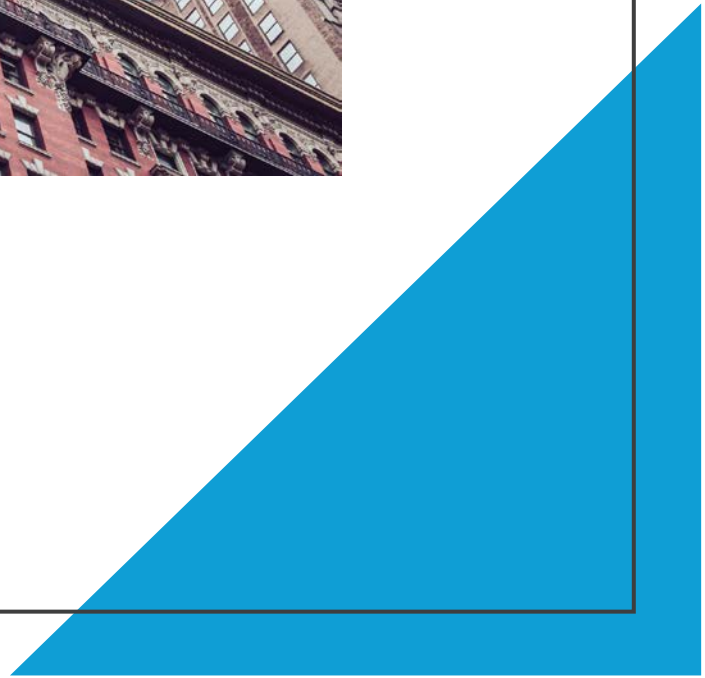


Local Government in Pennsylvania

From Counties to School
Districts: Understanding How
Everything Works



Local Government in Pennsylvania



There are 6 types of local governments listed in the Pennsylvania Constitution: county, township, borough, town, city and school district.

- Pennsylvania has 67 counties
- There are 2560 municipalities
- There is only one incorporated town: Bloomsburg
- There are 500 school districts

Local municipalities can be governed by statutes, which are enacted by the PA General Assembly, and are specific to the type and class of municipality, under a home rule charter, adopted by the municipality; or by an optional form of government adopted by the municipality.

County



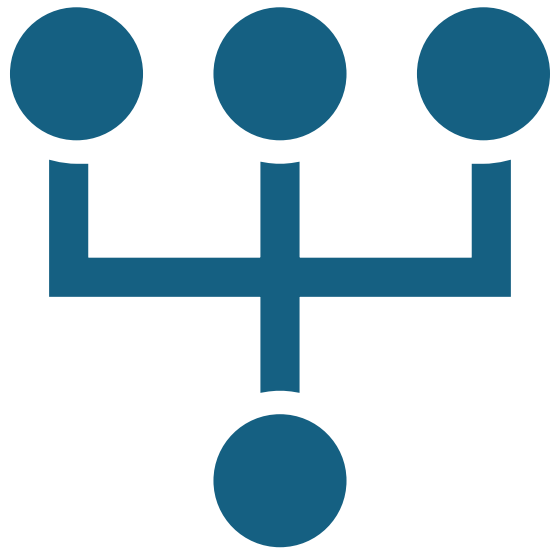
Counties in Pennsylvania serve the traditional roles for state including law enforcement, judicial administration, and election conduct. Some of the other functions that Pennsylvania's counties may perform include public health, property assessment, and redevelopment. Some of the welfare functions often performed by counties include mental health, geriatric care, community colleges, and library support.



Pennsylvania is divided into 67 counties. Most counties are governed by a board of commissioners, consisting of three members. Two must be of the majority party, and the third must be of the minority party, which is determined by which candidates receive the most votes, as two candidates from each party are on the November ballot. One of the members serves as the chair. The board of commissioners typically serves as both the legislative and executive body. In addition to the elected commissioners, most counties elect other officials, commonly called "row officers", independent of the board of commissioners. The offices include sheriff, district attorney, prothonotary, clerk of courts, register of wills, clerk of the orphans' court, recorder of deeds, treasurer, controller, auditors, and jury commissioners.



Seven counties currently have home rule charters: Allegheny, Delaware, Erie, Lackawanna, Lehigh, Luzerne, and Northampton. Philadelphia is a consolidated city-county with all its county functions being administered by the city government. Those counties have the types of officials elected determined by the home rule charter, and they often differ from the officials elected in most counties.



County

Counties are further classified by population. Each classification has its own code, set up by the General Assembly, to administer county functions.

(*): A county of the third class that is determined to have a population of 500,000 or more may elect to continue to be a county of the third class.

(~): A county having a population between 35,000 and 44,999 may elect to be a county of the sixth class.

(+): A county's population must be under the minimum for a class for two (2) censuses prior to a reduction in class.

Class	Max. Population	Min. Population	Number	Counties
First	--	1,500,000	1	Philadelphia
Second	1,499,999	800,000	1	Allegheny
Second A	799,999	500,000	3	Bucks, Delaware, Montgomery
Third	499,999	210,000*	12	Berks, Chester, Cumberland, Dauphin, Erie, Lackawanna, Lancaster*, Lehigh, Luzerne, Northampton, Westmoreland, York
Fourth	209,999	145,000	9	Beaver, Butler, Cambria+, Centre, Fayette+, Franklin, Monroe, Schuylkill, Washington
Fifth	144,999	90,000	7	Adams, Blair, Lawrence, Lebanon, Lycoming, Mercer, Northumberland
Sixth	89,999	45,000~	24	Armstrong, Bedford, Bradford, Carbon, Clarion~, Clearfield, Clinton~, Columbia, Crawford, Elk+~, Greene~, Huntingdon, Indiana, Jefferson, McKean+, Mifflin, Perry, Pike, Somerset, Susquehanna~, Tioga~, Venango, Warren+, Wayne
Seventh	44,999	20,000	4	Juniata, Snyder, Union, Wyoming
Eighth	19,999	0	6	Cameron, Forest, Fulton, Montour, Potter, Sullivan

Township

The township is the basic population center or town element in Pennsylvania, ranging in size from small hamlets to small towns. They are given Class I or Class II powers attributes and responsibilities and comprise the majority of communities in Pennsylvania.



Characterized by lower population densities over a widespread region, within which small clusters of housing and mixed main road businesses occur.



Townships in Pennsylvania were the first form of land grants established by William Penn and are generally large in area with a sparse population centered on one or a few clusters of homes and a handful of businesses. They have existed in one form or another since the Province of Pennsylvania was established. They were usually large tracts of land given to a person, a family, or a group of people by Penn or his heirs.

Township



Townships can be of the first or second class, the difference being the powers and offices of the municipal government or its officials. All begin as second class townships, and when certain legal requirements are met, the township may become a first-class township by a referendum of the township's voters, provided it meets population threshold requirements. Many that qualify prefer to continue as second class townships (established by voter referendum).



Representation in a second-class township is by a board of supervisors elected at-large for 6 year terms. Representation in a first-class township is by a board of commissioners that can consist of anywhere from five commissioners elected at large to boards with 7-15 elected by wards to four-year terms; though via home rule petitions, some townships have also maintained at-large representation, or mixed geographical wards and at-large election organization. By law there is always an odd number of township commissioners.



A second-class township usually has three supervisors, elected at large for six-year terms. A referendum may allow a second-class township's board of supervisors to expand to five members. Some townships have home-rule charters, which allow for a mayor/council form of government.

Borough

A borough is a self-governing municipal entity, equivalent to a town in most jurisdictions. It is usually smaller than a city, but with similar population density in its residential areas. Boroughs generally have few power and responsibilities than full-fledged cities.

Boroughs tend to have more developed business districts and concentrations of public and commercial office buildings, including courthouses.

There are 956 boroughs in Pennsylvania. Many home rule municipalities remain classified as boroughs or townships for certain purposes, even if the state's borough and township codes no longer apply to them.

What outside Pennsylvania many would think are called "towns" are by law officially boroughs (often also spelled as boros) which are generally smaller than cities in terms of both geographic area and population. Most cities in Pennsylvania were once incorporated as a borough before becoming a city, and both began under the constitution as a township. Boroughs are not strictly classified by population and are administered through the borough legal code. Each borough elects a mayor and a council of three, five, seven, or nine members with broad powers, as determined by home rule measures. Some boroughs have even numbers of council members. The borough offices of tax assessor, tax collector and auditor are elected independently. The borough council can also hire a borough manager to enforce ordinances and carry out the day-to-day business of the town's administration and dictates of its council. The definition of boroughs is a town or district that is an administrative unit, in particular. Nineteen boroughs have also adopted home rule charters.

Boroughs generally incorporate from areas of dense populations in a township. The areas generally had a train station and were centers of businesses and industrial activities. The first borough to be incorporated in Pennsylvania was Germantown in 1690. That borough ceased to exist when all of Philadelphia's municipalities were consolidated in 1854. The borough of Chester Heights has a unique distinction of incorporating into a borough out of Aston Township by a tax revolt.

Town



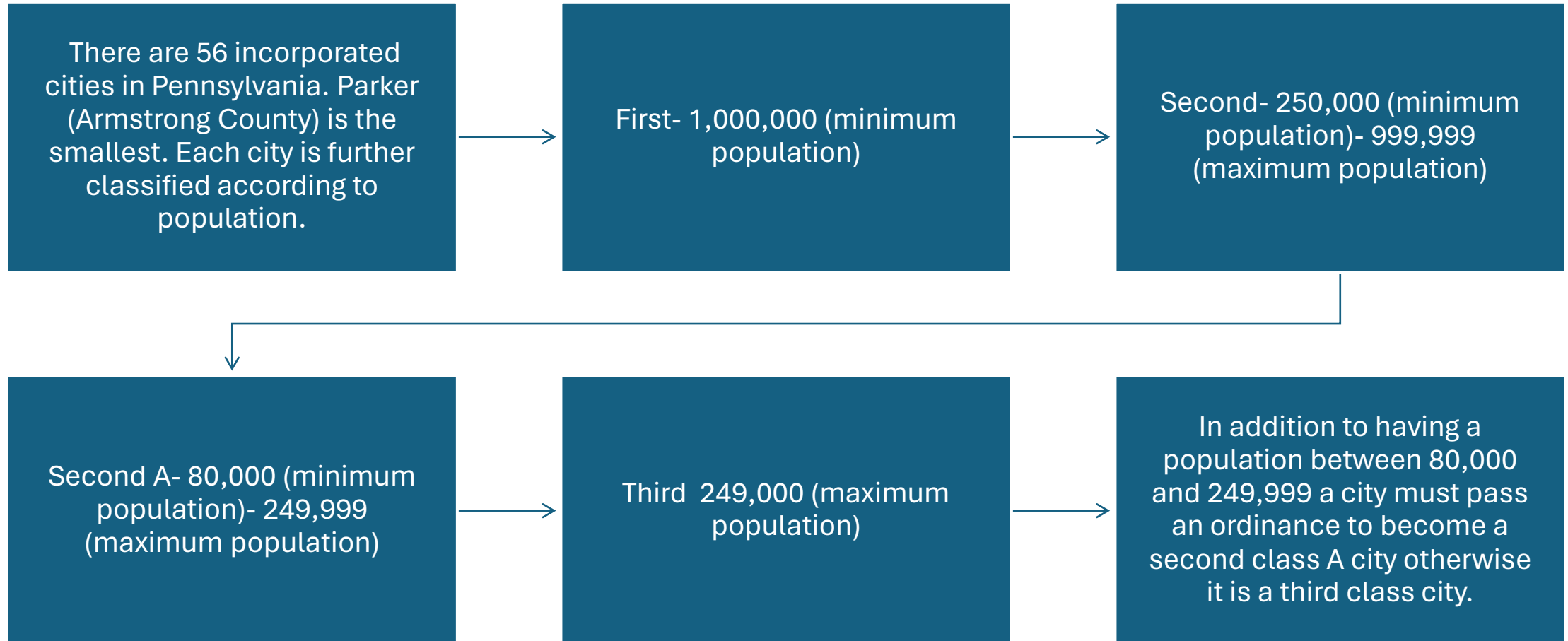
Towns are generally larger than villages and smaller than cities.



In some cases, town is an alternative name for "city" or "village" (especially a small city or large village; and occasionally even hamlets).

Sometimes, the word town is short for township. In general, today towns can be differentiated from townships, villages, or hamlets on the basis of their economic character, in that most of a town's population will tend to derive their living from manufacturing industry, commerce, and public services rather than primary sector industries such as agriculture or related activities.

City



City

Philadelphia is the only first class city. It has more than 1 million residents.

Pittsburgh is the only second class city, with a population between 250,000 and 1,000,000 residents.

A city with between 80,000 and 250,000 residents that has also adopted a certain ordinance can be classified as a second class A city. Only Scranton has done so.

First class, second class and second class A cities have a strong mayor and home rule charters. The mayor has broad power to appoint and remove certain commissioners and department heads. Most of the city's functions are independent of the state's control because of their charters, which must pass legislative approval.

City

Third Class Cities

Any municipality adopting conversion into a city government with a population below 250,000 people that has not adopted the second class ordinance is a third class city.

Third class cities can be governed in 3 ways:

The third class city codes establishes a commission form of government; the mayor and four other members constitute the commission, the governing body of the city. The mayor is one of the members of council and acts as president. Each council member is in charge of one of the five major departments. The city controller and treasurer are elected independently. Twenty cities employ this form of governance.

The mayor-council form has a council of five, seven, or nine members, elected at large for overlapping four-year terms. A mayor, treasurer, and a controller also are elected for a four-year period. The mayor is the chief executive of the city and enforces the ordinances of council. The mayor may veto ordinances, but that can be overridden by at least two thirds of the council. The mayor supervises the work of all city departments and submits the annual city budget to council. This form was adopted by nine cities by referendums.

The last is the council-manager form, in which all authority is lodged with council which is composed of five, seven, or nine members elected at-large for a four-year term. A city treasurer and controller also are elected. A city manager is appointed by council. The manager is the chief administrative officer of the city and is responsible for executing the ordinances of council. The manager appoints and may remove department heads and subordinates. Only four cities use this method of city organization.

Sixteen third class cities have adopted home rule charters. Two cities (DuBois and Altoona) have an optional council-manager plan, and one city (Hazleton) has a mayor-council optional plan.

School Districts

There are 500 school districts in Pennsylvania, administered by the Pennsylvania Public School Code of 1949. School districts can comprise one municipality, like the School District of Philadelphia, or multiple municipalities. School districts have the sole responsibility to instruct the school-aged population of the Commonwealth. Some school districts cross one or more county lines creating challenges in equalizing property taxes because of widely varying property tax assessments. Like some other local governments, school districts are classified based on population and these classifications determine what regulations they follow.

Class	Max. Population	Min. Population ⁽¹⁴⁾
First	--	1,000,000
First A	999,999	250,000
Second	249,999	30,000
Third	29,999	5,000
Fourth	4,999	--

Municipal Authorities



Municipal authorities are a special kind of local unit: unlike cities, boroughs, and townships, which are general government entities, they are set up to perform special services. An authority is a body corporate and politic authorized to acquire, construct, improve, maintain, and operate projects, and to borrow money and issue bonds to finance them. Projects include public facilities such as buildings, including school buildings, transportation facilities, marketing and shopping facilities, highways, parkways, airports, parking places, waterworks, sewage treatment plants, playgrounds, hospitals, and industrial development projects.



An authority can be organized by any county, city, town, borough, township, or school district of the Commonwealth, acting singly or jointly with another municipality. An authority is established by ordinance by one or more municipalities. The governing bodies of the parent local unit or units appoint the members of the authority's board. If the body created by one unit, the board consists of five members. If the body created by two or more local units, there is at least one member from each unit but no fewer than five. The board carries on the work of the authority, acquires property, appoints officers and employees, undertakes projects, makes regulations and charges, and collects revenue from services of the facilities or projects.

Unincorporated communities



Unincorporated communities in the state of Pennsylvania are well-defined communities that are part of one or more incorporated municipalities but are not independent municipalities in their own right. They have no elected form of government and have no authority granted to them by the state or county but have a historical authority all their own. Often they are little more than neighborhoods once serviced by a railway station, that once had a post office in the 19th century or were clustered as supporting community housing for a local industry, which may no longer exist. Many unincorporated communities though, often overshadow the true municipal government. King of Prussia is an example of an unincorporated community that tends to be better known than Upper Merion, the municipality King of Prussia actually resides in.



These communities can be small, cross-roads type areas with a few homes and businesses or they can be large business complexes with relatively few residents but a strong commercial center. They can also be simply recognized for prior historical relevance which carries on as they are referenced by new generations.

Villages

Villages in Pennsylvania are often small unincorporated communities within a township. Many villages are identified by familiar PennDOT signs along a state highway even though the community has not chosen to incorporate into a borough. Lahaska is an example of typical village in eastern Pennsylvania.



Census-designated Place

These are areas recognized by the United States Census Bureau for enumeration purposes. Many Census-designated places are also names of villages or post offices that tie a community together. The steep forested landscape and terrains of Pennsylvania generally forced settlements into relatively small areas that had appropriate conditions making it easy to build. Modern heavy machinery has broadened the scope of where housing settlements and business can be situated, but at the cost of moving a lot of soils and rocks.

Home Rule Municipality



In the commonwealth of Pennsylvania, a home rule municipality is one incorporated under its own unique charter, created pursuant to the state's home rule and optional plans law and approved by referendum. "Local governments without home rule can only act where specifically authorized by state law; home rule municipalities can act anywhere except where they are specifically limited by state law". Although many such municipalities have retained the word "Township" or "Borough" in their official names, the Pennsylvania Township and Borough Codes no longer apply to them. All three types of municipalities (cities, boroughs, and townships) may become a home rule municipality.



When Pennsylvania was chartered in 1681, its proprietor William Penn was given the power to create counties, towns, and other municipalities, and the legislature was given sovereignty over them. "Abuse of legislative interference in local matters in the nineteenth century led to prohibition of special and local laws in the Constitution of 1874". Early in the 20th century, the concept of municipal home rule spread across the United States, and in 1922 the Pennsylvania Constitution was amended to give the legislature the right to grant cities the right to choose home rule. Philadelphia became the first home rule city of Pennsylvania in 1951. The Assembly further adopted the Optional Third Class City Charter Law in 1957, and in 1968, the new Constitution declared that "Municipalities shall have the right and power to frame and adopt home rule charters." The new Home Rule Charter and Optional Plans Law, creating that right in the statutes of the Commonwealth, was passed in 1972.

Commonwealth

Commonwealth is a term used by four of the 50 states of the United States in their full official state names: Kentucky, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Virginia.

"Commonwealth" is a traditional English term used to describe a political community as having been founded for the common good and shares some similarities with the Latin phrase "res publica" ('the public thing') from which ultimately is derived the word republic.

The four states are all in the Eastern United States, and prior to the formation of the United States in 1776 were British colonial possessions, although Kentucky did not exist as an independent polity under British rule, instead being a part of colonial Virginia. As such, they share a strong influence of English common law in some of their laws and institutions. However, the "commonwealth" appellation has no legal or political significance, and it does not make "commonwealth" states any different from other U.S. states.

The term commonwealth does not describe or provide for any specific political status or legal relationship when used by a state. Those that do use it are equal to those that do not. A traditional English term for a political community founded for the common good, it is used symbolically to emphasize that these states have a "government based on the common consent of the people" as opposed to the British crown. It refers to the common "wealth", or welfare, of the public and is derived from a loose translation of the Latin term *res publica*.^[a] Premodern English used the alternative term "commonwealth" in such sense in place of the now singularly standard term "republic".