

# What Does Our Local Government Do For Us?

## A. WHAT STUDENTS WILL LEARN IN UNIT FOUR

**S**tudents will understand the major services of local government and how those services are delivered. Students will be able to:

- Match a list of services and responsibilities with the appropriate city department.
- Identify the principal functions of general plans, including the most common elements, and describe the reasons for these elements.
- Identify the different functions of government with respect to land use and zoning and explain why land use questions occupy so much time in local government activities.
- Explain how the acronyms NIMBY and NIMTO are related to land use and zoning.
- Describe the purpose and function of environmental impact studies.

## B. ADDITIONAL STUDENT ACTIVITIES

1. Take your classes on a walking field trip in the immediate area of your school. Have them list all examples of

local government activities and which departments of the city or county are responsible for those activities. You may also have students identify activities of other levels of government — state and federal — during the walk.

2. Have a city or county planning staff member debrief the general plan for your local community with the students. The planner might focus on one of the seven elements, as noted on pages 52 and 53 of the student guide, and project what your community's plans are for that element. What areas of your local community are due for changes? Will your students and their families be affected by any potential changes? How do general plans change as goals for the local community change?
3. Give students a sample blank Environmental Impact Statement and have them complete it for either their own residence or some new construction contemplated or underway. These forms, available for reproduction, are available from your planning or building department.
4. Invite as a guest speaker a staff member from the personnel department of the local government entity. Have the

person review the qualifications for employment in various departments of the city or county. Obtain employment flyers from the city, county or school district and review them with students.

5. Have your students consider the three applications for a business operated out of a home, shown on page 57, and have them consider and develop a list of restrictions. Obtain your own community's home business limitations, and compare the lists. Should the actual list be more or less restrictive and why? How much freedom should homeowners have in the use of their property?
6. A more ambitious project would be to have the class create its own general plan for either your own community or for an ideal community the class would design. Each of the seven general plan elements would be assigned to a group to prepare; the entire document might be critiqued by a member of the local planning department or one of the planning commissioners.

### C. UNIT FOUR DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**Question 1.** Explain the connections between the acronyms NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) and NIMTO (Not In My Term Of Office) and the development of controversial land uses. Have there been any of these controversies in your own community? If so, what was the outcome?

#### **Possible student responses**

- a. *The two acronyms refer to the recognition of the need a community has for certain types of developments, but the resistance to having developments occur*

*either in people's immediate neighborhoods or during the term of the elected government official.*

- b. *Answers will vary by community.*

**Question 2.** What are the seven elements required of each city's general plan? What does the state of California urge that every general plan protect or protect against? Why? Which elements of a typical general plan would be of greatest concern in your own local community?

#### **Possible student responses**

- a. *Every general plan will include the following elements: land use, circulation, housing, conservation, open-space, noise and safety, including earthquake zones and responses. The state of California urges that communities protect open space and agricultural land, and to avoid urban sprawl, both in the community and in spheres of influence around a city that may eventually be annexed to the city.*

- b. *Answers will vary by community.*

**Question 3.** What is the purpose of zoning ordinances and why would a planning commission or a city council permit a variance from a zoning regulation?

#### **Possible student responses**

- a. *Zoning ordinances divide the community into different areas, each of which is designed to permit particular types of land uses, such as residential, commercial, open-space, agricultural or industrial. This allows for a balanced community containing compatible land uses. Zoning ordinances also include particulars for land use development requirements.*

b. Variances can be granted if landowners cannot properly use their properties because of anomalies in the land, such as steep hills, or irregular shapes, such as corner residential lots.

## D. INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

Unit IV allows you to involve the:

- mathematics department in creating graphs and charts dealing with percentages of city employees in each department, and comparing that to surrounding communities.
- computer department in preparing charts which show percentages of city land devoted to city parks and open space, and comparing them to the surrounding communities.
- business department in researching information on requirements for employment in different city or county departments, and preparing charts listing requirements, salaries and other pertinent information.

## E. CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

Unit Four: What Does Our Local Government Do For Us?

*Answer Key to Questions on Pages 59 - 60*

1. What is the name of a city's legal authority to preserve order and ensure safety?

**Police powers**

2. If you want a speaker to talk to your school about safety to and from school, which department would you call?

**The police department**

3. If you find a notice on your door asking you to clear the brush from around your house, which department probably left the note?

**The fire department**

4. When your street floods in a rain storm, which department would you call?

**The public works department**

5. If you want to learn the address of the nearest refuse dump, which department would you call?

**The public works department**

6. If the lights on the neighborhood tennis court are not working, which department would you call?

**Parks and recreation department**

7. If you wanted to look at a copy of your city's budget, which department would you call?

**Finance department**

8. Name one program run by counties, but not by cities.

**Health and welfare services**

9. Which local government is responsible for collecting property taxes in California?

**Counties**

10. What does California's redevelopment law allow a city to do?

**Designate a redevelopment area and use its increased property taxes to pay for the redevelopment**

11. Why would a county government object to a city's redevelopment plan?

**Because it loses money (the property tax growth in a redevelopment area)**

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12. What does the acronym NIMBY stand for?

**Not In My Back Yard**

13. Name two land use proposals that usually are reviewed by a planning commission before going to a city council or county board.

**Zoning changes, variances, conditional use permits, subdivisions and plot plans**

14. When contractors have completed a building foundation and are ready to begin framing walls, which department would they call to get an inspector to approve the work?

**The building department**

15. Why does California require every city and county to adopt a general plan?

**To prevent unbridled, chaotic development**

16. What is a “sphere of influence” in a general plan?

**Areas outside a city’s boundaries that impact city services now or in the future**

17. List the elements that a general plan must contain.

**Land use, circulation, housing, conservation, open-space, noise and safety**

18. If you want to know where new housing developments are planned, which general plan element would you consult?

**The land use element**

19. If you want to know how many lanes your street may have in the future, which general plan element would you consult?

**The circulation element**

20. If you want to know the plans for the wooded area across the street, which general plan element would you consult?

**The conservation element**

21. If you want to build something on your property that is not allowed under the local zoning ordinance, what must you obtain?

**A zoning variance**

22. If you want to use your property for some purpose other than that allowed under the local zoning ordinance, what must you obtain?

**A conditional use permit**

23. What does the acronym EIR stand for?

**Environmental Impact Report**

24. Under what circumstances does the law say an environmental assessment must be made on a proposed project?

**When a project could cause significant environmental impacts**

25. If you own property near the coast, what state agency must approve your plans in addition to your local city or county?

**The California Coastal Commission**