

Local Governments and Their Services



Mississippians can be proud of their contributions to the development of the United States government. The strength of America's political system has been its ability to embrace and accommodate the changes required of it.

County government was among the first units of local government established under the English system. Nothing similar to a county was known to the Roman Empire. The English county, known as the shire, denoted a community of people with some common interest—geographic, social, or cultural.

Why Is Local Government Necessary?

The original role of local government was limited. The county was merely a subdivision of the state, and its role was to assess and collect taxes, provide for the local courts, and maintain the roads. Today, if you woke to find that your local government had closed, you would not be able to call the sheriff or police for protection, your school bus would not arrive, *and* your schools could be closed. There would be no fire protection. The health department, which inspects restaurants, milk, and food, would be closed. You could not check a book out of the public library or secure a license to get married. Soon the roads and bridges would become impassible from disrepair; criminals would roam free since there would be no police, no courts, and no jail. As you can see, we rely on local government and the public services it provides every day and in many areas of our lives.

Counties remain geographical and political subdivisions of the state. Originally, members of the general assembly were chosen from the counties. However, the U.S. Supreme Court decision mandating "one man, one vote" necessitated forming legislative districts in order to equalize the population. Still, the government closest to the people is local government; the county and city are governed by friends and neighbors.

Beginning in colonial times and continuing today, people have looked to their local governments for more and more services, especially those having an immediate impact on their lives, including public safety, health, education, and social services.

What Services Does Local Government Provide?

Modern Mississippi local government provides services to its people in the following categories:

- public works: construction and maintenance of county roads, bridges, and public buildings;
- public safety: law enforcement, courts, and fire protection;
- planning and development: planning, zoning, and industrial development;
- public utilities: water, sewer, and other utilities;
- public health, recreation, and education: health clinics, environmental sanitation, parks and recreation programs, public schools (cosponsors with state and federal government), and the county Cooperative Extension Service;
- public assistance: general relief and welfare; and
- general government services: recording of deeds, issuance of marriage licenses, and assessment and collection of taxes.

Not every county and city provides the same level of services. Urban counties function much like city governments, and rural counties provide the level of services needed by the people who live there. However, each unit of local government, whether urban or rural, is being called on to increase both its level of services and the types of services rendered.

Who Pays for Local Services?

Obviously, the services provided by local governments cost money. City and county officials and employees have salaries; materials and supplies must be purchased. However, these services are so commonplace that people have a tendency to think they are free. A local government pays for its services and supplies from funds supplied by the county residents and from funds received from the state and federal government, such as assistance for schools, welfare, and revenue sharing.

The local residents pay their part of the cost of these services in the form of ad valorem taxes. These include taxes assessed against homes, businesses, automobiles, and farm equipment based on their values; fees for various permits including business, marriage, and driver's licenses; and user charges for the water or sewer system. Cities also receive a share of state sales tax collected within each municipality as a source of revenue. If the residents of a community desire more or higher quality services, more money is needed. Today, inflation has made even the same level and type of services cost more each year. This is the dilemma of local government officials; the people want more services yet want to pay lower taxes.

How Can Citizens Get Involved?

Constructive changes in Mississippi's local government can be expected to continue and probably accelerate as control over local affairs is given to local officials who are readily accessible to the people. By taking an active interest in local government, citizens can be a part of this change. Here are some ways you can participate:

- Stay informed about local problems and what governmental officials are doing to solve them.
- Join organizations devoted to improving your community.
- Become involved in local political organizations and help elect people you believe can offer the kind of leadership your area needs.
- Talk with your elected officials and tell them your views on local issues.
- Most importantly, express your opinions on issues by voting.

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