



A Citizen's Guide: Community Decision-Making Basics



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This information is provided as a resource and it is important to know that the Environmental Quality Board (EQB) has no jurisdiction over local government planning and community development. The primary role of the EQB is to advise organizations on the proper procedures for environmental review and to monitor the effectiveness of the process in general. It is encouraged to contact the EQB on matters related to environmental review.

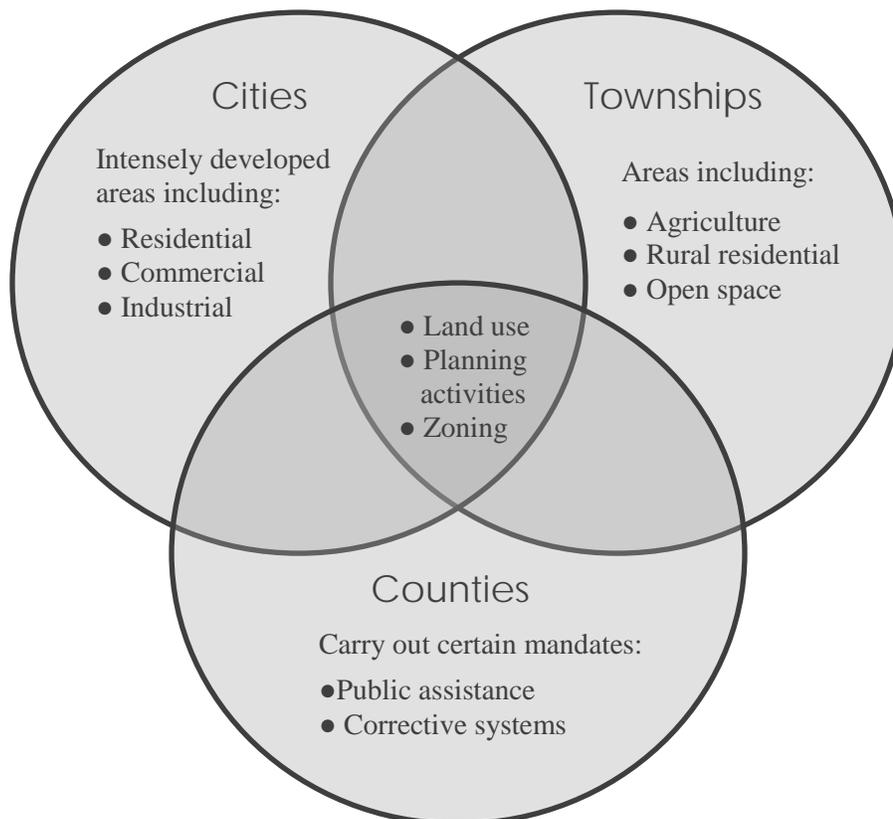
## Overview

The term "Local government" applies to:

- Counties
- Hospital districts
- The Metropolitan Council
- Towns (townships)
- Regional development commissions
- Soil and water conservation districts
- Cities
- School districts

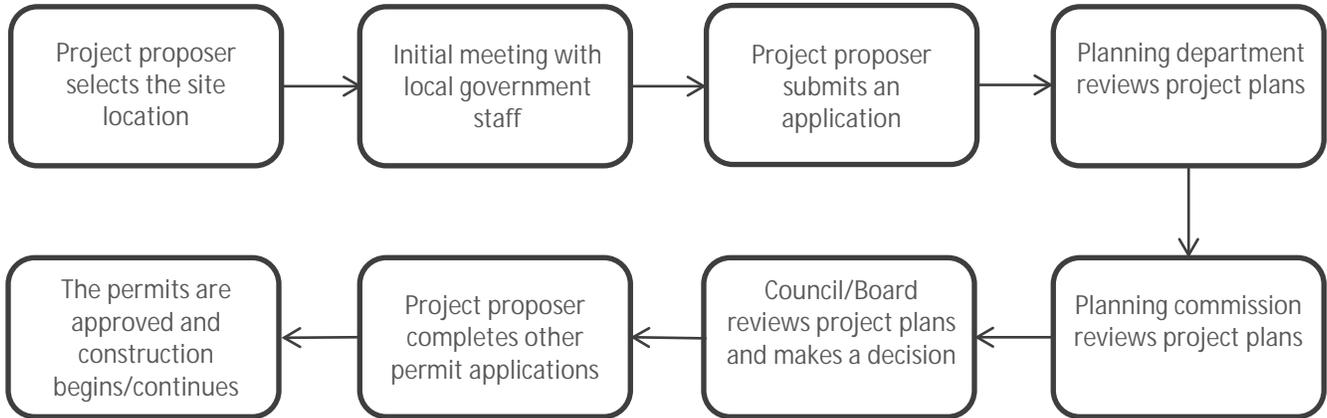
While local governments have a great deal of authority to oversee activities that take place under their jurisdiction, they are also subject to the laws, permits and rules of the state and federal government. Cities, townships, counties and certain joint power organizations can be named the responsible governmental unit (RGU) for a project to carry out environmental review. Other forms of local government, such as school districts, cannot be the RGU.

The diagram below shows some of the services/locations the three types of local government provide for:





Below is an example of the typical community development process works. It is designed to provide you with a background on a typical community planning process; it is not meant as an authoritative guide:



## Community development procedures

Environmental review must be completed before any project approvals can be given or permits issued. If a project is large enough to require mandatory environmental review then local government planning staff will inform the developer of these requirements during the initial staff meeting. If a citizen petition is filed and the project has proceeded through some of the community's approval steps, the approval process is suspended until all requirements of the environmental review program have been met. In many local governments the environmental review decisions are made by the organizations governing authority, such as the council or board.

### Who is involved

The following list provides a brief description of common local government positions, however it is recommended that individuals contact their local government or review its website to learn more about its normal staffing and operating procedures.

Local government position	Description
Council/Board members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Council= city council</li> <li>• Board= township or county board</li> <li>• Generally made up by 5-7 members elected by local residents</li> <li>• Responsibilities vary between each entity, but generally they:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ Pass ordinances</li> <li>§ Set administrative policy</li> <li>§ Vote on major proposals and activities</li> <li>§ Order an EAW</li> <li>§ Deny a petition</li> <li>§ Require an EIS</li> </ul> </li> </ul>



Clerk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More densely populated areas often have one or more clerks</li> <li>• In most governments the clerk is the first administrative officer</li> <li>• Generally clerks will:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ Maintain official documents, resolutions, ordinances and records</li> <li>§ File documents with proper officials/offices</li> <li>§ Answer questions from the public regarding ordinance/official actions</li> <li>§ Administer licenses and permits</li> <li>§ Coordinate council/board meeting agendas, packets and meeting minutes</li> <li>§ Interact with citizens filing for petitions</li> <li>§ Obtain/file/forward submitted comments for EAW, EIS, etc. to appropriate staff person for a response</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Attorney	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Either full-time staff or hired as a consultant on an as-needed basis</li> <li>• Generally attorneys will:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ Provide legal guidance</li> <li>§ Draft/review contracts, ordinance resolutions and other legal documents</li> <li>§ Represents local government in judicial and administrative matters</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Zoning administrator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Either full-time staff or hired as a consultant</li> <li>• Generally Zoning administrators will:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ Review/process requests for zoning changes, conditional use permits, variances and subdivision applications</li> <li>§ Analyze project proposals</li> <li>§ Prepare reports for the planning commission or local government council/board</li> <li>§ Oversee and coordinate the environmental review process</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Planning commission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Serves as a preliminary step in the review of zoning and development proposals</li> <li>• Generally planning commissions will:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ Provide recommendations to the council/board on all proposed developments, annexations, zoning changes, special uses and variances</li> <li>§ Investigate new development proposals and provide insight to the council/board</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Engineer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More densely populated areas often have one or more Engineers</li> <li>• Either full-time staff or hired as a consultant</li> <li>• Generally Engineers will:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ Help with many aspects of planning and project design/inspections. Including: water mains, water distribution systems, storm/sanitary sewers, pumping stations and related water and sewer facilities</li> <li>§ Review environmental review documents and project proposals to ensure that the projects are designed appropriately for the current infrastructure capabilities of the community.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>



## Becoming involved

This list provides some ways to become involved with your local government:

- § Start regularly attending local government council/board meetings and planning commission meetings.
- § Find out if communities have a regular newsletter or e-mail distribution list, or if they have a bulletin board on their website that is updated on a regular basis
- § Join local committees or citizen groups in order to advocate more effectively (i.e. Becoming a member of your local park board or planning commission or council/board)

The best time to have input and discussion in a community's land use decisions is when a comprehensive plan is being prepared or updated or when new ordinances are being considered for approval. Before a project proposal is presented and environmental review documents are prepared, the stage is often already set for how a community will grow and develop. Through regular, cooperative work with local government officials it is possible to be able to design procedures and ordinances that can accomplish more for a community's environmental protection than the information/analysis that is a part of the environmental review process.



## About the EQB

The Environmental Quality Board (EQB) draws together the Governor's Office, the heads of nine state agencies and five citizens in order to develop policy and review proposed projects that could significantly influence Minnesota's environment. The Board staff is housed in the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency building.

## About this document

This document was prepared as a result of an undergraduate research assistantship provided by the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA) New Initiatives Program. In 2005 University of Minnesota undergraduate student April Loeding and a team of EQB staff members, including Gregg Downing, Jon Larsen and John Wells, first prepared this document to streamline public understanding of the environmental review process. Heidi Johnson at the Department of Administration provided assistance in graphic design work for the publication. Dr. Terrence Cooper, a Professor at the University of Minnesota, served as the supervising faculty member for this project.

In 2014 the document was revised by University of Minnesota undergraduate student Amy Whooley and a team of EQB staff members, including Kate Frantz and Caroline Magnuson.

This document is not intended as a substitute for Environmental Quality Board rules and should be used in conjunction with the rule provision parts 4410.1000 to 4410.1700. Copies of the rules are available from Minnesota's Bookstore, [www.minnesotasbookstore.com](http://www.minnesotasbookstore.com), or at the Revisor of Statutes homepage at [www.revisor.mn.gov](http://www.revisor.mn.gov). Further information about the environmental review process is available in the Guide to Minnesota Environmental Review Rules, located on the EQB website. Upon request, this document will be made available in an alternate format, such as braille, large print or audiotape. For TTY, contact Minnesota Relay Service at 800-282-5077 and ask for the Minnesota Environmental Quality Board.

## Addition information

Contact the Minnesota Environmental Quality Board at:

Environmental Review Program  
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Saint Paul, MN 55155  
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Website: [www.eqb.state.mn.us](http://www.eqb.state.mn.us)  
E-mail: [Env.Review@state.mn.us](mailto:Env.Review@state.mn.us)

This document is available in PDF format on the Environmental Quality Board's website:  
<https://www.eqb.state.mn.us/EnvironmentalReview>