

## City Government: Why Should I Care?

### Overview

In this lesson, students will identify services provided by local city government and determine which government departments are responsible for various services. They will then assume the roles of city council members and prioritize various government services, allocating mock resources accordingly. Finally, students will discuss the importance of being active citizens and participating in their local governments.

### Materials

- Accompanying Power Point available at <https://k12database.unc.edu/files/2017/09/CityGovernmentPPT.pdf>
  - To view this PDF as a projectable presentation, save the file, click “View” in the top menu bar of the file, and select “Full Screen Mode”
  - To request an editable PPT version of this presentation, send a request to [CarolinaK12@unc.edu](mailto:CarolinaK12@unc.edu) with the title of the PowerPoint in the subject line.
- NC’s Local Government Departments and the Services They Provide graphic organizer, attached
- Services provided by local government departments list and key, attached
- City Council Persona slips, attached
- Timers (optional)
- Why Local Government is Important, article attached
- 5 Reasons You Might Love Working in Local Government, article attached

### Optional Resources

- Invite a Local Government Official, such as a city council member, the mayor, the city manager, etc., to class
  - Arranging for a municipal official to join the class for this lesson can provide a great opportunity to engage with and learn from a local government official with first-hand knowledge. It is recommended that the official be invited not to give a “speech,” but rather is prepared to engage with the students. For example, the official might introduce himself/herself at the start of class and provide a brief 5-10 minute overview of their work, but then the official might float among groups and offer advice as they participate in the small group city council budget role play. Afterwards, he/she can discuss how the role play and group decisions connect to real life, and students can pose questions.)
  - For a generic procedure for having students create and deliver a presentation
  - to local government officials, see Carolina K-12’s [Exploring the Importance of Your Local Vote and Voice with First Vote](#).
- Contact the local government official of your choice 2-4 weeks in advance of this lesson to explain the activity and to ask for assistance in providing students knowledge about the roles and responsibilities of local government officials. After making an initial contact, follow up with an e-mail including the date, time, location, parking arrangements, school procedures for guests, and a complete set of materials for the activity.
- For a lesson plan focusing on county government, see Carolina K-12’s “Choice, Conflict & Compromise at the County Level.” Click for [LESSON PLAN](#) | [ACCOMPANYING POWER POINT](#)
- For a lesson plan focusing on the importance of local elections, see “Turn Up the Turnout: Overcoming the Obstacles to Voting in Local Elections.” Click for [LESSON PLAN](#) | [ACCOMPANYING POWERPOINT](#)
- In addition, numerous local government lesson plans and resources can be found in Carolina K-12’s Database of K-12 Resources [here](#).
- *Local Government in North Carolina* textbook (optional); available at <https://www.sog.unc.edu/publications/books/local-government-north-carolina-fourth-edition-2012-0>

## Duration

90 minutes

## Procedure

### City Government – Exciting, Boring, or Somewhere in Between?

1. As a warm-up, project slide 2 and ask students to respond to the question and images provided: “When hearing that we are going to be talking about city government today, which image best describes you and why?” Provide a few minutes students to share their initial thoughts about local government, allowing them to vent honestly if they feel that it’s a boring topic. Provide follow up questions based on student comments, such as:
  - So, you think city government is uninteresting or boring – why? (Or, if you are lucky enough to have a student note that it’s interesting, ask them to also share why.)
  - Do you feel local government is more exciting or less exciting than national/federal government? Why?
  - Does city government impact you in anyway? Explain.
  - What is a “city” anyway? (Or a “town” or “municipality?”) Can anyone explain? Why do you think the concept of a city even exists?
  - What city government offices do citizens get to vote for? Do you know when the next election is for these offices?
  - Do you think it is important to vote in local elections? Why or why not?

### Basics of Municipal Government

2. Let students know that in today’s lesson, students will be exploring city government, and that it is your priority to turn those of them with a #2 impression into a #1 impression! Project slide 3 and give students a brief overview of cities/municipalities, which are “**incorporated**” within counties because the people living there want a more “local” provision of public services, a means for providing public order and improving the community, and the right to participate in local decision making. Municipalities must be incorporated by act of the General Assembly, which defines the geographic boundaries of the municipality and approves its charter. The **charter** may call the municipality a city, a town, or a village; in North Carolina, these terms carry no special legal meaning and are not tied to the population of the municipality as in some other states.
3. Next, ask the class: “What does city government do for citizens and members of our community? Can you think of any services city/municipal government is in charge of?” List student responses on a piece of chart paper – you will come back to this in a bit, so there is no need to correct inaccuracies at this point.

### City Government Agencies and the Services They Provide

4. After students have brainstormed for a few moments, tell the class they are going to take a quick look at some of the numerous services cities typically provide. Choose one of these two options for the activity:
  - Allow students to pair up and distribute the “NC’s Local Government Agencies and the Services They Provide” graphic organizer. Explain that the list isn’t necessarily exhaustive, but that most towns and cities have at least these nine government departments. Provide students with the attached list of services provided by city government. Ask students to place services with corresponding government department responsible for each. Spot check students as they are working and answer questions as they arise. After about 10 minutes discuss answers (key attached).
  - Prior to class, label 9 pieces of chart paper with each of the agencies. Enlarge the list of city services and then cut each service into a strip. Distribute several strips to each student, or have students partner up and work on strips in pairs. Students should then circulate around the room (individually or with their partner) and find the appropriate agency that they think provides their service. Students will tape their service there. Once the activity is complete, have nine volunteers (one at each piece of chart paper) read the services placed their and as a class, determine if any are incorrect. (Teachers may want to provide the attached graphic organizer to students so that they can write in the correct services for each department as each is reviewed for accuracy.)

5. Afterwards, choose a few city services to discuss in a way that highlights their actual importance. (Teachers should try and choose services that relate to issues their students will care most about.) For instance:
  - We see that city government is responsible for managing storm water – why is this important? (Storm-water runoff occurs when precipitation from rain or snowmelt flows over the land surface. This runoff is swiftly carried to local streams, lakes, wetlands and rivers and can cause flooding and erosion, and wash away important habitat for critters that live in the stream.)
  - Do any of you consider yourself animal lovers, or animal rights activists? Are any of you afraid of animals? What does animal control do? (Animal control investigates mistreated animals and controls those that are deemed dangerous, abandoned or lost. Some of the jobs within this field include animal control officers and attendants, investigators for animal cruelty, dog wardens and catchers, canine service trainers, and humane officers.) So, if your little three-year old brother or cousin is playing in the yard and a rabid dog runs up, who would you call?
  
6. Go through [slides 4 & 5](#) to review city services and their importance. Also, explain that cities are not *mandated* to provide any services at all, though they do have the authority to provide certain services under an act of the General Assembly dating to 1855. Over time, individual municipalities and groups of municipalities have been given additional authority. Still, because basic needs are fairly consistent from one municipality to another, the larger cities and towns provide many of the same services: water supply, wastewater treatment, police and fire protection, garbage collection, planning and zoning, and building inspection. Some municipalities operate additional services, such as airports, auditoriums, bus systems, cemeteries, electric or gas systems, parks and recreation programs, public housing, and traffic control. \*Oftentimes, counties and municipalities will work together to coordinate for the most efficient provision of services.
  
7. As an optional critical thinking activity, instruct students to pair up and take 3-4 minutes to discuss and rank the importance of each agency from 1 to 9. Teachers can also ask students to discuss and list any services that cities don't provide but *should*, in their opinion. Call on a few pairs to explain what they chose for their top three and why they chose them. Ask which agencies in particular they had trouble ranking. Explain that the process of thought they just used in figuring out which agencies are most important is similar to what city council members go through when trying to figure out how to fund these very agencies.

### **Mayor and City Council**

8. Next, ask students who they think is “in charge” in North Carolina local government. As they brainstorm their thoughts, project [slide 6](#) to encourage deeper thinking. (Are voters in charge? Is the Mayor in charge? Is it a combination of people?) Move to [slide 7](#) and explain that in municipalities, voters elect their own governing board, called a council, board of aldermen, or board of commissioners. In some municipalities, a mayor is elected separately from other members of the governing board, while in other municipalities, citizens elect members of the governing board and then the governing board selects a mayor from within the group. The governing board makes all official decisions for the city, including setting the local tax rate, adopting the budget, making policies for services, passing ordinances to regulate behavior, and entering agreements on behalf of the municipality. Advisory boards, made up of citizens appointed by the governing board, often offer recommendations in areas such as planning and parks and recreation, but nearly all final decisions are made by the municipality's governing board. Teachers can also utilize [slide 8](#) to discuss the role of a city or town manager. Discuss:
  - Do you know anything about our local elected officials (i.e., Mayor and city council for those within city limits)? (Encourage students to note names, political stances or actions of such officials, news stories they have been in, etc.)
  - Do you feel the work of a city council and their decisions – from appointing a town manager to setting local tax rates - important to you? Why or why not?

### **You're a City Council Member – What Projects Will You Prioritize?**

9. Tell students that in the next activity, they will explore the relevance of a city council's work from the "inside." Project [slide 9](#) and explain to the class that they are to imagine they are each a city council member who is on his/her way to an important budget meeting. At this meeting, they must decide how to allocate \$10,000 in the budget, despite numerous city needs and each of them wanting something different. Explain that in groups of five, each of them will be given a persona of a city council member, as well as a particular duty. After a few minutes of individual planning, each group's "Mayor" will facilitate the conversation, during which each city council member will be given two minutes (provide each group's time keeper with a timer or ask them to use the minute hand of their watch) to tell the rest of the group who they are and how they believe the \$10,000 should be allocated. After each of the five council members have shared their thoughts, the group will have up to 10 minutes to try and decide how to allocate the money.
  
10. Once instructions are clear, divide students into groups of five. (Prior to class, copy the attached "City Council Personas," cutting the handout into 5 strips.) Provide each student in each group a different city council persona and give students 5 minutes to read and assume their respective roles. Before commencing discussion and debate, have students write a few sentences supporting the proposed plan of their persona. Once students have had a few moments of planning time, call the class to order and review expectations and ground rules for successful group work and have the groups get started.
  
- **Variations:**
  - If you feel your students may have trouble appropriately portraying their role and advocating for their requested funds, teachers can first have all students playing the same role meet in five or ten small groups to strategize. Once students have discussed how to advocate for what they want with fellow classmates playing the same roll, they can form their mixed city council groups and begin the simulation as described above.
  - As currently written, the city council personas are generic. Teachers are encouraged to edit each role so that council members are advocating for issues students may have specific interests in, and/or issues that are actually being debated in your local area.
  
11. At the end of the activity, have each group's "spokesperson" (Councilmember Bradshaw as assigned by persona slips) explain to the class how their group allocated the money and why they chose to allocate it in such a manner. After each presentation, if time permits teachers can allow students outside of the presenting group to raise their hands to ask questions/bring up issues regarding the group's decision. This will add to the demonstration of how difficult it can be to reach decisions. Facilitate discussion by asking:
  - Was it hard for your city council to reach a decision? Why or why not? Did you come to consensus, or were you still debating when time ran out? Explain.
  - Evaluate your council's discussion. Did others convince you that their needs were also important? If so, what techniques and ideas convinced you? What did the city stand to lose as a result of your final decisions?
  - Compare this exercise to a real city council's budgetary meeting. How would they differ or be similar?
  - What factors do you think influence city council members in the decisions they make?
  - Do you know of examples where a public official has made an unpopular decision? If so, do you think they were trying to do the right thing or do you think that they had other motivations?
  - Based on this exercise and prior knowledge, what do you think would be difficult about being a city council member? In some ways, why is the work of local elected officials even harder than that of federal offices? (For instance, encourage students to consider the fact that local officials come face to face with their constituents on a daily basis, whereas someone like the President has much more control over who he/she sees and interacts with and when. Also, many local government officials will tell you that they typically only hear from residents when they are angry about something.)
  - Why do you think people choose to run for elected office and serve as local government officials?

- Earlier, I asked you whether you feel the decisions of city council are important or impact you. How is the work of city council relevant to every single one of us, young and old? Why is local government important?

### **Why Local Government is Important**

12. After students have discussed, provide the attached “Why Local Government is Important” reading. In pairs, have students read the brief handout then work on filling in the chart (which they should create on notebook paper) together. After students finish, debrief as a class by creating one compiled chart at the front of the room. (Teachers can have each pair report out, with students only adding ideas not already mentioned by previous pairs.)
13. With their (hopefully) newfound understanding of how it is the local level of government that has the most direct impact on our lives (local government agencies pick up our trash, provide places for recreation, has council members that set the ordinances we must abide by, etc.), ask students to estimate the percentage of voters who turn out for local elections. After students have guessed, project [slide 10](#) and explain that local elections in North Carolina often have very poor turnout – with only 13.66% of registered voters participating on average! Discuss with students:
  - Does this number surprise you? Why or why not?
  - Why do you think so few people are showing up to vote in local elections?
  - Why is it incredibly important for citizens to participate in the election process of their city council members?
  - Why is it equally important to be aware of the decisions your elected council members are making?
  - In what other ways other than voting may citizens and community members participate in their local government?
14. Wrap up the lesson by asking students to respond to the prompt, “City Government: Why Should I Care?” Teachers can be creative in how they have students answer (i.e., a social media post of limited words, a more detailed reflection, etc.)

### **Optional Extension Activities**

- **Exploring Local Government through Photography:** Local government provides countless benefits for the communities they serve. Instruct students to take a photograph that visually demonstrates how professional local government impacts the community in a positive way. Photos might depict anything from a professional local government administrator or staff in action; a process or program that makes the community better; a community leader who helps to promote efficient, effective, and ethical local government; or other creative photos that highlight the importance, relevant and positive impact of local government. Photographs can be literal or abstract, as long as they meet the assignment requirements. In addition to a photograph, students should also submit a caption that describes:
  - Where and when the photo was taken
  - Who and/or what is depicted in the photo
  - Why the student chose to take this particular shot, and how it demonstrates the positive impact of professional local government leadership.

Teachers should pre-determine and let students know how they will submit their final photographs and captions (i.e., print them out to bring to class; share them digitally on a specific site or shared folder, etc.) Teachers might also want to consider creating a school exhibit of the final/best photos and inviting local government officials to view the students’ work.

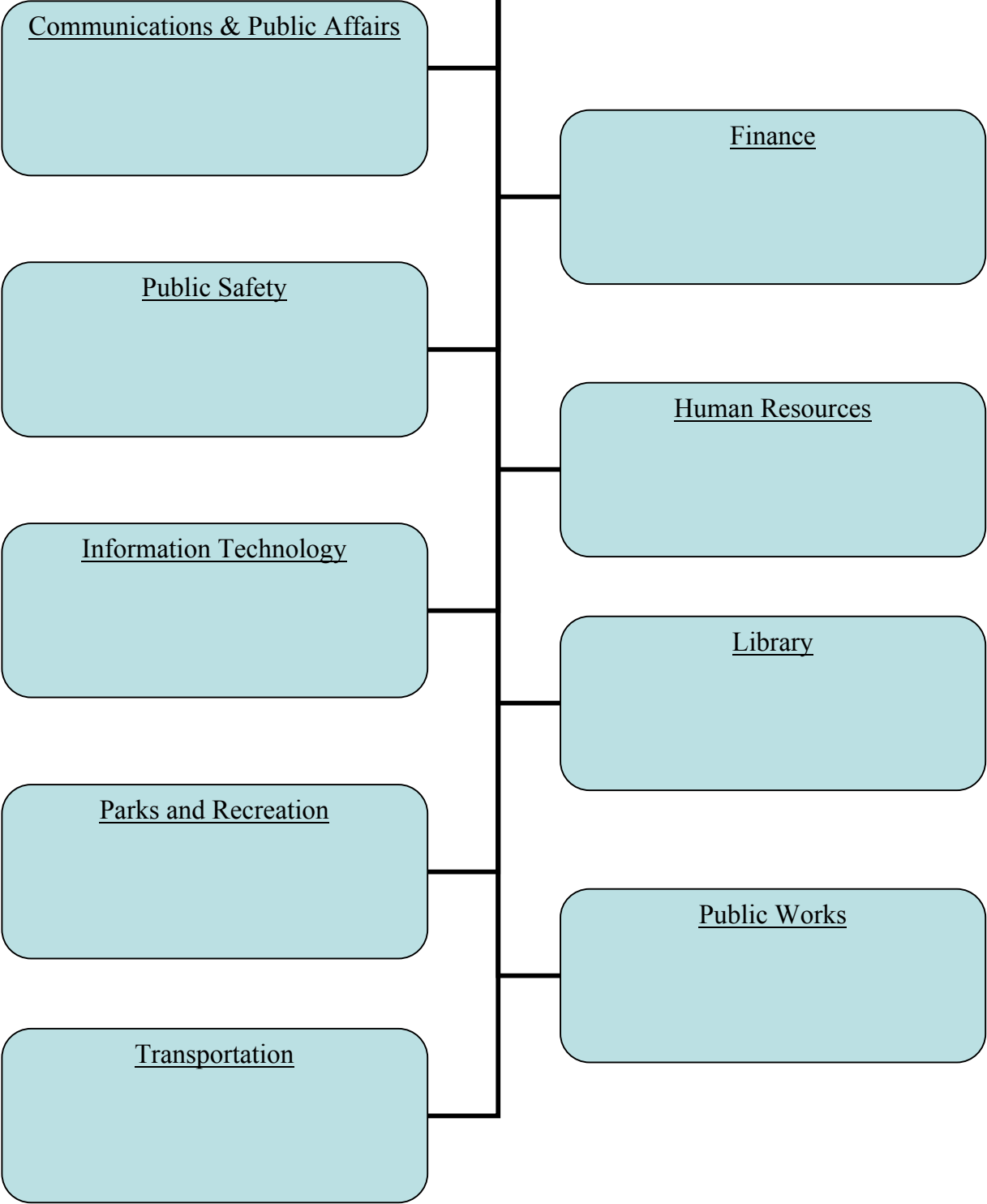
*(This activity is based on ICMA’s actual local government photo competition for college students; information at <http://elgl.org/2017/08/11/student-photo-competition-for-life-well-run-icma/>)*

- **City Hall Selfie:** To encourage students to continue thinking about local government outside of class, have them all come into class on the pre-determined due date with a selfie taken in front of a local government

building (any local government building!) Encourage students to try and think of a spot that no one else will think of. Teachers can have fun with the class by voting on “best of” selfies, such as “Most Historic”, “Best Props”, “Most Creative,” etc. This idea stems from the Engaging Local Government Leaders actual City Hall Selfie Campaign; see their page for other fun award categories: <http://elgl.org/city-hall-selfie-day/>

- **5 Reasons You Might Love Working in Local Government:** Assign the attached reading, “5 Reasons You Might Love Working in Local Government.” Have students discuss particular aspects of local government work they think they would find appealing and why, as well as research particular local government jobs they might like to have themselves (see below activity.)
- **Exploring Public Servants:** On [slide 11](#), explain that while elected officials are responsible for making many of the important decisions in counties and municipalities, they rely on staff for day-to-day operation of the locality. Ask students to think about local “public servants” in their county/city. Discuss some of these roles and their importance in local government. (Don’t let them forget public school teachers!) Assign each student the job title of a local public servant. Give students time to schedule and conduct an interview (over the phone or in person) with a person of that title. The purpose of the interview is to find out exactly what the requirements of the position are, and to find out some of the pros and cons of working for local government. (Be sure to go over proper interview etiquette with students and have them turn in interview questions to be checked prior to their interview.) Have students prepare a brief presentation for the class based on their findings. Once all students have given their presentations, culminate with the following discussion questions:
  - Based on your interviews, what did you learn about public service in general?
  - What are some qualities and characteristics of public servants?
  - What type of personality do you think a public servant should have?
  - What are some of the possible advantages and disadvantages of working as a public servant?
  - Would you ever consider being a public servant? Why or why not?
  - If you are interested in a career in public service, what department or division interests you most?
- **Public Servant Classroom Visits:** Invite a local government official (i.e., anyone from a city council member to a police officer to a school board member) to speak to your class. In advance, advise the visitor of your time frame and provide some information regarding what in particular you’d like him/her to discuss, such as:
  - how he/she became involved in local government
  - a “day in the life” of their work
  - how decisions are made (i.e., for an elected official, how information is provided, whether or not other individuals or boards make recommendations, what other input the board seeks out, how the vote is taken at public meetings)
  - the toughest decision he/she has faced in this position
  - the one or two biggest issues facing your local government this month
- **Rotating Interviews with Local Government Officials:** While it takes more planning and preparation on the part of the teacher, one of the most effective ways for students to learn about and interact with local government officials is through Carolina K’12’s “Rotating Interviews with Local Government Officials,” available at: <http://k12database.unc.edu/files/2012/05/RotatingInterviewswithLocalGovernmentOfficials.pdf>

# Types of Local Government Departments



## Miscellaneous Government Services

- Maintain network of hiking trails
- School Resource Officers
- Promote ease of access to books and other information
- Public Awareness communication
- Provides software support for government staff and citizens
- Animal Control
- Develop budget documents
- Organize and coordinate youth athletic activities
- Organizes recruitment and employment for Town positions
- Fire code inspection
- Oversees taxi franchise approvals
- Garbage collection/Recycling
- Search & Rescue Team
- Oversees all Town computer, telephone and data network systems
- Crime investigation
- Deals with relationships with the media
- Oversees maintenance of computer systems, network and telephone services
- Maintains all employee information and records
- Fire prevention education
- Provides training programs for employee growth
- Aide individuals in their pursuit of self-education and research
- Provide outdoor programs and activities
- Oversee Town and agency purchases
- Maintain athletic fields
- Revenue collection
- Firefighting
- Serve as centers for up-to-date, reliable information
- Monitor Town's financial position
- Sidewalk construction
- Maintain dog park
- Oversees public service announcements
- Develops and maintains Town's website
- Coordination of Neighborhood Watch
- Mosquito control
- Maintenance of storm water system
- Provide safe, clean, and efficient public bus service
- Make official public affairs records accessible
- Payroll services for government employees
- Traffic enforcement
- Installation of street signs and traffic lights



## Miscellaneous Government Services KEY

### Communications and Public Affairs

Relationships with the media  
Public Awareness campaigns and communication  
Make official public affairs records accessible  
Oversees public service announcements

### Public Safety and Emergency Response

Firefighting  
Fire code inspection  
Search & Rescue Team  
Fire prevention education  
Coordination of Neighborhood Watch  
Crime investigation  
Traffic enforcement (*this may be a tricky one; students might accidentally include this with "Transportation"*)  
School Resource Officers

### Information Technology

Oversees all Town computer, telephone and data network systems  
Provides software support for government staff and citizens  
Oversees maintenance of computer systems, network and telephone services  
Develops and maintains Town's website

### Human Resources

Maintains all employee information and records  
Organizes recruitment and employment for Town positions  
Provides training programs for employee growth

### Public Libraries

Aide individuals in their pursuit of self-education and research  
Serve as centers for up-to-date, reliable information  
Promote ease of access to books and other information

### Parks and Recreation

Organize and coordinate youth athletic activities  
Provide outdoor programs and activities  
Maintain athletic fields  
Maintain dog park  
Maintain network of hiking trails

### Public Works

Garbage collection/Recycling  
Animal Control  
Sidewalk construction  
Mosquito control  
Maintenance of storm water system  
Installation of street signs and traffic lights (another one that may be tricky)

### Transportation

Provide public bus service  
Oversees taxi franchise approvals

### Finance

Develop budget documents  
Oversee Town and agency purchases  
Monitor Town's financial position  
Payroll services for govt employees  
Revenue collection

### City Council Personas:

1) **Hyatt, Treasurer:** It is your first year on the city council. You are an avid animal lover. As part of your election, you campaigned for a new and improved spaying/neutering program in the city that would ease the cost for pet owners. The cost to now get the program started is \$3000, which will cover a staff person's salary for a month and initial education materials (pamphlets and posters about spaying/neutering).

**Your Responsibility within this Group:** Keep track of how much money each person requests for their project. After everyone has presented their request, announce the total amount of funds requested, and point out that only \$10,000 is available right now for new projects.

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2) **Simpson, Secretary:** You are in your 2<sup>nd</sup> term. Because you have 2 young children, and there are many young children in the city, you strongly support the idea of renovating the city park with a new playground. The cost of the new equipment is \$4000.

**Your Responsibility within this Group:** Take notes when each council member is making their proposals.

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3) **Bradshaw, Spokesperson:** You are in your 7<sup>th</sup> year on the city council. You ran a campaign to get "tough on crime" in response to a recent surge in burglaries in the city. You support the police chief's request to hire 3 more police officers. To do this, \$6,000 is needed for recruitment and training of the new officers.

**Your Responsibility within this Group:** Summarize the dialogue that takes place during the debate period for the rest of the class once the activity ends.

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4) **Williams, Mayor:** You are in your 10<sup>th</sup> term on the city council. You support a program that provides better training to city employees, since in the long run it will help with efficiency and citizens will save some money on taxes. The program is \$1000. Also, a majority of your constituents favor adding two new stoplights on Main Street which studies show will reduce traffic congestion by 30%. The addition of two stoplights will cost \$2000.

**Your Responsibility within this Group:** Lead the conversation and keep the debate civil and on track. Even though you have your own proposal, you are responsible for coordinating compromise.

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5) **Miller, Time Keeper:** You are the senior city council member entering your 14<sup>th</sup> term. Your constituents favor starting a new recycling program so that taxes will not be raised to expand the landfill in the future. The cost of the program is \$2000. You are also good friends with the fire chief who has requested upgrades to the fire station, which he feels will help in the recent wave of fires due to a lack of rain. The cost to upgrade the fire station is \$5000.

**Your Responsibility within this Group:** Timekeeper. 2 minutes for individual proposals; 10 minutes for open debate after each council member has shared their proposal.

# Why local government is important

Bob Stephens, former Mayor of Springfield and Missouri Municipal League Board of Directors Member Published 4:10 p.m. CT May 3, 2017

<http://www.news-leader.com/story/opinion/contributors/2017/05/03/why-local-government-important/101198084/>

During the first week of May, our state of Missouri celebrates Local Government Week. This is important to our citizens for two reasons: First, municipal governments impact our constituents far more frequently and more positively than either state or federal governments, and secondly, our citizens can have far more influence at the local level than they ever will at the state or federal level.

Did you drive to work today? Chances are good that you drove on a city street. Did you flush the toilet this morning? It is likely your municipal government that “makes that stuff go away.” Buy a cup of coffee on your way? You paid a few cents in sales tax, but that tax is what helps provide public safety services such as fire and police protection, street repairs, crosswalk markers, lights, and signs as well as many other services that we take for granted.

Citizens also have more influence over local government. Our municipal governments are closest to our constituents. They see us eating in local restaurants; they see us shopping in local department stores; they see us at high school football and basketball games; in short, they see us out in the community, their community, our community, and they talk to us. They tell us their dreams, they tell us their problems and frustrations. Sometimes we — along with our city councils or boards of aldermen — can do something to fix that problem or alleviate that frustration. Even more exciting, we may be able to help achieve that dream.

In the book "If Mayors Ruled the World: Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities," author Benjamin Barber notes that with all the issues confronting our world, such as climate change, terrorism, poverty and trafficking of drugs and guns, most nations seem incapable of solving the problems. He shows that there are certain qualities that cities around the world (and I might add, around our state) share with each other: “civic trust, participation, pragmatism, indifference to borders and sovereignty and a democratic penchant for networking, creativity, innovation and cooperation.”

In this time of transitioning for both our federal and state governments, and in a time of political gridlock, it may be left to us to take on these larger issues and to solve them one city, one town at a time. It is up to us to step forward and take on these challenges.

**? What are the two major reasons Mayor Stephens argues that local government is important? Create a chart similar to the one below on notebook paper. Title each column with one of his two major reasons, and note examples that prove this below. Include both the example Mary Stephens points out, as well as your own examples.**

### Why is local government important?

1.	2.

## 5 Reasons You Might Love Working in Local Government

*By Eliza Berman, former City Council member for the City of New York*

During my six years working for the City of New York, I had the privilege of collaborating with scores of talented people on issues that really mattered to my neighbors. My uncommon choice to enter local government meant that I was the one at the bar with a story about donning a bulletproof vest and riding in a cop car for a day. I helped couples navigate the Marriage Bureau on the first day gay marriage was legal, and I ventured 12 stories below the bedrock to see a 200-ton machine creating our next subway tunnel.

That said, the job isn't about the stories, and glamour is the exception, not the rule. But whether you're a political junkie or a recent graduate looking to make a difference, working for your city, town or county can be incredibly rewarding. Here are five reasons why.

### 1. You Learn How Stuff Really Works

You don't have to be a public policy nerd to marvel at the fact that 6,000 combined miles of city streets are plowed whenever it snows. While most people only notice things like this when they go wrong, working in local government allows access to the insider processes that keep a town or county ticking. When New York City's response to the 2010 "Snowpocalypse" blizzard did go wrong, I served on the team that investigated the causes of plowing delays and implemented new preventive measures. I became a minor expert in everything from tire chains to GPS monitoring—and it was fascinating.

Even though I worked for only three of more than 50 departments, my knowledge of the city's inner workings is miles beyond that of the average citizen. My familiarity with city services made me a good resource to friends applying for film permits or reporting an apartment without heat. But it served me even more professionally. The more I understood the interconnectedness of the pulleys and levers that comprise the system, the more effectively I could figure out which ones to pull to make something happen. And the breadth of my knowledge qualified me to move around the organization with relative ease.

### 2. You Invest in Your Community

There are a lot of ways to invest in your city or county—you could coach a team of ragtag softball players or cultivate turnips in a community garden. But working for your local government means you're investing in your community five days a week, every week of the year. When I sat down at my desk each day, I knew my efforts would be judged on the extent to which they improved the lives of New Yorkers.

Jeff Chen, Director of Analytics at the New York City Fire Department, recalls the long days that followed Hurricane Sandy in 2012. "A bunch of policy advisors, a fellow data geek, and myself huddled in a conference room at the Office of Emergency Management until the wee hours of the early morning. But over only a few hours, we re-designed a damage assessment field survey...then successfully deployed [it] only three hours after our work session." In the wake of destruction, his job was to take concrete steps toward rebuilding. When everyone else was looking for ways to help, he was able to really make things happen from the inside out.

### 3. You Get to See the Results of Your Work

Some may perceive local government as less prestigious than a White House job, but I found that proximity to the issues offers the chance to see results. Take David Barker, a seven-year veteran of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation who helped transform more than 200 asphalt schoolyards into public green spaces. After completing each project, he could sit on a newly installed bench and take in the fruits of his labor. "There's nothing more rewarding than flying in a plane over New York City and being able to see all the corners of the city you've affected," he says.

Benjamin Clark, a professor of public administration at Cleveland State University, has worked at both the local and the federal levels. "Having worked at the federal level, I always felt very disconnected from the final product or result of my work," he says. But at the local level, "you are closer to the people and the programs. This makes it

easier for someone working in local government to actually see their working have an effect on the people they are serving.”

#### **4. You Learn to Swim Upstream**

Red tape. Bureaucracy. Paper pushing. This is how most outsiders envision local government, and the stereotype is based on more than a kernel of truth. New York City, like many municipalities, has come a long way in combating the inefficiencies that are often baked into the rules themselves, but working in local government still often means swim upstream or be doomed to stagnation.

This may not sound like an ideal work environment, but I’ve found that learning to navigate the obstacles inspires creative thinking. You need a contract in place in two months and the normal process takes six? You’re going to bury your nose in procurement rules until you find a way to make it happen.

Fighting the bureaucracy also leads to opportunity. According to Barker, "There's definitely red tape at times, and some of your co-workers might be a little jaded, but a recent graduate with energy and optimism on his or her side can make a big difference—and rise quickly." Barker started his local government career after college and rose from a coordinator to a director to a district manager in a matter of a few years. Change is slow and often gets derailed, but it does happen, and being the one to make it happen gets you noticed.

#### **5. You Meet People You Might Never Otherwise Meet**

The owner of an Upper East Side pizzeria told me that his business was at risk because of the noise and scaffolding from the Second Avenue subway construction, and he asked me what I could do about it. There was, in fact, little I could do, save for printing up some fliers and posters promoting his business and those around it. Suffice it to say, we didn’t become fast friends. But it’s been five years since that conversation, and I won’t soon forget it.

The people you meet as a local government employee depends entirely on the type of position you fill. If you work in community affairs, you’re likely to meet more pizzeria owners than if you work as a statistician, like Chen. Recalling the breadth of experience of his hurricane response team, he says: “Over an intense 72-hour period, I worked with policy advisors, doctors, plumbers, cartographers, electricians, data geeks, educators, police officers, and building inspectors. It was a civic adrenaline rush.”

Like Chen, my exposure to colleagues of a variety of backgrounds burst the bubble of my fluorescent-lit cubicle. The sanitation workers whose tenure was longer than my current lifespan sometimes opposed the new technologies we introduced, but they knew more about the city’s history than I could ever hope to. And people like the pizzeria owner constantly reminded me of the varied and often urgent needs of the other people who call my city home.

Yes, working in local government offers its fair share of reasons to bang your head against your desk. But in many cities and counties, the old regime is being pushed out and replaced by a considerable shift toward innovation. It offers the chance to turn your local pride into tangible changes—and to gather more than a few good stories along the way.

*Edited from: <https://www.themuse.com/advice/5-reasons-you-might-love-working-in-local-government>*