

Washington

Washington ranks 19th among the states in number of local governments, with 1,787 as of June 2002.

COUNTY GOVERNMENTS (39)

There are no areas in Washington lacking county government. Except for home-rule counties, a county's governing body is known as the board of county commissioners. Home-rule counties are governed by the county council. Five counties operate under home-rule charters: Clallam, King, Pierce, Snohomish, and Whatcom. Legislation enacted in 1991 eliminated references to formal classes of counties. Since 1991, all state statutes intended for counties of a particular population size specify the applicable population range. Although consolidated city county governments are authorized by state statutes, none currently exist.

SUBCOUNTY GENERAL PURPOSE GOVERNMENTS (279)

Municipal Governments (279)

Municipal governments in Washington are the cities and towns. Municipalities are divided into classes according to population size, as follows:

First class—10,000 inhabitants or more and a home-rule charter

Second class—1,500 or more inhabitants and no home-rule charter

Towns—Less than 1,500 inhabitants and no home-rule charter

Change from one class to another occurs only after voter approval. Cities with a population of 10,000 or more may adopt a home-rule charter if the voters of the city approve. In addition, since 1969, all municipalities may acquire statutory home-rule by becoming a noncharter code municipality. Two cities, Union Gap and Waitsburg, operate under charters granted prior to 1889 by the former Washington territory.

The minimum population requirement for incorporation is 300, but if the proposed incorporation is within 5 air miles of a city of 15,000 population or more the minimum population requirement is 3,000.

For provisions governing "metropolitan municipal corporations," see "Special District Governments," below.

Governments—State Descriptions

Township Governments (0)

Although township governments are still authorized by state law, there are currently none in existence. They were last reported in operation during the 1972 Census of Governments.

PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS (296)

School District Governments (296)

The following types of school districts in Washington are counted as separate governments for census purposes:

First class school districts—2,000 or more pupils

Second class school district—fewer than 2,000 pupils

A school district may include territory in more than one county. Such districts are called joint (intercounty) school districts. Also, school districts are divided into high school and nonhigh school districts on the basis of whether or not they operate a high school.

An elected board of directors administers each school district. School districts receive funds from state property tax levies for common schools, county ad valorem taxes, profits from school trust lands, and allocations of grants from the state and the federal government. A school district may levy a special tax for maintenance and operation or issue bonds for capital construction after voter approval.

Dependent Public School Systems (0)

Washington has no dependent public school systems.

Other Educational Activities

Educational services districts consist of one or more counties or portions of counties. They provide regional administration of local school districts. These districts are classified, for census reporting, as joint educational service agencies of the participating school districts and are not counted as separate governments. As of June 2002, nine educational services districts were reported in operation.

The community colleges and technical colleges in Washington are classified for census purposes as state institutions and are not counted as separate governments. A board of trustees appointed by the Governor governs each college. These colleges receive revenue from tuition and operating fees, state appropriations, federal grants, and the proceeds of state bond issues.

In addition, school districts may jointly establish and operate vocational skills programs by means of cooperative agreements. The vocational skills programs are classified as joint educational service agencies of the participating school districts, and are not counted as separate governments. As of June 2002, ten vocational skills programs were reported in operation.

SPECIAL DISTRICT GOVERNMENTS (1,173)

Washington statutes authorize the creation of a variety of special districts or authorities that are counted as governments. These are discussed in detail below.

Air Pollution Control Authorities

A 1967 general law establishes air pollution control authorities in counties with a population of 125,000 or more and permits the creation of air pollution control authorities in other counties. In these latter counties, authorities may be established by the board of county commissioners on its own initiative or on petition of property owners, after public hearing. Multicounty authorities may be established by contiguous counties. A board of directors, appointed by the governing bodies of the establishing county or counties and municipalities within each county, governs each authority. The authorities apportion their fiscal needs to the underlying governments according to population and/or assessed valuation. Other sources of revenue include federal and state grants and gifts. Air pollution control authorities may levy property taxes with voter approval.

Cemetery Districts

Cemetery districts may be established by the board of county commissioners after petition, hearing, and voter approval. An elected board of commissioners governs each district. The districts may levy ad valorem taxes, but may not borrow money in excess of currently levied taxes.

County Airport Districts

County airport districts are established by the county governing body after petition of voters and voter approval. Voters may also petition for an elected district board of commissioners. A district may levy ad valorem taxes if approved by the voters, fix charges and revenues, accept federal aid, and issue revenue bonds. A county airport district administered by the county governing body is not counted as a separate government. See “Subordinate Agencies and Areas,” below.

Cultural Arts, Stadium, and Convention Districts

Districts to provide cultural arts, stadium, and convention facilities are established by petition of voters, by resolution of one or more counties, or by resolution of two or more cities, after public hearing and voter approval. The

district governing body consists of appointed representatives of the participating governments, as specified in the resolution creating the district. The districts may receive the proceeds of county hotel-motel tax levies, issue revenue bonds, and after voter approval, may levy ad valorem taxes and issue general obligation bonds. Districts governed by the county commissioners ex officio are not counted as separate governments. See “Subordinate Agencies and Areas,” below.

Diking and Drainage Districts

Washington statutes authorize the following types of diking and drainage districts:

Diking districts—1895 law

Drainage districts—1895 law

Intercounty diking and drainage districts—1909 law

Diking districts or drainage districts may be established by the board of county commissioners after petition of landowners, hearing, and voter approval under two separate 1895 laws. Intercounty diking and drainage districts are established by a joint meeting of the commissioner of public lands and the participating county boards after petition of landowners, subject to voter approval.

Elected boards of commissioners govern all three types of districts. The districts may impose special benefit assessments and issue bonds. Participating counties and cities may appropriate funds for the district. In addition, cities within diking and drainage districts may levy an assessment on property. A general law authorizing the establishment of ditch districts has been repealed, but there are some such districts still in existence.

Improvement districts for drainage, diking, or sewerage created under a 1913 law are not counted as separate governments. See “Subordinate Agencies and Areas,” below.

Fire Protection Districts

Fire protection districts may be established in unincorporated areas after voters file a petition with the county auditor and after a hearing and election called by the board of county commissioners. An elected board of commissioners governs each district. The districts may issue bonds, upon voter approval, and may levy an ad valorem tax and benefit assessments.

Local improvement districts may be created within fire protection districts. They have the power to levy special benefit assessments, but are subordinate areas of the fire protection districts. Local improvement districts are not counted as separate governments.

Flood Control Districts 1937 Act

Under a 1937 general law, these districts may be established upon petition of property owners or upon resolution of the governing body of the county or the municipality to be served, after a public hearing and voter approval.

An elected board of directors governs each district. The districts may levy assessments and issue bonds. For flood control districts established under a 1935 law, which are not counted as separate governments, see “Subordinate Agencies and Areas,” below.

Housing Authorities

The governing body of any county, city, or town may create a housing authority by resolution. Joint city and county housing authorities are created by agreement between the city and county governing bodies. County housing authority boards are appointed by the county governing body. City or town housing authority boards are appointed by the mayor. Housing authorities may fix rentals and charges, issue bonds, and accept federal aid.

Hydroelectric Resources Authorities

Authorities to build, operate, and maintain hydroelectric facilities are created by agreement between one or more irrigation districts and any combination of cities, towns, or public utility districts. The composition of the authority governing body is specified in the agreement creating each authority. The authorities may fix rates, tolls, and charges and may issue revenue bonds.

Irrigation or Reclamation Districts

These districts are created by the county board of commissioners after petition of landowners and after voter approval. Such districts may also provide drainage, domestic water supply, and electric power facilities as well as irrigation. An elected board of directors governs each district. The districts may fix rates and charges and may levy special benefit assessments. Bond issues must be approved by the voters. Irrigation and rehabilitation districts are formed from irrigation districts under special conditions and possess the same type of organization and powers.

Irrigation Districts Joint Control

Irrigation districts under joint control may be established by petition of landowners, followed by a hearing and referendum. These districts administer water works, main and branch canals and water lines, and the water facilities of two or more irrigation districts. The district is governed by a board of directors consisting of a president appointed by the county board and the resident owner of each tract of land involved. The districts receive special assessments and charges upon each member irrigation district.

Joint Operating Agencies for Electric Power

These agencies are established to develop and sell electric power. The system board of directors consists of one representative from each of the participating public utility districts. The system may fix rates and charges for the sale of power and may issue revenue bonds.

The Conservation and Renewable Energy System and the Washington Public Power Supply System were established under this legislation.

Library Districts

Washington statutes authorize the following types of library districts that are counted as governments for census purposes:

Island library districts are established in counties with less than 25,000 in population and consisting solely of islands (San Juan) by petition of voters to the county commission, after voter approval. A board of trustees appointed by the county commissioners governs each district. The district may levy ad valorem taxes and, after voter approval, issue bonds.

Regional libraries are formed by action of the governing bodies of any two or more local governments. The intergovernmental agreement establishing the regional library specifies the membership of the library board. Expenses of the regional library are apportioned among the participating governments as provided in the agreement.

Rural library districts are established in unincorporated areas by the county commissioners after petition of voters and voter approval. A board of library trustees, appointed by the county commissioners, governs each district. The districts may levy ad valorem taxes and issue bonds.

Intercounty rural library districts are formed by identical resolutions of the boards of two or more county commissioners, or by majority vote of the county commissioners in joint session, after voter petition and approval. The district board of trustees is appointed jointly by the participating county boards. District finances and powers are the same as for rural library districts.

Metropolitan Municipal Corporations

General law provides that any area containing two or more cities, one of which is a city of 10,000 or more, may organize as a metropolitan municipal corporation for one or more of the following metropolitan functions: sewage disposal, water supply, public transportation, garbage disposal, parks and parkways, and planning. Establishment is by approval of the voters at an election that has been called either by: (1) resolution of the council of a central city, (2) resolution of the councils of two or more component cities other than a central city, (3) resolution of the board of commissioners of a central county, or (4) petition of the voters of the metropolitan area. A metropolitan council consisting of elected officials of the component counties and cities governs each corporation. The council members select an additional member of the council to serve as chairperson of the corporation.

Metropolitan municipal corporations may fix fees and charges, and may issue general obligation and revenue bonds. They may also levy a retail sales and use tax and a

motor vehicle excise tax for public transportation purposes upon voter approval. A 1 year property tax can only be submitted for voter approval at the establishing election. If income is insufficient, participating towns and cities make supplemental payments to the corporation.

Local improvement districts may be established within metropolitan municipal corporations. They are classified as dependent activities of the metropolitan municipal corporations for census purposes, and are not counted as separate governments.

Metropolitan Park Districts

A city of 5,000 or more population plus contiguous area may establish a metropolitan park district by an election that has been called either by petition of the voters or by the city council on its own initiative. An elected board of park commissioners governs each district. The district may levy ad valorem taxes and issue bonds. Voter approval is necessary for bond issues that exceed a specified percentage of the assessed value of the property in the district.

Mosquito Control Districts

Mosquito control districts may be established by petition of voters to the county commissioners or by resolution of intent by the board of county commissioners, followed by hearing and voter approval. A board of trustees, appointed by the governing bodies of the participating counties and cities, governs each district. The districts may issue bonds and levy ad valorem taxes upon voter approval.

Park and Recreation Districts

General law authorizes the formation of park and recreation districts on petition of voters after hearing and voter approval. An elected board of commissioners governs each district. The districts may fix rates and charges, accept gifts and grants, and issue bonds. Upon voter approval, the districts may levy ad valorem taxes. Park districts may create local improvement districts; the local improvement districts are classified as dependent activities of the park and recreation districts, and are not counted as separate governments.

Port Districts

Port districts are established by an election that is called by the board of county commissioners on petition of voters or on its own initiative. Port districts furnish airport or port facilities and promote the use of such facilities. An elected port commission governs each district. The districts may fix rates and charges, levy ad valorem taxes, accept gifts, and issue bonds. Industrial development districts as well as local improvement districts may be established by and within a port district as a dependent activity of the port district. Industrial development districts and local improvement districts are not counted as separate governments.

Public Facilities Districts

Public facilities districts may be created to build and operate sports and entertainment facilities in counties with a population of 300,000 or more that are located more than 100 miles from a county in which the state has constructed or owns a convention center. Creation of such districts is by a joint resolution of the county board of commissioners and the governing body of the largest city in the county. If the largest city in the county has a population that is at least 40 percent of the total county population, the board of directors consists of two members appointed by the county legislative authority, two members appointed by the city council of the largest city within the county and one appointed by the aforementioned four. If the largest city in the county has a population of less than 40 percent of the total county population, the district is governed by a five or seven member board appointed by the county. The district may levy sales and use and excise taxes, fix fees and charges, receive the proceeds of a hotel-motel tax, issue general obligation bonds, and after voter approval, may levy ad valorem taxes.

Public Hospital Districts

Hospital districts are established by resolution of or petition to the board of county commissioners, after voter approval. An elected board of commissioners governs each district. The districts may fix rates, levy ad valorem taxes, and issue general obligation and revenue bonds.

Public Transportation Benefit Area Authorities

These authorities are created by resolution of the county commissioners upon recommendation of a transportation improvement conference (consisting of city council representatives and county commissioners) and public hearing. The authority board consists of elected officials selected by the governing bodies of component cities and counties. The authorities may fix rates and fares and accept appropriations, gifts, and grants.

Unincorporated public transportation benefit areas are not counted as separate governments. See "Subordinate Agencies and Areas," below.

Public Utility Districts

Districts for the conservation and the supply of domestic and irrigation water and electric light and power are created by a resolution of or a petition to the board of county commissioners after voter approval. An elected board of public utility commissioners governs each district. The districts may set rates and fees, levy ad valorem taxes, and issue bonds.

Local utility districts with the power to levy benefit assessments may be established as dependent activities of the parent public utility district. They are not counted as separate governments.

Regional Transportation Authority

This authority was established by resolution of the governing bodies of contiguous counties each with a population of 400,000 or more to develop and operate a high capacity transportation system. The authority is governed by a board consisting of representatives of each participating county appointed by the county executive. The authority may levy special assessments, fix rates and charges, issue revenue and general obligation bonds, and with voter approval, may levy a motor vehicle excise tax and a sales and use tax.

Water and Sewer Districts¹

These districts are created upon petition of voters to the board of county commissioners, followed by a hearing and voter approval. An elected board of commissioners governs each district. The districts may levy special benefit assessments, fix rates and charges, and submit property tax levies to the voters. Comprehensive plans require the approval of an engineer and the county director of health. Bond issues to finance the comprehensive plan require voter approval.

Districts may establish utility local improvement districts as dependent activities and levy special benefit assessments therein. Utility local improvement districts are not counted as separate governments.

Water districts, which may provide water supply, sanitary sewer systems, fire protection, and street lighting, are created on petition of voters to the board of county commissioners and after voter approval. An elected board of commissioners governs each district. The district may levy special benefit assessments, fix rates and charges, issue bonds, and submit property tax levies to the voters.

Local improvement districts or utility local improvement districts may be created within a water district as dependent activities of the parent water district. They are not counted as separate governments.

SUBORDINATE AGENCIES AND AREAS

Shown below are various governmental designations in Washington that have certain characteristics of governmental units but that are classified in census statistics as subordinate agencies of the state or local governments and are not counted as separate governments. Legal provisions for some of the larger of these are discussed below (see "Public School Systems," above, regarding educational agencies of this nature).

Among the subordinate agencies and areas listed below, some represent "special taxing areas" within the territory of an established government. This method of financing

¹Originally created as a water or sewer district, state statutes hold that all of these districts are now classified as "water-sewer districts."

additional services in limited areas by property taxation, while also used by some municipal and township governments in a few states, is more widely utilized by county governments. In the listing below of authorized county-related agencies, a bullet (▪) appears for each entity of this kind; i.e., any that may individually serve a portion rather than all of a county and for which a tax may be levied against the assessed value of the property in the area served.

Conservation districts (county). These districts are established to provide soil and water conservation services on petition of landowners to the state conservation commission after public hearing and voter approval. A board of supervisors, three elected and two appointed by the state conservation commission, governs each district. A conservation district has no independent revenue raising powers, but it may accept contributions, receive special assessments collected by the county, and manage and lease property.

Washington Health Care Facilities Authority (state).

This authority was established by state law to assist and encourage the building and maintenance of modern health care facilities. The authority governing body consists of the Governor, the Lieutenant Governor, the insurance commissioner, the secretary of health, and a public member appointed by the Governor. The authority may set fees and charges for services and may issue revenue bonds.

Washington State Housing Finance Commission (state). This commission was created by act of the legislature to provide mortgage credit for low and moderate income housing. The commission consists of 11 members, nine of whom are appointed by the Governor, and the state treasurer and the director of community development ex officio. The commission may fix fees and charges in connection with the provision of mortgage credit and may issue bonds.

Other examples include:

State²

Economic Development Finance Authority
Infestation control districts
Puget Sound Action Team and Puget Sound Council
Washington Higher Education Facilities Authority
Washington State Building Authority
Washington State Public Stadium Authority
Water Conservancy Boards

County

Community councils (for unincorporated areas of island county)

²The Washington State Maritime Commission was phased out by legislature, effective midnight June 20, 1995.

County airport districts (governed by county commissioners)

- County park and recreation service areas

County public transportation authorities
County rail districts
County road districts
County road improvement districts (listed in the 1987 Census of Governments as “county improvement districts”)
Emergency medical service districts
Emergency service communication districts

- Flood control districts—1935 act³

Flood control zone districts
Health districts
Improvement districts for drainage, diking, or sewerage—1913 law⁴
Intercounty weed districts
Lake management districts
Local improvement districts (water and sewerage systems)
Multipurpose community centers (county)
Parking and business improvement areas (county)
Public corporations for economic development—1981 law (county)
Public waterway districts
River and harbor improvement districts
Service districts (for bridge and road improvements)
Shellfish protection districts

³Authorizing legislation for districts of this type has been repealed, but existing districts may continue to operate.

⁴Budgets of districts organized under this law are subject to county approval.

Solid waste collection districts—1971 law
Solid waste disposal districts—1982 law
Television reception improvement districts
Transportation benefit districts—1987 law (county)
Unincorporated transportation benefit areas
Utility local improvement districts (water and sewerage systems)
Weed control districts

Municipal

Flood control districts—1935
Local improvement districts
Multipurpose community centers (municipal)
Parking and business improvement areas (municipal)
Parking commissions
Pike Place Market Preservation and Development Authority (Seattle) City Ordinance
Public corporations 1974 law⁵
Public corporations for economic development—1981 law (municipal)
Transportation benefit districts—1987 law (municipal)
Urban renewal agencies

Other

Public corporations established by port districts are classified as dependent activities of the port districts and are not counted as separate governments. Washington laws also provide for various types of local areas for election purposes and administration of justice.

⁵Corporations under this law may be organized to receive and administer state and federal grants, and to perform any lawful public purpose. The Seattle Museum Development Authority is an example of an agency created under this law.