

Who Are The Players In Local Government And How Can You Get Involved?

MOVERS AND SHAKERS...OR MOVED AND SHAKEN?

Enter a planning trend called "New Town." Just buy a big piece of cheap agricultural land outside town, but not too far away, and then build a whole new city from the ground up. Developers put in the streets and water, sewer, gas and electric lines, and they make their money selling thousands of houses and the businesses that serve them.

So why has the new town proposed for eight miles outside our city become so controversial?

A whole new community of 24,000 people right next door will change our city and the entire area forever.

So everybody in town is fighting somebody on this issue. We have tenacious citizen groups fighting high-powered public relations firms. We have landowners who want to sell out fighting with their neighbors who want to stay. And we have some heavy-duty lawsuits. We had one election that ousted two of our county supervisors, and now we have a recall campaign that could put the issue to a vote again.

On the one side we have Inland Associates, whose financial resources include the Bank of Caltopia's billions of dollars. They've already spent millions, most of that for the property for their planned city.

On the other side are some people who happen to live near the planned site. They like living there and don't want to see things change. They are people who think growth and change are normal, but don't want it all to happen overnight.

The problem is, if the new town is built, just about everybody in town will either make a lot of money or lose something important to them.

The ability to think critically about public issues, candidates for office, and governmental decisions is an essential attribute of good citizenship in a democratic society.

— California History-Social Science Framework

WELCOME TO LOCAL POLITICS!

Take government, put it in the hands of real people, and you have “politics.”

Politics and government have at least one trait in common with professional sports: We love the game, but it is the players who make it interesting, and those players can be “regular people” as well as elected officials.

Of course, you won't find any local government trading cards in a pack of bubble gum in your neighborhood store. For the most part, the players in city or county government, let alone those in special districts or school districts, are not that well known. Who — or what — is the city manager? What does the city manager do? As a rule, few people can even guess what city council members or a city manager do as part of their function of office, or why their jobs are important.

The Mayor

The mayor can be the single most influential person in a community, but this power in most cases is more a result of the individual's personality and leadership qualities than of any legal powers ascribed to the office itself.



Local government will be more interesting when you begin to understand how many different people can be players in important decisions. Most local governments have a similar structure. What makes one community different from the next is the people who get involved. Most local governments are shaped much more by the personalities holding office — both appointed and elected — than by the offices themselves. Beyond those elected to office, everybody from the news media to local churches, labor unions, neighborhood associations and the League of Women Voters can get involved when a really “hot” issues emerge.

IMPORTANT OFFICEHOLDERS

The Mayor

The mayor can be the single most influential person in a community, but this power in most cases is more a result of the individual's personality and leadership qualities than of any legal powers ascribed to the office itself. Only Los Angeles and San Francisco directly elect mayors whose functions are entirely executive and who are not also members of their city councils. In all other cities, the mayor sits as a voting member of the city council, first among equals, perhaps, but with few powers beyond those of the other elected members.

In the other cities that directly elect a mayor, the job usually includes the responsibility for chairing council meetings. In most cities, voters do not elect a mayor. Instead, the council selects one of its members to serve as mayor. In some cases, the honor is rotated, while in others one person might retain the mayor's position for many years.

The Elected Representatives

“Government of the people, for the people and by the people” means, first and foremost, that the people who make the rules must be elected by those expected to follow them. The legislative bodies of cities, counties, independent special districts and school districts are elected, and the people who serve in these offices naturally tend to wield the greatest degree of influence.

These elected councils and boards in California local governments usually consist of five or more members, each one elected “at-large” by all voters, or by the voters who live within the legislative district. When you have a problem or complaint, who do you call? Your city council member? Do you know who your member is? The fact is, you probably don’t have one. You may have five, seven or more. As of 1994, only 23 of California’s 470 cities elected council members by district. In city elections, the at-large system has become the rule.

However, at-large elections have drawn criticism because all five council members can — and sometimes do — reside in the same neighborhood of a city. Running for office city-wide can be much more expensive and raising large campaign funds becomes more important, because you have to get your message across to all voters in the city, not just those who live in the neighborhoods closest to your home. These shortcomings came to public attention in 1989 when a federal court ordered the city of Watsonville to create districts for its council elections. The court found that the city’s at-large system violated federal laws regarding minority representation and resulted in many people casting ballots that were, in effect, without mean-

ing since none of the winners came from their part of town.

Running for election by district can open up the process to more potential candidates because they face lower campaign costs and can rely more on personal contact with the constituents in the district. On the other hand, some feel that election by district tends to discourage a citywide view on the part of council members. District council members have been accused of working for the benefit of their own district exclusively, without taking into account the overall needs of the city.

In several cities, candidates represent a legislative district and must live and be nominated in that district in a primary election, yet they are elected at large by all of the voters, including those who live in other districts.

In California, all local government officials are elected on a non-partisan basis. The voter does not see the candidates’ political party affiliation on the ballot. While a candidate’s political party rarely remains a secret through a campaign, it is true that most local governments are shaped much more by the personalities holding office — both appointed and elected — than by political parties.

The City Manager

The day-to-day administration of municipal government in California is handled by a city manager hired by the city council. The city manager serves “at the pleasure” of the council and can be removed by a vote of the council.

City managers have great influence over city government because they are responsible for organizing and staffing city government departments. City managers fill key positions such as police chief and

*The antidote to
the abuse of formal
government is
the growth of the
individual.*

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

City Managers
*City managers fill key
positions such as police
chief and directors of
planning, public works,
parks and recreation,
and other important
departments.*

directors of planning, public works, parks and recreation, and other important departments. They coordinate the city's departments, execute policies and enforce ordinances adopted by the city council. The city manager prepares the annual budget for council consideration.

In some cities, department heads are chosen by the city council; this chief executive is usually called a "city administrator."

The City Clerk

In some cities the city clerk is an elective office, but in more and more cities the city clerk is appointed by the city council. The city clerk's office is responsible for keeping all official city records, legal actions and documents; for keeping accurate and complete **minutes** of all city council meetings; and for processing and distributing legal documents and correspondence. The clerk has some responsibility for the administration of local elections and also serves as the filing officer under the provisions of the Fair Political Practices Act, which requires all candidates, elected officials and senior administrators to file statements of economic interests and campaign finance reports. In some medium-sized and small cities the city clerk position is held by the city manager.

The City Attorney

The city attorney is a part-time or full-time appointed officer who advises the council, the city manager and department heads on legal questions and represents the city in any legal action. Several of the larger cities have elected city attorneys.

The City Treasurer

In some cities the city treasurer is an elected position and is responsible for the custody and investment of all city

funds. In a growing number of cities this office has been made an appointed position and may be consolidated with the director of finance.

Boards, Commissions and Special Committees

Local citizens are often appointed by the city council to advise or to perform advisory and regulatory functions, subject to appeal to the council, in one or more aspects of city government. Commissions are frequently relied upon to advise or help administer such functions as city planning, parks and recreation, libraries and traffic. These appointed bodies are excellent settings for citizens to participate in local politics. Individuals who ultimately become candidates for council seats often have had experience on one or more appointed commissions.

Commissions and **boards** tap the talent and expertise of members of the community to enhance the public dialogue. Whether it is a **planning commission** that considers **zoning** issues, a parks commission that deals with recreational matters, or a human relations commission that works to improve race relations, these volunteer bodies offer many citizens a chance to participate in their local government. By involving more citizens, they also improve and expand the quality of debate on local issues.

Citizens interested in serving on a board or commission might consider writing a letter to the mayor or members of the city council expressing their interest in a particular commission. Generally, such citizen boards are appointed by a majority vote of the council, and letters of interest can be helpful when openings must be filled.



The City Attorney

The city attorney is a part-time or full-time appointed officer who advises on legal questions and represents the city in any legal action.

THE COUNTY OFFICIALS

With the exception of the combined city and county of San Francisco, county governments in California do not have an elected chief executive. The boards of supervisors select a member to chair the county board. Local customs vary. In some counties, the senior supervisor is given the gavel; in others, the chair rotates annually. Elsewhere, board members who have never had the chance to chair the body are given preference. In counties without such informal customs, it is necessary for one supervisor to win the support of at least two others to become the presiding officer. Besides chairing meetings, this supervisor gains no additional powers beyond those of the other board members.

In addition to the elected supervisors, a blend of elected and appointed officials administers county operations. Counties in California elect their sheriffs, coroners, district attorneys, **auditors**, tax collectors, assessors and county clerks. Some counties consolidate certain offices, such as the sheriff and coroner, or the tax assessor and tax collector. The supervisors are responsible for appointing the remaining administrative leadership, beginning with the county administrative officer (CAO). The CAO generally selects other key administrators, including the directors of departments like welfare, health, public works and parks.

THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OFFICIALS

Because of the importance of good schools and well-educated young people to a community's economic and

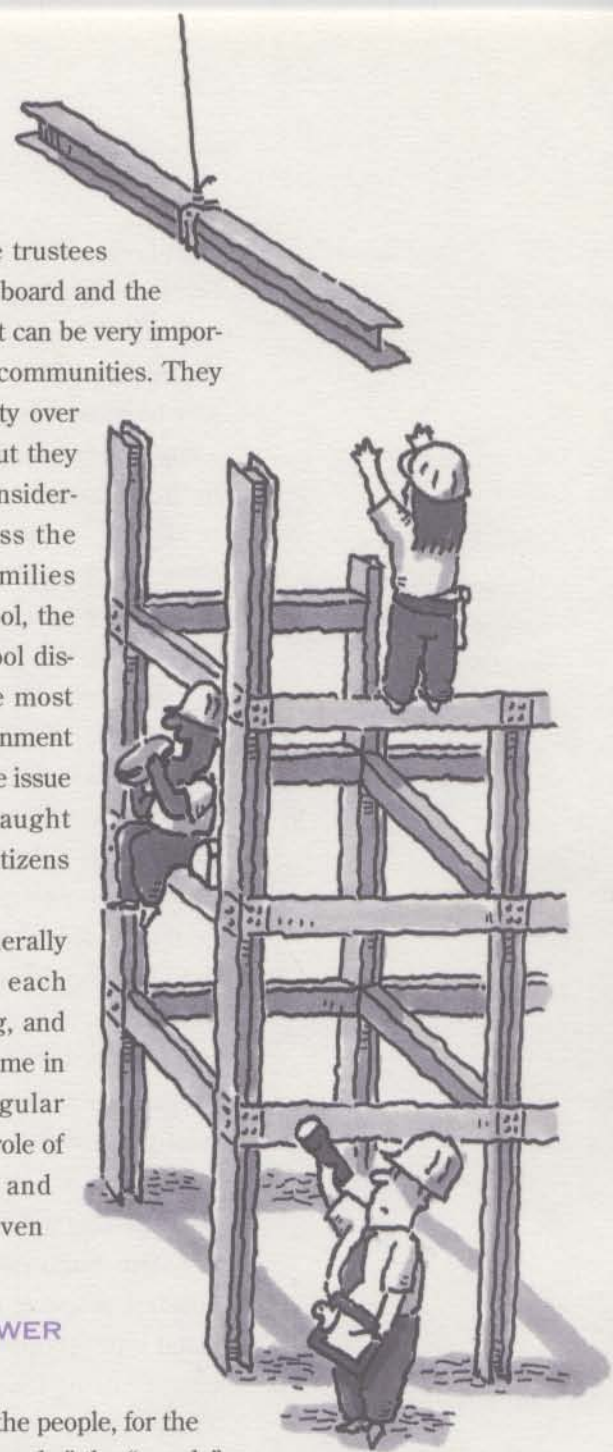
social well-being, the trustees elected to the school board and the district superintendent can be very important players in their communities. They not only have authority over the school system, but they can also exercise considerable influence across the community. For families with children in school, the local school and school district may well be the most important local government of all. For example, the issue of what should be taught often brings many citizens to a public meeting.

School boards generally meet several times each month in the evening, and members serve part-time in addition to their regular jobs. This makes the role of the superintendent and the administration even more important.

COMMUNITY POWER STRUCTURES

In a government "of the people, for the people and by the people," the "people" naturally should play an important role in how their government operates. Both as individuals and as organized interest groups, many members of the community are significant players in local government and politics.

- **Large employers.** The owners and managers of the enterprises that employ most of the local labor force carry considerable weight in most localities. Important decisions must always take into account



Large Employers

The owners and managers of the enterprises that employ most of the local labor force carry considerable weight in most localities.

*To give people
uncontrolled power
is not the way to
preserve liberty.*

—John Adams

any effects on the area's largest employers. How such employers are treated not only affects the jobs of many citizens, but it can also affect other businesses that may be considering a move to the area. If a city's business climate is viewed negatively, companies may decide to relocate to another community. The interests of other major employers, like a university or a military base, are also considered and their managers consulted regularly.

- **Real estate developers.** No business is more directly dependent on the rulings and actions of local government agencies than the real estate development industry. If you want to build a warehouse, you need permits and approvals from a number of agencies, ranging from the planning department and planning commission to the city council or board of supervisors. Developers, therefore, work continually with elected and appointed local government officials, and naturally work as hard as they can to influence decisions that will favor their projects.

- **The business community.** Local business people in most areas have organized into groups such as chambers of commerce or Lions and Rotary Clubs. These groups often involve not only representatives of large corporations, but also small businesses, which employ many of the area's citizens. In many communities, such organizations have influence on government issues that could affect them.

- **Labor unions.** The influence of unions varies widely across the state, depending on which industries are located in an area and the level of union membership. The most influential unions tend to be those representing local government employees. They are not just lobbying

their government: They are also lobbying their boss. Employee unions can exert tremendous influence over local governments because their jobs are directly affected by decisions about pay and working conditions. While public employees are forbidden by law to work on political campaigns on the job, they can be a very powerful force in elections during their after-work hours and with campaign contributions.

- **Local newspapers and news media.** How the media cover local government can have a big effect on legislation and administration. Often the influence is more a result of the media's power to publicize an issue rather than a specific editorial stand taken by newspaper, radio or television management. Local newspapers can have an unusual degree of influence because coverage of local government is often left almost exclusively to neighborhood or weekly



papers. In many parts of California there are too many local governments in the major media market competing for coverage on television and radio. As a result, there is relatively little electronic coverage at all. City government often relies on the local newspaper writer to explain issues to the public.

• **Church leaders.** In many communities, the local church is an important meeting place for community members, and many churches in recent years have taken a more active role mobilizing political support for social and moral issues of interest to their members.

• **Community groups.** Such groups may be neighborhood-based, or they may organize around specific causes, such as preservation of architectural landmarks, the environment or the arts. Members will bring to bear both the importance of their issue and any personal contacts they may have with decision makers.

MAKING YOUR VOICE HEARD IN CITY HALL

There may come a time when you will feel strongly enough about an issue that you will want to try to persuade a city council or board of supervisors to support your position. You may oppose or support proposed budget cuts to the police department; you may oppose or support proposed new taxes; you may wish to make your views heard regarding a hazardous condition near your school; you may want your city to adopt a recycling program. How can you put your best arguments forward?

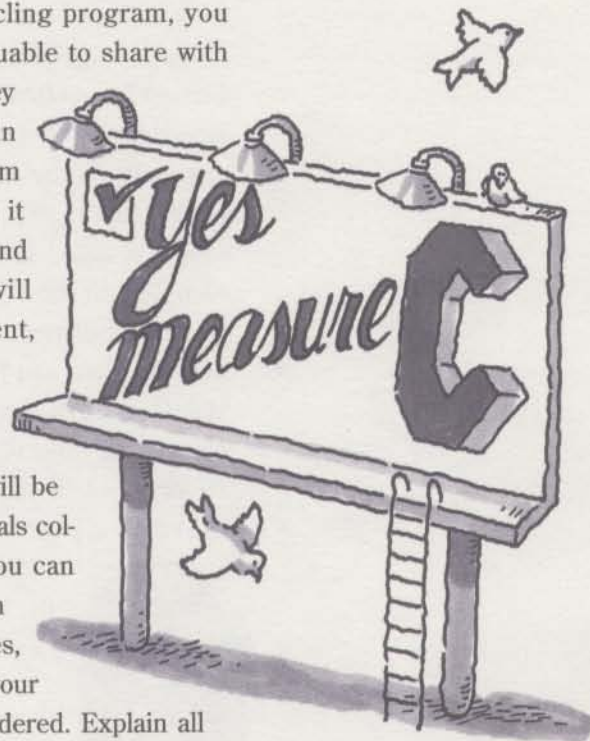
• **Know your issue.** People who know what they are talking about always have more “influence” than those who do not. If you are opposing budget cuts or new taxes, you must know enough about the entire agency to discuss the consequences of not cutting the budget and not raising taxes. Decision makers must consider all sides of an issue, so they are more likely to pay attention to people who can show that they, too, have considered all sides. Once you do learn all about your

issue, you may be in for a surprise: Your original view may have changed!

• **Present good information.** If you have done research on an issue, such as starting a city recycling program, you have something valuable to share with decision makers. They will be interested in how much the program will cost, how much it will save residents and taxpayers, how it will help the environment, and technical information about what materials can be recycled and what will be done with the materials collected. The more you can back up your opinion with facts and figures, the more seriously your opinion will be considered. Explain all the likely effects — both good and bad — that may result from your proposal. Show how your idea will help the community. Prepare a brief fact sheet to highlight key points about your idea.

• **Make personal contact.** Once you have demonstrated your seriousness and interest by submitting information about your issue, schedule an appointment with the decision maker you wish to influence. Politics is a people business. Your arguments will be more persuasive when you present them personally. If you have established a good relationship with the decision maker before in other settings or on other issues, your meeting will be even more cordial and productive.

• **Meet with staff.** In the larger cities, council members may have a staff representative who helps analyze issues and



**Community
Power Structures**
*Both as individuals
and as organized
interest groups, many
members of the commu-
nity are significant
players in local govern-
ment and politics.*

makes recommendations. Be certain to share your information with agency staff as well as your elected representative. They may also be able to advise you on how best to proceed with your issue. While briefing staff is important, try also to meet face-to-face with your elected representative, even if only for a brief time.

- **Talk to the media.** It is important to educate the local press concerning the issues at stake. Reporters can easily be identified at most city meetings. Share your point of view with them and share materials that will help them write their stories. You can also try to win the media's support for your views by meeting with editorial boards and submitting letters to the editorial page at the paper and to the public affairs directors of the local TV stations.



- **Anticipate your opposition.** You can better represent your cause if you know who opposes your idea and what their arguments may be. One effective strategy is to go to meetings of groups known to oppose your view and speak with them directly. Ignoring your opposition can be a serious mistake.

- **There is strength in numbers.** Decision makers are more concerned with issues that affect many people. It helps to demonstrate the degree of support you may have by collecting names on petitions, by sponsoring rallies or by bringing large numbers of people to hearings and meetings. Encourage your supporters to write letters and to make telephone calls. Local officials do take note of the letters and phone calls they receive. They know that for every person who contacts them there are probably several more who feel the same way, but have not bothered to call or to write.

- **Use good sense.** When you feel strongly about an issue, it is easy to go overboard. Think through the strategies you plan to use, and try to picture how they will be perceived by others, by your opposition, and by the decision makers you hope to persuade. The Golden Rule has its own application in political debate: Don't do unto others what you would not have them do unto you. The system works best for those who respect it.

New Words

auditor
board
minutes

planning
commission
zoning

A Day In The Life



You have read about some of the important jobs you can find in almost any city, county or other local government. Jobs like “city manager” or “supervisor” are standardized titles, but the people who fill these positions can be very different from each other. What are these jobs like and what kinds of people fill them? How do their decisions affect your family’s life?

Take a moment to picture yourself in a job in your local city, county or other local government agency. Whose job do you think might be the most exciting? What do you suppose they do during their work day? What kinds of people do they meet and work with? Why?

1. Pick the position in local government that you think might be the most interesting. Note: You may want to coordinate with your classmates so you don’t all choose the same position.
2. With what you know about local government, imagine what the work day might look like. Draw up a schedule from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. — or later! — and then fill it in with the meetings and appointments in which you can picture your chosen officeholder participating. These might be meetings with staff people, other agencies, community groups and community social gatherings. Feel free to use your imagination.
3. Now it’s time for a reality check! Call the office of the person who currently holds the job you’ve been thinking about. Explain to the staff your assignment, and ask if you could have a copy of the officeholder’s schedule from a recent work day. Interview the staff member, either by telephone or in person. How does it compare to what you imagined it might be?
4. Prepare a written report about your interview or make an oral presentation to your class.
5. If you are tracking an elected official, such as a mayor, council member, or county supervisor, consider working on his or her next election campaign. There is no more exciting introduction to politics and the nuts and bolts of government than an election campaign and its moment of truth on election day!
6. When you contact the office of the person whose job you are studying, you should also ask if that office accepts youth interns. Volunteering as an intern is an excellent way to learn about what an agency does and how it operates. It can be an opportunity to contribute to your community, and a great experience.





Who's Who In Your Town?

After studying the Community Power Structures section's list of the important groups in any community, think about who in your community is part of each group. You may work in teams, or exchange thoughts about your community's power structure in a class discussion.

1. What companies or government agencies do you think might be the biggest employers in your community? Poll your classmates to learn where their parents or neighbors work. Are there any large factories in town with a large number of employees?
2. Is there a service club in your community? Perhaps a Rotary Club, Urban League, Kiwanis Club, Soroptimists, Lions, Parent/Teacher Association, League of Women Voters? Do you have a Chamber of Commerce? Big Brothers or Big Sisters? Perhaps your class could send delegations on field trips to your service group meetings. These are often held at lunch in a public restaurant, and usually include an informational program. Your class should choose a club and write a letter asking to visit. Have the membership help you answer two questions:
 - A. What is the most important contribution your club makes to your community?
 - B. What is the most important thing you would like to change about City Hall (or the County Board of Supervisors)?Given a written request and enough time to schedule, most community service groups would be very happy to have students from local schools as their guests at a meeting.
3. Do any of your classmates' parents belong to a labor union or a professional association? Invite a representative from an association to come to your school to speak to your class. Most are very interested in education and often have members who can speak to student groups. Again, a letter describing what you are studying, and what kind of questions you might have about the union's activities and its interest in local government will be helpful.
4. What other groups does your family belong to? Are you part of a church congregation? Do your parents participate in an official or informal neighborhood association? If so, try to find out as much as you can about what these groups do and report back to the class.
5. Make a list of agencies and organizations in your community that have student members or youth committees. (Hint: Does your school board have a student member? Does that member vote?) Are young people in your community encouraged to give input for planning new projects, such as a park? Do you think it is important for young people to be involved in their communities? Why? What must an individual contribute to be an effective member of the community?
6. Collect editions of the local newspaper until you have at least one newspaper for every student in your class. Skim through the papers to find any articles that show how one of the groups listed in the Community Power Structures section on pages 39 and 40 has tried to have an impact on a local government issue. Give an oral presentation to your class telling about your article.

The Day The City Voted On Professional Sports

You have learned about the public servants who run our local governments, and about the different kinds of interest groups within any community who work to represent their views in the halls of government. As a class project, your class will demonstrate how the system works by taking an issue to the city council and presenting the views of some of the different groups within your community.

Some local business leaders are working on a deal to bring an NFL franchise to your town. You are a big football fan and are delighted, but much to your surprise there are others in town who aren't as pleased. In fact, just about everybody in town has an opinion, and every group imaginable has asked for time to address the city council before it takes a vote. Your classroom will become the city council's chambers for a day as you break into teams to present the viewpoints of the various groups with strong opinions on the issue.

1. Using at least the seven groups listed in Community Power Structures, on pages 39 and 40, you should decide which group you might most enjoy representing. Can you think of any other interests, or any special community groups that would take an interest but are not listed? Do you feel strongly enough, pro or con, to create a lobbying group just for this issue? Can you think up a catchy name for it?

2. Design a ballot measure to tax residents to help fund the new team. Which of the Community Power Structures might support the measure? Which might be against it? Who else might support or oppose the measure? Why?
3. Working with your group, make a list of things you might do to press your case before the evening of the decisive council meeting.
4. Work out a 5-to-7 minute presentation before the city council. Pay attention to the tips included in Making Your Voice Heard In City Hall. Have everybody in your group share in making the presentation.
5. Invite a city council member or other members of the community to act as your "city council." You might include elected officials, agency staff, school or district administrators, parents and businesspeople. Make your presentations just as an interest group would do at an official council meeting. Let your guest "city council" ask questions, take a vote based on the arguments and give verbal feedback on your presentation.



Who Are The Players In Local Government And How Can You Get Involved?

Please answer the following questions to demonstrate what you have learned.

1. What will the ballot and voter pamphlet NOT tell you about any candidates for local government offices?
2. Why can the mayor be called “first among equals” in most cities?
3. In most California cities, who elects the mayor?
4. What two California cities elect a mayor who does not also serve on the city council?
5. What is the minimum number elected to most boards and councils in California local governments?
6. Which voters do you seek when you run in an “at-large” election?
7. As of 1994, how many cities elect council members by district?
8. Why can district elections open up the process to more potential candidates?
9. Why did a federal court find the city of Watsonville’s at-large system to be illegal?
10. Who is responsible for presenting a proposed budget to the city council in most cities?
11. With whom do you file your campaign expense reports when you run for city council?
12. If you sue your city government, who is likely to oppose your attorney in court?
13. Whose job is it to determine whether a city’s revenues will be sufficient to meet expenses?
14. What arm of city government is often considered to be a springboard for running for city council?
15. Who elects the presiding officer of a county board of supervisors?
16. What decisions do school board members make that might make them key players in their community?
17. Name an issue that can usually draw a crowd to a school board meeting.
18. Name at least two county office holders — other than supervisors — who are elected by the voters.
19. What is a possible negative effect of electing council members by district instead of “at large”?
20. Which industry normally is the most directly dependent on the actions of a city council or county board of supervisors?
21. Which unions usually have the most influence over the actions of a city council?
22. In your community, do you believe that newspapers, radio or television give local government issues more coverage? Explain your choice.
23. What is the Golden Rule as applied to political debate and lobbying?