Concord’s Form of Government

4
1. **What is the Council/Manager form of local government?**

The Council/Manager form is the system of local government established in State law which combines the strong policy leadership of elected officials in the form of the City Council with the strong managerial experience of the City Manager. More than 300 cities in California operate under this Council/Manager form of government.

2. **What is its purpose?**

This form of government provides the City Council with the power to direct policy in the interest of the community, decide on the allocation of public resources, and determine the shape and type of growth in the jurisdiction. The City Manager is given the authority to carry out the Council’s decisions and programs.

3. **What is the difference between the Council and the Manager?**

Concord is a California municipal corporation. The Council is the community’s legislative body and is similar to the board of directors of a private or public corporation. Its members are the community’s decision makers. It sets policy, provides direction on business matters, and adopts the annual budget.

The Council hires the Manager and oversees his or her performance. The Manager serves as the Council’s chief general advisor, prepares the recommended budget, directs the staff and operations and is accountable to the Council. The Manager serves at the pleasure of the Council as its full-time executive whose job is to operate the City organization on behalf of the Council.

The Council also directly hires the City Attorney who serves as the City’s chief legal advisor.
4. **What is the role of the Mayor?**

The Mayor represents the City at community functions, maintains liaison with other governmental agencies and serves as the presiding officer at Council meetings. The position of Mayor is rotated every year among the Councilmembers. The Council also selects a Vice Mayor to substitute for the Mayor when he/she is not available.

5. **How is City policy formulated and established under the Council/Manager plan?**

The Council retains the sole power of being the policy making and legislative body for the City. However, both the Council and Manager have responsibility for initiating consideration of new policies. The Manager routinely prepares policy alternatives and recommendations for consideration of the Council. The Council may adopt, reject or modify the recommendations. The Manager is bound by whatever action the Council takes and is responsible for implementation of Council-approved policy.

6. **Who appoints the City Manager, City Attorney, and other staff?**

The City Council is responsible for appointing the City Manager and the City Attorney. The City Manager is responsible for hiring all other staff.

7. **How are the City Council meeting agendas developed?**

The City Council meets the first, second and fourth Tuesdays of the month to consider and act on City business, although the Council traditionally goes dark in July and holds no public meetings. The agenda is prepared by the City Manager.

8. **Who appoints City commission members?**

The City Council appoints all members of official City boards and commissions.
9. **How is the City budget prepared?**

   The City Manager has responsibility for preparation of the proposed annual budget for the City. The City Council is responsible for reviewing the document and making those policy choices that ensure that the budget addresses the needs of the community. After adoption by the Council, the Manager implements and administers the budget.

10. **Who supervises the day-to-day activities of the City staff?**

    The City Manager exercises general supervision and provides direction to the staff. City department heads report to the Manager. The City Council deals with the administration of the City through the City Manager.

11. **Does the Manager participate in local politics?**

    The City Manager refrains from participation in the election of the City Council or other elected offices, and from those partisan activities which would impair her performance as a professional administrator.
2.10.120 Appointment; qualifications; removal.

(a) A City Manager shall be appointed by the City Council solely on the basis of an objective evaluation of his administrative qualifications; he need not be a resident of the city at the time of his appointment, and he shall hold office at the pleasure of the City Council. No person elected or appointed to membership on the City Council shall, subsequent to such election or appointment, be eligible for appointment as City Manager until one year has elapsed following the expiration of the last term for which he was elected or appointed.

(b) In the event of an intended removal from office by the City Council, the City Manager shall be furnished with a written notice stating the Council's intention to remove him and the reasons therefor at least 30 days prior to the effective date of his removal. Within seven days after the delivery to him of such notice, the City Manager, by written notification to the City Clerk, may request a public hearing before the Council. The Council shall then determine the time and date for such a hearing, which shall occur before the 30-day period and at which time the City Manager shall appear and be heard. Subsequent to furnishing the City Manager with notice of intent, the Council may suspend him from duty without loss of salary until such time as his removal has been accomplished by resolution subsequent to the public hearing. The Council, in removing the Manager, shall exercise its uncontrolled discretion; its action shall be final and shall not be predicated upon any particular showing or degree of proof at the public hearing, the sole purpose of which is to allow the City Manager to present publicly his basis of opposition to his removal.

(c) If required by the City Council, the City Manager shall furnish a surety bond in such sum as the Council may determine.


2.10.130 General authority.

Except for the purpose of inquiry, the City Council and its members shall deal with the administrative service solely through the City Manager, and neither the City Council nor any member thereof shall give orders to any of the subordinates of the City Manager.

2.10.140 Duties.

The City Manager shall be the administrative head of the city government under the direction and control of the Council, except as otherwise provided for by ordinance. He shall be responsible to the City Council for the efficient administration of the affairs of the city which are under his control. In addition to the City Manager’s general powers as administrative head, and not as a limitation thereon, he shall have the following duties:

(1) To see that all laws and ordinances are duly enforced;

(2) To employ, discipline, or remove all heads of departments and all subordinate officers and employees of the city, to transfer employees from one department to another, and to consolidate or combine offices, designate departments and department head titles, and positions under his jurisdiction, with the approval of the City Council in each instance; however, nothing herein contained shall apply to the City Treasurer or the City Attorney; provided further the authority given the City Manager under the terms of this paragraph shall be subject to any civil service or personnel system now or hereafter established by ordinance;

(3) To exercise control over all departments and divisions of the city government and over all appointive officers and employees thereof subject to the approval of the City Council;

(4) To attend all meetings of the Council, except when his removal is under consideration, unless excused therefrom by the Council;

(5) To recommend to the Council such measures and ordinances as he deems necessary or proper;

(6) To serve as Purchasing Officer of the city and have the responsibility as such to make all purchases. The City Manager may delegate the duties of Purchasing Officer to other city employees;

(7) To serve as Personnel Director under the personnel merit system in the absence of the Personnel Director or, if both the City Manager and Personnel Director are absent, the City Manager may delegate the functions of the Director to a city employee;

(8) To approve all warrants drawn upon the city treasury before they are presented to the City Council;
(9) To serve as Director of Civil Defense;

(10) To consolidate departmental budget requests and prepare budgets for Council review and adoption; to be responsible for administration of the government of the city;

(11) To investigate all complaints in relation to all matters concerning the administration of the government of the city;

(12) To investigate all complaints made to the city with regard to services maintained by public utilities in the city, to ensure that the provisions of franchises, permits, privileges, and contracts granted by the city are faithfully observed;

(13) To perform such other duties as may from time to time be delegated to him by the Council;

(14) To prepare and recommend to the City Council a salary plan for appointive department heads;

(15) To prepare and submit to the City Council an organization chart showing the organizational plan for all departments of the city government;

(16) To devote his entire time to the duties and interests of the city.

(Code 1965, § 2208; Code 2002, § 2-143. Ord. No. 227; Ord. No. 17; Ord. No. 09-1; Ord. No. 687; Ord. No. 1001; Ord. No. 763; Ord. No. 813)
ICMA Code of Ethics with Guidelines

The ICMA Code of Ethics was adopted by the ICMA membership in 1924, and most recently amended by the membership in June 2020. The Guidelines for the Code were adopted by the ICMA Executive Board in 1972, and most recently revised in June 2020.

The mission of ICMA is to advance professional local government through leadership, management, innovation, and ethics. To further this mission, certain principles, as enforced by the Rules of Procedure, shall govern the conduct of every member of ICMA, who shall:

Tenet 1. We believe professional management is essential to efficient and democratic local government by elected officials.

Tenet 2. Affirm the dignity and worth of local government services and maintain a deep sense of social responsibility as a trusted public servant.

GUIDELINE
Advice to Officials of Other Local Governments. When members advise and respond to inquiries from elected or appointed officials of other local governments, they should inform the administrators of those communities in order to uphold local government professionalism.

Tenet 3. Demonstrate by word and action the highest standards of ethical conduct and integrity in all public, professional, and personal relationships in order that the member may merit the trust and respect of the elected and appointed officials, employees, and the public.

GUIDELINES
Public Confidence. Members should conduct themselves so as to maintain public confidence in their position and profession, the integrity of their local government, and in their responsibility to uphold the public trust.

Length of Service. For chief administrative/executive officers appointed by a governing body or elected official, a minimum of two years is considered necessary to render a professional service to the local government. In limited circumstances, it may be in the best interests of the local government and the member to separate before serving two years. Some examples include refusal of the appointing authority to honor commitments concerning conditions of employment, a vote of no confidence in the member, or significant personal issues. It is the responsibility of an applicant for a position to understand conditions of employment, including expectations of service. Not understanding the terms of employment prior to accepting does not justify
premature separation. For all members a short tenure should be the exception rather than a recurring experience, and members are expected to honor all conditions of employment with the organization.

Appointment Commitment. Members who accept an appointment to a position should report to that position. This does not preclude the possibility of a member considering several offers or seeking several positions at the same time. However, once a member has accepted a formal offer of employment, that commitment is considered binding unless the employer makes fundamental changes in the negotiated terms of employment.

Credentials. A member’s resume for employment or application for ICMA’s Voluntary Credentialing Program shall completely and accurately reflect the member’s education, work experience, and personal history. Omissions and inaccuracies must be avoided.

Professional Respect. Members seeking a position should show professional respect for persons formerly holding the position, successors holding the position, or for others who might be applying for the same position. Professional respect does not preclude honest differences of opinion; it does preclude attacking a person's motives or integrity.

Reporting Ethics Violations. When becoming aware of a possible violation of the ICMA Code of Ethics, members are encouraged to report possible violations to ICMA. In reporting the possible violation, members may choose to go on record as the complainant or report the matter on a confidential basis.

Confidentiality. Members shall not discuss or divulge information with anyone about pending or completed ethics cases, except as specifically authorized by the Rules of Procedure for Enforcement of the Code of Ethics.

Seeking Employment. Members should not seek employment for a position that has an incumbent who has not announced his or her separation or been officially informed by the appointive entity that his or her services are to be terminated. Members should not initiate contact with representatives of the appointive entity. Members contacted by representatives of the appointive entity body regarding prospective interest in the position should decline to have a conversation until the incumbent's separation from employment is publicly known.

Relationships in the Workplace. Members should not engage in an intimate or romantic relationship with any elected official or board appointee, employee they report to, one they appoint and/or supervise, either directly or indirectly, within the organization.

This guideline does not restrict personal friendships, professional mentoring, or social interactions with employees, elected officials and Board appointees.
Influence. Members should conduct their professional and personal affairs in a manner that demonstrates that they cannot be improperly influenced in the performance of their official duties.

Conflicting Roles. Members who serve multiple roles – either within the local government organization or externally – should avoid participating in matters that create either a conflict of interest or the perception of one. They should disclose any potential conflict to the governing body so that it can be managed appropriately.

Conduct Unbecoming. Members should treat people fairly, with dignity and respect and should not engage in, or condone bullying behavior, harassment, sexual harassment or discrimination on the basis of race, religion, national origin, age, disability, gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

Tenet 4. Serve the best interests of the people.

GUIDELINES
Impacts of Decisions. Members should inform their governing body of the anticipated effects of a decision on people in their jurisdictions, especially if specific groups may be disproportionately harmed or helped.

Inclusion. To ensure that all the people within their jurisdiction have the ability to actively engage with their local government, members should strive to eliminate barriers to public involvement in decisions, programs, and services.

Tenet 5. Submit policy proposals to elected officials; provide them with facts, and technical and professional advice about policy options; and collaborate with them in setting goals for the community and organization.

Tenet 6. Recognize that elected representatives are accountable to their community for the decisions they make; members are responsible for implementing those decisions.

Tenet 7. Refrain from all political activities which undermine public confidence in professional administrators. Refrain from participation in the election of the members of the employing legislative body.

GUIDELINES
Elections of the Governing Body. Members should maintain a reputation for serving equally and impartially all members of the governing body of the local government they serve, regardless of party. To this end, they should not participate in an election campaign on behalf of or in opposition to candidates for the governing body.

Elections of Elected Executives. Members shall not participate in the election campaign of any candidate for mayor or elected county executive.
**Running for Office.** Members shall not run for elected office or become involved in political activities related to running for elected office, or accept appointment to an elected office. They shall not seek political endorsements, financial contributions or engage in other campaign activities.

**Elections.** Members share with their fellow citizens the right and responsibility to vote. However, in order not to impair their effectiveness on behalf of the local governments they serve, they shall not participate in political activities to support the candidacy of individuals running for any city, county, special district, school, state or federal offices. Specifically, they shall not endorse candidates, make financial contributions, sign or circulate petitions, or participate in fund-raising activities for individuals seeking or holding elected office.

**Elections relating to the Form of Government.** Members may assist in preparing and presenting materials that explain the form of government to the public prior to a form of government election. If assistance is required by another community, members may respond.

**Presentation of Issues.** Members may assist their governing body in the presentation of issues involved in referenda such as bond issues, annexations, and other matters that affect the government entity’s operations and/or fiscal capacity.

**Personal Advocacy of Issues.** Members share with their fellow citizens the right and responsibility to voice their opinion on public issues. Members may advocate for issues of personal interest only when doing so does not conflict with the performance of their official duties.

**Tenet 8.** Make it a duty continually to improve the member’s professional ability and to develop the competence of associates in the use of management techniques.

**GUIDELINES**

**Self-Assessment.** Each member should assess his or her professional skills and abilities on a periodic basis.

**Professional Development.** Each member should commit at least 40 hours per year to professional development activities that are based on the practices identified by the members of ICMA.

**Tenet 9.** Keep the community informed on local government affairs; encourage communication between the citizens and all local government officers; emphasize friendly and courteous service to the public; and seek to improve the quality and image of public service.

**Tenet 10.** Resist any encroachment on professional responsibilities, believing the member should be free to carry out official policies without interference, and handle each problem without discrimination on the basis of principle and justice.
GUIDELINE

**Information Sharing.** The member should openly share information with the governing body while diligently carrying out the member’s responsibilities as set forth in the charter or enabling legislation.

**Tenet 11.** Handle all matters of personnel on the basis of merit so that fairness and impartiality govern a member’s decisions, pertaining to appointments, pay adjustments, promotions, and discipline.

GUIDELINE

**Equal Opportunity.** All decisions pertaining to appointments, pay adjustments, promotions, and discipline should prohibit discrimination because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, sexual orientation, political affiliation, disability, age, or marital status.

It should be the members’ personal and professional responsibility to actively recruit and hire a diverse staff throughout their organizations.

**Tenet 12.** Public office is a public trust. A member shall not leverage his or her position for personal gain or benefit.

GUIDELINES

**Gifts.** Members shall not directly or indirectly solicit, accept or receive any gift if it could reasonably be perceived or inferred that the gift was intended to influence them in the performance of their official duties; or if the gift was intended to serve as a reward for any official action on their part.

The term “Gift” includes but is not limited to services, travel, meals, gift cards, tickets, or other entertainment or hospitality. Gifts of money or loans from persons other than the local government jurisdiction pursuant to normal employment practices are not acceptable.

Members should not accept any gift that could undermine public confidence. De minimus gifts may be accepted in circumstances that support the execution of the member’s official duties or serve a legitimate public purpose. In those cases, the member should determine a modest maximum dollar value based on guidance from the governing body or any applicable state or local law.

The guideline is not intended to apply to normal social practices, not associated with the member’s official duties, where gifts are exchanged among friends, associates and relatives.

**Investments in Conflict with Official Duties.** Members should refrain from any investment activity which would compromise the impartial and objective performance of their duties. Members should not invest or hold any investment, directly or indirectly, in any financial business, commercial, or other private transaction that creates a conflict of interest, in fact or appearance, with their official duties.
In the case of real estate, the use of confidential information and knowledge to further a member’s personal interest is not permitted. Purchases and sales which might be interpreted as speculation for quick profit should be avoided (see the guideline on “Confidential Information”). Because personal investments may appear to influence official actions and decisions, or create the appearance of impropriety, members should disclose or dispose of such investments prior to accepting a position in a local government. Should the conflict of interest arise during employment, the member should make full disclosure and/or recuse themselves prior to any official action by the governing body that may affect such investments.

This guideline is not intended to prohibit a member from having or acquiring an interest in or deriving a benefit from any investment when the interest or benefit is due to ownership by the member or the member’s family of a de minimus percentage of a corporation traded on a recognized stock exchange even though the corporation or its subsidiaries may do business with the local government.

Personal Relationships. In any instance where there is a conflict of interest, appearance of a conflict of interest, or personal financial gain of a member by virtue of a relationship with any individual, spouse/partner, group, agency, vendor or other entity, the member shall disclose the relationship to the organization. For example, if the member has a relative that works for a developer doing business with the local government, that fact should be disclosed.

Confidential Information. Members shall not disclose to others, or use to advance their personal interest, intellectual property, confidential information, or information that is not yet public knowledge, that has been acquired by them in the course of their official duties.

Information that may be in the public domain or accessible by means of an open records request, is not confidential.

Private Employment. Members should not engage in, solicit, negotiate for, or promise to accept private employment, nor should they render services for private interests or conduct a private business when such employment, service, or business creates a conflict with or impairs the proper discharge of their official duties.

Teaching, lecturing, writing, or consulting are typical activities that may not involve conflict of interest, or impair the proper discharge of their official duties. Prior notification of the appointing authority is appropriate in all cases of outside employment.

Representation. Members should not represent any outside interest before any agency, whether public or private, except with the authorization of or at the direction of the appointing authority they serve.

Endorsements. Members should not endorse commercial products or services by agreeing to use their photograph, endorsement, or quotation in paid or other commercial advertisements,
marketing materials, social media, or other documents, whether the member is compensated or not for the member’s support. Members may, however, provide verbal professional references as part of the due diligence phase of competitive process or in response to a direct inquiry.

Members may agree to endorse the following, provided they do not receive any compensation: (1) books or other publications; (2) professional development or educational services provided by nonprofit membership organizations or recognized educational institutions; (3) products and/or services in which the local government has a direct economic interest. Members’ observations, opinions, and analyses of commercial products used or tested by their local governments are appropriate and useful to the profession when included as part of professional articles and reports.
Mission Statement for the Organization

Our mission is to join with our community to make Concord a city of the highest quality. We do this by providing responsive, cost-effective, and innovative local government services.

Our Vision for the Future

- We will be a customer based, performance driven, results oriented organization, focused on finding the answer, solving the problem, and achieving positive outcomes.
- We will partner with the Concord community to maximize resources, deliver high quality services, and be recognized as setting the standard for excellence.
- We will be trustworthy guardians of the public’s resources.
- We will make Concord a premier business location.
- We will collaborate to provide "seamless" services that benefit both our external and internal customers, streamlining our work processes and removing barriers wherever they arise.
- We will accept the challenge of change and be committed to continually enhancing the safety, environment, quality of life, and economic vitality of our community.
- We will constantly look for new and better ways to deliver services. We will seek to be innovative, take reasonable risks, learn from our mistakes and always strive for excellence.
- We will welcome diversity in our community and our work place.
- We will conduct our work in an atmosphere of trust, respect and courtesy with open doors and open communication for our customers and each other.
- We will provide ethical, dynamic and effective leadership, establish clear direction and priorities, and model the mission and values in support of our common Vision.
- We will be accountable for our performance and our organization’s success, and be recognized for our achievements.
Organizational Values

**Integrity and Trust** - We say what we mean and mean what we say. We honor our word and keep our commitments. We are worthy of the public's and each other's trust.

**Commitment to Service** - We put our customers first. We respond to our internal customers and treat them with the same courtesy and respect as our external customers. We facilitate, enable, and problem-solve.

**Partnerships** - We place a high value on building partnerships with members of our community to assure we understand their needs and continue to deliver the services they desire in the most effective manner possible.

**Innovation and Continuous Improvement** - We strive for excellence in the quality and productivity of our work. We create a work environment in which we look for new solutions and experiment with innovative ways to do things - even if they don't always work the first time. We recognize the need to be dynamic in meeting the community's changing needs. Each and every employee is given the opportunity to develop and grow.

**Performance Accountability** - We set measurable performance goals which support the priorities of the City and our individual work groups. We are given the necessary authority, training and resources to enable us to achieve these goals. Performance reviews are conducted in a timely and effective manner. Employee advancement and other incentives are based on performance. We are proud of the professionalism, competency and dedication that exist throughout the organization.

**Long Range Planning** - We conduct long range strategic and financial planning to maximize service delivery and build the economic stability of the City. We practice sound fiscal management to protect the public's resources.

**Team Work** - We respect each other as individuals, and we take the time and effort to show it. Although certain positions have more decision-making authority, we treat all members of the organization with the same consideration for their ideas and concerns. We really listen to, and give each other honest feedback. We recognize partnerships among work groups and employees as essential to effectively maximizing resources and delivering high quality services.

**Individual Worth and Diversity** - We recognize and appreciate the uniqueness of each individual. We value the contribution made and the synergy created by different experiences and perspectives. We are committed to treating each and every person within the organization and the larger community with respect and dignity.
Corporate Goals

Goal 1  Continue to make Concord a desirable place to live, work, and raise a family.

Goal 2  Be responsive to the needs of Concord citizens, maintain a high level of customer satisfaction, and provide quality public information and outreach.

Goal 3  Promote and improve Concord as a premier location for existing, expanding, and new businesses.

Goal 4  Ensure a balanced budget for a ten-year planning period with adequate replacement funds for buildings and equipment.

Goal 5  Preserve and enhance the livability of Concord's residential neighborhoods with opportunities for a broad range of housing options.

Goal 6  Offer an array of recreation, leisure, and cultural events and programs to meet the needs of citizens of all ages, with an emphasis on the well-being of youth.

Goal 7  Maintain a safe and efficient traffic circulation system.

Goal 8  Have Concord be among the safest cities of comparable size in California and have citizens feel safe in their homes, places of work, and throughout the City.

Goal 9  Maintain City parks, recreation facilities, streets, buildings, and other infrastructure to meet high standards of condition and appearance.

Goal 10 Guide Concord's development according to the General Plan and manage physical resources based on sound environmental principles.
Since 2013, the City Council has adopted priority areas of focus as part of preparing its budget. The use of priority focus areas has proved to be very successful, allowing the City to manage its resource allocation to achieve Council’s highest priority objectives.

The financial resources that the City Council authorized for the FY 2019-20 and FY 2020-21 Budget allow staff to make progress on achieving Council’s priorities which are below (not listed in any order of priority):

- Long Term Fiscal Stability & Economic Development
- Concord Naval Weapons Station
- Public Safety
- Infrastructure Maintenance
- Organizational Health & Employee Success
- Quality of Life
- Customer Service

The Council further refined the organization’s focus in March of 2019 by defining the organization’s priorities for the next two years, as follows:

**Tier 1**
- Fiscal Stability
- Review/Update Economic Development Strategy

**Tier 2**
- Smoking Ban in Multi-Family Dwelling Complexes
UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS OF LOCAL AGENCY DECISION-MAKING

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UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS OF
LOCAL AGENCY DECISION-MAKING

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About This Guide: A Starting Point for Learning about Local Government

The goal of this guide is to provide an introductory overview of how local government decision-making works. The intended audience is newly elected officials, new staff, the media and the public.

As an overview for busy people interested in key concepts, this guide necessarily generalizes and simplifies complex and varied topics. For example, California local government has been described this way:

- California has 7,000 local government agencies, including counties, cities, special districts, and school districts. California voters elect about 15,000 people to oversee these governmental agencies. Many of these entities have overlapping—if not conflicting—duties and responsibilities. [...]

Within most counties, whether urban or rural, observers will find a multitude of agencies with separate boards operating programs and providing services.¹

In addition:

- On the local level, there are a multitude of governmental agencies providing services and regulatory activities. As is the case with state-local responsibilities, the confusing array of local government entities makes it difficult for citizens to understand which agency is responsible for providing a particular service and whom they should hold accountable.
Reasonable people can disagree on the merits of endeavoring to explain, in simple terms, a system whose components and processes are both varied and intricate. There is a real risk that, in any given situation, some of the generalizations made in this guide will not be true. There is also a great deal more to know about the details of the processes described in this guide.

The structure of the local agency decision-making process is intricate. Yet it is vital that those who participate in these processes have a starting point for learning about them. This guide is offered with that goal: to provide a starting place for those who want to understand more about local government and its decision-making processes.

For that reason, resources for further information are an importance offering in this guide.

As always, the Institute for Local Government welcomes your feedback. Contact info@ca-ilg.org with reactions, corrections, thoughts and suggestions. Most importantly, thanks for your interest in this topic.
Public Agency Decision-Making is Different

The key thing to understand about public agency decision-making is that it’s different. Different from what? It is different from the way individuals make decisions; it’s also different from the way private businesses make decisions. That difference is in the fundamental purposes and objectives of those decisions.

Collective Decision-Making in the Public’s Interest

When a public agency makes a decision, the guiding principle must always be what best serves the public’s interests, not the personal self-interests of the decision-makers. That is because the very purpose of having public agencies is to provide mechanisms to engage in collective decision-making. The goal of this decision-making is to work through challenges being faced in a community, to provide services and facilities and, through laws, to guide individual behaviors to promote the overall safety, well-being and prosperity of the community.

Another way that public agency decision-making is different is that often the decision-making power is shared. For example, special district governing boards, county boards of supervisors, city councils, school boards and various other public agency boards and commissions make decisions collectively, typically by a vote of the members of those bodies.

The prevalence of shared power and decision-making has important implications.

- **Co-Leaders.** For participants in the decision-making process, shared power and decision-making puts a premium on leadership skills that help one’s fellow leaders find common ground.

- **The Public.** For those members of the public desiring to influence the process, shared power and decision-making frequently means having conversations with multiple decision-makers.
Reporters. For the media covering the process, shared power and decision-making means understanding that decision-makers may have diverse perspectives.

Shared decision-making provides checks and balances in the exercise of authority. Such checks and balances maximize the likelihood that decision-making does indeed serve the public’s interests.

Determining the Public’s Interests

How do decision-makers and the public determine what course of action in a given situation best serves the interests of the community? There are several ways:

Elections. The public votes to elect representatives to make decisions on their behalf. Well-run campaigns provide fair, relevant and truthful information about the qualifications, values and vision of those who seek public office so the public can elect those whose judgment and opinions they trust and agree with.

Decision-Making Processes. A public agency’s decision-making process typically provides a number of opportunities for people to provide input in the process. An important responsibility for public officials is to listen and consider this input as they decide what course of action best serves the public.

Analysis and Management. Public agencies hire professional staff to provide analysis to elected officials and other decision-makers on the pros and cons of a given course of action. Staff also implements the policies that elected officials and other decision-makers make. Staff is also responsible for day-to-day management of agency functions.

Ballot Measures. In some situations, the voters make the decision themselves. Examples include certain kinds of financial decisions (such as the decision to incur debt or raise certain kinds of revenues). In other cases, the public can insist on being part of the decision-making process through what’s called the initiative and referendum process (see page 37). Elected officials may also choose to put issues on the ballot to let the public weigh in, either in an advisory capacity or to make the final decision.

These processes are all means to the end of determining the public’s interests. However, as Martin Luther King Jr. observed, in a democracy, the means are the ends. These processes—and the integrity with which one engages in these processes—all have an intrinsic value wholly apart from the resulting outcome.
Who Does What?

Different kinds of public agencies have responsibility for different kinds of functions. From a member of the public’s standpoint, the first task is figuring out what public agency has decision-making responsibility for the issue he or she cares about. For example, complaining to a city government about an issue involving a local fire department will not be effective if the fire department is operated by a special fire district.

Similar problems can occur if an individual is interested in becoming more involved in the community by seeking appointment or election to local public office. If the person is interested in being appointed to a board or commission, or running for public office, then it’s important to know the specific responsibilities of the board, commission, or office to be sure it deals with issues that are of the most concern.

In addition, a candidate for election to the governing body of a city or a county needs to realize that such office holders are responsible for making decisions on the full range of issues confronting that agency—not just the ones the individual was originally interested in.

Types and Responsibilities of Local Agencies

**Counties.** Counties play a dual role in California’s system of government. California is divided into 58 counties.

- **Countywide Services.** Counties provide a variety of important countywide health, welfare and social services that serve all residents within a county. In these respects, counties are part of a statewide system that delivers certain kinds of programs and services to Californians.

  Counties’ district attorneys work with county sheriffs and city police departments to prosecute crimes.

- **Municipal Services and Regulations.** For those areas that are not within a city (often referred to as the “unincorporated areas” of a county), counties provide law enforcement services through the sheriff’s office. For these areas,
counties may also provide such services as fire protection, animal control, parks, recreation, public works (including roads), planning and land use, water, waste water, solid waste, and library—services that are similar to those cities provide within their boundaries (known as the incorporated areas). Sometimes counties and cities provide these services collaboratively. Sometimes these services may be provided by a private company or by a special district.

Counties also have regulatory authority within the unincorporated areas (such as land use planning authority and building code enforcement). This includes the power to adopt regulations to promote the public good within those areas.

For More Information About Counties and County Issues...
See the California State Association of Counties‘ website www.csac.counties.org, including the "California’s Counties" tab.

Cities. California has nearly 500 cities. Within city boundaries, cities have responsibility for such services as police and fire, animal control, parks, public works, water, waste water, solid waste, and library. Sometimes these services may be provided by the city itself or by the county, a special district or a private company.

Cities also have authority to adopt regulations that promote the public good within city limits. These include regulations relating to land use and building code enforcement.

For More Information about Cities and City Issues...
See the League of California Cities’ website www.cacities.org.

OTHER TYPES OF PUBLIC AGENCIES CREATED BY COUNTIES AND CITIES

Counties and cities can also create entities to accomplish particular tasks, such as redevelopment agencies and housing authorities.

Redevelopment is a tool created by state law to assist counties and cities in eliminating blight from a designated area, as well as to develop and rehabilitate residential, commercial, industrial and retail property within an area.

Housing authorities administer local, state and federal housing programs to provide safe and sanitary residential dwelling accommodations for persons of very low-, low- and moderate-income.
**Special Districts.** Special districts are public agencies created to provide one or more specific services to a community, such as water service, sewer service, parks, fire protection and others.

- **Dependent Special Districts.**
  Sometimes the governing board of either a city or county will also serve as decision-makers for a special district. These kinds of special districts are called “dependent special districts.”

- **Independent Special Districts.**
  Other special districts operate under a locally elected, independent board of directors, which oversees district functions. These kinds of special districts are called “independent special districts.”

Most special districts perform a single function, such as water service, parks and recreation, fire protection, pest abatement or cemetery management.

Other districts have multiple functions, such as community service districts. Some special districts provide services for residents in both cities and counties, while others provide services only for residents who live outside city boundaries in the unincorporated areas.

In California, cities must be located in one county, and city boundaries may not cross county lines. On the other hand, special districts may cross city and county boundaries. For example, the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California serves residents in six different counties and most of the cities within those counties.

**For More Information about Special Districts and Special District Issues...**

See the California Special District Association’s website www.csda.net “About Special Districts” tab.
THE BENEFITS OF COLLABORATION AMONG LOCAL AGENCIES

Counties, cities, schools and special districts are distinct legal entities that have no control over each other (except for dependent special districts, as mentioned above). Yet these entities usually have overlapping constituencies. Those constituencies provide financial support to these local agencies through taxes, assessments, fees and other kinds of service charges.

Promoting Collaboration. For this reason, local agencies are alert to opportunities to work together in order to stretch those resources as far as possible. The public wants safe communities with good public services and facilities in which to live, work, and play. The public does not view or divide its thinking and evaluation of public officials according to public agency jurisdictional boundaries.

Agencies collaborate in many ways such as study sessions, use of public facilities, joint purchases, and consolidation of services. Collaboration may be informal or by formal agreement. For information about collaborative efforts among local agencies, visit the Cities-Counties-Schools Partnership website at www.ccspartnership.org.

Resolving Disputes. Similarly, members of the public often disapprove of battles between public agencies and public officials. The public generally finds using public funds to sue each other to resolve such disputes to be wasteful.

To address this concern, public agencies can seek out alternative ways to work through disputes. For information about such options, visit the Institute for Local Government’s Intergovernmental Conflict Resolution webpage at www.ca-ilg.org/intergovtconflictresolution.
Other Kinds of Local Agencies. Local agencies also join together to accomplish shared objectives.

- **Joint Powers Authorities (JPAs).**
  Local agencies will sometimes enter into agreements to exercise shared powers to provide more effective or efficient government services or to solve a service delivery problem. A JPA may collectively offer any service provided by its member cities and counties. One common form of joint powers authority is one that serves as a form of insurance company for local agencies. Through the joint powers agreement, these agencies pool their resources to promote activities to reduce risk and pool their assets to pay claims against member entities (for example, workers compensation claims). Joint powers authorities typically have their own board of directors (typically public officials appointed by each participating public entity), their own policy development system, and their own management structure.

- **Councils of Government (COGs).** A council of government is a particular form of joint powers authority created to engage in certain policy-making activities. The exact combination of duties varies from region to region. The two most prevalent duties are planning-related activities relating to affordable housing and transportation on a regional level. Some councils of government cover one county; others cover multiple counties. Some councils of governments cover such a large area (as in the Southern California area) that local agencies also participate in sub-regional council of government activities as well.

In addition, local agencies will sometimes create a **nonprofit corporation** to perform certain functions for the community. These nonprofits are governed by a board of directors according to an adopted set of bylaws. As with public agencies, there are certain transparency requirements for nonprofit corporations because of their special status.

For More Information...

For More Information . . .
See the California Association of Councils of Governments’ website www.calcog.org.
"CHARTER" AGENCIES

Some public agencies are “charter” agencies. This means that they have special rights.

Charter Cities. The residents of a city can vote to have their city become a charter city. That means, among other things, that the city’s organization and manner of operation is determined by a charter, as opposed to certain state laws that apply to “general law cities.” The charter is a “mini-constitution” for the city and determines how the city is organized, operated, and authorized to provide for municipal functions. It also includes limitations that the residents of that city may legally choose to place on the city. Generally, charter cities have an extra measure of independence from certain kinds of state requirements, such as establishing their own election dates, rules, and procedures, that would otherwise apply as a general law city.

Charter Counties. Like charter cities, charter counties operate according to a charter adopted by county voters. Charter counties have authority relating to the election, compensation, terms, removal, and salary of the governing board; for the election or appointment (except the sheriff, district attorney, and assessor who must be elected), compensation, terms, and removal of all county officers; for the powers and duties of all officers; and for consolidation and segregation of county offices.

Charter Schools. Charter schools are governed by the terms of their charters and by certain state laws, as well as the federal laws that govern public school districts. Charter schools’ governance structures vary widely, with some being under the authority of the district’s governing board (or the County Office of Education or the State Board of Education), and others operating autonomously. The entity that approved the charter is responsible for certain oversight functions, and has authority to revoke the charter under certain circumstances, but is otherwise not responsible for the charter school’s operations.
Schools. School districts are responsible for educating children from kindergarten through high school. Some school districts provide pre-school services. Unlike some other states, in California public schools and cities/counties have separately elected governing bodies. For example, in New York City, the mayor is responsible for the schools. This is not the case in California.

California’s public education system also includes community college districts, the California State University system and the University of California system.

This is perhaps the most important thing to understand about California’s public education system—it is a multi-leveled, complex system. There are many state laws that determine how schools operate. The availability of funding for schools is also largely determined by the state, through the budget process. Locally elected school boards are a part of this system, as are county offices of education.
KEEPING POWER CLOSEST TO THE PEOPLE: LOCAL AGENCY LOBBYING EFFORTS

From time to time, the state and federal governments take power away from local agencies by adopting legislation that “preempts” local law-making on a particular subject or dictates how a state or local agency must conduct itself. Other times the state and federal governments will cut funding for important services delivered at the local level.

One of the leadership roles for local officials is to weigh in on the wisdom of such decisions by state and federal policymakers. In this way, local officials serve their constituencies by advocating that decision-making authority and resources be maintained at the local level.

Another important aspect of local agency lobbying efforts is to simply provide information to state and federal policy makers and their staffs. Such advocacy may occur through state and nationwide associations of local agencies, such as the California State Association of Counties, the League of California Cities, the National League of Cities and the National Association of Counties. Some local agencies also hire lobbyists to add to the voices of state and national associations; such lobbyists also help advocate on uniquely local issues too.

Keep in mind, however, that state and federal policymakers also need to hear directly from local officials about how legislation and other policy proposals affect local government and communities. Such efforts and information are part of what informs and influences policymaking at the state and federal levels.
Division of Authority between Federal, State, Regional, and Local Agencies

As part of our democracy, we have created different levels of government based on the scope of their power. The reason this is relevant to understanding local government is that public agencies in different levels of government have responsibilities for different governmental functions.

Sometimes, a higher level of government will assume regulatory or other responsibility for something to the exclusion of regulation by other forms of government. For example, the state legislature may adopt a rule that will restrict what a city or county can do about an issue. This is known as “preemption.” The federal government can do the same thing by adopting a regulation that limits what state or local agencies can regulate.

Types of Government Entities

- **Federal Government.** At the national level, three branches of government make decisions that generally affect the entire country. Services provided by the federal government include providing for the defense of our country, regulating interstate commerce, and regulating who can become citizens. The federal government also provides a variety of services and facilities, such as our national highway system and national parks.

Decision-Making at the federal level is divided into three branches or functions:

1. **The Legislative Branch.** Congress comprises the Senate and the House of Representatives. The legislative branch makes laws that govern conduct and create programs to benefit everyone in the country.

2. **The Executive Branch.** This is the President and the various federal departments and agencies overseen by the President. The executive branch is generally responsible for implementing or carrying out the laws made by Congress.

3. **The Judicial Branch.** This is the federal court system, including the Supreme Court. The federal courts resolve disputes over the interpretation of laws Congress passes; they also determine whether conduct violates the federal constitution or laws passed by Congress.
The official website for the federal government is www.usa.gov; www.usa.gov/Apublications/federal.shtml is the portal for federal government agencies.

**State Government.** The United States is divided into 50 states. Each state also has a local government that makes decisions that affect services, facilities, conduct and other matters within the state’s geographic boundaries. Like the federal government, states have legislative, executive, and judicial branches. In some states, even though school district governing boards are locally elected, for many purposes school districts are considered to be part of state government. The official website for California is www.ca.gov; www.ca.gov/Apublications/Government.html is the portal for state government agencies.

- **Regional Entities.** The state may perform its functions through a network of regional entities that implement and enforce state laws. Examples include air quality management districts and regional water quality boards.

### What’s in a Name?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Agency</th>
<th>The Governing Body is Called</th>
<th>Presiding Officials Are Called</th>
<th>Other Individual Elected Officials are Called</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>County</td>
<td>Board of Supervisors</td>
<td>Chair, Vice Chair (Some counties may use the term “President”)</td>
<td>Supervisors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special District</td>
<td>Board of Directors or Board of Trustees</td>
<td>Chair or President, Vice Chair or Vice President</td>
<td>Directors or Trustees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City (also sometimes called a “town”)</td>
<td>City Council/Town Council</td>
<td>Mayor (elected or appointed) Vice Chair or Mayor Pro Tem</td>
<td>City or Town Council Members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School District</td>
<td>School Board</td>
<td>Chair or President, Vice Chair or Vice President</td>
<td>Board Members</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In other instances, regional governments are created by local governments when they voluntarily come together to form such regional bodies. Examples include councils of governments, often referred to by their acronyms as “COGs”. Such regional governments include the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG), the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) and joint powers authorities, sometimes referred to as “JPAs.”

Local officials frequently serve as decision-makers on regional bodies in addition to their responsibilities as county, city and special district officials.

- **Local Governments.** These generally include cities, counties and special districts as described on pages 5 to 11.

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**Finding Out Who Does What**

Residents often find it difficult to determine which public agency is responsible for an issue or matter they care about. Clues can often be found in the government section of the local telephone book, by visiting public agency websites on the Internet, or by visiting the library.

Using an Internet search engine can help locate the website of a particular government department. Many city and county websites also have links to other governmental agencies.

The State of California website, www.ca.gov/About/Government/State.html is a good resource for state agency information. The California website also offers links to local agencies from www.ca.gov/About/Government/Local.html. District offices of state legislators also tend to be helpful in knowing which agency is responsible for what issue in a given area.

For those counties in which it is available, the “211” telephone service can help connect the public with information on social services in a given area. See www.211.org.
Division of Labor within a Local Public Agency

Governing Body/Elected Officials

The highest level of leadership of a local public agency is its governing body, composed of individuals elected by the voters within that jurisdiction. These governing bodies play a number of roles in the process of local governance, depending on the nature of the public agency.

Presiding Official. Typically, the members of the governing body select one person from among themselves to serve as the presiding official at meetings. In counties, this individual is called the chair or chairperson of the board of supervisors. In cities, this individual is called the mayor.

In some cities, voters directly elect the mayor. In those cities, besides presiding at council meetings, the mayor may have some additional powers or responsibilities, such as the power to nominate to make appointments to city commissions. In many cities, the position of mayor rotates among the members of the governing body annually, so that all members experience the responsibilities of presiding. In this case, the mayor is selected amongst and by the city council. Most cities also elect a person to play this function when the mayor is absent (sometimes called a “mayor pro tem” or vice mayor).

The presiding official is responsible for running the meeting or hearing, keeping the meeting on track, ensuring that all sides are heard, and bringing the body to a decision. An effective chair will bring a number of skills to the task, including good listening skills, a thorough understanding of the agenda, a sense of fairness, an appreciation of the respective roles of staff versus elected and appointed decision-makers,
patience, and the ability to keep order and move the discussion forward to decision using collaborative decision-making or some other method. These are also helpful skills for all members of the decision-making body to have.

Unlike the President of the United States or the governor of a state, however, most mayors and board chairs do not have the power to “veto” actions of the governing board.

Legislative Role. Through city councils and county boards of supervisors, the laws and policies are adopted that determine further the goals and vision of the community and, in certain areas, regulate the conduct of the public. Those laws and policies can promote public health, safety and welfare, including, for example, protecting property, regulating businesses and governing land use – all of which come together to help create and maintain the unique nature and character of the community.

Examples of Local Legislation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public Safety</td>
<td>Curfews, anti-gang measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property Protection</td>
<td>Graffiti, code enforcement laws (such as regulation of nuisances, blight, and land uses)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Regulations</td>
<td>Rent control, adult entertainment restrictions, parking requirements, business license</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land Use and Building Regulations</td>
<td>Planning and zoning laws, historic preservation, sign regulations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operational Policies</td>
<td>Instructions to staff on how certain utility and other services are to be operated</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Quasi-Judicial Role.** From time to time, local elected officials also play a judge-like role. This occurs when they (or boards and commissions to which they have delegated this task) apply the agency’s adopted policies and standards to a particular situation. An example is when a person applies to engage in a certain use of their property or business operation. The task of the decision-making body is to determine whether the proposed use or business complies with the community’s adopted policies and standards. When the decision is made, it is good practice to adopt statements called findings that explain why the application does or does not satisfy these standards.

When the decision-making body is acting in a quasi-judicial role, it will typically conduct a publicized public hearing on the matter. Under such circumstances decision-makers are not only deciders, they are also stewards of a process that must satisfy certain standards for fairness. These standards require, for example, that the person applying for the permit be heard and given an opportunity to present his or her case before the deciding officials.

For more information about public hearings, see page 32.

*See Fair Process Requirements in Adjudicative Decision-Making at www.ca-ilg.org/ everydayethics.*

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**“MINISTERIAL” DECISIONS**

Some decisions involve less discretion. A “ministerial” decision is a matter that must be approved if certain specific standards are met. Because the decision-maker has very little leeway or discretion when making “ministerial” decisions, these kinds of decisions are frequently referred to as mandatory and “nondiscretionary.” Sometimes those decisions can be made by the appropriate local agency staff, such as a department head.

For example, a building permit must be approved if all of the conditions and requirements imposed in various building codes have been satisfied. It is approved through a “ministerial” decision.
Boards and Commissions

Many counties and cities involve members of the community in the decision-making process on particular issues. Those individuals serve on boards or commissions that advise the city council or board of supervisors on permits, applications, policy and other matters. In some cases, they are empowered to make decisions.

Many cities and counties, for example, have a separate planning commission. Planning commissions provide policy advice and feedback to the county board of supervisors or city council on land use and development issues. They also can play a decision-making role on some permit applications and other matters, depending on how a public entity’s rules and procedures are crafted.

Other examples of such advisory bodies include arts commissions, human rights commissions, cultural heritage commissions, parks and recreation commissions, waste advisory commissions, zoning boards, youth commissions, and civil service commissions.

Typically a county or city resolution or ordinance creates the board or commission, defines its authority, and specifies the manner in which its decisions may be reviewed. In some charter counties and cities, the charter may provide for certain commissions. State law requires cities and counties to have a list of boards and commissions available for public information and review. These boards and commissions are required to follow the same open-meeting laws required of elected decision-making bodies. (See page 26 on open meeting laws.)

When a board or commission is authorized to make administrative decisions, their task is to apply the standards and criteria established by ordinance or resolution for the exercise of such administrative authority. For example, in order to grant a discretionary approval such as a conditional use permit, the board or commission must find that the application conforms to all required standards and criteria, such as standards for noise, parking or hours of operation. The ordinance or resolution may also include provisions for appealing decisions of the board or commission to the governing body.
Local Agency Staff

Public agency staff members play a number of roles. Agency staff:

- analyze options for decision-makers, including how proposals stack up against currently adopted policies and standards;
- make professional recommendation on matters brought to elected officials;
- implement programs and provides services to the public approved by the decision-making bodies;
- suggest new policies or programs or how existing policies or programs can be improved or operated more effectively;
- make administrative decisions for the agency based on adopted legislative policies and direction;
- maintain an accurate record of proceedings and actions of the public agency; and
- determine financial impacts of all policy options available.

Staff members are an important resource to both the public agency and the community that the staff serves. Particularly valuable are staff members who are willing to speak up to keep the agency from making mistakes or falling short of the public’s expectations. Many bring significant policy, technical, program area, or management expertise to their work in service to the public. Many of these individuals spend all or most of their careers working for public agencies, and thus are often deeply committed to serving the public.

The table on page 21 lists common staff positions, along with websites that provide more information on what these professional roles involve.
### Common Staff Positions within Local Agencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Counties</th>
<th>Cities</th>
<th>Special Districts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>General Management and Administration</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County Administrator <a href="http://www.caaoac.org">www.caaoac.org</a></td>
<td>City Manager or Administrator <a href="http://www.cacitymanagers.org">www.cacitymanagers.org</a></td>
<td>District or General Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County Clerk and Elections Official** (Some are called &quot;Registrar of Voters&quot;) <a href="http://www.caceo58.org">www.caceo58.org</a></td>
<td>City Clerk** <a href="http://www.californiacityclerks.org">www.californiacityclerks.org</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerk of the Board of Supervisors <a href="http://www.ccbsa.net">www.ccbsa.net</a></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Financial</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Assessor* <a href="http://www.calassessor.org">www.calassessor.org</a></td>
<td>Finance Director <a href="http://www.csmfo.org">www.csmfo.org</a></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Treasurer-Tax Collector** <a href="http://www.cacttc.org">www.cacttc.org</a></td>
<td>Treasurer** <a href="http://www.cmta.org">www.cmta.org</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Auditor-Controller**</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Legal</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>County Counsel</td>
<td>City Attorney** <a href="http://www.cacities.org/attomeys">www.cacities.org/attomeys</a></td>
<td>District Counsel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public Safety</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheriff* <a href="http://www.calsheriffs.org">www.calsheriffs.org</a></td>
<td>Police Chief <a href="http://www.californiapolicechiefs.org">www.californiapolicechiefs.org</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Attorney* <a href="http://www.cdaa.org">www.cdaa.org</a></td>
<td>Fire Chief <a href="http://www.calchiefs.org">www.calchiefs.org</a></td>
<td>Fire Chiefs in fire special districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Defender <a href="http://www.cpda.org">www.cpda.org</a></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Probation <a href="http://www.cpoc.org">www.cpoc.org</a></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* Always elected by the voters
**Sometimes elected by the voters
COUNTY OFFICES

The most common county offices include:

- Administrative: Information Technology
- Agriculture: Personnel
- Assessor: Planning
- Auditor-Controller: Probation
- Child Support Services: Public Defender
- Cooperative Extension: Public Guardian
- County Clerk: Public Works
- County Counsel: Sheriff-Coroner-Marshal
- District Attorney: Social Service-Welfare
- Environmental Health: Treasurer-Tax Collector
- Health Services: Weights and Measures

The California State Association of Counties’ website (www.csac.counties.org) has links to descriptions of the roles these offices play (http://www.csac.counties.org/default.asp?id=111); the association’s “affiliates” page also lists statewide membership organizations for these professions.

Because of the diversity of California counties, a specific title given to a county officer and the specific responsibilities of that office may vary by county (for example, public conservator services are often provided by the public guardian but the responsibilities may be shared with mental health staff).

In addition, some counties combine certain offices. For example, the treasurer and tax collector are combined in 56 of the 58 counties. Thirty-nine counties have merged the sheriff-coroner offices and the other 19 counties have either a separate sheriff or sheriff-marshal.

Specific office descriptions vary by county and are subject to change based on new laws and funding availability.
A NOTE ABOUT PROFESSIONAL PUBLIC AGENCY MANAGEMENT

In most public agencies, the governing body appoints a top staff person, such as a county executive officer, city manager, or special district general manager. This person is responsible for implementing the governing body’s policy directives and agency laws, as well as overseeing the administrative operation of the agency. Many of these administrative professionals bring public administration training from graduate school as well as other education and experience to their job.

The Advantages of Professional Staff

Having an administrative professional to oversee the agency’s day-to-day operations enables elected and appointed officials to focus on big-picture policy issues for the agency, without the distraction of administrative tasks like managing personnel and preparing and implementing budgets. It also enables the governing body to hold one individual accountable for the agency’s administration. Top staff members also have the authority and responsibility to resolve inter-departmental disputes.

These individuals often are members of and participate in professional organizations that keep them current on management and other important issues. These organizations are a valuable source of continuing education, professional development and connections with fellow public servants.

The Division of Roles between Staff and Elected Officials

It is helpful to keep in mind the division of labor between elected officials and agency staff. A conscientious staff member respects the policy-making role of elected officials and understands that his or her role is to implement the policies adopted by those officials.

Because staff implement policies adopted by the governing body, problems arise when an individual elected official gives agency staff direction. For example, it can put staff in an awkward position to be directed to take an action that is inconsistent with agency policy or concerns an area in which the agency has not yet adopted a policy.

To avoid these issues, some local agencies have adopted rules relating to this issue. An example is those cities with a council-manager form of government. In these cities, the protocol is for the governing body to give direction to the manager and for the manager in turn to give direction to the staff. The governing body holds the manager accountable for implementing the agency’s policies and the manager holds the staff accountable for following his or her direction.

When the Leadership of an Organization Changes

When new decision-makers are elected, resulting in a change in policy direction, the agency’s staff typically understand that it is their job to implement any new policy direction. Sometimes members of the public mistakenly assume that if they have an issue with a policy a local agency has adopted, that somehow means they should also have an issue with the staff member whose job it has been to implement that policy.
The Local Government Decision-Making Process – Key Things to Know

It is unusual for one individual to have sole decision-making authority within a public agency. By definition, boards of supervisors, city councils, school boards and special district boards are collective decision-making bodies. That means decisions are typically made by groups, not by individuals. A key task for an elected official, then, is to build consensus for proposals and positions among colleagues and others. However, trading votes is illegal.

Even elected department heads, such as district attorneys, sheriffs, city treasurers, city clerks, city attorneys, assessors and others, must work with others to ensure that funding for their departments is included in their agency’s budget. And, of course, these elected officials represent the same communities.
CALIFORNIA’S OPEN MEETING LAW

California’s local agencies have been operating under open meeting laws since 1953. Known as the Ralph M. Brown Act, the law basically requires:

- Majorities of decision-making bodies may not decide among themselves on issues within their agencies’ jurisdictions except in open and publicized meetings.
- Agencies must publicize when and where meetings will occur, as well as what will be discussed, so the public can observe those meetings;
- The public has a right to be heard on matters on the agenda before decisions are made;
- The public also has a general right to address agency decision-makers on items of concern to them, even if they aren’t on the agenda (typically called the “public comment period” on agendas).
- No action can be taken by the decision-making body until such item has been placed on the agenda for consideration.

The principles of open government were added to California’s Constitution in 2005. Although the basic concepts are straightforward, the law itself is very complex with a variety of directions about how these principles should be carried out and a number of exceptions.

For more detail about the open meeting laws, see Open and Public IV: A Guide to the Ralph M. Brown Act at www.cacities.org/openandpublic.
Decision-Making at Meetings

Because of the state open meeting laws, virtually all of the conversations among a quorum of members of city councils, boards of supervisors and special district boards occur at public meetings. This is also true for certain committees, commissions, and boards created by these governing bodies. The law strictly limits the circumstances under which conversations among elected and appointed officials may occur in private (known as “closed sessions”)

State law also requires prior notice of such meetings and that the agenda must be available for public review before the meeting.

At times, this may seem like a very cumbersome way to make decisions, particularly ones that seem insignificant, non-controversial, or not of great interest to the public. However, it is important to remember the decision-making process is designed with an eye towards balancing a number of competing views. Efficiency and speed are important, but in our democracy, public participation and transparency of government is paramount. The open meeting laws are premised on the notion that transparency and the opportunity for public input are more important than speed.
The Concept of a Quorum

Because of the often-collective nature of public agency decision-making, the concept of a quorum is important. A quorum is the number of members of a decision-making body who must be present in order for the body to conduct business and make decisions. Typically a quorum is a majority of the decision-making body.

If there are not enough members present – thus, meaning that a quorum is not present – the meeting must adjourn and be rescheduled to a time when a quorum is present. This keeps decisions from being made by too few people. If for some reason a decision-making body makes a decision without a quorum, the decision is legally invalid.

Separate from the issue of whether a quorum is present is the issue of how many votes it takes to approve an action. In some instances, an action requires a specific number of “yes” votes beyond a majority of the quorum in order to be approved. Staff typically alerts decision-makers when this is the case.

Another issue is whether an official, although present, is allowed to participate in the decision. For example, a council member or county supervisor may be at the meeting, but cannot be counted toward the quorum for a particular item because he or she must step aside from the decision-making process due to a disqualifying conflict of interest. (For information about disqualifications and abstentions, please see sidebar at right).

A NOTE ABOUT CONSENT CALENDARS

To expedite meetings and reserve time for matters that need to be discussed, many local agencies have a section on their agendas labeled as the “consent calendar.” Items on the consent calendar are generally non-controversial items that do not require much, if any, discussion. The consent calendar allows decision-makers to group such items together under one heading and decide them at one time.

Local agencies typically have a procedure for removing an item from the consent calendar for separate discussion. This enables the item to be considered and voted upon separately if discussion is needed or if a decision-maker needs to not vote on that item because of a disqualifying conflict of interest.
WHEN NOT TO PARTICIPATE: DISQUALIFICATIONS AND ABSTENTIONS

An important underlying premise for all public agency decision-makers is that decisions should be made and based on what is good for the overall public interest. This guiding principle is of key importance in maintaining the public’s trust and confidence in the decision-making process.

The Obligation to Step Aside from the Decision-Making Process. In order to achieve these goals, state law requires that decision-makers remove themselves from the decision-making process when they have a personal financial interest that might tempt them to put their own financial interests ahead of the public’s interests. Because these laws deal with situations in which there might be conflicting interests, this area of the law is called “conflict of interest” law.

For example, if a county supervisor owns property within 500 feet of a proposed development that may affect the value of that property, the supervisor likely must refrain from discussing or voting on any action the board of supervisors may take to approve or deny the project. This prohibition applies to conversations with staff or colleagues anytime before meeting at which a vote will occur.

For More Information about Ethics Laws. California’s conflict of interest laws are very technical and complex. They deal not only with actual conflicts of interest, but also perceptions of conflicts. For more information on conflict of interest laws, as well as other laws designed to promote trust in the decision-making process, see Understanding the Basics of Public Service Ethics Laws, at www.ca-ilg.org/ethicslaws.

Setting One’s Sights Above the Minimum Requirements of Ethics Laws. As extensive as public service ethics laws are, there are still situations when the law nonetheless allows a decision-maker to participate in a decision, even though the public might reasonably question whether the decision-maker’s ability to put the public’s interests first. When that happens, decision-makers should seriously think about voluntarily abstaining from participating in the decision, even though the law might allow them to participate. It’s important to understand the law only creates a floor for ethical behavior in public service—not a ceiling.

The Duty to Decide, Not Avoid Tough Issues. In spite of being aware of perceptions of conflict, it’s also important to understand that the option to abstain should not be used to avoid difficult or controversial decisions. One of the responsibilities of being a public official is to participate in the decision-making process, even when difficult or controversial issues are involved.
Rules of Procedure

**Why Procedures Help.** Many agencies adopt rules of procedure to guide discussions and decision-making at meetings. The collective nature of public policy decision-making makes necessary a common set of rules and procedures for discussing items and bringing them to a vote. Such rules and procedures facilitate the decision-making process by allowing items of business to be handled and discussed in a smooth and fair manner that everyone understands.

**Sources of Rules.** Robert’s Rules of Order is one example of such procedures; Robert’s can be a bit formal and technical, however. For this reason, a number of agencies adopt a more streamlined approach that may be easier for both decision-makers and the public to understand and follow. Whatever procedures are used, they are generally adopted by ordinance or resolution of the agency’s governing body.


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**THE IMPORTANCE OF CIVILITY**

Thoughtful people can reasonably disagree about the best way to solve difficult problems. Disagreement is not a bad thing in itself. It can be a healthy element of the decision-making process.

The issue is how disagreement is expressed. The best approach is to focus on the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches. Issues that come before elected bodies to decide upon are rarely simple and without controversy. Figuring out how to resolve those issues in a way that best serves the public involves considering a range of options and perspectives.

The crucial part of civil discourse is to keep the focus on the merits of a given proposal. Another way of putting it is to criticize ideas, not the person advancing the idea.

Civility is closely linked to the ethical value of respect. For more ideas and information about civility in public discourse, visit www.ca-ilg.org/civility.
**Basic Procedure.** Generally, the procedure for discussing and resolving an issue at an agency meeting occurs along the following lines:

1. **Item Agendized.** The item is placed on the agenda

   Notes:
   - An agency’s rules of procedure usually say how items get placed on the agenda;
   - The state’s open meetings laws generally forbid off-agenda items from being discussed and acted upon;

2. **Item Called.** At the appropriate time on the agenda, the presiding official takes up the item for discussion;

3. **Presentation.** An agency staff member or other person presents an overview of the item, together with a recommendation to approve or deny the item;

4. **Questions.** Members of the decision-making body ask any questions of the presenter;

5. **Public Comment.** The presiding official asks whether anyone in the audience wants to comment on this item, giving the public the opportunity to address the item;

   Notes:
   - To allow everyone time to speak, many agencies have a time limit for each speaker;

6. **Discussion.** Members of the decision-making body discuss the item

   Notes:
   - There may be a motion to discuss;
   - If a member of the decision-making body wishes to suggest a change to the item (for example, an ordinance under discussion for adoption), he or she proposes the change, which the body then discusses;

7. **Motion.** A member of the decision-making body makes a motion to approve or deny the item;

8. **Second.** Another member of the decision-making body “seconds” the motion;

9. **Vote.** The body votes; and

10. **Announcement.** The presiding official or agency clerk announces the result of the vote.

   Staff then typically follows up, taking the steps necessary to implement the action.
The Special Nature of Public Hearings

Public hearings are formalized opportunities to present information to a decision-making body. By law, certain types of decisions, such as the issuance or denial of a development permit or zoning code amendments, require public hearings.

The formal nature of the public hearing process guarantees that the fundamentals of due process are incorporated into the decision-making process. This includes the right to know that the item is on the agenda (the right to notice) and the opportunity to be heard on the matter.

Notice. Local agencies must typically give more advance notice of a public hearing than regular meetings. Sometimes these notices must be published in local newspapers or must be posted at the location of the hearing; sometimes the notices must be mailed to interested individuals, including those that may live close by a proposed project. Notices may also be available on local agency websites.

More Emphasis on Evidence and Making a Decision-Making Record. A public hearing involving a specific project generally involves an emphasis on providing “evidence” or information provided to decision-makers to support one point of view or another. Principles of fairness require that all sides having an opinion on an issue be allowed an opportunity to present information supporting their position to the decision-makers. Much of the information upon which the decision will be based is presented at the hearing.
Listen. Decision-makers should be present and attentive during the hearing in order to receive, review, and understand the information presented and to ask questions of the persons presenting the information.

Information Offered Prior to the Hearing. Sometimes people will want to give decision-makers information before the public hearing. The best approach is to encourage those who want to share such information to present it at the public hearing so all of the decision-makers can benefit from the information. This also allows others to present contrary information.

Knowledge Gained Outside the Hearing. Sometimes a decision-maker has personal knowledge and information about the issue. If so, the decision-maker should share that information with his/her colleagues during the meeting and provide the public an opportunity to comment on that information. Otherwise fair process or “due process” problems may arise.

For More Information...
Findings. In complicated matters or when legally required, a decision-making body will typically adopt “findings” that explain to a project proponent, the public, and ultimately the courts (if a lawsuit occurs), why the decision-making body made the decision it did. Findings draw connections between the information the public agency has (the record at the public hearing), the standards the agency applied, and the decision ultimately made. Put another way, a finding is a specific, written factual explanation relating to the reason for approving or denying the item before the decision-making body.

For More Information…

On encouraging informed participation in public hearings, see:


- Land Use One-Pagers (2007) (a series of “plain English” descriptions of common land use decisions that public agencies can attach to public hearing notices; the reverse offers tips on how to participate in the hearing—also available in Spanish), www.ca-ilg.org/onepagers.

On designing decision-making procedures to minimize the likelihood of lawsuits, see:

Different Types of Actions

Ordinances

Local agencies make local laws through ordinances. Ordinances typically require or prohibit certain actions under certain circumstances. A local agency’s ordinances are frequently indexed and recorded into a “code.” These codes become part of the city or county’s legislative history and may prove useful even many years after adopted. As access to technology improves, many local agencies publish and/or make their codes available online.

Drafting. Typically, an agency’s staff, along with the help or oversight of the agency’s attorney, will prepare a preliminary ordinance for review by the decision-making body and the public. This also enables staff to be aware of and help the agency comply with any special notice requirements that may apply to that particular kind of ordinance.

Timing Issues. There is usually a waiting period between the time the ordinance is first considered by that body (known as the “introduction” of the ordinance) and second or final presentation of the ordinance during which it is considered by the governing body for adoption. This introduction process is also known as the first “reading” of the proposed ordinance, because it is the first opportunity decision-makers have to consider the merits of the proposed ordinance. In some limited circumstances, urgency and certain other types of ordinances can be adopted at the time of their introduction without going through a later waiting period.

Making Revisions during the Adoption Process. Sometimes decision-makers will ask staff to revise the proposed ordinance. Such changes may respond to ideas or concerns expressed by decision-makers or the public; changes may also result in language that a majority of the decision-making body can support. If substantive changes are made to a proposed ordinance after it is first introduced, it generally will need to be re-introduced and another waiting period must pass before the modified ordinance can be adopted. These steps both ensure that laws are drafted as carefully as possible and that a full and open review of the ordinance occurs that permits the public to review and comment on the proposed law prior to its approval.
**Adoption.** After the initial “reading” and waiting period have occurred, the ordinance is then presented at a subsequent meeting for second reading. A member of the decision-making body moves for approval of the ordinance. If the motion receives a second, the body votes on whether to adopt the ordinance.

**Effective Date.** Most ordinances are effective 30 days after the date of adoption. Staff will typically take care of any requirements for publicizing the ordinance’s adoption during this period (for example, by publishing the ordinance in a newspaper and adding the ordinance to the agency’s code).

**Resolutions**

A resolution is a legal action by a decision-making body, such as setting fees and adopting policies. It can also be a vehicle through which the body expresses its opinion on a matter.

Resolutions are formal actions by the decision-making body and are retained as part of the agency’s record. Compared to ordinances, though, resolutions involve fewer procedural requirements. For example, they do not have to be “introduced” and “adopted” over the space of two meetings but may be adopted at one meeting. Furthermore, with limited exceptions (for example, setting tax rates), resolutions do not have to be published in a newspaper.

**Motions and Minute Orders**

Local agencies do not always have to adopt an ordinance or resolution to take action. For less important actions, local agencies also may act by motion, which may be summarized in a minute order. Typically, the agenda materials will describe the action that is proposed to be taken.

These actions, along with others at the meeting, are memorialized in the record of the meeting (the minutes). Once approved by the body, the minutes become the official record of the meeting. The agency’s secretary or clerk maintains the official records of the agency, including the minutes.
Initiative and Referendum

In California, the public also plays a role in the decision-making process by voting on ballot measures. The rules relating to placing matters on the ballot are both complex and technical. Ballot measure proponents are well advised to seek advice from experienced attorneys and political consultants on these matters to avoid missteps.

Referendum. If members of the community disagree with a legislative act approved by elected officials, then they can circulate a petition to put the matter on the ballot for the voters to decide whether the law should be repealed. This is called a “referendum” because the petition requires the matter to be referred to the voters for approval. The petition process must occur within a short window of time before the law goes into effect.

When a successful referendum petition occurs, a governing body has two choices. It can repeal the law that is the subject of the referendum petition. If the repeal occurs, it becomes unnecessary for the matter to go to a community vote. Otherwise the body must put the matter on a ballot for a vote.

Initiative. The public may also propose a new law (or an amendment to an existing law). To do that, they circulate petitions that must include a copy of the proposed law. If enough people sign the petition, the governing body must either adopt the proposed law without change or put the matter on the ballot for a community vote. This process is known as the “initiative” process, because members of the community are initiating the legislative proposal.
Decisions to Spend Money

Perhaps one of the most important roles elected officials play is deciding how to allocate public funds to pay for necessary services and facilities. There are a number of steps in this process.

**Budget.** A budget is a device that enables decision-makers to project what revenues will be available to fund services and facilities and how those revenues should be allocated and spent. The decision to spend money for particular purposes is an “appropriation,” which is an authorization to spend money consistent with the budget.

Typically the budgeting process involves:

- The administrative head of the agency (county executive officer, city manager or general manager of a special district) prepares and transmits a set of instructions to department heads for submitting budget information and requests;

- Department heads prepare and submit their budget information and requests;

- The administrative head reviews the requests and assembles them into a comprehensive budget document;
- The decision-making body holds budget hearings at which elected officials and the public receive information about the proposed budget;

- Elected officials receive public input/reactions to the proposed budget;

- Elected officials evaluate all the information received and revise (as necessary) and adopt the final budget;

- The administrative head of the agency (typically the city manager, county executive officer, city manager or district manager) is responsible for implementing and executing the budget.

(Note that the budget includes decisions about money that don’t involve “spending” per se, such as saving for capital projects, and allocated and unallocated reserves.)

For More Information...
**Expenditures.** The agency then spends money throughout the year in a manner consistent with the adopted budget, which may include expenditures to satisfy contractual obligations (for example, labor agreements, and contracts for goods or services). Some expenditures, such as election costs related to an initiative, referendum or recall may not be budgeted for, but may be a required expenditure directed by the public through the signature gathering process.

**Warrants.** These are specific authorizations to spend money from a local agency’s bank account. To avoid having to take every minor payment to the decision-making body for approval, some agencies have policies delegating authority to staff to authorize payment for budgeted expenditures up to certain amounts.

**For More Information...**

For more information about how cities and counties are funded, see the Institute for Local Government’s publication *Understanding the Basics of County and City Revenues* (2008), at www.ca-ilg.org/revenuebasics.
Creating Meaningful Opportunities to Engage the Public

Much important work occurs at meetings of local agency decision-making bodies. The public’s right to attend these meetings and provide input on issues is legally mandated and is an important element of the way local agencies conduct their everyday business.

It’s important to note, though, these formal meetings are not the only vehicles through which local agency decision-makers can solicit public input on questions facing their agencies. Furthermore, the structured format of those meetings is not necessarily the best format for encouraging the public to share their thoughts on issues.

Creating additional opportunities for a wide-range of residents to learn about issues affecting the community in a comfortable and safe setting has a number of advantages. Examples include neighborhood meetings, work shops and discussion groups. These opportunities help the residents become more informed and engaged in community issues, and it also allows them the opportunity to hear directly from the policy-makers on important policy considerations that impact their daily lives. Thus, they will be able to formulate their own views and opinions about local government.

In addition, these opportunities can provide public officials with valuable information about a broader range of public perspectives, which will enable them to understand what kinds of decisions will have public support, and which will not.

For More Information...
The Institute for Local Government’s Collaborative Governance Initiative (www.ca-ilg.org/cgi) offers a number of resources and case studies on additional ways local agencies can engage residents in the decision-making process. One is Planning Public Forums: Questions to Guide Local Officials (2007), www.ca-ilg.org/publicforums. Check out the CGI section of the Institute’s website for additional resources.
Endnotes


2 Government Code Section 54972.

3 See, for example, Government Code Sections 65090, 65095.
Resources for Further Information

General Websites

Association of California Healthcare Districts
www.achd.org

Association of California Water Agencies
www.acwa.com

California Association of Joint Powers Authorities
www.cajpa.org

California Association of Local Agency Formation Commissions
www.calafco.org

California Association of Public Cemeteries
http://capc.info/index.html

California Association of Recreation & Park Districts
www.carpd.net

California Association of Resource Conservation Districts
www.carcd.org

California Association of Sanitation Agencies
www.casaweb.org

California School Boards Association
www.csba.org

California State Association of Counties
www.csac.counties.org

Cities-Counties-Schools Partnership
www.ccspartnership.org

Fire Districts Association of California
www.fdac.org

Institute for Local Government
www.ca-ilg.org

League of California Cities
www.cacities.org

Local Government Finance Almanac
www.californiacityfinance.com

Mosquito and Vector Control Association of California
www.mvcac.org
Publications

Staff Relations and Staff Skills

_A Primer for California County Managers_, by Albert “Al” Beltrami, Mendocino County CEO, available from Grassroots History Publications, Mendocino County Museum, Attn: Book Store Manager, 400 East Commercial Street, Willits, California 95490, (707) 459-2736


Open Government


Legal


_California Special District Association’s Guide to Special District Laws and Related Codes_, available from the California Special Districts Association

Other

_What’s So Special About Special Districts?_, available from California Senate Local Government Committee

_Special Districts Fact Sheet_, available from the California Special Districts Association

General

_The County Leadership Handbook_ (2008), available from the National Association of Counties (www.naco.org)

_Leading Your Community: A Guide for Local Elected Leader_, available from ICMA (www.icma.org)

_Handbook: Council Members in Council-Manager Cities_, available from The National Civic League at (303) 571-4343 or www.ncl.org/publications

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The Institute’s current program areas include:

• Climate Change
• Collaborative Governance Initiative
• Communities for Healthy Kids
• Intergovernmental Conflict Resolution

• Healthy Communities
• Land Use and Environment
• Local Government 101
• Public Service Ethics

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