

HOW TO BE GEORGIA'S BEST ADVOCATE

NGP'S MUNICIPAL ADVOCACY GUIDE

THE BASICS:

What is a municipality? A municipality in Georgia is a city or a town, and the municipality can choose to call itself a “city” or a “town” in its charter (more on charters below).

How many municipalities are there? There are currently 535 municipalities in Georgia. There are also eight consolidated city-counties in Georgia (more about this below).

How is a municipality formed? Each municipality drafts a charter of municipal incorporation, which must be approved by the Georgia General Assembly. To maintain their charter and their incorporation status, a municipality must provide at least three government services for residents (e.g., zoning, policing, parks and recreation, waste management, etc.). New cities seeking incorporation must state what these services will be and which services they will contract with the county to provide.



City Hall - Athens, GA

What kinds of things can municipalities and municipal leaders do? Municipal leaders are allowed to collect taxes to pay for public services, generally through property tax collection. They are also permitted to take on loans, enter into debt, issue bonds, and enter contracts as part of the budget and spending process. Like counties, municipalities have what is called “home rule,” meaning they can create and pass laws that affect the property within their borders and their residents, so long as they do not conflict with state law.

But what about state law and the power of the General Assembly? The state is considered a higher authority of law than a municipality and therefore has “preemption,” which allows state law to override conflicting local, municipal law. The General Assembly can adjust municipal boundaries, leadership structure, and even abolish a city or town.

FORMS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT:

The powers of local government can vary by municipality depending on the form of government their municipal charter lays out. There are three major forms of government for municipalities in Georgia:

Council-Manager: The mayor serves a more ceremonial role and may be elected directly or appointed from among members of the elected council. The mayor is an active part of the council but unable to veto legislation. An appointed (hired) manager oversees all city functions. They report to the mayor and/or council and have authority over city staffing and resources. They must still seek final approval from, and may be removed by, the council. Examples of this format include Savannah and Decatur.

Mayor-Council: There are two forms this type of government can take:

- **Strong Mayor:** The mayor is the executive of the city and carries out city functions, including staffing, budget administration, and contracts. The mayor can also appoint committees, veto legislation, and oversee advisory boards. In larger cities, they may name additional administrators to carry out city duties. The council is the legislative body, adopting ordinances and resolutions. Examples of this format include Atlanta and Warner Robins.
- **Weak Mayor:** The mayor is still the chief executive, but the council must vote to approve administrative actions. The mayor has more limited authority for appointments and budgeting. Examples of this format include Augusta and South Fulton.

Commission: Commissions combine executive and legislative functions. Commissioners are elected and then select a chair from among their ranks to preside over meetings and serve as ceremonial lead of the commission. Each commissioner oversees one or more departments. This is more common for county governments than cities. Examples of this format include Macon and Athens.



City Hall - Savannah, GA

LAWMAKING:

Ordinances: Ordinances are written laws that are adopted by the municipality, which are permanent and enforceable. The municipal charter will determine the way an ordinance is passed, including if a public hearing is required or if the ordinance must be considered over multiple council meetings.

- The Georgia Municipal Association has examples of ordinances as well as suggestions for how a municipal ordinance should be written.

Resolutions: Resolutions deal with temporary issues or special matters and express the opinion of the governing body. They focus on one issue and are not intended to necessarily align with the municipal charter. Under most municipal charters, resolutions do not require multiple readings or public hearings.

Proclamations: Proclamations commemorate special days or events, honor a group or individual, or uplift a cause. These normally begin from residents advocating for such an honor. Proclamation signings often become special events alongside those being honored.

ROLES:

City Clerk: A critical staff role, this person oversees much of the administrative, day-to-day work of the municipality, including, but not limited to: documenting council meetings, documenting and publishing ordinances and resolutions, managing public records, coordinating contracts and bidding, licensing, and permitting, overseeing payments to the city, coordinating with department leads, filing candidate paperwork, and filing ethics paperwork.

- In some smaller cities, the clerk may take on additional administrative roles, such as utilities billing, zoning administration, managing court records, human resources, and/or financial administration for the city (including tax collection).

City Manager: The City Manager is hired by the elected body to carry out the work of the city. This includes: preparing a budget for approval, hiring and supervising city staff, advising elected officials, making policy recommendations, carrying out city procurement, and carrying out city spending and capital plans.

Mayor: The role of the mayor varies depending on the form of government (see above). In a “weak mayor” system, their role is mostly ceremonial, serving as the spokesperson for city government and providing general oversight of city functions. In a “strong mayor” system, they may more directly oversee and carry out city duties. Mayors oversee signing official documents, such as legislation and contracts. They may or may not have an equal vote in council and/or veto power over legislation.

Council Members: The policy making body of the municipality, the council can approve ordinances, resolutions, and other legislation to govern residents. Under a “weak mayor” system, council members may be assigned to committees which oversee city departments.



INCORPORATED CITY-COUNTIES (CONSOLIDATED GOVERNMENT):

What Are They: A type of government where the powers typically vested in a city are combined with the powers and functions of a county. These are common both when no incorporated cities exist in a county, or when one large city exists within the bulk of one county.

Which Ones: Athens-Clarke, Augusta-Richmond, Columbus-Muscogee, Georgetown-Quitman, Statenville-Echols, Macon-Bibb, Cusseta-Chattahoochee, and Preston-Webster.

What is Different: Like municipalities, consolidated governments will vary on their leadership structure. Many have a mayor who can be deemed “weak” or “strong” as with a traditional municipality. In place of a City Council, the legislative body is more often called a County Commission.

The major difference is that these consolidated governments default to practicing in the ways of counties, for example, offering a more complete line of services and hosting elections in even-numbered years.

ELECTIONS:

When are municipal and consolidated government elections? Municipal elections generally take place in odd-numbered years, outside of presidential and gubernatorial election cycles. Municipal elections, or specific contests within those elections, may be canceled if there are no competitive races on the ballot and a single candidate will win without having to appear on the ballot.

Consolidated governments generally run on a county schedule, and, thus, have elections in even-numbered years, often in the same year as a presidential election.

Who Runs Them? Traditionally, all elections in Georgia are conducted by the county. Even a state-wide election will be carried out at the county level for each of Georgia’s 159 counties. Municipal elections are unique in that they can be conducted by the county, but municipalities are also able to opt to oversee their own elections, including hiring their own poll staff and selecting their own polling sites. This complication can make finding information about local candidates and sample ballots confusing for residents.

SUPPORTING THE WORK OF MAYORS AND COUNCILS

In order to carry out the many duties of municipal life, mayors and/or council members make appointments to or serve on boards, authorities, and other advisory bodies as well as hire for city departments. There are numerous options to grant authority to subdivisions within the municipality, many of which are listed below.

Definitions:

- **Advisory Council:** A body of local residents appointed by the governing authority to represent the community's interests on local issues. They have no fiscal, legislative, or legal authority but, instead, are meant to share the common issues residents face.
- **Authority:** Separate entities created for a specific public purpose outside of the work of the municipality. Authorities focus on specific areas of importance and are able to raise separate funds and make legal decisions for projects. They may serve a single jurisdiction (such as a downtown development authority) or a larger region (such as an airport or hospital authority).
- **Board:** A body with advisory, investigative, and/or management powers. They are created and run at the will of the municipal council. Boards are generally made up of appointed, unpaid members.
- **Commission:** A body with investigative and decision-making powers focused on specific topic areas. They are often empowered with somewhat judicial authority and able to make rulings on behalf of the city. (Different from Commission above in the Forms of Local Government section.)
- **Committee:** A body with investigative, review, and advisory roles regarding municipal ordinances or specific municipal functions. Often these will include members of the municipal council.
- **Department** – Consists of full-time, staffed bodies focused on specific topic areas that are under the review of the governing authority (i.e., city manager, mayor, or council). These are the day-to-day staff of the municipality from police officers to city clerks.



City Hall - Macon, GA

COMMON SUBDIVISIONS OF LABOR:

No matter the size, municipalities are all made up of residents with the same needs and concerns and, therefore, tend to have similar subdivisions of labor. Whether these are formed into boards, commissions, or departments will be clear in the name given such as “Fire Department” or “Board of Health” or “Zoning Commission.” Larger cities may have many departments specializing in serving a higher volume of residents.

Code Enforcement: Enforces local ordinances and policies, which may take the form of writing parking tickets, responding to complaints of barking dogs and loud neighbors, or warning businesses about their waste management practices, among others.

Economic Development: Encourages commercial and residential growth through construction, business registration, job creation, tourism, and population growth. May be focused on the town or a specific area, such as downtown or a former industrial area.

Emergency Management: Oversees municipal response and readiness to any number of natural and human-made disasters. This may include anything from information sessions and preparedness trainings for residents to recruiting response teams.

Fire: On top of responding to emergency calls related to fires, this department implements fire safety and prevention techniques, educates the community about fire safety, and provides medical care in safety situations. They often assist emergency management in responding to disaster situations.

Health: Ensures local businesses follow regulations that relate to health standards. They also provide public health education for residents. Where possible, this department may provide basic care services, such as health screenings and/or vaccinations.

Judicial/Municipal Courts: Address minor offenses, enforcement of local ordinances, document management, and administrative needs of the municipality and residents. This can include issues such as wills and estates, adoption, and guardianship.

Parks and Recreation: Manages and maintains the municipality’s parks, playgrounds, and public spaces. They also process requests for events to take place in those locations.

Planning and Zoning: Dictates what kind of infrastructure (e.g., commercial, residential, school, etc.) are allowed within certain areas of the municipality. Utilizing the municipality’s comprehensive plan for growth, this body makes recommendations on land use, hears rezoning requests, receives petitions for annexation, and may make recommendations on zoning ordinances to the council.

Police and/or Corrections: Police enforce laws and patrol the municipality in the name of public safety. Corrections oversees jail and/or prison in the municipality as well as the processing of those charged with crimes.

Public Schools: Manage the K-12 education of students in the jurisdiction. While most school districts are countywide in Georgia, there are approximately 20 cities with their own localized school districts.

Public Works: Fixes municipality’s assets and infrastructure when they are in need of upgrading and repair. Examples include broken water lines, trash collection, repair to city vehicles, and city road repairs.

Transportation: Oversees the functioning, growth, and budget of the municipality’s transit systems, including expanding ridership.

Watershed Management: Manages water-related services, including delivering safe drinking water, collecting and treating wastewater, and managing stormwater.

RESOURCES

New Georgia Project

www.newgeorgiaproject.org
Facebook: @newgeorgiaproject
Twitter: @NewGAProject
Instagram: @newgeorgiaproject

Research the Candidates

www.readysset.vote

Problem at the Polls?

www.fixmy.vote

Ride to the Polls

1-800-874-1541
www.newgeorgiaproject.org/rides

Voter Status

www.mvp.sos.ga.gov

Register to Vote

www.registertovote.sos.ga.gov

Georgia General Assembly

www.legis.ga.gov

U.S. Congress

www.congress.gov

Discover Politics

www.openstates.org

ACCG

www.accg.org

Georgia Municipal Association

www.gacities.com

