

Local governments affect people more directly than either federal or state governments do. In Wisconsin, local government takes the form of counties, cities, villages, towns, and a variety of special-purpose districts, like school districts or water and sewer districts.

Every bit of land in Wisconsin is included in one of the 72 counties. The state created counties for its administrative convenience. Counties often exercise delegated powers of state government. Each county is governed by a board of supervisors and most have an elected county executive who manages the county's programs and employees and enforces federal, state and local laws.

Cities, villages and towns are also established under state law, and the state grants them certain powers. Cities and villages are similar in nature and, unlike towns, derive some of their authority directly from the state constitution. A city normally has a council and mayor who run its municipal business. A village is run by a board of trustees. A town has an elected board that oversees its business. All of the area in each county that is not included in a city or village is part of a town. As cities and villages grow, they take territory from towns.

Counties manage the facilities and the support staff for the state's circuit court system. Cities and villages maintain courts which handle ordinance violation cases such as minor traffic offenses. Counties operate the "E-911" service which refers emergency phone calls to the police, fire departments, or emergency medical services organizations.

Local governments create land-use plans and enact zoning ordinances that spell out how land may be used, for example, for residential, industrial, or commercial purposes.

Most of what local governments do is proprietary in nature. They manage the schools, maintain public libraries, provide clean water, collect garbage, treat and dispose of sewage, and clean the streets. In many cases, counties, cities, villages, and towns offer the same or similar services. They all provide law enforcement, build and maintain parks, pave and repair roads, and remove snow from the streets and roads. Several of Wisconsin's larger cities offer bus service.

Counties operate social services programs, such as public assistance, medical assistance, and child protective services under the guidance of the state. Many of the services offered by counties are conducted by groups of counties working together.

The state has created several special-purpose districts that may include parts of several counties or other local governmental units. School districts that run the K-12 schools cover the state, but there are many other special-purpose districts. For example, special-purpose districts operate the technical colleges. A special-purpose district renovated Lambeau Field, and another such district built Miller Park.

Other special-purpose districts, such as drainage districts, cover only a portion of a county's territory. Drainage districts plan, build, and maintain ditches to make farmland more usable. These districts have a separate governing board with the power to tax property.