The selectmen are responsible for implementing policy</p>		

# Municipal Government

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**My Municipality.** Research your local municipality, or special district to complete this fact sheet.

<b>Basic Information</b>	
Municipality Type (city, town, village, etc.)	
Municipality Name	
Population (with date of census)	
Has population grown or declined since the previous census? By how much?	
Date Established	
Size of Municipality (sq. mi.)	
Is the municipality more rural, suburban, urban?	
Identify major employers in your municipality. (Think: industry, agricultural exports, corporate headquarters, universities, tourist sites, etc.)	
<b>The Government</b>	
What is the website address for your municipal government?	
What kind of structure does your municipal government have?	
List two elected positions in your municipal government and who currently holds those offices.	
List three services the municipal government runs.	
What was the most recent annual budget for the municipality?	Revenue: Spending:
<b>In the News</b>	
Provide the headline for one news story relating to your municipal government.	
<b>Contact Information</b>	
What is the general contact address for municipal government and services?	



# Municipal Government

\*\*TEACHER GUIDE\*\*

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**Supporting the Ups and Downs.** The city of Williston had to work quickly to adapt to the influx of residents and money and is having to work just as hard to address the needs during less lucrative times. From the point of view of the municipal government, brainstorm responses to the questions in each square.

Growing Pains: Rapid growth in population/income	The Big Slow Down: Loss of population/income
<p>What are some benefits/opportunities for the city?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-increase in revenue from taxes and fees</li> <li>-new revenue could fund new and expanded municipal services and departments</li> </ul>	<p>What are some benefits/opportunities for the city?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-ability to catch up with providing resident needs</li> </ul>
<p>What are some challenges/drawbacks for the city?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-can't address new resident needs fast enough</li> <li>-likely disagreements on best way to use increased revenue</li> <li>-likely growth in crime and social problems</li> </ul>	<p>What are some challenges/drawbacks for the city?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-decrease in revenue from taxes and fees</li> <li>-likely still on the hook for large spending projects planned in better times</li> <li>-crime and need for social welfare services could also increase due to higher poverty</li> </ul>

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<p><b>Mayor-Council</b></p> <p>Second most common form of government (35%)</p> <p>Found in older cities, popular in the Mid-Atlantic and Midwest</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Strong Mayor Plan: Mayor elected by the people, is often full-time and paid, and has significant executive authority</li> <li>-Weak Mayor Plan: Mayor is selected by the council and has less executive powers</li> <li>-Council is elected and maintains legislative powers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-clear legislative and executive powers</li> <li>-strong mayors work best in larger cities, weak mayors in smaller cities</li> <li>-elected mayors are accountable to the voters</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-may not have the right type of mayor strength for the size of the city</li> </ul>
<p><b>Town Meeting</b></p> <p>Considered the purest form of democracy (5% of municipalities)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-All voters meet to decide basic policy and elect officials to carry out those policies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-allows for direct democracy</li> <li>-provides all residents with a voice and a vote</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-requires a high level of citizen engagement and participation</li> <li>-with low participation, the town could be run by just a few involved residents</li> </ul>
<p><b>Commission</b></p> <p>Oldest form of government in the U.S but not widely used (less than 1%)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Voters elect individual commissioners to a small governing board</li> <li>-Each commissioner is responsible for one aspect, such as fire, police, public works, etc.</li> <li>-One commissioner is designated as chairman or mayor, who presides over meetings</li> <li>-The commission has both legislative and executive functions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-allows for direct election of department leadership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-no single leader to take charge and direct the departments</li> <li>-lacks an accountable leader to voters</li> </ul>
<p><b>Representative Town Meeting</b></p> <p>Found almost exclusively in small New England communities (less than 1%)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Voters select a large number of citizens to represent them at town meetings, where only they can vote</li> <li>-Each town meeting must be announced with a warrant that provides the date, time, and location of the meeting and the agenda for discussion</li> <li>-The select citizen group are responsible for implementing policy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-allows residents to select people to represent them in the business of government</li> <li>-the policy makers are also responsible for carrying it out</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-no clear leader to hold accountable</li> <li>-representatives could choose not to vote in line with whom they were selected to represent</li> </ul>