

Introduction

A *community* is a group of people living in a particular area who share common characteristics, interests, activities, or purposes. That group could be as small as a family living together in an apartment or as large as the population of a sprawling metropolitan area. You can belong to communities within communities: family, neighborhood, school, Scout troop, club, team, worship group, and city. The United States is a patchwork of communities.

Local communities are the building blocks of government. They differ from each other and may be governed differently. The makeup of a particular local government depends on its history, population, size, geography, and various laws. But regardless of how local communities differ, they all have one point in common: In the United States, local government means self-government. Here, citizens help to make decisions about their community through their elected local officials.

Top-Down Government

In many countries outside the United States, the national government controls and directs what happens in local communities.

Every community has a history. Some are centuries old and full of hope or despair; others are beginning right now, as carpenters nail shingles on the last house in a new neighborhood. While you are earning this merit badge, you will discover ways you can help your community, old or new, by participating as a good, active citizen.

Citizenship: The Value of Belonging

Every time an American family adds a child, the United States adds another citizen. Citizens are people who either were born in this country or were born elsewhere and have been *naturalized*, or granted citizenship by the government. If you are a U.S. citizen, you also are a citizen of your state and local community.

The Rights, Duties, and Obligations of Community

Being a member of a community—your family or your Scout troop, for example—gives you rights, privileges, and protection. You may express your opinions, try out new skills, spend time with your friends, and be safe. In return, you have responsibilities: to honor your parents, to respect adult leaders and fellow Scouts, to help one another, and to follow the rules.

As a citizen in the larger community, you are entitled to the freedoms guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution and to the full protection of federal, state, and local laws. You also can count on the support of local service departments like fire, sanitation, and animal control. But these rights of citizenship come with a price.

With citizenship comes obligations—some that are required by law, including paying taxes and debts, and obeying the law. Other obligations, such as valuing others' opinions, staying informed about candidates and issues, and respecting elected representatives, might not be written laws, but they may be considered instructions for good conduct.

Just as you are loyal to your family and troop members—even if you do not always agree with them—you should show allegiance to your local government. If you disagree with what is happening in your community, you have the right to try to change local public policies.

Public policy includes the goals the government sets as well as the actions required to achieve those goals. For example, a city council might set a goal to build the local economy by giving tax breaks to new businesses.

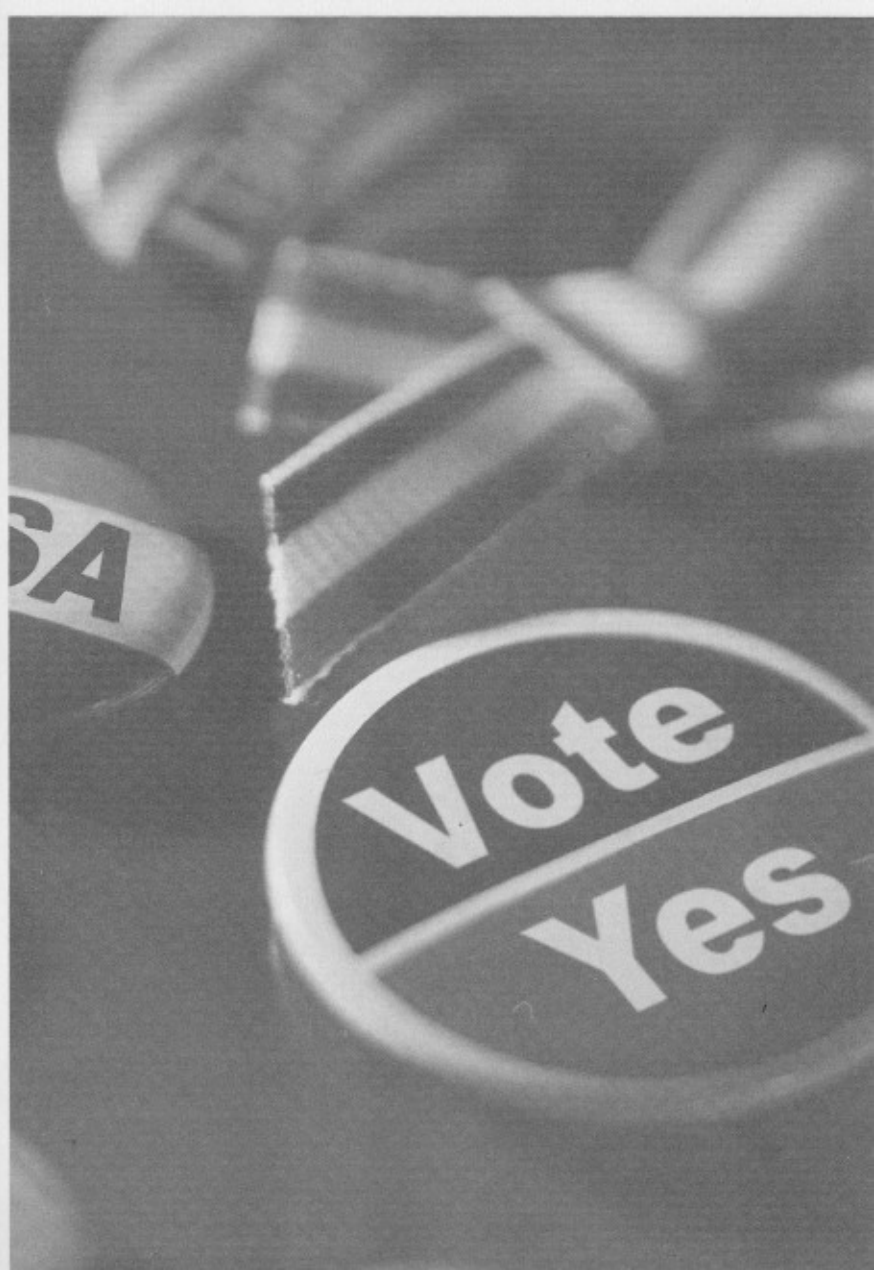
Participation: The Antidote to Apathy

Many citizens take their rights for granted. Some citizens choose not to vote, so they voluntarily give up their voice in the government. Other citizens do not know or care about what is going on in their community—until a prison is built behind their homes or their neighborhood creek is found to be contaminated. Unless they are upset about a particular issue, most citizens leave the decisions to elected representatives and local activists.

People who feel connected to their community tend to participate. The more connected citizens are in their community, with ties to a school, youth organizations, clubs, businesses, and service groups, the more interest they will have in the local government. That is why longtime residents often hold many of the local offices.

You have a chance now to build connections in your own community. Look for opportunities to get involved with charities, local companies, your place of worship, and your school. By trying to help people and understand the issues in your community, you will develop a respect for the opinions of others and a compassion for those in need. You also will appreciate the efforts that your elected officials make on your behalf.

Good citizenship goes beyond feeling loyal to your community. It is how you conduct yourself as a citizen, being constantly alert to ways you can improve the lives of your family, friends, neighbors, and your community as a whole.



Seats of Power

The U.S. Constitution outlines a federal system in which the powers of the people's government are divided between the national government and the 50 states. State constitutions create unitary systems in which all powers are centralized in the state governments. Nowhere in the Constitution are local governments mentioned.

The Relationship Between State and Local Governments

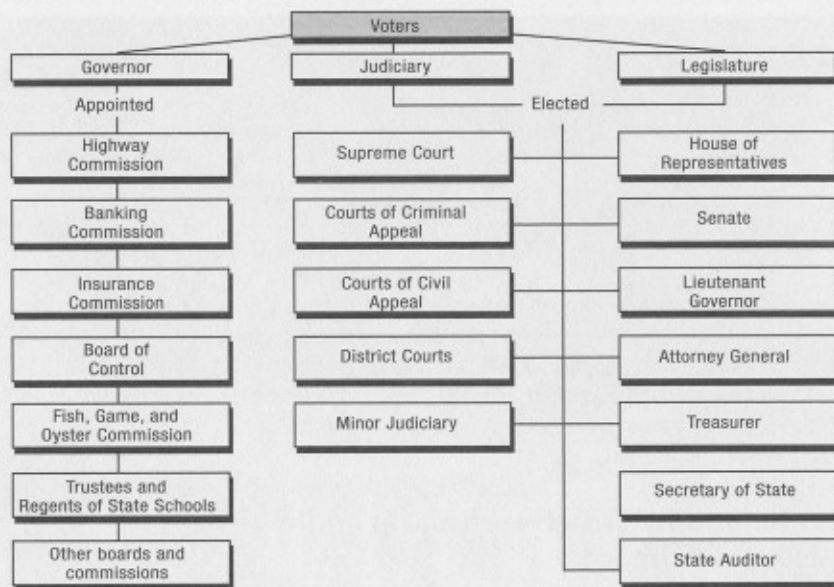
Each state has complete authority over all the local governments within its borders. The local governments borrow their powers from state governments and can exercise only those powers specifically given to them by the state.

State governments are patterned after the three branches of the federal government: executive, legislative, and judicial. The governor heads the executive branch, which includes other elected officers such as the lieutenant governor, attorney general, secretary of state, and treasurer. Elected representatives from districts throughout the state make laws in a two-house legislature. Most states have what they call the upper house, or Senate, and the lower house, or House of Representatives. (Nebraska calls its one house the Legislature.) The judiciary is the system of courts headed by elected or appointed judges.

Citizens vote for many state officials, but the governor and Senate share appointive powers and choose officials to run certain state boards and commissions.

We Can Do It Ourselves

In recent years, many states have added *home-rule amendments* to their constitutions. These amendments give local governments the authority to handle their own internal affairs without interference from the state.



Organization of a typical state government

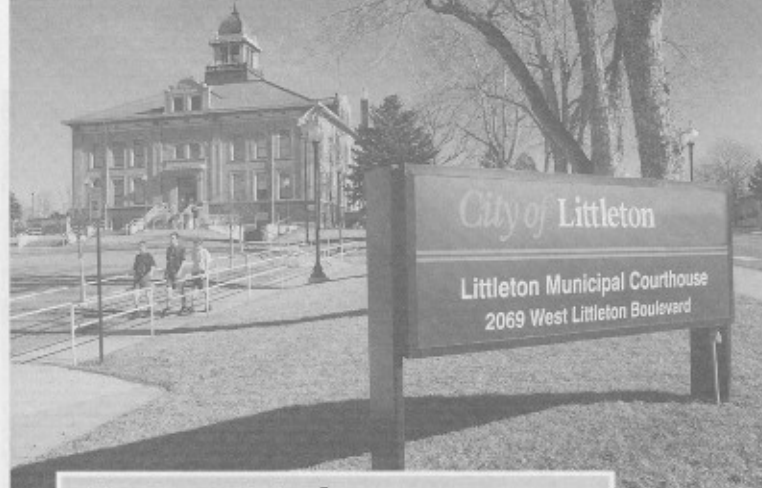
At the federal and state levels, separation of powers is very important and helps ensure that no one branch of government becomes too powerful. It is not as critical at the local level where most governing bodies perform administrative and legislative duties.

Structure of Local Governments

No matter where you live, you probably are touched by several layers of local government: city, county, school district, special district, and region. Your family might pay taxes to one or more of these government entities.

Counties

All U.S. states are divided into *counties* (called *parishes* in Louisiana and *boroughs* in Alaska), which are further divided into *townships* or *districts*. In 48 states, the county is the largest unit of local government. Connecticut and Rhode Island do not have county governments. In Connecticut, counties exist only for the purposes of elections; in Rhode Island, counties are divisions of the state court system.



Farm to Market

The county has its roots in rural life. Boundary lines that were drawn in the days of the horse and buggy were laid out so that everyone living within a given county could travel in one day to and from the center of local government and commerce.

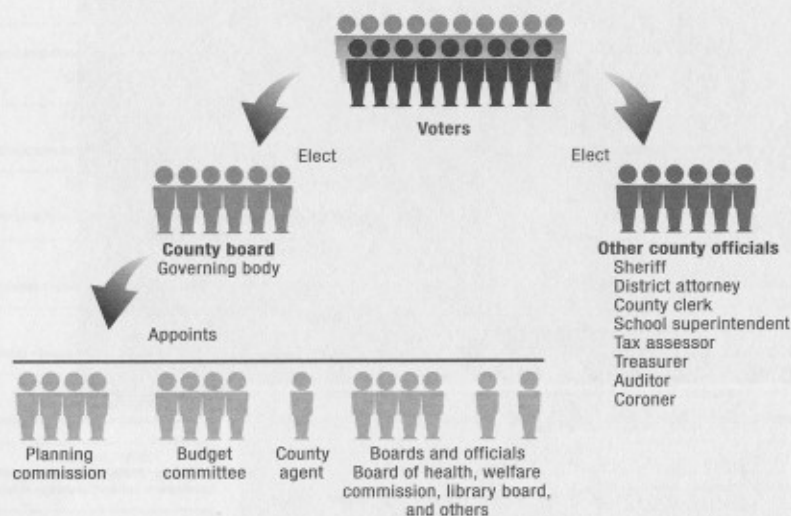
The main functions of county government are law enforcement; property assessment and tax collection; highway construction and maintenance; recording of important public documents such as deeds, mortgages, and death certificates; issuing licenses for hunting, fishing, and marriage; and providing public welfare.

When state and local government budgets are cut, counties in large urban areas assume more responsibility in providing services such as transportation, water and sewer operations, emergency medical services, and land-use planning. Regions made up of multiple counties often regulate air quality control and mass transit networks, and coordinate natural disaster planning.

County governments can be structured several ways. The most common form is the *county board*, in which citizens elect officials from their township or district to represent them on a board of commissioners (usually with three to seven or more members) or a board of supervisors (typically with 15 to

Whenever a call is made to 9-1-1, you should know that it is recorded and documented and can never be "canceled." If this number is dialed accidentally or if it is a prank call, someone (such as a police officer or sheriff) will show up at the door to make sure everything is all right.

With your parent's permission, visit your state's Web site on the Internet.



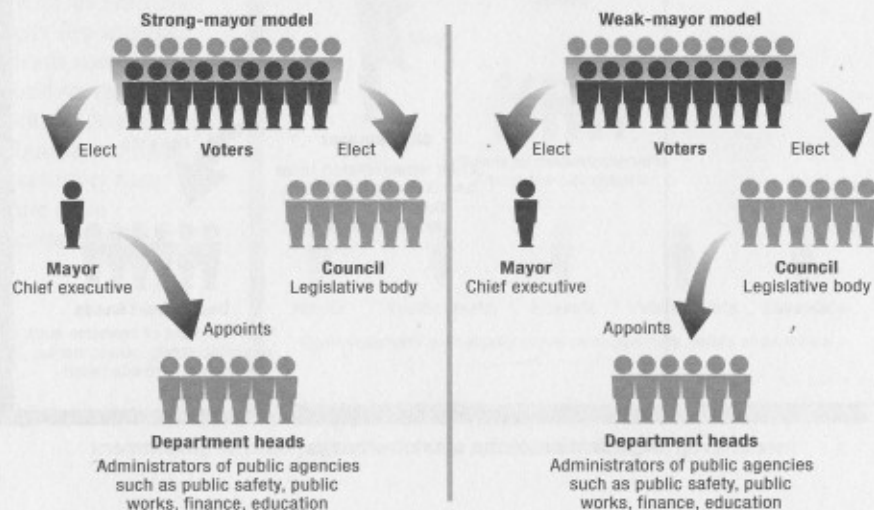
Organization of one typical county government

Bath, Population 652

A state establishes a community as a legal entity through a process called *incorporation*. Each state constitution defines the conditions and procedures for a local area to become an incorporated municipality. States generally require that a minimum number of people live in that particular area so that providing services makes financial sense.



Municipal governments are organized according to their *charters*. The most widely used form of city government is the *mayor-council charter*. Voters elect a mayor as the chief executive and a council as its legislature. For cities larger than 5,000 people, the average size of a city council is seven members, but huge cities like New York City may have as many as 50 council members. Depending on how many formal powers are given to the mayor, the mayor-council form of government often is described as a "strong-mayor" or "weak-mayor" type.



Organization of strong-mayor council and weak-mayor council forms of government

A *charter* is a formal, legal document that defines the boundaries of a city and creates its government.

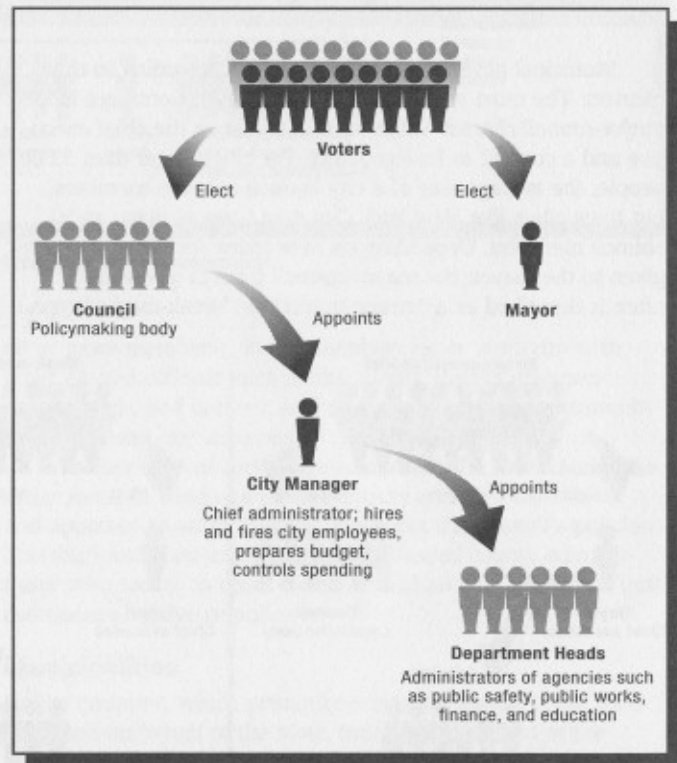
80 or more members). Board members share authority with other elected officials such as the sheriff, district attorney, county clerk, and coroner, and they appoint people to committees and lesser commissions.

Another type of county government is the *council-administrator form*, in which an elected county council passes laws and appoints an administrator to execute the council's policies. The third and least-used form has an *elected county administrator* who serves as chief executive and an elected council that determines legislative policy.

Municipalities

Unlike counties, which primarily exist to carry out broad local functions on behalf of the state, *municipalities* exist at the request of their residents who want more public services. Municipalities (cities, towns, villages, and boroughs) are densely populated urban areas with local governments. The state creates them by *charters* or other legislation, which then serve as local constitutions.

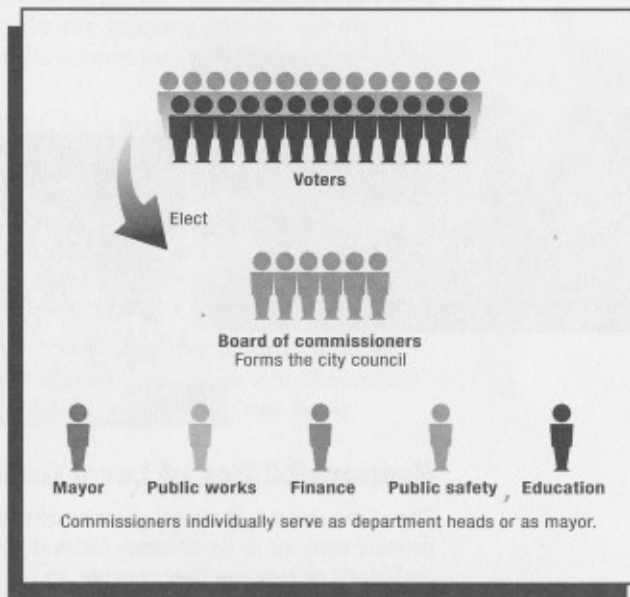
Another form of city government that is gaining wide support is the *council-manager government*, also called the city manager plan, in which citizens vote for council members in a nonpartisan, at-large election and elect a mayor with limited authority. The council then hires a *city manager*, often a professionally trained career administrator who is given the authority to appoint all department heads. Under this arrangement, the council makes policies to be carried out by the city manager. The city council retains the right to dismiss the manager at any time.



Organization of the council-manager form of government

In at-large (or citywide) elections without political party affiliations, the majority of voters tend to elect well-known candidates. Some citizens in neighborhoods with a high concentration of one ethnic minority might think they are not adequately represented on the city council. They may protest that elections should be based on single-member districts so that racial and ethnic groups can have stronger voices in local government. What do you think?

The third and least-used type of municipal government is the *commission* form. Voters elect three to nine commissioners who act together as a council to pass ordinances and control finances, and individually to head the different departments of city government. The voters or the commissioners may choose one of the commissioners to be mayor. The mayor, who also heads a city department, leads meetings and represents the city at ceremonies, but has no more authority than the other commissioners.



Organization of the commission form of government

Special Districts

A school district's name includes "ISD" for "independent school district."

The fastest growing form of local government is the *special district* run by an elected board. This separate legal unit provides a single service—such as flood or mosquito control—to a particular area, and often overlaps other local jurisdictions. These special districts range in size from neighborhood blocks concerned with historic preservation to the mammoth Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which operates tunnels, bridges, and airports.

School districts are by far the most common kind of special district. Voters in most districts elect a board of education whose policies are carried out by an appointed school superintendent. The board sets school tax rates, hires teachers, and runs all the public elementary and secondary schools under its authority. The board of education is one of the most important official groups of citizens and is generally independent of the city council.



Responsibilities of Local Government

The state entrusts the local government to protect and provide services to its citizens. Cities differ in the number and kinds of services they provide. In the nation's snowbelt, local governments spend huge sums of money on snow removal. Communities in America's tornado alley have to pay for sophisticated early-warning systems. Most cities provide roughly the same services to meet a community's basic needs.

By the Numbers

State and local governments use the latest U.S. Census Bureau data to project population growth and determine the need for new schools and additional public services.

Mandates funded by taxpayers are the responsibility of local governments.

- To protect life and property, the local government provides public safety and fire departments, and a municipal court system.
- To guard the health of its citizens, the city or county runs hospitals and clinics, manages sanitation services, and handles animal control.
- To provide education, the city supports libraries and the school district maintains schools for students in grades K through 12.
- To care for those in need, local government may offer social services such as foster home care and mental health facilities.
- To make the community a good place to live, local government builds and maintains streets, provides public transportation, creates parks and recreational facilities, and attracts new businesses.

For a quick overview of the variety of services provided by your community, look under "Government and Community Services" (the blue pages) in your local telephone book.

Public Meetings

More than 300 years ago, American colonists regularly met to decide how best to manage and protect their communities. At those gatherings, people discussed and argued and finally voted for their convictions. This is the purest form of democracy—when voters participate directly in making laws, levying taxes, and spending money.

Today, the New England town meeting still exists in many small towns. But because of population growth, time constraints, and modern-day complexities, it has given way to a modified form in which citizens elect representatives to attend the meetings and vote on their behalf.

Attending a city council or school board meeting or a court session is a major step toward becoming an informed citizen. Imagine what it would be like to live in a community where all public meetings were held in private. However, some executive meetings are closed sessions and are not open to the public. Generally in those cases, the actions taken will be announced after the closed session.

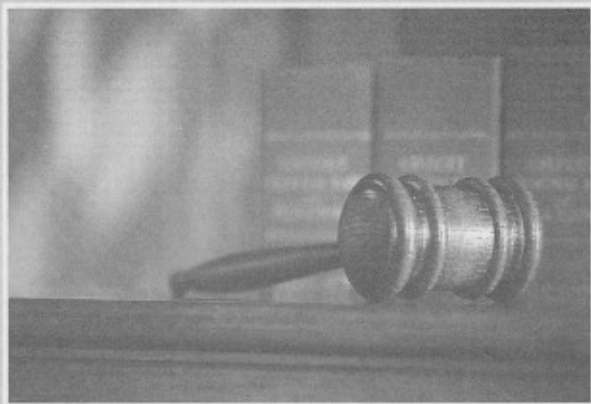
Local government—regardless of its structure—is the level of government most directly accountable to the public. Citizens meet face-to-face with their representatives at public meetings. If you do not know what local voting district you live in or who represents you, call the city council or school board. Then attend one of those meetings and watch how elected representatives participate and vote. If you get the opportunity, introduce yourself to local council members or school board representatives.

Charters require that city councils publish proposed *ordinances*, or municipal laws, in local newspapers. That

way, interested citizens can voice their concerns at scheduled hearings before the laws are enacted. This prevents the council members from legislating in secret and acting out of self-interest.

Public meeting agendas are posted in advance in the newspaper and on the city or school district's Web site, if it has one. In most places, a citizen must register to speak at the meeting about an item on the agenda. Topics at a council meeting might include architectural requirements for new commercial buildings, a proposal for a multilane highway through a residential neighborhood, the sale of municipal bonds, and the best use of a vacant parcel of land.

At a school board meeting, you might hear about the cost of buying band instruments, the need to reduce expenses, the value of block schedules compared to six-period days, whether to award physical education credit for off-campus sports, and other similar issues.



Be Aware

How can you know how the council or board members voted on a motion? Do certain representatives seem more knowledgeable about the issues than others? Some people at the meeting do not vote. What are their roles? Are you surprised at how many citizens attend these meetings?

The Court System

Municipal courts have citywide authority and are organized in divisions: civil, criminal, domestic relations, small claims, traffic, and probate courts. If you sit in on a session of one of these courts, you will hear cases involving *misdemeanors* (less serious crimes) and matters involving small amounts of money. County and state courts (known as general trial courts) handle more serious civil and criminal cases, which are tried before a judge.

If a dispute arises about how the law has been applied in one of these trial courts, a judge in an *appellate court* (often called a court of appeals) reviews the case and makes a decision.

In some instances, a case is appealed to the state's Supreme Court, which is the court of last resort in the state's judicial system. Five to seven justices sit on the high bench and have the final say about all cases relating to state law. On rare occasions, when a question of federal law is involved, a case may be appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court.



Local Issues: What's on the Public's Mind?

You can learn a lot about your community just by paying attention to what is going on around you. You might hear people talking in the grocery store, in the post office, in restaurants, or in the stands at athletic events. Listen closely, read the newspaper, watch the local news on television, and you will find out what issues concern the public.

For example, you might hear a mother expressing worry that her child's frequent asthma attacks may be caused by air pollution in the community. Or you might hear that many car accidents have occurred at a particular intersection. You might see news coverage on television about how graffiti has been a problem in a particular community.

Read the *editorials* in your local newspaper. If you have attended a court session, you might have discovered connections between cases in the courtroom and articles in the paper. Consider the subjects you heard discussed at the city council or school board meeting. Think about the hot topics. Pick an issue that interests you and find out how to help.

Getting to the Bottom of an Issue

You can easily figure out which branch of local government is responsible for resolving the problem by calling the city council office or school board, or asking the reference librarian at your local library. If you read about the problem in the newspaper, look for names in the article or contact the newspaper for a lead.

An *editorial* is a piece of writing that expresses the writer's opinions. Editorials usually are separated from regular news stories in the newspaper.

Before you
contact an official
to interview, be
sure you have
your counselor's
and parent's
permission.

Once you know which branch, board, or committee is responsible, find out who might be willing to discuss the issue with you and how to reach that person. Then request an interview (by telephone probably is the most convenient). Allow yourself enough time before the interview to thoroughly prepare. Try to find out as much as you can about all sides of the issue. What is currently being done to address it? How can young people help?

In many cities, young people serve as representatives on advisory boards for the library, city council, school board, and parent/teacher association, and as members of teen court. Citizens 18 or older usually are eligible to run for local office.

Tips for Interviewing

- Do your research. Understand the issue and different points of view.
- Prepare a list of questions. Include questions about how young people can help.
- Allow the person time to think and reply to your questions. Do not interrupt.
- Thank the interviewee for his or her time.



Do not show up to an interview unannounced. Call first to set up an appointment or a time when you can call back and talk at length by telephone.



Making a Difference

A good citizen looks for opportunities to help improve the community. Small efforts make a difference, and you also can join forces with others to benefit many people.

Young citizens who participate in Scouting, school activities, and religious organizations tend to volunteer far more often than students who do not participate in those groups. This willingness to help continues into adulthood. By fulfilling requirement 7, you will make a real contribution to your community and open the door to a lifetime of rewarding experiences.

Matching Your Interests to Volunteer Work

You know how much more you enjoy doing something if you are good at it or if it really interests you. So keep that in mind as you consider volunteer opportunities. List your skills and talents. Think about whether you are willing to teach those skills to other people. Consider your personal goals and what you want to learn, too. List the issues that are most important to you.

Think of the merit badges you have earned and how you might use those skills to be a valued volunteer. Perhaps you like to play an instrument. Maybe you can repair electronic equipment. If you are bilingual or computer savvy, there are many opportunities to put those skills into practical and fulfilling experiences. Having a good sense of humor is a valuable skill, too.

Many people volunteer because they care about social problems like illiteracy and poverty, or environmental issues, or finding cures for specific diseases. Others take pleasure in helping elderly people, animals, or children. There are endless opportunities to volunteer, so pick one that suits you. That way, you will make a bigger difference.

At the Movies: Activists, Whistle-Blowers, and Ordinary People

Individuals sometimes make great personal sacrifices to tackle problems that threaten a community or to stand up for what is just. Filmmakers love to turn these bigger-than-life stories into movies. You can find *documentary films* (factual or objective films) and blockbusters about people who acted alone or with others to have a positive effect on society. Examples include true stories of people exposing a cover-up about a contaminated water supply, leading a country to freedom through passive resistance, publicly disclosing a company's strategy to profit by harming consumers, and creating an inspiring program of musical instruction for urban children. Also look for movies about people who played a powerful role in business or government to benefit society.

Choosing a Charity

Once you decide what cause interests you, it is time to find out which charitable organizations in your community address the issue. You can start by looking at the community services pages in your telephone book. Call the local Better Business Bureau. Pick up fliers about charities at the local chamber of commerce. With your parent's permission, visit the Web sites listed in the resources section of this merit badge pamphlet.

Find out if the group is a not-for-profit organization. Read its mission statement and decide if you agree with its goals. If you want to volunteer for that organization, call to discuss possible responsibilities or suggest what you would like to do. Even though you are giving your time and effort for free, you may have to interview for the position. Most organizations want the best people working for their cause. They also know volunteers can make big contributions, of time and other resources and many are needed.



Shining a Light on Your Community

When you aim a spotlight at something, your focus is narrow. You have chosen one perspective to highlight and ignored the rest. But by learning more about your community, you shine a floodlight. Suddenly, you see lots of different kinds of people and places with varying world views. Good government officials and good citizens always try to understand different points of view.

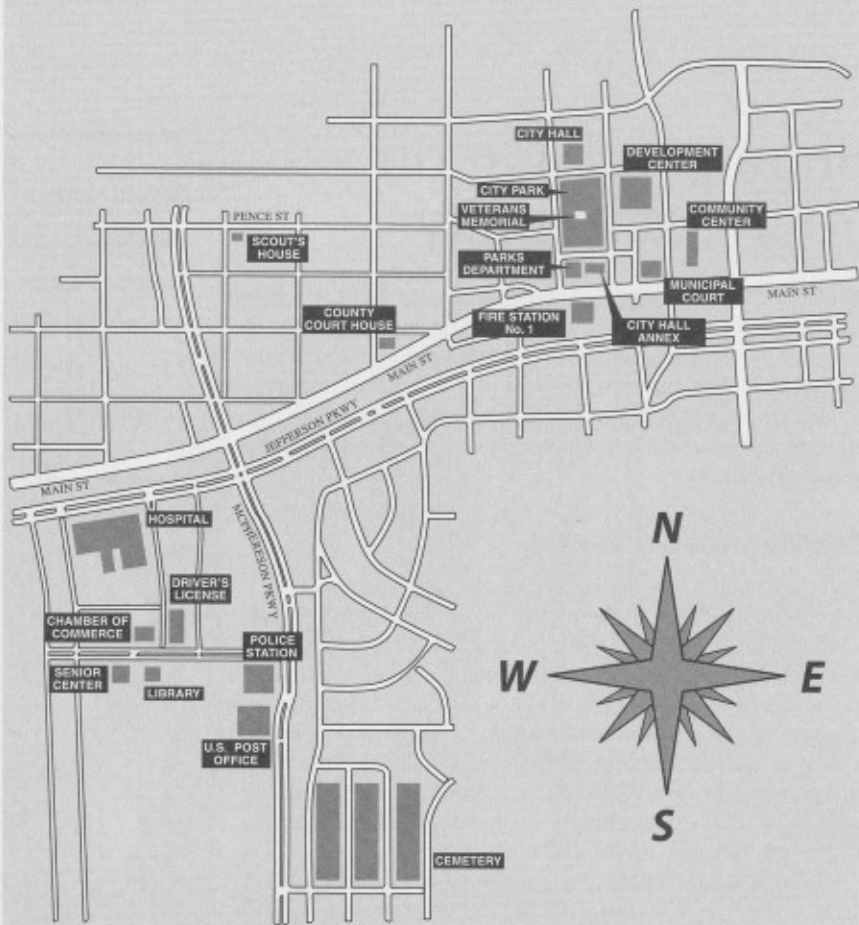
As you become familiar with your community, it is important to know the major streets in your area.

The Hometown Tourist

There are people who have lived in New York City all their lives and never been to the top of the Empire State Building. Have you been to the tourist attractions in your hometown? You probably remember driving in your community with family or friends when someone looked out the car window and said, "I've never noticed *that* before." Ride through your community with your parents (or with their permission) and explore streets you have never traveled. You will discover unfamiliar and interesting neighborhoods, businesses, historical places, elementary schools, parks, and more.

To fulfill requirement 2, you must map out your community. If you go to the building where the local government board or council meets, you likely will find a map of your community marked with the chief government buildings and public service facilities. Read the government and community services pages in your local telephone book to learn the addresses of the hospital, fire, and police stations nearest your home. Call or visit the local historical society to know where to find historic sites in your community.

Regardless of whether you live in a city with a mass transit system and a take-it-for-granted clean water supply or in a rural area with unpaved roads and well water, you live in a



Community map

unique community with its own history and special places.

If your community has a tourist center, go there to collect information about local attractions. You can gather all sorts of information about local *demographics*, parks, lakes, and recreational facilities, museums, public gardens, sports attractions, and cultural events. You can pick up similar fliers at the local chamber of commerce. With your parent's permission, check out the Internet. Most towns and cities regularly update their own Web sites with helpful information.

While walking or riding through your community, pay attention to the names of schools, community centers, and streets. These are clues to the history of your community and to the people who played active roles. Notice how many signs on businesses and religious buildings are posted in different languages. Take a tour of the produce section in your grocery store. How do the varieties of fruits and vegetables reflect the ethnic influences in your community?

Think about what makes a neighborhood. How is one neighborhood different from another? Isn't your community a cluster of all these local groups?

The Informed Booster

Every community needs an enthusiastic supporter who will promote it as a great place to live. You can be a booster for your community when you make your public presentation for requirement 8. To make a fair and balanced speech or exhibit, be sure to also point out the challenges your community faces and what the community is doing to address the challenges.

When you interview someone in the local government (for requirement 4b), use that opportunity to discuss community challenges. Consider contacting your elected officials to discuss those problems, too. Include something about your community's geography.

Demographics are statistical characteristics of human populations that reflect the composition of a group of people (community, state, or country). Commonly tracked characteristics include ethnicity, age, income, religious preference, and level of education. People use these statistics to determine who might buy certain products, whether to build more apartments or houses, or if a community will be best served by an extreme sports park for teenagers instead of a traditional recreation center.

For tips about making speeches and multimedia presentations, refer to the *Public Speaking, Communications, and Photography* merit badge pamphlets.

Think about the geography of your community. How do the physical features contribute to the local lifestyle or attract industries?

Use your talents to shape your presentation. If you enjoy talking in front of a group of people, make a speech. If you love to take photos, then create a photographic exhibit. Keep in mind, however, that people in your audience respond differently to information. Some like to hear it presented; others prefer to see it. Combine aural and visual elements so that your presentation interests everyone.

Staging Your Presentation

Reach out to your community when you make your presentation. Consider staging it at a nursing home, senior citizens center, Rotary Club meeting, YMCA after-school program, or volunteer group.

Invite people who helped you with your presentation, such as residents and officials you interviewed. You might include elected officials or members of the volunteer organization you assisted for requirement 7c.

Have fun doing this project as well as the other requirements. As you learn more about your community and make more of an effort to get involved, you will develop a greater sense of belonging, a stronger pride in your hometown, and a better understanding of what it means to be a good citizen in your community.

Consider any of these possibilities as a starting point for your presentation: oral history, timeline, photographic exhibit, collage, mural, plasticine model, multimedia show.

