

MICHIGAN'S SYSTEM OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Introduction

According to the 2017 Census of Governments, Michigan has 2,863 units of local government, including counties, cities, villages, townships, school districts, and special purpose units. The number of local governments is considerably higher in Michigan than many other states.

The creation of local units of government is often the result of local initiative. Some local governments predate the formation of the state of Michigan itself. Several counties, townships, and a few cities were first organized on the authority of the Michigan territorial government and the Northwest Ordinance. However, most local units came into being after Michigan was admitted to the Union in 1837 on the basis of permissive legislation—that is, citizens petitioned Lansing for the right to organize under one statute or another.

There is no overall state plan as to how the system of local governments should be arranged. Rather than impose a preconceived structure, the state has chosen a flexible, incremental approach. In general, it permits people in local areas to decide what form of local government they want based on the concerns and needs of the area.

The Michigan Approach

The Michigan approach to creating local units of government was based on the premises that the state requires a comprehensive system of governments through which it could extend its authority to all parts of the state and that rural areas would need less local government than urban areas.

A two-tiered network of government comprised of counties and townships turned out to meet both requirements of the state. The county system creates an overlay of governments through which the state can effectively manage its vast territory. Having a system of such outposts was essential during a time when transportation was laborious and communications slow.

The county system was imported from England, but modified by individual states to fit their needs and circumstances. Michigan borrowed and adapted the New York model in which the county board of commissioners included each township supervisor in the county. This model emerged as a way to stem clashes between township government advocates and county supporters. In 1968, the legislature created the county commissioner system of county representation. Under this plan, commissioners are directly elected from districts within the county.

Townships were the result of an organizational plan conceived by Thomas Jefferson and incorporated in the Northwest Ordinance of 1785, adopted by Congress. Under the Northwest Ordinance, government lands that would comprise the future states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota were surveyed and divided into townships each comprised of 36 1-square-mile parcels. The local government in the territory was to be patterned after the town meeting system of New England. When settlers from the east came to Michigan, they began organizing township governments—governments for rural areas that would eventually blanket the entire state.

Through these two forms of local government, state officials had their counterpart officers at the county and township levels through which state laws could be enforced, birth and death records maintained, roads built, land records recorded, taxes collected, and other important matters handled.

However, counties and townships were not adequate for more densely populated areas where certain municipal services, such as water, sewer, police, and fire, were desired. For these areas, the Legislature provided for the establishment of city governments. Prior to 1909, petitions were submitted to the state seeking approval for an area to become a city, and the Legislature chartered each city by passing a special act. Beginning in 1909, cities were granted home rule by the Legislature, a grant of authority that permitted cities to draft and adopt their own charters through a vote.

Villages are another type of local government. They have many of the special powers of cities but not the duties the state demands, and so villages remain part of the townships in which they are located. Village residents participate in township affairs and pay township taxes. Like cities, villages may have home rule status, which they were granted by the Legislature in 1895. Previously, the Legislature enacted village charters by special act, similar to cities.

The Contemporary Reality

At the local level, cities, villages, and townships exercise the primary governing authority. The three units have similar, but not identical, service and regulatory powers. The major differences are that townships do not have full territorial integrity or control over the road system. They also have limited general taxing power and only limited flexibility in structuring the government. Villages differ from cities in that villages are not legally separated from the township and are not required to assess property for tax purposes or conduct state and national elections. Unlike cities, neither townships nor villages are empowered to levy a personal income tax.

County governments have undergone change from earlier days. The change, though, has been more in detail than in role. That is, county government, in many ways, still exists to extend the outreach of state government and serve state interests. Moreover, this role is perhaps being strengthened. For instance, counties are partners with the state in state programs such as public health, courts, vital records, land and property records, disaster preparedness, solid waste management, highway and road administration and maintenance, property tax administration, law enforcement, elections administration, and incarceration of convicts.

Counties also conduct some strictly local services. Parks and recreation programs, senior citizen services, medical care facilities (nursing homes), hospital and ambulance services, county highway patrols, public transportation, libraries, drainage systems, and water and sewer facilities are some examples of programs in which counties are engaged for local reasons. In many instances, counties operate these programs in partnership with cities, villages, and townships.

Despite the many services provided by these four general purpose governments, other needs arise that fall outside their jurisdiction. To address some of these needs, local officials and citizens establish special districts and authorities. In some cases, a community government may establish a special district pursuant to general statutes; in other cases, the Legislature may adopt a law customized to fit a particular situation. Formation of a special unit is then generally subject to voter approval. Special units are often attractive for several reasons. One is that voters can be reasonably assured that a particular problem will be addressed, often financed by user fees rather than general property taxation. Another is that special districts provide a degree of flexibility in forming service jurisdictions that address areas of need or want for a particular service. Moreover, they provide a means of crossing municipal boundaries without threatening the integrity of the general purpose units.

State-Local Relations

State government now assumes a greater administrative role over local governments than in times past. Examples include general statutes setting rules on open meetings; free access to records and documents; and uniform budgeting and accounting procedures including financial audits, annual financial reports, and assignment of emergency managers in units that face a financial crisis.

In addition, various state agencies have partnership programs with local units. State agencies sometimes exercise a significant supervisory role with respect to the planning, conduct, and reporting of particular programs.

State financial aid, referred to as revenue sharing, forms another cornerstone in the relationship between the state and local governments. Property taxes and fees for services constitute the main source of locally raised funds in most units, but revenue sharing substantially supplements local revenue. Some revenue sharing is unrestricted and local units may use the money as they see fit. Other assistance is restricted to a specific purpose, such as for schools, roads, mental health, public health, libraries, and other uses.

Sources: Professor Ken VerBurg, Department of Resource Development, Michigan State University; VerBurg K., *Managing the Modern Michigan Township*, Michigan State University, Department of Resource Development, 2002; *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 2001, U.S. Census Bureau; Center for Educational Performance and Information, State of Michigan; *Directory of Michigan Municipal Officials*, Michigan Municipal League, 2003; Vanderberg, Alan, *Michigan Local Government Structure, Services and Practices*, July, 2002. Updated by the Legislative Service Bureau, 2015, 2019, and 2021.

MICHIGAN COUNTIES



NOTE: Michigan has 83 counties. According to the 2010 federal decennial census, they range in population from 2,156 persons in Keweenaw County in the Upper Peninsula to Wayne County's 1,820,584 persons (approximately 40 percent of whom reside in the city of Detroit) in the southeastern part of the state.