

Power Up Supplement: Local Government

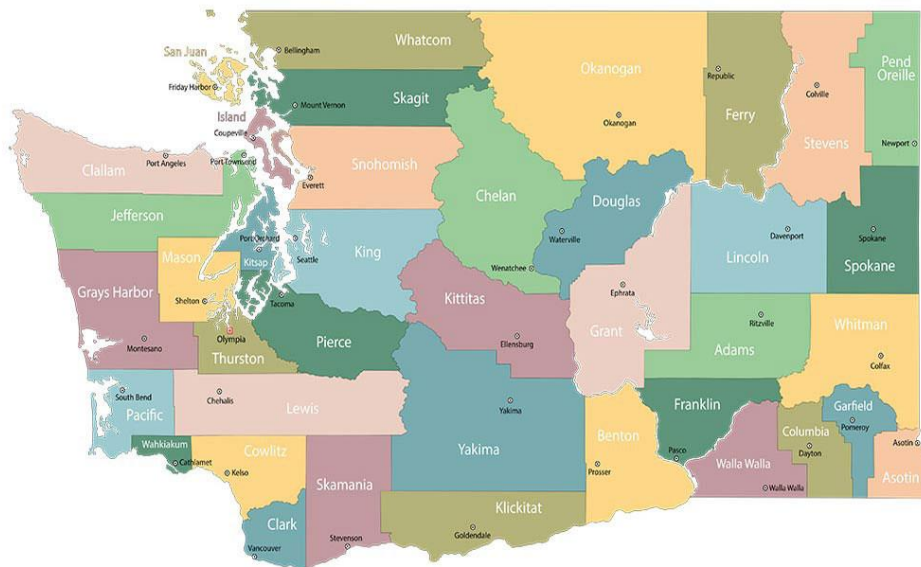
Why should I care about how my local government functions?

Local government officials make decisions every day that affect all aspects of your community! From overseeing public safety to making funding decisions about infrastructure projects to regulating public health, city and county governments have immense influence over our day-to-day lives. To be effective activists, it is critical to understand local government structure, lawmaking procedures, and the election cycles within our communities to know how and when to advocate for meaningful policy.

By understanding these processes, combined with the organizing and campaign tools in the original Power Up handbook, activists can leverage their knowledge and power as constituents to take collective action.

Local Government Structure

Washington is composed of 39 counties covering 281 incorporated municipalities. Each municipality is classified based on size into first class cities, second class cities, towns, and code cities. First class cities have a population greater than 10,000 and have adopted a city charter that outlines the powers and structures of their local government. The structures for second class cities, towns, and code cities are determined in the Revised Code of Washington (RCW).

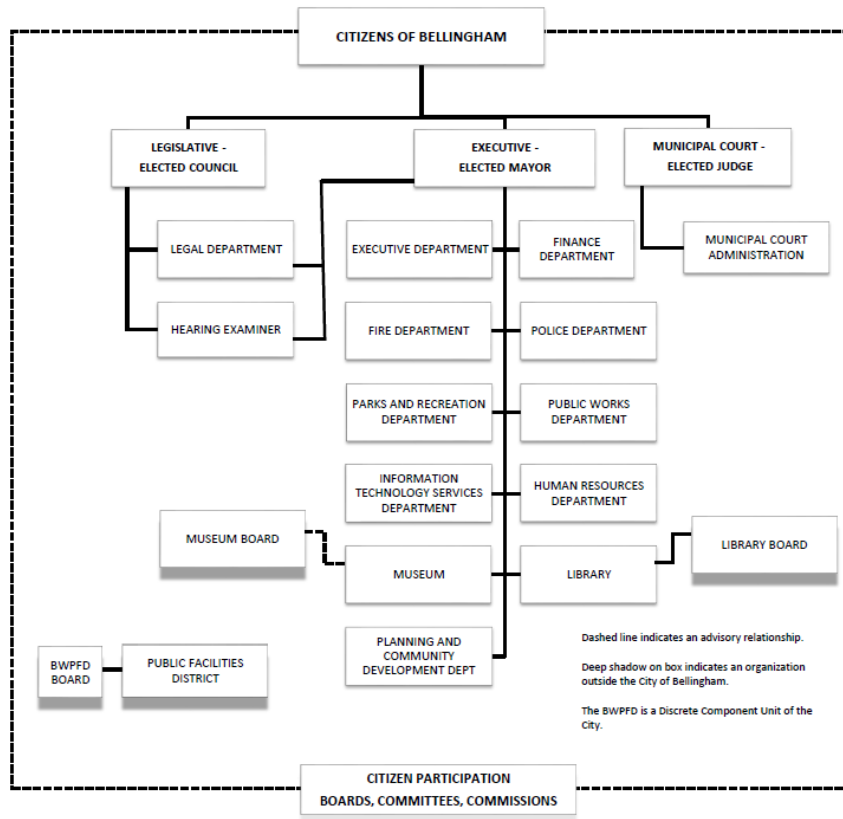


Source: Commerce.wa.gov

Local municipalities in Washington typically follow one of two forms of government: mayor-council or council-manager.

- Mayor-council:** The mayor is elected at-large (by everyone in the municipality) and the council (elected at-large or from districts) serves as the legislative body, with the power to propose and pass policies. The mayor does not vote except in the case of a tie. The mayor’s veto power varies depending on the classification of the jurisdiction. This is the most common structure in Washington. *Examples: Seattle, Everett, Spokane, Bellingham*
- Council-manager:** The council is elected at-large or by district, and councilmembers appoint a city manager, who acts as the administrator for the municipality. The council also selects a mayor from among the councilmembers, but this role is ceremonial. *Examples: Tacoma, Richland, Vancouver, Yakima*

Below is an example of a city organizational chart that follows a mayor-council model. As you can see, the council and mayor function independently but work together in service of the citizens. The elected mayor oversees a variety of administrative departments and services. Most city and county organizational charts can be easily found through a simple online search and illustrate how different government entities relate to one another.



Source: City of Bellingham

Mayors

Mayors can be elected by the people (as in a mayor-council structure) or appointed by the city council (as in a council-manager structure) that is elected by the people.

Mayoral powers:

- Preparing the annual budget
- Serving as tie-breaker vote (in mayor-council structure)
- Vetoing bills (in mayor-council structure)
- Serving on city council and voting (in council-manager structure)
- Appointing citizens to advisory boards or commissions
- Serving as city administrator (in mayor-council structure)

City Councils

Councilmembers may represent a specific district or serve at-large, meaning they represent the entire jurisdiction. Many councils include a combination of both forms of representation. For example, the Seattle City Council is comprised of seven district seats and two at-large seats.

Council powers:

- Passing ordinances and resolutions
- Reviewing and approving the annual budget
- Modifying the city's charter
- Regulating public health and safety
- Appointing city manager and mayor (in council-manager structure)
- Creating city positions and setting salaries
- Confirming mayoral appointments
- Approving business licenses and regulations
- Regulating land use
- Borrowing funds

County Government

County legislative structure is similar in many ways to city structure. The **county council or board of county commissioners** serves as the legislative body for the county. Its size is determined by the county's charter. Some counties delegate administrative functions to an elected county executive, while others have an appointed administrator.

The roles and powers of a **county executive** are determined in each county's charter and are not specified in state law. You can find your county's charter and more information about the executive's role on your county website. Typically, county executives (also called county administrators) are responsible for the day-to-day administrative functions and services of

the county, including overseeing the many county departments ranging from 911 services to building and planning to parks and recreation.

County councilmembers and executives are not the only officials who show up on your ballot. Here are some of the other elected county officials you should know:

- **Assessor:** Determines property values in the county, which impacts tax liability for taxpayers.
- **Auditor:** Examines and audits financial records; oversees local elections and voter registration; issues titles, licenses, and registrations; and collects county fees and taxes. Auditors are elected in all counties except for King County.
- **Coroner/Medical Examiner:** Conducts death investigations, including inquests. In some counties, the county council or board of commissioners appoints a medical examiner in place of an elected coroner.
- **Prosecuting Attorney:** Serves as the legal representative for the county and all county officials, whether appointed or elected; prosecutes violators of state law and county code; represents the county in criminal and civil actions; and serves as legal advisor to all county officers. In small counties, the prosecuting attorney also acts as coroner, conducting death investigations.
- **Sheriff:** Serves as head of county law enforcement, including investigating complaints, providing emergency response, monitoring traffic safety, conducting criminal investigations, and executing warrants.
- **Treasurer:** Oversees management of county funds; provides financial services for the county; receives and distributes funds; invests county funds; and maintains financial records. Treasurers are elected in all counties except King County.

Elections

Term lengths for local officials vary depending on the position. In Washington, mayors and councilmembers serve 4-year terms. Terms may be staggered across seats – for example, in Seattle, mayoral and at-large council seats are up for election in 2021, but district seats are not up for election again until 2023.

Researching candidates and asking probing questions during the election cycle are important tools for activists. You may want to get candidates on the record so you can hold them accountable after they are elected or push them to take a stronger or different position on an issue.

The Washington Secretary of State publishes all candidate filing information on their website as well as information on your voting eligibility and historical voter data. The Public Disclosure Commission is a great resource for looking up how much money a candidate has raised and who has made donations to their campaign.

Sometimes the best tool is a simple internet search – try typing the candidate’s name in quotations plus the topic you are interested in to see if they have made any statements to the media or at a public event. You can also sign up for candidates’ email newsletters or check out their website and social media accounts to hear from them directly. The most impactful way to determine a candidate’s position on an issue is to attend a candidate forum or town hall and ask them a question directly. For more tips on how to find out about election events and craft strong candidate questions, check out the Elections Center on the ACLU of Washington website.


Understanding how laws are passed

Local governments have the power to pass both resolutions and ordinances. A **resolution** is a symbolic declaration about future purposes or proceedings of the governing body, or a policy statement. An **ordinance** is a local law that has been adopted by the governing body that has the legal formality of a statute.


Ordinance Process

Procedures vary between jurisdictions, but the process of how a bill becomes local law generally follows the steps below. As you will see in this list, there are opportunities for constituent advocacy at every stage of the process!


- 1. Bill Introduction.** A councilmember formally introduces a bill to the council. The bill is assigned a number, a title, a committee, and a sponsor (the councilmember who introduced the bill). Bills can either be referred to a specific committee based on subject matter or to the full council for consideration.

 **Advocacy opportunity:** Bring an idea for a bill to a councilmember.


- 2. Committee Hearings.** Bills are scheduled for public hearing within a policy committee or in front of the full council. During a public hearing, staff or the sponsor will explain the bill, councilmembers will review the bill and possibly propose amendments, and the public will have an opportunity to provide spoken comment. Members of the public can also submit written comment to the committee.

 **Advocacy opportunity:** Sign up to make a comment at a public hearing. Attend hearings with other people on your side and wear buttons or bring signs to show your position. Urge committee members to schedule the bill for a vote by calling or emailing them.


- 3. Committee Vote.** The committee considering the bill will schedule a vote. This usually takes place during a different committee meeting than the public hearing. In most jurisdictions, bills must pass by at least a majority vote of the committee.

 **Advocacy opportunity:** Contact committee members and urge them to vote yes on the bill you support (or no on the bill you oppose).


- 4. Council Vote.** Once a bill has passed out of committee, it may be scheduled for an additional public hearing in front of the full committee. The bill will also be scheduled for a vote by the full committee. Jurisdictions will either require a majority vote or more than a majority vote for the bill to pass.

 **Advocacy opportunity:** Contact councilmembers and urge them to vote yes on the bill you support.

5. Mayoral Approval. After a bill is passed by the city council, it is signed by the council president and sent to the mayor for approval and signature. In Seattle, the bill becomes effective 30 days after it is signed and returned to the city clerk. Other jurisdictions have similar processes. The mayor may also veto the bill or parts of the bill, in which case it is sent back to the city council for reconsideration. The city council may override a mayoral veto by a two-thirds majority vote. (Note: under a council-manager structure, this step may be skipped.)

 **Advocacy opportunity:** Contact the mayor's office and urge them to sign the bill into law (or veto the bill if it's one you don't support).

6. Bill Becomes Law. Once a bill has been signed by the mayor, it is assigned an ordinance number, similar to the Revised Code of Washington (RCW) at the state level. The ordinance is then codified and incorporated into the city or town's municipal code.

 **Advocacy opportunity:** Spread the word! Educate other members of the community about the new law or changes to an existing law.

Open Public Meetings Act

The Open Public Meetings Act (OPMA) was passed by the Washington State Legislature in 1971 to make government processes more transparent and accessible to the public. Under the OPMA, meetings of a “governing body” of a “public agency” must be open to the public (RCW 42.30.030). Public agencies under this definition include state boards and commissions, cities, counties, school districts, special purpose districts, courts, the Legislature, and more. Because of this law, council meetings where proposed legislation is being discussed and votes by the council are open to public viewing, and agencies are required to make the schedule for those meetings available to the public ahead of time. The OPMA does not require that governing bodies allow public comment, however, and it allows them to limit the topics that may be addressed and amount of time members of the public are given to speak.

You can read more information about the OPMA from the State Attorney General here: <https://www.atg.wa.gov/open-government-internet-manual/chapter-3>.

Public Records Act

The Public Records Act (PRA) is a law passed by Washington voters in 1972 that requires public access to all records and materials from state and local agencies (RCW 42.56). Anyone can submit a request for information to a public agency. State law requires that agencies respond to a records request within five business days, although they do not necessarily have to provide the records requested within that time frame. Public agencies may also charge “a reasonable fee” for providing a copy of records, and these costs vary.

For more information about utilizing the PRA, visit the Washington Coalition for Open Government’s website: <https://washingtoncog.org/records-requests/public-records-act/>.

Additional Resources

- [Cities 101 — Council Powers - National League of Cities \(nlc.org\)](#)
- [Legislative Process - CityClerk | seattle.gov](#)
- [MRSC - County Elected and Appointed Officials](#)
- [MRSC - Quick Guide for Newly Elected City Officials](#)
- [Ordinance Process - StateScape](#)

Useful Terms

- **At-large:** Serving an entire jurisdiction.
- **Bill:** A proposed law being considered by a governing body.
- **Charter:** A formal written document that defines a governing body's powers.
- **Commission:** A government agency with administrative, legislative, or judicial powers.
- **District:** A geographic subdivision of a jurisdiction.
- **Municipal code:** A compilation of passed ordinances for a jurisdiction.
- **Ordinance:** A local law that has been adopted by the governing body that has the legal formality of a statute.
- **Resolution:** A symbolic declaration about future purposes or proceedings of the governing body, or a policy statement.
- **Statute:** A law enacted by the legislative body of a government.