

# WHAT IS A COUNTY COMMISSION?



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# Intro


Tocqueville's words ring true now more than ever. Government has forgotten its role among the people, and the people have forgotten their role within government. Americans forget that local government preceded both state and federal government. In a way, local government is the cradle for American self-government, and a country is made strong, and free, only through local citizens engaging in the process of governing themselves. Every day in the tens of thousands of local communities across America, people practice self-governance, form social associations, and interact with each other. The more vibrant these communities, the stronger the fabric of this nation will become.

Unfortunately, many have lost sight of local governance, and have instead started looking to Washington, DC for the answers. But distant bureaucrats and elected leaders in Washington do not, cannot, know the best solutions for local communities. It is the people within the communities that will know what's best for them. Strong, local communities will prove this to be true. That's one of the reasons American Majority emphasizes greater engagement at the state and local level. By empowering citizens to engage and strengthen their local governments, we make this nation stronger and more efficient.

This manual is not meant to be an encyclopedia or comprehensive reference for county commissions, but rather an introduction to the subject. I hope that those considering running for county government will find it meaningful and helpful, for this is the key to continued liberty. As Tocqueville writes, we all must learn to protect "that fertile germ of free institutions."

For Liberty,

Ned Ryun



Ned Ryun  
President  
American Majority

“The strength of free peoples resides in the local community. Local institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they put it within the people’s reach; they teach people to appreciate its peaceful enjoyment and accustom them to make use of it.”

- Alexis de Tocqueville,  
*Democracy in America*

# What is a County Commission?

All 50 states are divided into a number of administrative districts, each having its own government. In most states, these districts are called *counties*. There are a few exceptions: in Louisiana, these administrative districts are called *parishes* and in Alaska they are called *boroughs*. The states of Rhode Island and Connecticut both contain county-like units but have no county governments; local affairs are handled by the municipal and township governments instead.

State governments wield varying degrees of authority over counties, depending on the laws of the state. County governments are often described as “administrative arms” of the states, primarily because they provide state services to local residents.

The elected body that governs the county is the *county commission*, and the officers who sit on the commission are called *county commissioners*. The Governing Body and the officers go by many different names across the country, including some of the names listed below:

State	County Governing Body <sup>1</sup>	County Legislative Official
Oklahoma	Board of County Commissioners	County Commissioner
California	Board of Supervisors	County Supervisor
Arkansas	Quorum Court	Justice of the Peace
New Jersey	Board of Chosen Freeholders	Freeholder
Louisiana	Parish Police Jury	Police Jurors

These different terms reflect the unique histories and traditions of their respective states. However, for the purposes of this manual, we will use the terms “county commission” and “county commissioner.”

The county government is responsible for setting policy for the county, maintaining peace and order, filing records pertaining to county citizens and property, administering elections, repairing roads and bridges, and providing essential services, such as 911 coverage for residents in unincorporated areas (who are not likely to benefit from services provided by municipalities). In recent years, the federal and state governments have also required counties to provide citizens with an increasing number of health and human services, such as mental health counseling, crisis management, and substance abuse treatment.

The structure and obligations of county governments vary widely from state to state and often reflect a region’s priorities and culture. A county government’s character is shaped by a number of different factors, including population, demographics, geography, and economy. The Greeley County, Kansas, commission, which serves a total population of 1,200, naturally has different priorities than the Board of Supervisors of Los Angeles County, California, which serves a constituency of 9.5 million people<sup>1</sup> (and manages an annual budget of \$23 billion).<sup>2</sup> In the same way, Arlington County, Virginia, which has a density of 7,000 people per square mile, has different needs than North Slope Borough, Alaska, which has 0.1 people per square mile.<sup>3</sup>

# How a County Commission Works

There are more than 3,000 county governments in the United States. Most of them use one of four structural models:

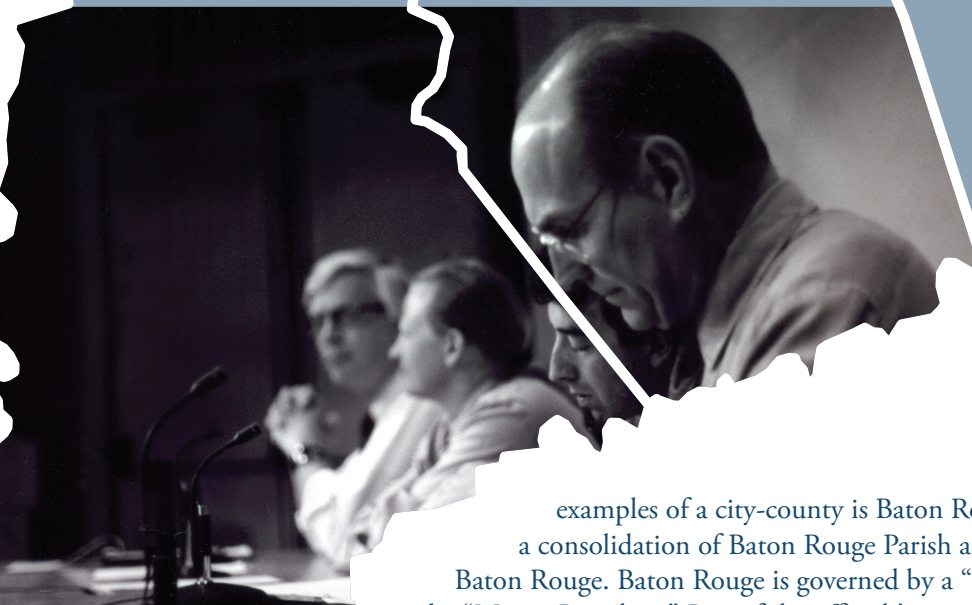
**Commission** – The most basic form of county government consists of a commission or council usually numbering between 3 and 15 people. The county’s legislative and executive powers are both concentrated in this body. Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Maine, and Nebraska are just a few of the states that use this model.

**Commission-Manager/Administrator** – In the same way that many cities employ a city manager, many counties employ a county manager or county administrator to implement the policies of the commission. The county manager oversees county personnel and personnel policies, prepares the annual budget, makes recommendations to the commission, and regularly reports to the commissioners on the affairs of the county.<sup>4</sup> One benefit of the council-manager model is that it creates a check and balance in the top tier of county government. Kansas, Minnesota, and Florida are among the states that use this system.

**Council-Executive** – Counties in several states employ a council-executive system of government. This model resembles the council-manager system in that many of the county’s administrative and managerial responsibilities are vested in an individual who is not a commissioner. However, a county executive differs from a county manager in some important ways. A county executive is an elected official (usually elected at large) and is the presiding officer of the county commission. The executive does not have a vote on the board but does retain the power of veto (the commission may override the veto with a specified number of votes). The county executive also proposes the budget; hires, fires, and manages county personnel; acts as the county’s signatory; serves as the county commission’s main spokesman; and in some cases sets the agenda for meetings.

One advantage of the council-executive system is that it divides power between a legislative branch (the commission) and an executive branch (the county executive and other county officers). At least half of the 50 states contain counties that use the council-executive system.<sup>5</sup> Depending on the state, the county executive is sometimes called the county judge<sup>6</sup> (as in Arkansas), the county judge/executive (Kentucky), or, in a few places, the county mayor (Tennessee).

**Consolidated City-County** – A few county governments have found it expedient to consolidate, or combine forces, with a city within its boundaries. In this situation, the county government and the municipal government merge into one. A common form of consolidated government is a combination city council–county commission headed by a combination city mayor–county manager. One of the oldest



examples of a city-county is Baton Rouge, Louisiana, a consolidation of Baton Rouge Parish and the city of Baton Rouge. Baton Rouge is governed by a “Metro Council” and a “Mayor-President.” Part of the officials’ original motivation for consolidating Baton Rouge was to make it easier to provide services to residents of both the city and parish and to residents living in unincorporated areas.<sup>7</sup>

Consolidating a city and a county can be a difficult and lengthy process—one that requires much planning as well as a public referendum. To date, there are only about 30 consolidated city-counties in the nation. However, because most city-county consolidations occur in metropolitan areas, this model of government has a disproportionate effect on the United States population.<sup>8</sup> In addition to Baton Rouge, examples of city-counties include Wyandotte County / City of Kansas City, Kansas; Parish of New Orleans / City of New Orleans, Louisiana; the County and City of Denver, Colorado; and the County and City of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.<sup>9</sup>

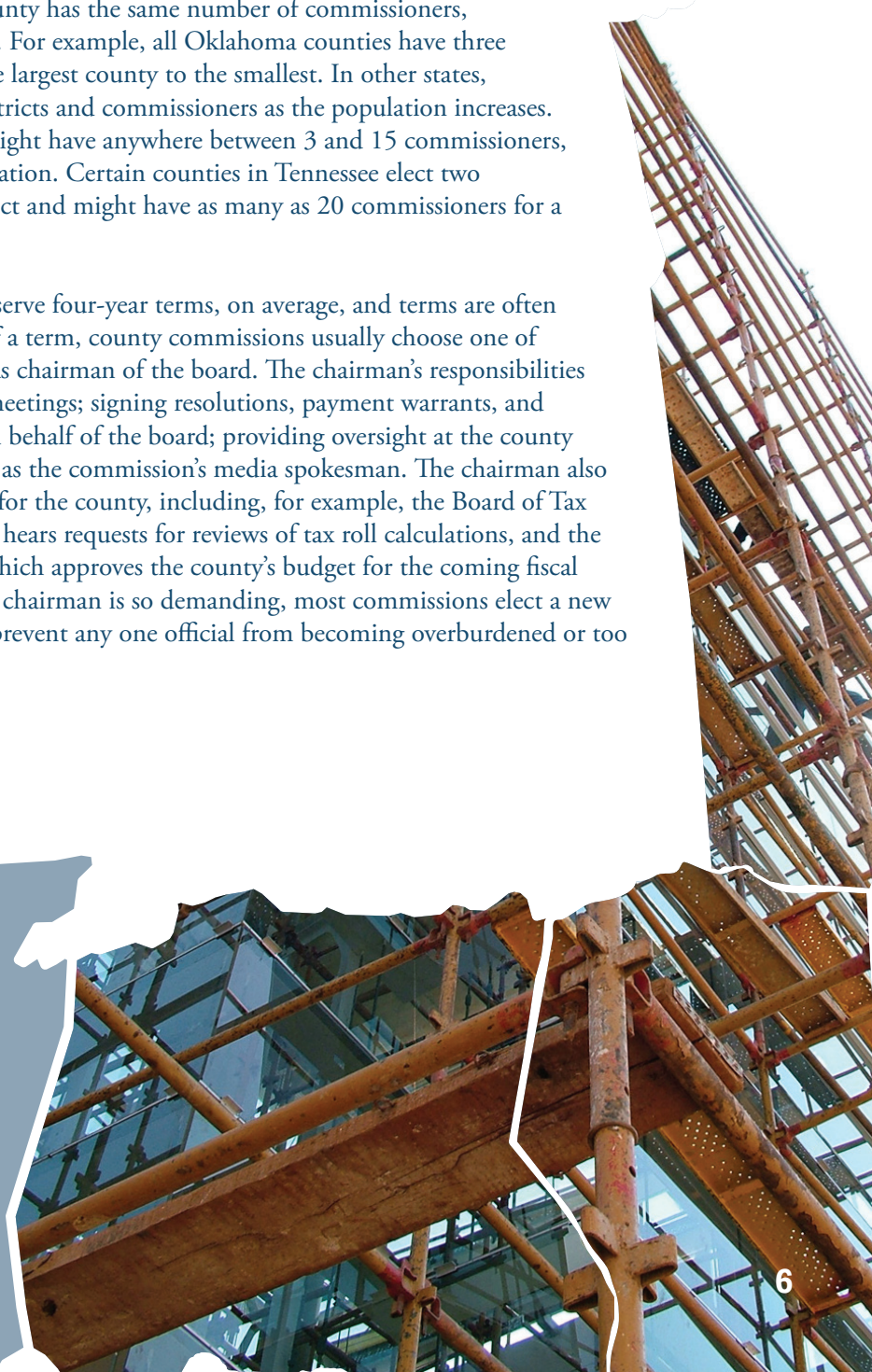
In states like Oklahoma and Arkansas, state law requires all counties to have the same model of county governance (a three-member commission in Oklahoma and an executive-led quorum court in Arkansas). However, several other states allow *home rule*, which permits counties to adopt different forms of government via charter. The home rule process may be initiated by county voters or by county officials themselves, if they believe a form of government other than the state-prescribed model would better meet the needs of residents. A home rule charter must comply with state law and be approved by a majority of registered voters before it can be adopted. Home rule is what permits counties and cities to consolidate, for example, or allows one county to choose to hire an administrator while another chooses not to hire one.

# The Commissioners

Most counties are divided into a certain number of *districts*, with each district electing a commissioner to represent it on the board of county commissioners. Other counties elect their commissioners *at large*, in which the whole county votes to fill all commissioner seats. Still others elect their commissioners through a combination of by-district and at-large voting.

In some states, every county has the same number of commissioners, regardless of county size. For example, all Oklahoma counties have three commissioners, from the largest county to the smallest. In other states, counties tend to add districts and commissioners as the population increases. In Arkansas, a county might have anywhere between 3 and 15 commissioners, depending on the population. Certain counties in Tennessee elect two commissioners per district and might have as many as 20 commissioners for a single county.

County commissioners serve four-year terms, on average, and terms are often staggered. At the start of a term, county commissions usually choose one of their members to serve as chairman of the board. The chairman's responsibilities include presiding over meetings; signing resolutions, payment warrants, and other documentation on behalf of the board; providing oversight at the county courthouse; and serving as the commission's media spokesman. The chairman also serves on several boards for the county, including, for example, the Board of Tax Roll Corrections, which hears requests for reviews of tax roll calculations, and the County Excise Board, which approves the county's budget for the coming fiscal year. Because the role of chairman is so demanding, most commissions elect a new chairman every year to prevent any one official from becoming overburdened or too powerful.





# The People of a

**W**hile the board of county commissioners is the top tier of county government, several other elected officials implement its policies and conduct county business. Six of these officials are common to most county governments: the county clerk, county treasurer, county assessor, court clerk, sheriff, and district attorney. These officials go by different titles in different states. Some counties combine two or more of these offices into one, while others subdivide responsibilities and thus create more offices. Despite these differences, each official listed here represents a fundamental aspect of county government. Brief descriptions of these officials and their duties are below.

**County Clerk** –As the chief record keeper for the county, the county clerk has a broad range of responsibilities. He or she acts as secretary to the board of county commissioners and other official boards, including the County Board of Equalization and the County Excise Board. The county clerk keeps track of the county’s financial transactions, serving as a check and balance for the county treasurer, and also works closely with the county purchasing agent, maintaining proper paperwork regarding the acquisition of supplies or services. In counties that do not employ a separate register of deeds, the county clerk fills this role, keeping a record of all deeds and mortgages for county property. In addition, the county clerk typically administers elections for the county and also has the day-to-day responsibilities of issuing marriage licenses, issuing birth and death certificates, and filing articles of incorporation for businesses.

**County Treasurer** – The county treasurer oversees all funds related to the county. He or she is responsible for collecting revenue owed to the county through taxes, fines, and fees, and is also in charge of disbursing this revenue to the appropriate county departments, offices, and districts, in accordance with the budget. The treasurer regularly reports to the board on the county’s financial standing and also assists the commissioners in crafting the annual budget. In addition to collecting county revenues, the treasurer invests and manages funds on the county’s behalf. When necessary, the treasurer partners with the district court and





# County Commission

the sheriff to collect delinquent taxes.


**County Assessor** – The county assessor, as the title implies, assesses the value of property in the county in order to prepare the annual property tax roll. The assessor determines tax payments based on his appraisals and then provides this information to the state and county boards of equalization. After the valuations have been approved, the assessor sends them to the treasurer, who then collects the taxes.<sup>10</sup>

**Court Clerk** – Called the circuit clerk in some regions, the court clerk keeps a record of all the proceedings of the district court. Because the court hears several types of cases—civil, domestic, criminal, juvenile, probate, and small claims—the court clerk must keep a wide variety of records, ranging from divorce papers to arrest warrants to wills to adoption papers. The court clerk collects all fees, fines, and payments due to the district court (including traffic fines, licensing fees, and child support payments) and then distributes these funds to the appropriate government entities as directed by law. The court clerk also sends out jury summons.

**Sheriff** – The office of the sheriff has one of the longest histories of any county position, going all the way back to the Anglo-Saxon “shire-reeve,” or shire bailiff.<sup>11</sup> The sheriff is the chief law enforcement officer of the county and is responsible for preserving peace and protecting the community. He or she works closely with the county courts to enforce the law and carry out justice. The sheriff maintains the county jail; has the charge and custody of prisoners; carries out warrants, summons, and other orders issued by the county courts; provides security for the county courthouse; and inspects buildings to ensure compliance with county safety regulations. The sheriff (or deputy sheriff) also carries out foreclosures and holds public auctions of seized or forfeited property. In the smaller counties of some states, such as in Arkansas, the sheriff may double as the tax collector.

**District Attorney** – Each state is divided into several judicial districts, and each district usually encompasses four to six counties. Each





of these districts elects a district attorney as its chief prosecuting official. The district attorney works to maintain public safety, prosecute crimes committed within the district, and arrange help for crime victims and witnesses. In some states, the district attorney also provides legal advice to the board of county commissioners and acts as the commission's representative if it becomes involved in civil litigation.<sup>12</sup> Because the district attorney works for the state as well as for the counties in the district, county commissions have limited oversight of the attorney's activities.<sup>13</sup>

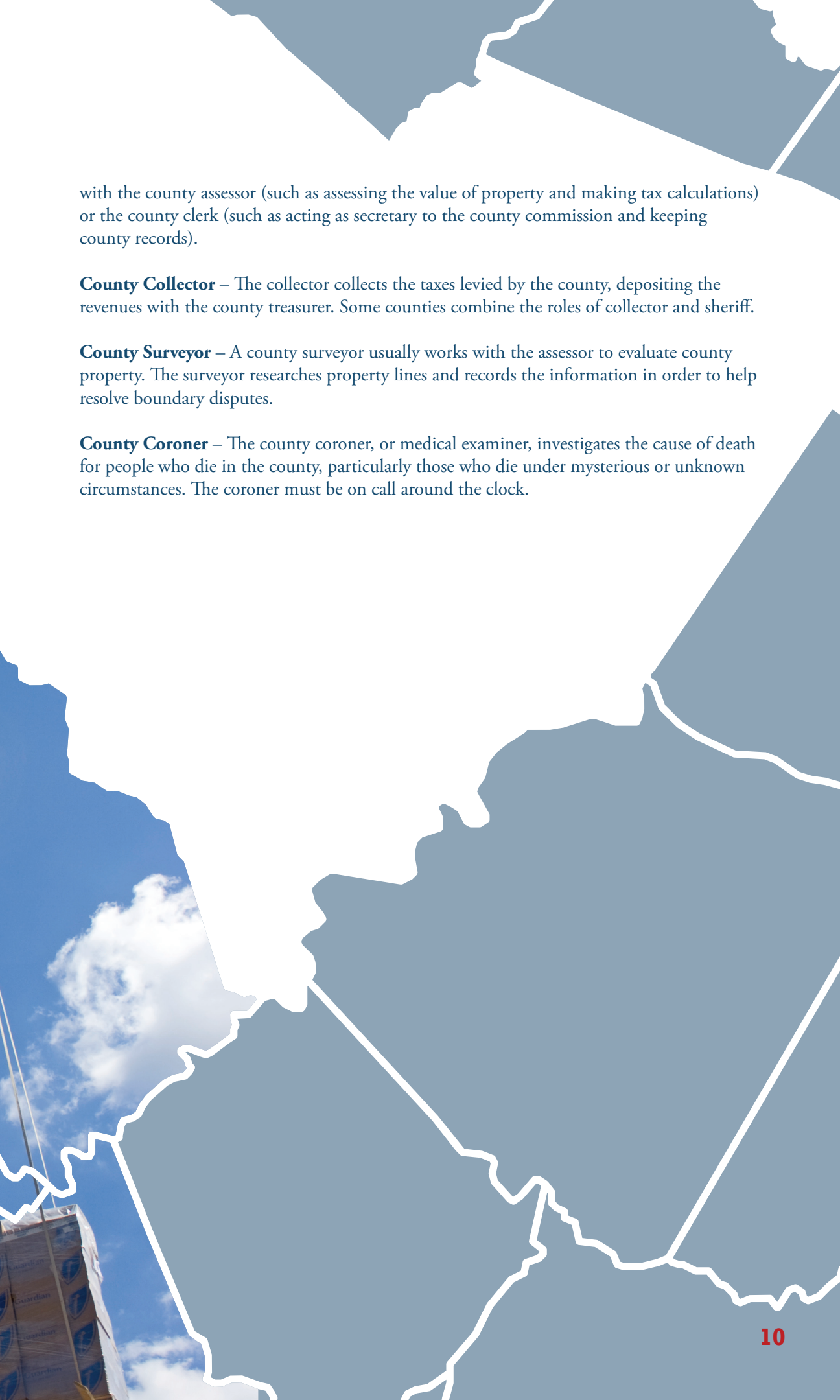
Elected county officials usually serve four-year terms, and their terms are often staggered with the terms of county commissioners. All county officials are required to maintain offices in the county seat, usually at the county courthouse or another official building. The board of county commissioners is required by law to provide elected county officials with office space, official letterhead, and other supplies (state governments often cover some of the expenses for the district attorney's office since he or she works for more than one county).<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the positions listed above, a county may have several other officials who carry out the various aspects of county government. These offices, listed below, may be elective or appointive, depending on the laws of the state:

**County Purchasing Agent** – The county purchasing agent oversees the purchasing of supplies, equipment, and services for the county and its departments. He or she is responsible for researching vendors, obtaining quotes and bids, and placing orders on behalf of the county. The purchasing agent supplies bids to the board of county commissioners through the county clerk. When the commissioners select a bid, the purchasing agent notifies the vendor and places the order. The purchasing agent also keeps an inventory of the county's physical property.

**County Attorney** – One of the county attorney's main roles is to provide legal advice to the board of county commissioners, as well as to other county officials and to department heads. In some states, the county attorney may also prosecute felonies or juvenile offenses.

**County Auditor** – The county auditor maintains the books and audits the accounts of county departments and agencies. In some states, the auditor fulfills obligations often associated



with the county assessor (such as assessing the value of property and making tax calculations) or the county clerk (such as acting as secretary to the county commission and keeping county records).

**County Collector** – The collector collects the taxes levied by the county, depositing the revenues with the county treasurer. Some counties combine the roles of collector and sheriff.

**County Surveyor** – A county surveyor usually works with the assessor to evaluate county property. The surveyor researches property lines and records the information in order to help resolve boundary disputes.

**County Coroner** – The county coroner, or medical examiner, investigates the cause of death for people who die in the county, particularly those who die under mysterious or unknown circumstances. The coroner must be on call around the clock.



# Responsibility and Oversight

The county government provides many of the services that touch citizens in their daily lives, such as collecting curbside garbage, issuing a marriage license or birth certificate, dispatching an ambulance to a rural home, protecting a road from erosion, researching the history of a plot of land, or providing an air-conditioned environment for elderly residents during a heat wave. Some county services are mandated by the state; others arise out of the particular needs of the community. Some services are available countywide; others concentrate on residents in unincorporated areas—residents who do not benefit from services offered in the city. While a county’s attention is divided differently depending on its location and population, the county government’s main responsibilities generally fall into the following categories:

**Record Keeping** – The county collects and files vital statistics on behalf of the state government. County officials maintain records related to county residents and property, including property deeds and transactions, land surveys and assessments, marriage licenses, birth and death certificates, and business licenses and permits. The county also files all records pertaining to the district courts, such as dockets and court orders.

**Budget** – The county commission is ultimately responsible for all of the finances of the county—its revenues, expenditures, and appropriations. Each year the commission must assess the financial needs of county departments and offices and then prepare a budget that will meet those needs. The county commission has the authority to levy taxes, issue bonds, and accept state and federal grants (where applicable) to fund county operations and programs. The county commission may also incur debt and make investments on the county’s behalf.

**Roads and Bridges** – The construction and maintenance of roads and bridges is one of the oldest occupations of county government. According to the National Association of Counties, U.S. county governments currently maintain 1.8 million road miles and 256,000 bridges around the country.<sup>15</sup> In rural areas especially, road and bridge maintenance is arguably one of the county’s most significant responsibilities. Road maintenance is a “main priority,” according to County Commissioner David Weaver from Harper County, Oklahoma, which has a population of 3,600. Weaver points out that his constituents, many of whom are farmers and ranchers, must be able to get from their farms to the market or to the nearest town.<sup>16</sup> Road maintenance in urban areas also demands continual attention, as these roads must bear the weight of industrial vehicles, semis, and rush-hour traffic.

Many counties

employ a county engineer or a road foreman to oversee these maintenance responsibilities.

**Public Safety and Law Enforcement** – The county is responsible for preserving the peace and keeping the county safe for its residents. This includes maintaining the county jail, prosecuting offenders, solving crimes, battling fires and floods, providing emergency medical services, and disposing of hazardous waste. Counties must also develop response plans in the event of a natural disaster, a pandemic, a terrorist attack, or any other situation that would threaten the lives and health of residents.

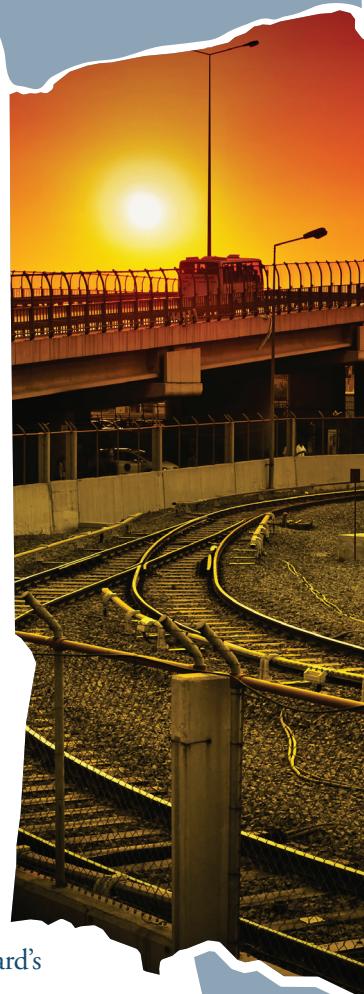
**Courts** – County governments play an important role in the operation of the district courts. State law generally requires that counties pay for courtroom and office space, court personnel and officers, facility maintenance, and necessary supplies and equipment. State governments partially reimburse counties for some of these court-related expenses.

**Personnel** – The county commission oversees all county employees, which may number in the hundreds or even the thousands. County personnel include clerks, accountants, receptionists, road foremen, sanitary workers, probation officers, attorneys, information-technology specialists, counselors, nurses, engineers, and a host of others. The commission has the authority to hire and fire personnel, fill vacancies, and establish and implement personnel policies. In counties that operate on the council-manager system, the county manager is responsible for personnel, but his or her decisions must meet with the board's approval.

**Elections** – The county administers all federal, state, and local elections on behalf of county residents. The county usually works through the county clerk's office or through an appointed election board to fulfill this purpose. The county commission also has power to call referendums and special votes (such as for a bond or a budget proposal), as permitted by law.

**Property Management** – The county commission has legal authority to buy or sell property on behalf of the county. For example, sometimes a county must purchase a tract of land for a public works project, such as the building of a road or a drainage system. Under certain circumstances, the county commission also has power to establish or adjust boundary lines.

**Care of the Indigent** – Counties typically offer several programs for those who may not be able to care for themselves, such as the elderly, the mentally ill, or the homeless. These services include medical care, meal provision, activities, and transportation assistance.





# County Administration


Most county governments are organized into a tiered system of departments, boards, and committees. *Departments* are designed to manage a set of responsibilities or provide a certain services. Some departments relate specifically to the running of the government, such as finance, personnel, and technology departments. Others relate to county services, such as the departments listed below:<sup>17</sup>

- Public Works – roads, sewers, water treatment, hazardous waste
- Public Safety – emergency services, fire protection, corrections, forensics
- Human Services – mental health, senior care, child and juvenile services, addiction counseling, disability assistance, veterans' services
- Planning and Building – building permits and inspections, zoning, rural housing policy
- Parks – development and maintenance of county parks

In addition to creating departments, most counties appoint *boards* or *committees* to monitor specific activities or services. Some of these bodies are *administrative*, having the authority to make policy decisions; others are *advisory* and may only make recommendations. Boards or committees serve a variety of purposes: some advocate for a certain group or demographic (such as a council on aging or a rural-landowner's board); some monitor a particular set of activities (an environmental health committee); and some may partner with a municipality, a neighboring county, or the state to address an issue (a joint city-county planning committee or a regional economic development board). Boards and committees work together with the appropriate county departments to accomplish their goals: for instance, a local emergency preparedness committee will likely work with the county public safety department.

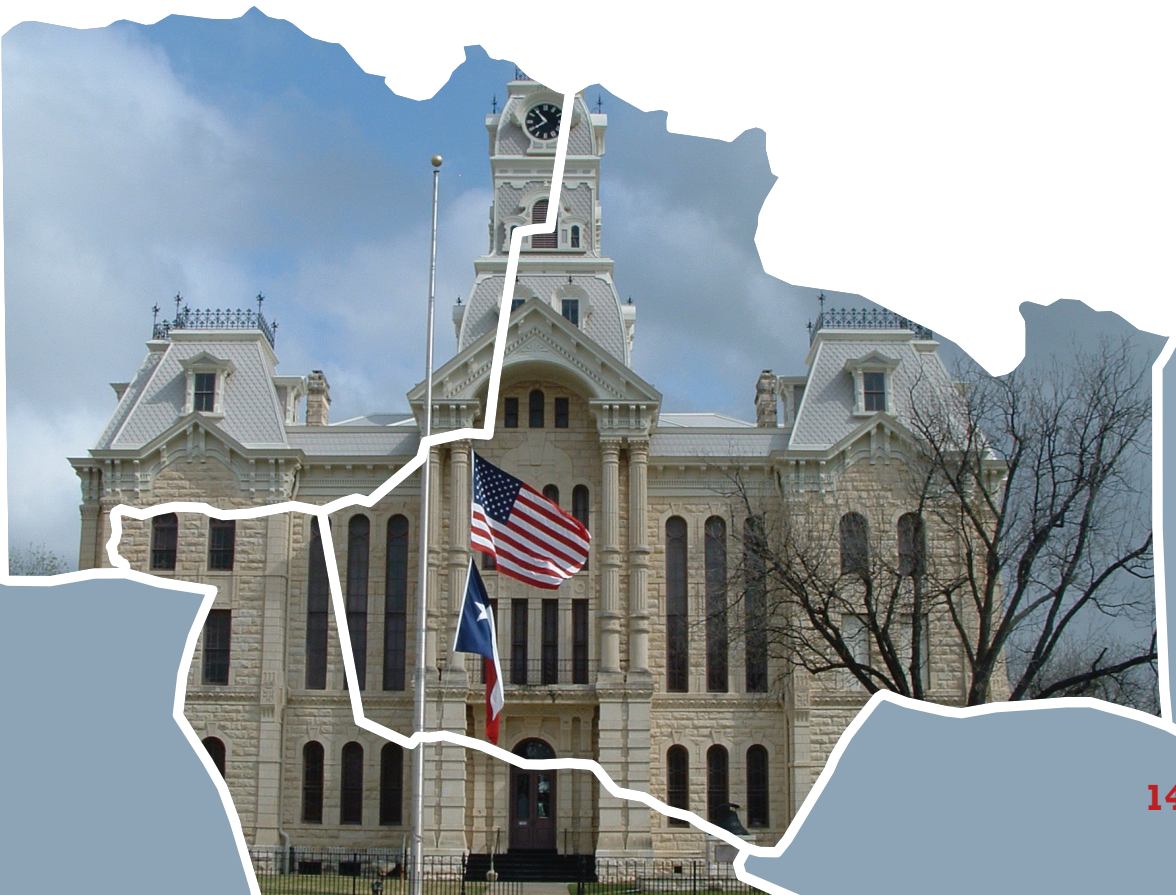
County commissions are usually responsible for appointing both the heads of departments (except for those heads that are popularly elected, such as the sheriff) and the members of county boards and committees. (In counties that employ a council-executive form of government, the county executive makes these appointments, subject to approval by the county commission.) County commissioners also sit as members on many committees. Other committee members might include county officials or employees, interested citizens, or citizens who are experts in the committee's subject. Much like the county commission, committees set agendas and hold regularly scheduled meetings. Committees also report periodically to the county commission, giving an account of their activities and making policy recommendations, as appropriate.

Under certain circumstances, state governments allow counties to create a *special district government* or an *authority* to address a particular need or issue. The U.S. Census Bureau defines special districts as "independent, special-purpose governmental units..."



that exist as separate entities with substantial administrative and fiscal independence from general-purpose local governments.”<sup>18</sup> Special districts are often created to administer services that are not already being provided by the county, or that are not being provided sufficiently to a particular area.<sup>19</sup> A special district might be created to provide water to a rural area, dispose of solid waste or wastewater, encourage economic or industrial development in a run-down neighborhood, create housing for low-income residents, establish a library or cemetery, or even to help organize an annual county fair. County commissions may create a special district by a resolution or ordinance, or in response to a petition presented by residents. In the case of a petition, the commission must hold a hearing and referendum on the proposal.

Because special districts are classified as governments, they have the ability to raise their own funds by issuing bonds (which requires voter approval); by levying a tax or an annual assessment; or by collecting tolls, fees, or usage charges. A special district’s governing board might be elected, appointed by the county commission, or, in the case of a district that serves more than one government, appointed collectively by the participating governments.



# In a Meeting

State constitutions designate when and how often county commissioners should meet. In Oklahoma, for instance, county commissioners are required by law to hold meetings on the first Monday of every month. Due to the volume of business, however, most county commissions meet once a week or even more frequently. Meetings are held in the *county seat*, which is the town or city within the county that has been designated as the center of government. The board is required to publish a notice of the meeting—including the time, location, and agenda—at the county courthouse and in a local newspaper prior to the meeting (usually 24 to 72 hours in advance). A growing number of counties also upload their agendas to their websites. The county clerk is responsible for officially publicizing upcoming meetings.

There are several different types of meetings that a board of county commissioners may call, depending on the business at hand.

**Regular Meeting** – County commissions are required by law to meet at regular intervals throughout the year, usually on the same day of every month. At any given regular meeting, commissioners might discuss the budget, vote on bids for county projects, deliberate over (non-confidential) personnel matters, take public comments, and hear reports from various officials and department heads.

**Special Meeting** – The chairman or the presiding member of the board may call a special meeting for commissioners to discuss a specific topic or issue, particularly one that is time-sensitive or requires lengthy deliberation. Notice of special meetings usually must be posted 24 to 48 hours prior to the session.

**Emergency Meeting** – In emergency situations, the board may call a meeting with sometimes as little as two hours advance notice. One of the most common reasons for an emergency meeting is a natural disaster, such as a flood or a damaging storm.

**Public Hearing** – The board may call a public hearing in order for the public to comment on a particular issue or piece of legislation that is being considered by the commission.

**Workshop** – Some county commissions hold informal workshops to discuss legislation or examine a particular issue in detail. The county budget is a common workshop topic. As with all other county sessions, the public is invited to attend and may participate. Some counties hold workshops on a monthly basis.

Boards of county commissioners conduct their meetings according




to a form of parliamentary procedure, often Robert's Rules of Order. As the meeting begins, the commission follows the *meeting agenda*, which outlines the topics of discussion and the order in which the items are to be discussed. The chairman or presiding officer directs the meeting and maintains order. The commission reviews a *consent agenda*, or a list of routine items that are not expected to require long discussion. Usually, county staff members or the county manager have researched the items on the consent agenda prior to the meeting and have made recommendations to the board for each item. The consent agenda might include recommendations on awarding contracts for public works projects, approving routine expenditures, and accepting federal or state grants. The county commission reviews the items on the consent agenda and then takes a vote on the agenda as a whole. A commissioner or an attendee may request that an item be "pulled" from the consent agenda if he or she feels an issue requires more attention and discussion.

The board must set aside time at each regular meeting for *public comment*. The presiding officer is responsible for recognizing attendees who wish to speak, and for maintaining order. County residents wishing to comment at a session usually must first submit their requests, in writing, to the county clerk or county manager. Citizens may also request permission to formally address or petition the board on a particular matter.

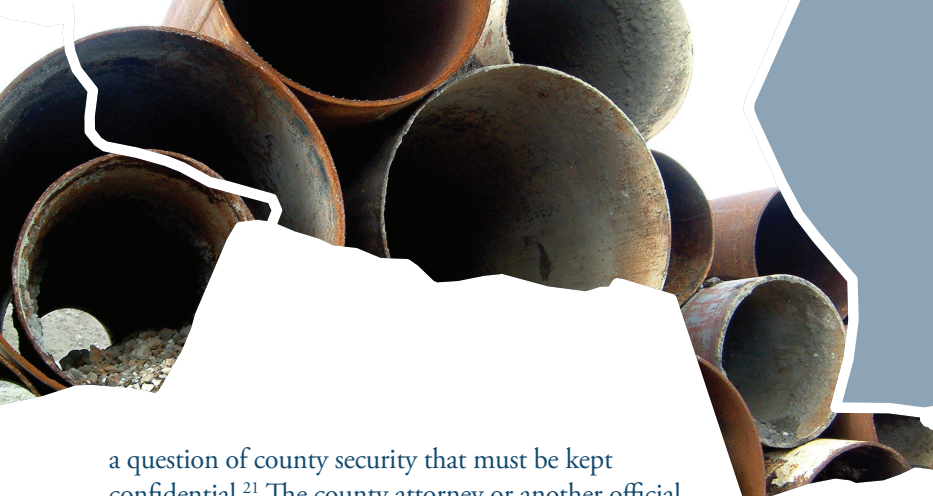
A typical meeting will run in this order:<sup>20</sup>

- The county clerk takes roll call and declares quorum.
- A designated guest, sometimes a local minister, offers an invocation.
- One of the commissioners or a designated guest leads the meeting participants in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag (in some states, this is followed by the pledge of allegiance to the state flag).
- The board votes to approve the minutes from the previous meeting.
- The chairman calls the meeting to order and announces the agenda.
- The board votes to approve the agenda.
- A public comment period is held.
- The board pauses to recognize county employees who are retiring or who have distinguished themselves in service to the county.
- The board reviews and votes on the consent agenda.
- Committees give reports and recommendations, accompanied by discussion and voting as appropriate.
- The county manager gives a report (in applicable counties).
- County departments give reports, if needed.
- The board holds a general discussion period and also addresses new business.
- The meeting is adjourned.



All meetings are open to the public, in accordance with the Open Meetings Act. The board of county commissioners is never permitted to conduct a meeting unannounced or in secret. When the board must address a sensitive matter, such as a personnel issue or a security concern, the board may, within statutory parameters, go into *executive session*, which allows commissioners (and often other county officials or staff members) to withdraw for private discussion. The privilege of executive session is bound by strict rules. The board may only enter into executive session by a vote (usually by a majority or two-thirds vote of the members present) during a public meeting.

Commissioners are allowed to call an executive session to discuss only certain types of topics, such as a personnel matter, a collective bargaining contract, a county property issue, or



a question of county security that must be kept confidential.<sup>21</sup> The county attorney or another official will often participate in these sessions. Despite the closed doors, executive session discussions are recorded. Commissioners may not take votes during executive sessions; all votes are made in the public portion of the meeting.<sup>22</sup> These precautions help to maintain the integrity of the board and keep commissioners accountable to the public.

### *Parliamentary terminology*

- *Motion* – A proposal made by a meeting participant. For example, a commissioner might make a motion to bring an item before the board for debate. A motion must be seconded by another meeting participant in order for the matter to be called to a vote.
- *Resolution* – A statement communicating the opinion or recommendation of the board; a resolution carries less force than an ordinance.
- *Ordinance* – A law enacted by the county commission.
- *Roll call vote* – The taking of a vote by polling one voter at a time.
- *Voice vote (vive voce)* – The taking of a collective vote by calling for “ayes” and “nays.”
- *Omnibus vote* – A single deciding vote taken on a group of items (this is the type of vote used to approve or disapprove the consent agenda).
- *Adjourn* – To cease business or conclude a meeting.
- *Quorum* – The number of board members required to be present for a meeting to come to order.
- *Recess* – A break in the meeting’s proceedings.
- *Executive session* – A period of time during an official meeting in which the commissioners withdraw for private discussion on a sensitive matter.

After each meeting, the county clerk is required to draw up the *minutes*, an item-by-item account of the meeting. The minutes include the names of the participants, order of events, items addressed, actions taken, and votes cast. The county clerk is required by law to furnish a copy of the proceedings to a county newspaper for publication. Today, it is increasingly common for meeting agendas and minutes also to be archived on a county’s website. Some counties, such as Sedgwick County, Kansas, post transcripts (verbatim records) of their meetings online. Downloading and reviewing the minutes from your county commission’s meetings is a good way to learn about the decisions the board makes on a regular basis.



# Budget

One of the most crucial and time-consuming responsibilities of the county commission is the county budget. The county commission is the holder of the county purse strings, and is therefore ultimately responsible for planning, approving, and implementing the budget each year. The budget must be able to fund all mandated services; the activities of all county departments and offices; employee salaries, wages, and benefits; construction and improvement projects; and all other county-generated programs and offerings. Assembling the budget can be an arduous and complicated task—one that requires flexibility, compromise, and political tact on the part of commissioners. From start to finish, the process of putting together the budget typically takes several months and requires multiple adjustments and revisions.

Primary sources of county revenue include:

- **Taxes** – County governments generate about 60 percent of their own funds, of which *property taxes* account for about 40 percent.<sup>23</sup> Property tax is levied on both *real property* (real estate) and *personal property* (all other property, including personal valuables and business property). The county collects taxes on an *ad valorem* basis, or according to the value of a property. The county calculates property tax amounts by applying a *mill rate*, which measures thousandths of a dollar, to the assessed value of the property. The commission sets the number of mills each year according to the county's budgetary needs (state governments usually set a limit on the number of mills a county can collect each year). While property taxes provide the greatest proportion of tax-generated revenue, the county also collects other taxes, such as sales tax, fuel tax, and use taxes.
- **State and Federal Grants** – On average, state and federal funds make up about 35 percent of county revenue.<sup>24</sup> Grants from the state and federal governments usually fall into one of two categories: categorical aids and block grants. *Categorical aids* are tied to specific services—that is, the county may only spend the aid for a specified purpose. County commissions have much more flexibility in appropriating *block grants*, which come with fewer conditions and may be spent on broad-based programs such as social services.<sup>25</sup> If state or federal funding declines or changes abruptly—as can happen quickly in a depressed economy—the trickle-down effect can be devastating to county budgets.
- **Fees and Fines** – County governments charge fees for a variety of services, such as granting and renewing licenses and permits, filing records, and providing copies of documents. In addition, the court clerk collects revenue each year in the form of court fines, restitutions, forfeitures, court costs, and filing fees.





Counties operate on a fiscal year, which may run July 1 to June 30, October 1 to September 30, or January 1 to December 31. At the beginning of the budget process each fiscal year, every county officer and department head must prepare and submit a financial report to the county commission. Each report must detail the office's earnings and expenditures from the previous fiscal year and project its earnings and expenditures for the approaching year. This gives the county commission an idea of how much funding each office will need for the year ahead; it also helps commissioners to know where they can afford make cuts and where they must increase the budget to meet their constitutional obligations. (In counties that employ a county manager, the manager does much of this budget "legwork," gathering reports from the various departments and then proposing a budget to the county commission.)

After reviewing the departments' financial reports, the county commission holds a series of public hearings to discuss proposals, listen to staff recommendations, and make revisions to the budget plan as needed. Finally, the county commission takes a vote to approve the budget.

The county commission must submit certain budgetary decisions to a public vote, such as when the county plans to build a jail, courthouse, county-operated nursing home, or another public building. The county must also win voter approval to raise or implement certain kinds of taxes, or when a proposed spending measure will require more funds than the county brings in each year in taxes.<sup>26</sup> At times, the county commission will also ask voters to approve a *bond* to fund a county project, such as the construction of a government facility. If a majority of voters reject a budgetary proposal, the county commission must drop the proposal or find another way of generating funds.

Commissioners face a delicate balance of providing constitutionally mandated services with limited funds. This task, as one commissioner puts it, is like “walking a tightrope.”<sup>27</sup> This aspect of the job of county commissioner offers some special challenges to those committed to limited government. How can county commissioners fulfill all state requirements, meet the needs of their communities, *and* keep government spending in check? For instance, in Minnesota, “as much as sixty to eighty-five percent of the county expenditures are used to deliver mandated services.”<sup>28</sup> As county governments face pressure on two fronts—with state legislatures handing down more responsibilities on one side and residents demanding more services on the other—it is more important than ever for county commissioners to practice fiscal responsibility. While prospective county commissioners should study the topic of fiscal responsibility in depth, for now, here are a few ways to start thinking responsibly about county budgets:

# The Budget Challenge

**Think in the long term.** A balanced budget today does not necessarily translate into a balanced budget tomorrow. Similarly, a little bit of debt today can mushroom into tomorrow’s staggering burden. Robert Daddow, deputy county executive of Oakland County, writes that counties face a “perfect storm” in times of economic distress: the state government lacks funds to support the county, and, at the same time, more county residents need public assistance, medical aid, and help with housing.<sup>29</sup> So in good economic times and bad, county commissioners should think ahead when making budget decisions. As Daddow points out, “It’s harder to deceive yourself when you’re forced to look at a trend, rather than a single year’s budget.”

State and federal grants are one area in which it is critical to think in the long term. Dave Lindstrom, a commissioner for Johnson County, Kansas (one of the fastest-growing counties in that state), says counties should be forward thinking when accepting external funds. When his commission is considering whether or not to receive a federal grant, Lindstrom has made a practice of weighing the long-term advantages *and* disadvantages of such a decision. Federal grants, he says, “are very alluring on the surface because they help us offer services we can’t (offer) otherwise.” However, when accepting a grant, county commissioners must be careful that they are not actually making a long-term financial commitment that they will be unable to keep. For instance, some grants are intended to fund a given program only for a specified period of time. What happens when the grant runs out but the program remains? “Sometimes we fall in the trap of implementing those programs and accepting those grants that aren’t going to continue,” says Lindstrom.<sup>30</sup> The final consensus: if the county will not be able to fund a program out of its own resources in the long run, commissioners should think twice about accepting the grant.

**Practice fiscal responsibility in the provision of services.** The rules of fiscal responsibility apply when it comes to the provision of services to county residents. The contracting out of services is a good example. In recent years, all levels of governments have been turning to the private sector in order to cut costs. Many counties have found that outsourcing certain services is more cost-efficient than shouldering the

burden in-house. However, while outsourcing can produce more jobs for the county and put more income into the local economy, such measures must be implemented carefully to ensure that they actually benefit the community. County commissioners need to be “absolutely proactive” when it comes to contracting out services, says Keith Self, County Judge of Collin County, Texas. The ultimate goal of any decision relating to the purchase of services should be “getting the best value for the taxpayers.”<sup>31</sup> Commissioners are responsible for hiring providers that will deliver the highest quality service for the lowest price. To meet this standard, commissioners must continually evaluate the way they do business, and must be willing to make changes accordingly.

Sometimes, fiscal responsibility means being willing to eliminate committees and services that have outlived their usefulness. Richard Bearden, a political consultant active in Arkansas politics, rattles off several boards that his county could reassess or maybe even do without: “We have a cemetery board here—there’s probably been one time in the past ten years we had an issue that the board had to address.... There’s a towing recovery board. Do we need eight people to drive to a meeting once a month to talk about this?.... There’s a boll weevil board that meets—there hasn’t been a boll weevil problem in 20 years!”<sup>32</sup>

**Promote budget transparency.** Every level of government should be able to give an account to taxpayers for every dollar spent. Even though county commissions plan, discuss, and approve their budgets in public meetings, very few county residents are actually aware of how their tax dollars are being spent. And while citizens may occasionally read headlines about how much money is being spent on this or that, seldom do they know how much the county is spending on a daily or monthly basis. Americans have grown increasingly concerned with allegations of waste, flagrant spending, and even ethical violations at every level of government, and citizens and officials alike have looked for ways to promote government transparency. Budget transparency helps taxpayers answer two questions:

- 1) How are my tax dollars being spent?
- 2) Are my tax dollars being spent effectively?

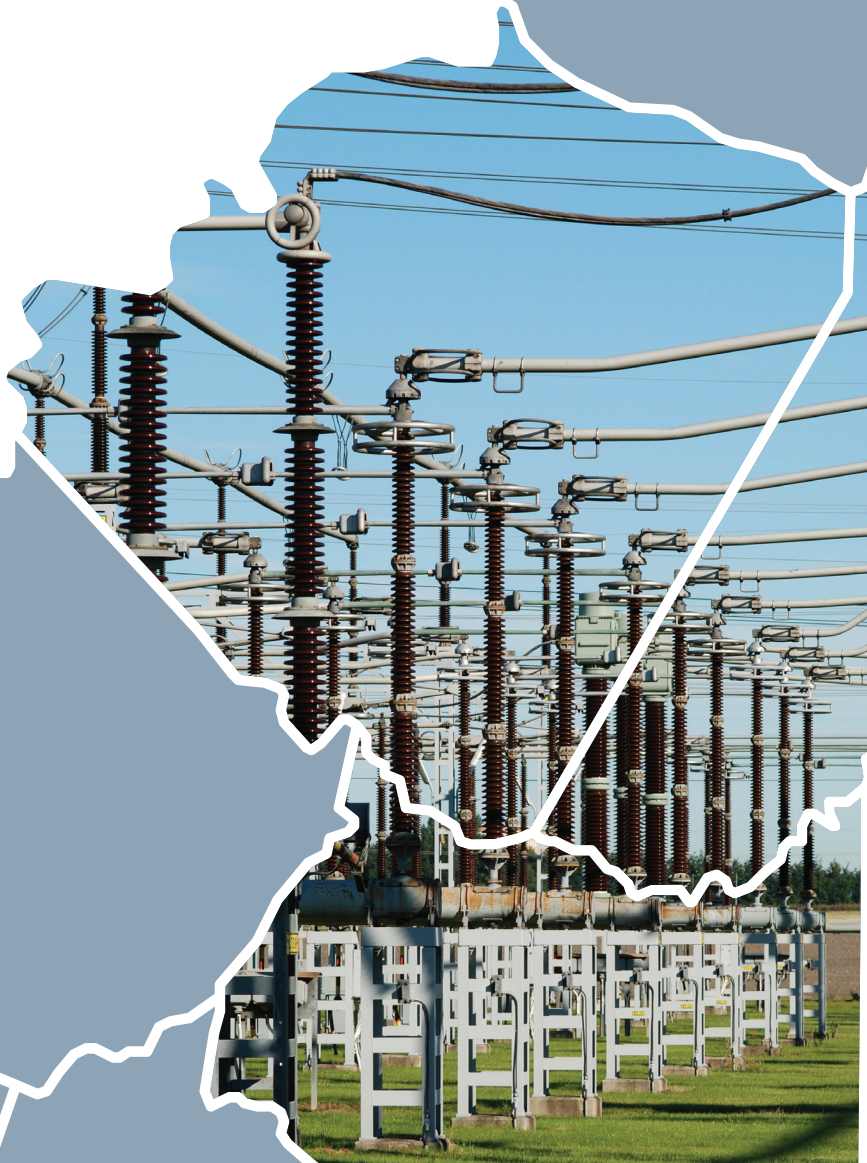
Counties can take very simple steps toward greater transparency. In the 21st century, the Internet has become a powerful transparency tool. But while a growing number of county governments are posting information online, many counties across the country have yet to establish an online presence. For example, over 60 percent of counties in both Arkansas and Oklahoma lack websites; the same goes for nearly a third of Louisiana parishes.<sup>33</sup> Establishing a website can be a simple way for a county to increase its transparency, while at the same time empowering its citizens with information and giving them a more immediate role in the government process.

While it is increasingly common for counties to display their annual budgets (including expenditures, tax revenues, indebtedness, and distribution of funds) online, some transparency proponents are not content to stop

there. One of them is Judge Keith Self of Collin County, Texas. Self believes that county governments should reveal not only their budgets, but also their checkbooks to the public. “A budget is a planning document,” says Self, but “the checkbook is the record of *who* the money went to. Who did you actually write a check to? And for how much?” Thanks to the efforts of Self and many others, in August of 2008 Collin County became the first county in the nation to post its checkbook online. Now, says Self, the taxpayers of Collin County “can see who’s actually getting the money.”

Other counties are beginning to follow suit. Sedgwick County, Kansas, the second most-populous county in the state and home to the city of Wichita, recently released its checkbook online after careful planning and cooperation between county departments. “Basically, the more information, the better,” says Self when it comes to transparency. “I will tell you that it’s incredibly powerful for people to just know that they *can* look at (county information online), even if they don’t.”

Check your state and county for transparency initiatives and programs. They can be excellent ways of tracking government activity and spending. And if you hope to serve as a county commissioner someday, be prepared for your own activities and decisions to be measured by these initiatives.





# Running for the Board of County


The role of county commissioner is an extremely important charge. County commissioners control millions of dollars in taxpayer monies, and commissioners' policies and decisions affect county residents on a daily basis. The office of county commissioner is also very often a stepping stone to higher office; many commissioners go on to serve in the state legislature, and some eventually serve at the federal level, either in elected or appointed positions. So how should someone prepare for this office? Before a prospective candidate even starts putting together a campaign, he or she should cultivate some territorial knowledge. Careful, personal preparation can make the difference between an average candidate and an outstanding candidate. So here are a few things a candidate should do before launching a campaign:

**Get to know your county.** In order to be an outstanding candidate, you must be informed about your county. While this may seem obvious, it is not altogether uncommon for eager prospective candidates to skip this step at first. So ask yourself: What are the demographics of my county? What are the county's main industries? What about its history? In what ways is the county important to the state? Knowing the answers to these questions will not only make you a stronger candidate but also a more effective citizen.

**Get to know your county budget.** First, if you are not already familiar with the basics of balancing a budget, learn them. Keep in mind that county commissioners typically manage millions of dollars and that they have final authority over all financial decisions for the county. Richard Bearden of Arkansas points out that good budget management is essential even in rural counties that have "small" budgets: "In smaller counties, the amount of money ushered through or managed by the county government may be greater than anywhere else in the county—even greater than any business or industry money," he says. Yet, Bearden notes, some commissioners lack necessary financial knowledge or experience. "You've got everyday people serving on [the county commission] that are not versed in (the) county budget or government."<sup>34</sup>

Second, learn your county's budget *process*. While all counties share some of the same planning methods, the precise process of putting together the budget can differ from state to state. For instance, several counties in Oklahoma have established "budget boards," in which the treasurer, assessor, sheriff, county clerk, and court clerk share authority with





the county commissioners in making budget decisions: each official has one vote on the budget board, and budget proposals must earn a majority of votes in order to pass. Procedural differences such as these can significantly impact how commissioners approach budget decisions.

# Commissioners

**Get to know your county government.** When asked how best to prepare for county office, County Commissioner Dave Lindstrom’s advice is, “Learn who your representatives are, what their philosophies are, what’s important to them. Learn how what *you* think interacts with that.”<sup>35</sup> To start this process, attend commission board meetings. If you are unable to attend meetings in person, try listening in online: many counties post videos of their meetings on their websites, and a growing number offer live streaming. Local television stations often broadcast the meetings. You should also be able to download meeting minutes online or obtain hard copies at the county courthouse.

In addition to participating in meetings, consider applying for a seat on a citizen advisory committee. Committee terms vary in length but usually run between one and five years. Choose a committee on which your skills and experience will be an asset. If you are a firefighter or an EMT, apply for the Fire Advisory Board or the Emergency Preparedness Advisory Board. If you are an attorney, teacher, or social worker, apply for the Juvenile Corrections Advisory Board. If you are a plumber, you might be a good fit for the Plumber Examining Board.

**Get to know your neighbors.** Educate yourself on the issues important to county residents. Research the boards and commissions that advise and inform the county commission. What do they focus on? What kinds of citizen advisory committees make recommendations to the commission, and who serves on them? Learn which issues are most important to the voters in your county. What have people been talking about? What issues cause the most controversy? Are residents asking for lower taxes? Better water? Downtown rejuvenation? Knowing the answers to these questions will help you formulate your own policies and assist you in building a strong campaign platform.



# Putting Together the Campaign

The legal qualifications for the office of county commissioner are usually simple. In most states, the following are basic requirements for candidacy:

- The candidate must be a registered voter
- The candidate must be a resident of the county and the district for certain period of time before filing
- If the candidate has previously committed a felony, a certain period of time must have passed since the completion of his or her sentence before filing for office

While these are the most common qualifications for office, be sure to check your own state and county's requirements before you file to make sure that you qualify.

## Make Connections and Gather Volunteers

No one knows you better than your family and friends, so they are your first source of volunteers. Then consider any associations that you belong to—civic, church, or community groups. Do not forget about students from nearby colleges and universities as well, as they are often eager to gain experience. As you campaign, be on the lookout for potential volunteers as you meet with voters. Many candidates are surprised by how many voters will offer to help. Be sure to have a card with you to take down their contact information so that you can connect them with your campaign.

## Message and Press

The campaign message is the most important and integral aspect of any campaign. To build your campaign message, you must understand three key things:

1. **Why are you running?** Think about the qualities that you offer and how they make you the best person to serve on your county's board of commission.
2. **Who are the voters?** Think about what the voters care about and what they know about you.
3. **What do the voters need to know in order for them to do what you want them to do?**

Your answers to these questions comprise your campaign message. This will be the message you consistently present in all your communications, whether they are postcards, mailings, buttons, brochures, yard signs, press releases, or speeches. Prepare yourself to be interviewed by members of your local press, including newspapers and radio and television stations. If you receive a call from a reporter and you are not ready to answer questions, feel free to tell the reporter that you will return his or her call, giving yourself time to research the issues before conducting the interview. Remember that once you start talking, you are on the record—even if you are told that you are not. Be succinct and honest, while remaining courteous.

## **Fundraising**

No campaign can survive without fundraising. Begin raising money as soon as you announce your decision to run and be certain to follow all legal requirements for reporting financial contributions to your campaign. Your treasurer should handle most of this.

Local campaigns, such as a campaign for county commissioner, do not always require extensive fundraising, but you must be able to raise a substantive amount of money in order for your campaign to be viable. Brian Maughan, who won election to the Oklahoma County Board of Commissioners in 2008 and has worked for many other campaigns, recommends having at least \$10,000 in the bank on the day you file to run.<sup>36</sup> Before you begin fundraising, determine how much money you need to raise by looking at the typical amount spent on a county commission race in your county and at the expenses you will incur in the course of your campaign. How much will literature (palm cards and brochures) cost? How many yards signs will you need, and how much will they cost? How much will postage cost to mail letters throughout your district? Whatever the total cost that your campaign will incur should be your fundraising goal.

## **Your Ground Game**

In county commission elections, few things are as effective as door-to-door campaigning. Local campaigns are fought and won on the ground.

Create a “walk list” by using the voter lists that can be obtained from your local election office. As you go door to door, make sure to record the names of the people you speak with and give them literature about your campaign. If a voter seems supportive, ask the voter if you can place a yard sign in his or her yard. Keep track of who agrees to do so, and be sure to come back with a yard sign to place in their yard.

One excellent way for candidates to meet with many voters at a time is to attend candidate coffees in neighborhoods around the district. Ask friendly members of the community to host a small (a 10- to 15-person) coffee in their home to allow you to meet with multiple voters. These events can be highly efficient and effective.

For more ideas on how to launch and run an effective campaign for office, see American Majority’s resource page for podcasts and training manuals available at [www.AmericanMajority.com](http://www.AmericanMajority.com).


# A Hands-On Act of Service

Serving as a county commissioner is both a solemn charge and a great privilege. The office is a uniquely influential position in a community. “It’s a very rewarding job,” says Dave Lindstrom, commissioner for District 3 of Johnson County, Kansas, a constituency of approximately 95,000. “Local government is unlike state and federal government in that... when you make a decision at local government levels, you’re looking right into the eyes of the people you’re making the decisions for,” he says—“and they’re most likely going to let you know how they feel.”<sup>37</sup>

Running the county government can be an even more personal matter in a rural county. Serving in a small county “has its advantages and disadvantages,” says County Commissioner David Weaver of Harper County, Oklahoma, whose district contains about 1,200 people. “You know your constituents’ parents, your constituents’ grandparents—and they know yours! When you eat in town—dinner or lunch—everyone’s around the coffee table.” And they ask, “‘Why don’t you do this? Why don’t you spend this money that way?’ There’s always communication, good and bad. I know the majority of...my constituents by name.”

Despite the challenges, working as a commissioner can be a rewarding and exhilarating process. Melba Nance, county commissioner for Blaine County, Oklahoma (District 1), and the board’s chairman, talks about the personal aspect of serving as a commissioner—its challenges and privileges. “It’s a continuous process of working together with the people you’re serving,” she says. “The county government is one of the most efficient and close-to-the people governments there is. People can come sit in my office and talk about the problem they’re having. This is a very hands-on, people-to-people level of government. We provide direct services.”<sup>38</sup>

True and lasting change in our nation begins from the bottom up. Our counties needs engaged, knowledgeable, and passionate citizens who are willing to accept the responsibility of leadership, confront difficult challenges, and remain soundly committed to the principles of individual liberty and limited government.



*Acknowledgements: Richard Bearden, Impact Management Group, Little Rock, Arkansas; David Lindstrom, County Commissioner, Johnson County, Kansas; Brian Maughan, County Commissioner, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma; Melba Nance, County Commissioner, Blaine County, Oklahoma; David Weaver, County Commissioner, Harper County, Oklahoma; William (Bill) Price, Phillips Murrah P.C.; Karl Peterjohn, County Commissioner, Sedgwick County, Kansas; James Quintero, Texas Public Policy Foundation; Keith Self, County Judge, Collin County, Texas; Bob Weeks, Voice of Liberty, Wichita, Kansas.*

(Footnotes)

1 Note that some states contain only one form of county governance while others may contain several, depending on state law.

# Footnotes

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- 19 Ibid. (2002 Census)
- 20 For more information on this topic, see "The Right Way to Run a Meeting: A Handy Guide for County Officials," by Jacqueline Byers, National Association of Counties, Revised 2008. This was a helpful resource for this section.
- 21 Oklahoma Statutes, Title 25, Section 307 (or 25 O.S. 2003, § 307(E)).
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# Connecting With American Majority

American Majority has several means of connecting with you as you begin to be involved with social media. Utilize the American Majority website as a tool for getting started and a resource as your projects develop.

**Website:** [www.AmericanMajority.org](http://www.AmericanMajority.org)

Check out the latest American Majority blogs and podcasts which are highlighted at the bottom section of the American Majority homepage.

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