



8. Making Government Work

GOOD government does not just happen. Good government is the result of people working together to decide what needs to be done for the community and then working to carry out those decisions. People make government work.

Who are the people involved in local government? This chapter explores the answer to that question. We consider six groups: voters, elected officials, local government employees, volunteers, members of appointed boards, and the general public.

People may be in several of these groups at once. For example, all voters are members of the general public, and all elected officials are also voters. Government employees may also be volunteers in other public agencies. They are almost always voters too. This chapter discusses the different groups separately to indicate the different ways people help shape the way government works.

Left: To be a voter, you must first register with the local board of elections in the county where you live. Seventeen-year-old citizens may register if they will be eighteen years old by the next general election.
Courtesy of Gina Childress, Forsyth County.

Right: Residents of Orange County wait to cast their votes on election day.
Courtesy of Orange County.

Voters

The voters in each jurisdiction choose the members of their local governing boards. The voters in each county also elect a sheriff and a register of deeds. The voters must also approve any agreement by their local government to borrow money that will be repaid with tax receipts. Through voting, the people determine who their government leaders will be and give the officials they elect the authority to govern. Voting is, thus, an essential part of representative democracy. Voting is both a very special responsibility and a very important civil right.

Who can vote?

Struggles over the right to vote have continued ever since the United States gained independence from Great Britain. At independence, only free male citizens who were 21 years of age or older and paid taxes could vote for members of the lower house of the North Carolina General Assembly. Only men who met all these qualifications and also owned at least 50 acres of land could vote for members of the state senate. (There were no local elected officials.) Most African American men were held as slaves and could not vote at all. In 1835 the General Assembly prohibited even free men of African descent from voting in North Carolina.

The Civil War ended slavery, and in 1870 the Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution extended voting rights to all male citizens 21 and older, regardless of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” For the next few years, African Americans were able to vote as the Constitution permitted. In 1890 more than 1,000 black North Carolinians held office. But some white leaders feared an alliance between black voters and poor white voters. To prevent that alliance, some white leaders stirred up racial fears among whites and pushed racial segregation. The segregation laws were called “Jim Crow” laws. By the end of the nineteenth century, the North Carolina General Assembly had devised means of keeping most nonwhite men from voting, and the federal government refused to enforce the Constitution.

Women could not vote in North Carolina at the beginning of the twentieth century either, even though some people had long been seeking voting rights (or “suffrage”) for women. Finally, in 1920 the women’s suffrage movement was successful. That year the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution extended the right to vote to female citizens 21 and older.

Although white women began to vote in North Carolina in the 1920s, most African American and Native American citizens of North Carolina were kept from voting until the 1960s. A major accomplishment of the civil rights movement, which also ended racial segregation in North Carolina, was the guarantee of voting rights for all adult citizens.

Young voters highly motivated

By Joel Burgess

Torre White was so excited about the spring primary election that she beat most North Carolina voters to the polls, casting her ballot April 17, the first day of the early voting period.

It was her first time picking candidates. The 17-year-old West Asheville resident and Asheville High School student was able to register and vote because of a state law that allows anyone who will be 18 by the Nov. 4 general election to participate in a primary.

She was one of 286 Buncombe County 17-year-olds who were registered to vote by April 11, according to N.C. State Board of Elections records. White and several others said a sense of history and responsibility drew them to the polls.

"I believe that my opinions mean something. And I can't talk about what's wrong and the need to change things if I don't make the effort," she said. "The first step is registering to vote. And that isn't enough. You need to go out and vote."

A historic presidential election also motivated her.

White voted for Sen. Barack Obama, a candidate she felt would help people get health insurance. Her mother, Irene Pickens, works part time at Asheville's Senior Opportunity Center and made too much for government-sponsored Medicaid and too little to afford private insurance.

The city recently extended health care to Pickens, but the situation left an impression on White, who will study nursing next year at Gardner-Webb University in Boiling Springs.

"It was about a year she didn't have insurance," she said.

She said she likes Obama's Democratic primary opponent, Sen. Hillary Clinton, but feels it's time for someone to hold office who is not linked to past administrations.

Wells Fanning, 17, lives in Candler but goes to Asheville High School. Long political discussions with family members made him ready to vote in the primary, he said.

"Politics is a big deal. We talk about it all the time," he said. "Sometimes it gets a little heated, but it's all in good fun."

A Republican, Fanning said he preferred a one-time candidate, former Sen. Fred Thompson. But Fanning said he would support GOP nominee, Sen. John McCain.

"I think McCain has a good chance to win the general election," he said.

Inna Zhuravleva, meanwhile, is an unaffiliated voter who plans to vote in the Democratic primary. The Woodfin 17-year-old came to the United States with her Ukrainian parents as a child and now goes to Erwin High School. She is not sure which presidential candidate she will choose, but she is interested in the idea of Clinton as the first female president.

"I'm not very feministic, but her being a lady wants to make me vote for her," she said.

In North Carolina, 17-year-olds may vote in the Tuesday primary if they will be 18 by the Nov. 4 general election. In Buncombe County, 286 17-year-olds had registered by April 11.

Reprinted with permission from *The Asheville Citizen-Times*, Asheville, NC, May 4, 2008

The last extension of voting rights came in 1971 when the Twenty-sixth Amendment to the United States Constitution guaranteed the right to vote to younger citizens. Now all citizens who are at least 18 years old are eligible to vote. Anyone who was born in the United States is a citizen. So are children born in other countries if either of their parents is a United States citizen. Other people who are born in other countries may become United States citizens through naturalization, a procedure administered by the U.S. State Department.

Being eligible to vote does not make you a voter, however. To be a voter, you must first register with the local board of elections in the county where you live. Seventeen-year-old citizens may register if they will be eighteen years old by the next **general election**. Thus, you can register and vote in a **primary election** when you are seven-teen if your eighteenth birthday comes before the November general election.

To vote, you must also cast your **ballot**. Each county is divided into voting **precincts**. The county board of elections establishes a place to vote—a **polling place**—in each precinct. Registered voters may cast their ballots in person at the polling place on Election Day. Many county boards of elections also establish spe-

general election: a regularly held election for public offices

primary election: an election in which voters select candidates for a general election

ballot: the list of candidates on which you cast your vote

precinct: a geographic area that contains a specific number of voters

polling place: an official place for voting

cial “early voting” polling places where any voter registered in the county may vote during a period set by the state board of elections. Voters who are unable to get to a polling place because of illness or travel may vote by **absentee ballot**.

People vote because they want to exercise their rights. They vote to support candidates, parties, or issues. They vote to oppose candidates, parties, or issues. They vote to make their communities better. They vote to show that the government belongs to them and because they feel responsible for helping to select public leaders.

Elected Officials

The elected leaders of local governments are the members of their governing boards. For counties, these are the county commissioners. For municipalities, they are the council members (or “aldermen” or commissioners) and mayor. These officials have the authority to adopt policies for local government and are responsible to the people for seeing that local government responds to public needs and works well to meet those needs.

The governing board is the local government’s legislature. The members discuss and debate policy proposals. Under state law, the board has the authority to determine what local public services to provide, what community improvements to pursue, and what kinds of behavior and land use to regulate as harmful. The local governing board also sets local tax rates and user fees and adopts a budget for spending the local government’s funds. The board appoints the manager, who is chief administrator for the government. All of these are group decisions. Board members vote, and a majority must approve any action.

Each local governing board has a presiding officer—someone who conducts the meetings of the governing board, speaks officially for the local government, and represents the government at ceremonies and celebrations. In cities and towns, this is the mayor. Voters elect the mayor in most North Carolina cities and towns. In a few of the state’s municipalities, however, members of the local governing board elect a mayor from among the members of the board. The presiding officer for a county is the chairman of the board of county commissioners. In most North Carolina counties, the board elects one of its members as chairman. In one county, the voters elect the chairman of the board of county commissioners.

The sheriff and the register of deeds are elected to head their respective departments of county government. The sheriff’s department operates the county jail, patrols and investigates crimes in areas of the county not served by other local police departments, and serves court orders and subpoenas. The register of deeds’ office maintains official records of land and of births, deaths, and marriages. Both the sheriff and the register of deeds hire their own staffs. They are not required to hire on the basis of merit, although their employees must meet basic requirements set by the state.



County commissioners, like these in Warren County, have the authority to pass ordinances and make other decisions affecting everyone in the county. *Courtesy of Warren County Board of Commissioners, Warrenton.*

absentee ballot: an official list of candidates on which voters who cannot get to the polling place on election day indicate their votes

School board members are also local elected officials. School boards are like city and county governing boards, except their authority is more limited. They are responsible only for policies regarding the local public schools, and they cannot set tax rates or appropriate funds. The county commissioners determine how much money the county will spend to support local public schools.

All local elected officials represent the people of their jurisdiction. People often contact these elected officials to suggest policy changes or to express their opinions on policy proposals that are being considered by the board. Boards hold public hearings on particularly controversial issues to provide additional opportunities for people to tell the board their views on policy proposals.

Elected officials get their authority from the people. Campaigning for office gives candidates an opportunity to express their views about local issues and to hear what citizens want from their elected officials. Elections give voters the opportunity to choose candidates who share their views on issues. Through elections, voters give elected officials the authority to make decisions that everyone will have to obey. Through elections, voters also hold elected officials accountable. People can vote against an elected official who does not represent them and defeat that official in the next election.

Elections are held every two or four years, depending on the term of office established for each office. In jurisdictions where board members are elected by district or **ward**, each voter votes only for the candidate from his or her own district. In jurisdictions where members are elected at large, each voter may vote for as many candidates as there are positions to be filled. (Some jurisdictions have at-large elections for board members, but require that candidates live in and run for seats representing specific districts.) Election by district may produce a more diverse governing board if minority groups are concentrated in some parts of the jurisdiction. Districts can be drawn around those population concentrations so that a group that is a minority in the total population is a majority within the district. Because of a history of denying African American citizens the right to vote, federal courts have required district elections in some counties and municipalities that have substantial African American populations but have failed to elect African American board members.

Elections for county commissioners are held on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November in even-numbered years, along with elections for state officials and members of Congress. The county sheriff and register of deeds are elected then too. In practice, the sheriff and register of deeds are often re-elected, term after term. Often sheriffs and registers of deeds serve until they choose to retire. Frequently their successors have served as their deputies. Sometimes, however, these elections are highly contested—especially the elections for sheriff.

County elections are **partisan**. That is, candidates run under **political party** labels. Primary elections are held several months before the November general election. Primary elections are elections among the candidates of a party to choose the party's candidates for the general election. In the primary election, members of each party



Campaign signs line the street in New Bern just before the 2008 election for county, state, and federal officials.

Courtesy of Judy Hills.

ward: a section of a jurisdiction for voting, representative, or administrative purposes

partisan: involving political parties

political party: an association of voters with broad common interests who want to influence or control decision making in government by electing the party's candidates to public office

vote only for their party's candidate. Candidates may also be placed on the ballot by filing petitions.

Elections for city council members (or aldermen) are held in odd-numbered years. Election for mayor is held at the same time in those cities and towns where the voters elect the mayor. Most cities and towns have **nonpartisan** elections. That is, candidates do not run under party labels. These municipalities may have local voters' organizations that support candidates, but parties are not permitted to run candidates in most North Carolina municipalities. Only a few cities and towns hold primary elections.

Most school board elections are also nonpartisan. School board elections are in even-numbered years, with some at the time of the general election, some at the time of the primary election, and some on special election dates.

Altogether, more than 700 elected officials serve the state's county governments and more than 3,200 serve in North Carolina municipalities.

Why do people run for a seat on the local governing board? They may be interested in getting local government to adopt a particular policy proposal. They may want to help shape the future of the community more generally. They may feel an obligation to serve the public. They may want to explore politics and perhaps prepare for seeking state or federal office. They may enjoy exercising public responsibility or being recognized as a public leader.

Local Government Employees

Counties and municipalities hire many different kinds of workers. Counties hire teachers, nurses, social workers, sanitation inspectors, librarians, and many other specialists to perform county services. Similarly, cities hire police officers, engineers, machinery operators, recreation supervisors, and a wide variety of other specialists to carry out their services. In addition, both city and county governments hire accountants, clerks, maintenance workers, secretaries, administrators, and other staff to support the work of the government. These employees organize government activities, keep government records and accounts of public money, clean and repair government property, and pay the government's bills.

North Carolina local governments employed over 360,000 people in 2007. Local governments thus employed, on average, about 28 people for every 1,000 residents of the state.

Most North Carolina local governments have well-established systems for hiring employees on the basis of their qualifications for the job. In some other states, people who work for local government get their jobs because of personal or political connections. Hiring based on kinship is called **nepotism**, hiring based on friendship is called **favoritism**, and hiring based on political support is called **patronage**. Most North Carolina local governments have and enforce rules against nepotism, favoritism, and patronage. Instead, local governments in North Carolina usually hire



Firefighters are among the many local government employees serving the people of North Carolina. *Courtesy of Warren County.*

nonpartisan: not affiliated with a political party

nepotism: hiring or giving favorable treatment to someone based on kinship

favoritism: showing partiality; favoring someone over others

patronage: hiring or giving favorable treatment to an employee because he or she is a member of one's political party

Managing a community where citizens are involved

By Matt Lail

Cal Horton knows that there are times when outsiders read about town of Chapel Hill issues in the newspapers and wonder, “what in the world is going on there?”

But Horton doesn’t see his town that way. In fact, he believes Chapel Hill is a special place with a distinct relationship between the local government, the citizens and UNC-Chapel Hill. And for 16 years, Horton was at the center of that relationship, serving as town manager. He recently retired after 40 years in local government.

“I’ve felt good about it ever since” beginning work in local government in 1967, he says. “I guess it’s a little late to change.”

Horton’s career began in the Charlotte personnel department in 1967. He would work there until 1974. That city allowed him to go back to school, so from 1971-72 Horton worked toward his masters of public administration at UNC. “I’ve been in Charlotte’s debt ever since,” he says. He’s made every effort over the years to pay the Queen City back by sending them qualified employees who either interned or got their starts in Chapel Hill. “We’re still sending good people to Charlotte to help pay that debt off.”

From Charlotte, Horton became the city manager in Decatur, Georgia, where he would stay for 15 years. It was then

off to Chapel Hill in June 1989 as public safety director. A year and a month later he was town manager.

“I’ve been fortunate to only work in good communities,” Horton says, “where people really care about a place.”

At any moment, hundreds of Chapel Hillians—beyond the elected officials and town staff—may be involved in town activities through advisory boards, commissions or just by showing up to meetings.

“There’s a civic engagement level here that is unique in North Carolina and is rare in the rest of the country,” says Horton. “We tug on the heartstrings of lots of people.”

Chapel Hill’s civic engagement means that rarely does a matter come before the town or the board that does not receive a more-than ample amount of discussion; the opportunities for citizen feedback are varied and numerous.

Take the example of a standard zoning process. Chapel Hill ordinances require the presentation of a concept plan for major developments, including special-use permits, rezoning and subdivisions, among others. In short, the developer must present the concept to the council “before they’ve spent a lot of money,” according to Horton. The council can then react to the proposal in an informal way; the citizens are also able to comment early on in the process. Next, the developers can make alterations before submitting

the actual plan for consideration. That is followed by standard public meeting notices, then a series of board reviews.

“We may have a few more boards” than other municipalities, jokes Horton. It would not be unusual for an issue to go before the transportation advisory board, the bicycle and pedestrian advisory board, the greenways commission, the parks & recreation commission, the historic district commission, or others. A review time follows which allow citizens multiple opportunities to hear about and comment on the project.

“And many of them do.”

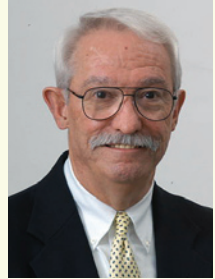
From there, the issue is on to a planning board review, then to the council (with more public hearings).

All of those levels of checks-and-balances result in a populace that has had ample time to comment, criticize and tweak/approve/shoot down a project. According to Horton, there is very little ignorance of goings-on in Chapel Hill.

“I can’t remember occasions where citizens have said ‘we didn’t understand this until it happened.’ We are fortunate to have good process and participation but also good coverage (in the press).

“Most people know what’s going on.”

Excerpted with permission from *Southern City*, September 2006



people who have the training and experience to do the job they are being hired for. This is known as hiring based on **merit**. Local governments in North Carolina hire people on the basis of merit because their primary concern is having employees who can provide the best government services for the lowest cost. In a merit system, people are also promoted or dismissed on the basis of their job performance, rather than for personal or political reasons.

Except in the smallest North Carolina local governments, the governing board appoints a manager who is responsible for hiring, promoting, and dismissing government employees. The board judges the manager on how well services are provided and how well government funds are used. Thus, the manager wants to be sure that employees are doing their jobs well.

merit: hiring or promoting based on a person’s qualifications, ability, and performance

Family camaraderie burns within them

By Francine Sawyer

Dinner came late recently for 10 firefighters of Company B at the New Bern Fire Department.

That is nothing new for the men who eat and sleep at the station. As veteran firefighter Bob Bordeaux said, "You never know what is going to happen next, no days or nights are ever alike."

He has been with Company B for 18 years. And it's the uniqueness of each day that he loves.

Rookie Sean Ostmann, 25, is new to Company B. He left his job at the Ocean Isle fire department for the New Bern job. The night a Sun Journal reporter and photographer were set to spend the night, Ostmann was putting sheets with fire trucks and engines on his Murphy pull-out pull-down bed.

The other men in the dormitory were calling him Martha Stewart, as he showed an easier way to get the sheets on the bed. He said he didn't know New Bern fire department supplied linen. As he was putting sheets on his bed his sister gave him, men around him watching said, "Yeah, your sister gave them to you, right".

While nighttime at the station is not a big frat party, the men are quick to tease each other.

"But we are family; we care about each other," said Dwayne Massenburg, the only minority in Company B.

Watching him interact with his colleagues is to see that Company B is color blind, as is Massenburg.

"One of the greatest things I have learned is how to have to have trust in another person," Massenburg said.

While the 10 men at Company B are protecting the city, six others are at the Elizabeth Avenue Station and four are at the Thurman Road firehouse.

Company A and C have female fire fighters while the Company B unit at the main station does not.

Collectively the men said women would be welcome.

Some men are married, some single, some with children some without children.

Eric Mullis is commander of the B shift at the main station. He said the men's family is used to them being away from home.

"It does take the family some time to get used to the dad or husband being away from home. Often family members might bring by children for a visit," Mullis said.

While the picture of firefighters playing cards around a table is so Norman Rockwell-yesterday, Mullis said he is struck by how the fire department has changed.

Mullis joined the New Bern Fire Department in 1987.

"If you would have told me then that one day the department would have multi-million dollar equipment and a new state-of-the-art station, I would not have believed it," Mullis said.

Equipment carried in response to fire calls varies, but all have been deemed essential over time.

Mullis said the high cost of energy is putting a focus on the public safety budget.

However with 20 paid firefighters on at any given time for the city and with volunteer fire departments willing to assist, the city appears to be protected.

On this night New Bern fire specialist Doug Soltow, who is chief of the Rhems Volunteer Fire Department, said his lower back was aching.

"When my back starts bothering me, it usually means there is going to be a call," he said.

That call was not coming for several hours.

Earlier in the day the men were in classroom training and answered four fire calls.

Before answering a call their 60-pounds of turnout gear is arranged strategically near the engines. They even have periodic training to hone putting on their gear in a safe and swift manner.

They have to clean their gear each time they return from a fire call.

Training is a constant, and the department's burn academy is often a site for refining their skills.

They work on all aspects of their job including, but not limited to, inspections of equipment; procedures for putting hose down, using ladders, hoisting and lowering victims or fire fighters using ropes, knots and rescue harnesses; opening walls and ceilings, or studying ventilation procedures; and tactical training as well as emergency medical certification.

They also work on salvaging a fire scene. Dinner didn't start until after 9 p.m.

Chris Wintemute, co-workers call him "Mute," is on cooking duty.

The cooks rotate just as all the men rotate duties at the station.

When the appointed cook has food duty, if classroom work is on the day's assignment, he usually does a dish that can cook itself.

Wintemute made a stew beef with carrots over noodles.

The men pay for their food. The average is \$7 per day for two meals.

The department has three refrigerators, and three storage areas in the kitchen area for the three shifts of A, B and C.

"If another company borrows something they usually put it back," Wintemute said.

A firefighter assigned to buy groceries for the day drove to a nearby store.

The department does not want the station to be shorthanded.

If the men have a craving for restaurant food usually they ignore the craving because it's a logistical nightmare. The fire trucks have to go in case they are called into service.

"It just doesn't look good to have fire trucks in the parking lot of a restaurant," Mullis said.

A firefighter from the Elizabeth Avenue Station drove to the main station to borrow a toilet plunger.

"After you drove downtown for that you are going to have more than a plunger problem when you get back," one of the main station firemen said with a chuckle.

One thing the men do not laugh about is cleanliness. Equipment is cleaned for the next fire call or next shift. An inventory is taken to be sure all the equipment that went on the most recent fire call is back in the station and ready to go into service.

That includes cleaning the kitchen for the next shift. Not only do the pots and pans and dishes get cleaned but the floor is mopped after each meal.

So the night is winding down and the men are going to their dorm rooms, the study room or workout room.

Mullis is going to his office where a stack of paperwork is waiting for him.

As the men slip into more comfortable clothing which turnout gear can quickly be put over, many will try to sleep, especially after an active day.

The men do not get in the showers all at once. They never know when an alarm will come in. They do stay downstairs at least until 8:30 p.m. if all of their work is done.

That includes making sure the fire fighting gear is where it is supposed to be.

Wintemute said when the men go into their dorm rooms someone will start dozing off and the rest of the men will start falling asleep.

"Its lights out," said Wintemute.

Soltow said when the firefighters are awakened for a call they usually can go back to sleep. "Especially if it is a false alarm," he said.

Lt. Scott Gladson is on the B shift. He is teased by his fellow firefighters because he was recently awarded the department's employee of the year award.

"He voted for himself, we sure didn't vote for him," teases Wintemute.

It's getting near 10 p.m.; the men excuse themselves and go to their dorms.

They came on duty at 7 a.m. and will leave the next day at 7 a.m.

Sleep is interrupted around 5 a.m. An alarm screeches through the building. The men were two hours away from the other shift coming on, and them leaving.

The fire is confined to a planter outside a book store near Wal-Mart. It's small, and easily extinguished.

They get back to the station, clean the gear and put everything back in order and it's about time to leave.

The men will be off 24 hours and back on again for 24 hours until the cycle ends and starts over again.

"We're all family here," said firefighter Jeremy Banks. "You usually can't pick your family, but we are with each other more than our real families."

Reprinted with permission from
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In larger counties and cities, the manager assigns much of the work of hiring and supporting the government's employees to a human resources (or personnel) department. To guide its work, the human resources department prepares job descriptions for all employees.

An employee's job description lists the duties of the job. When a job becomes vacant, the local government uses the job description to advertise the position. The personnel department accepts job applications from people who would like to be hired for the vacant position. In filling out the job application, the applicant lists his or her education, job training, skills, and previous work experience. The personnel department reviews the applications and selects the applicants who appear to be best qualified for the job. Applicants are often asked to provide the names of **references**. References are often asked about the applicant's performance or work ethic. The final set of applicants is then selected and interviewed, usually by the person who would supervise their work if they were hired. That person is usually responsible for recommending who gets hired.

Most local government employees enjoy their jobs and working for the public. They are honest, hard-working people who care about making their community a better place.

references: people who know how well someone did on a previous job or about that person's other qualifications for a job

Volunteers

Volunteers also help carry out important public services. In many places in North Carolina, volunteers fight fires and provide emergency rescue services. Volunteers assist in programs for children, youth, the elderly, homeless people, and other groups with special needs. The volunteers may be organized through a city or county's fire department, recreation department, social services department, or other division of government. The volunteers may also be organized through a nonprofit organization that works in cooperation with local government.

Like their full-time, paid counterparts, volunteer firefighters and emergency medical service technicians are required to have extensive training. In fact, most of the unincorporated areas of the state and most of the small municipalities depend on volunteers for firefighting. Also, many counties rely on volunteer emergency rescue squads to provide medical assistance and rescue work.

Many volunteer fire departments are organized as nonprofit corporations. They have contracts with a local government to provide fire protection to a specific area. The volunteer fire department receives public funds to buy equipment and supplies needed in fighting fires. Similarly, municipal and county governments often provide buildings or funding for emergency shelters, senior citizens centers, hot lunch programs, youth recreation leagues, and other services operated by nonprofit organizations and staffed by volunteers.

Members of Appointed Boards

Local governments also have appointed committees, boards, or commissions. These provide opportunities for many other citizens to assist the elected governing board in shaping public policy. State law requires that some of these (such as Alcoholic Beverage Control boards, and boards of elections, health, mental health, and social services) play a direct role in selecting agency heads and setting operating policies for the agency. Other boards are established by the local government to provide policy direction for airports, civic centers, public housing, stadiums, or other public facilities. Still other boards advise elected officials directly on matters ranging from the environment to human relations, from recreation to job training, from open space to transportation. Large cities and counties may have more than 30 appointed boards and commissions, and many hundreds of citizens may serve on the boards of a large local government.

On some boards, at least some of the members must be appointed from specific groups in the community. For example, a mental health local management entity board must include, among others, two people with financial expertise, a person with management or business expertise, and a person representing the interests of



Volunteers assist in a number of ways, including running programs for children, collecting canned goods for homeless people, and picking up litter.

Top: Courtesy of Town of Emerald Isle.

Center: Courtesy of Wayne County.

Bottom: Courtesy of Stacie Galloway, Town of Morrisville.

children. Other boards or commissions may require that members be residents of various parts of the jurisdiction to provide broad geographic representation. County boards of elections must include both Democrats and Republicans, with the party of the governor having the majority of members.

Some local governments, like Guilford County, reimburse fuel costs for volunteers who must travel to help provide county services, as this story from the *News-Record* explains: “Guilford Volunteers Get Help with Travel Expenses” (www.news-record.com/node/6735).



Appointed boards advise elected officials regarding government policies.
Courtesy of Town of Aberdeen.

People volunteer to serve on appointed committees, boards, and commissions for many of the same reasons people run for election. Having a particular concern for the subject the board deals with is especially important for many volunteers. Appointed boards have a narrower range of concerns than city councils or county commissions. Appointed boards provide an opportunity for people with a particular interest in historic preservation, nursing homes, or other public policy area to work on policy for that particular concern.

The General Public

Everyone uses local government services, is affected by the decisions local government makes, and influences local government decisions. Sometimes people are not aware of how they are influencing public policy. Other times they might be trying very hard to change local government policies. People unintentionally influence local government policies through the use of government services, through cooperation (or noncooperation) with government programs, and through public behavior that helps or harms others.

How does using government services affect public policy? Government officials often consider use to indicate the public's wants or needs. According to this view, the more people use a service, the more of that service the government should try to provide.

Local governments may sometimes be unable to provide more of a service, or officials may decide they cannot afford to do so. In such a situation, officials may try to limit use, but limiting use is also a government policy.

For example, the more often people use a ball field, the fewer hours it is available for other users. Government officials might respond to this increase in use by putting up lights so the field could also be used at night. They might also build additional fields so that more teams could play at the same time. These are examples of adding more service in response to increased use. But the local governing board might decide it could not afford to add lights or new fields. Instead, officials might decide to limit use of the existing field. They might require people who want to use the field

to reserve it in advance, pay a fee, or join a league that schedules games on the field. These are all ways of **rationing** the service.

Cooperating or failing to cooperate with government programs also influences public policy in important ways. Many programs can succeed only if people cooperate. Consider the problem of solid waste disposal, for example. Many local governments have recycling programs to reduce the amount of waste that goes into landfills. Most of these recycling programs depend on people sorting their own trash so that recyclable materials can be collected separately from waste for the landfill. If people do sort their trash, the program succeeds. If they do not, the program will not work, and officials will have to find other ways to get rid of the trash people produce.

Behavior that helps people may reduce the need for public programs. For example, if people help look after their elderly neighbors, there may be less need for county social services to provide visiting nurse services. Behavior that harms people helps shape public policy because it can create a problem that local government attempts to reduce through regulation. When some people in a community indicate that they are offended, annoyed, or hurt by dogs running loose, for example, local officials have to respond. The officials may decide that the action is so harmful that it should be regulated, or they may decide that the action is not causing enough of a problem to justify regulation.

rationing: controlled distribution of scarce resources

Influencing Public Policy

Talking directly to public officials is one very important way to influence policy. People can call officials or visit them in person to discuss problems they think require government attention. They may also speak at public hearings or other meetings attended by public officials. Letters to public officials or petitions signed by large numbers of people are also ways people communicate their views about what government should do.

Often it is important to organize public support for a proposal. Officials are frequently persuaded by the reasons people provide in arguing for or against a proposal, but they can also be persuaded when large numbers of people agree. To organize support, people publicize the problem and the response they think government should make. They may hold news conferences or demonstrations to get the attention of newspapers, radio, and television. They may also write letters to the editor.

People can and do seek to use government for their own personal purposes. But many people are also interested in helping make the entire community a better place to live and work. People may disagree about whether a particular proposal is in the public interest, and debate is important. It is important to ask how the community would be better off if a proposal is adopted. This helps focus attention on the public benefits of government action. People who want the government to act should be able to explain how they think the proposed action will help improve conditions in the community.

Good government depends on the public being aware of the problems and opportunities facing the community. Good government requires that many people learn about public issues and try to influence public policy. Good government requires that people register to vote and then actually do so. Good government requires that many people volunteer to help government, including running for elective office. Good government requires that well-qualified people make full-time careers serving as employees of local government. Good government will increasingly depend on you, as you become an adult in your community.

Discussion Questions

1. Who do you know who works for local government? Who do you know who volunteers with local government? Who do you know who has been elected to local office? Who do you know who serves on appointed boards?
2. What was the most recent local election in your city or county? How many people voted? How many people are registered to vote in your city or county? What was the voter turnout in the most recent election? (That is, what percentage of the registered voters voted in that election?) Are elections in your city or county by district or at large? How does that affect representation in your local government?
3. How have you or your family, friends, or neighbors been involved in influencing local government decisions?
4. Newspaper articles and radio and television newscasts often mention disagreements over whether or not local government should regulate certain behavior. Identify a local government law or regulation that has been the subject of disagreement where you live. Which government regulation is involved? What activities does the law or regulation apply to? What are the arguments in favor of this government regulation? Hint: Who might be harmed without the regulation? How might they be harmed? What are the arguments against this government regulation? Hint: Who might be harmed by the regulation? How might they be harmed? If you had to decide whether or not to pass this law or regulation, what would you decide to do? Why?