

UNIT 3:

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.

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.


For the most part, the players in city, county, special district or school district government are not well known. Few people can even guess what a board member or city manager does as part of their function or why their jobs are important.

NEW WORDS

The following are new words students will read in this text:

Auditor
Board
Minutes
Planning commission
Zoning

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Local government is more interesting when you begin to understand how many different people are 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 houses of worship, labor unions, neighborhood associations, and the League of Women Voters can get involved when really “hot” issues emerge.

IMPORTANT OFFICEHOLDERS

The Mayor

The mayor can be the single most influential person in an incorporated 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.

Some cities like Los Angeles, San Diego and San Francisco directly elect mayors whose functions are entirely executive and who are not also members of their city’s councils. In most cities, the mayor sits as a voting member of the city council, the first among equals, but with few powers beyond those of the other elected members.

In most cities, voters do not elect a mayor. Instead, the council selects one of its own 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 just one. You may have five, seven or more! No single board member has power by her or himself, the authority is invested in the board as a whole and a majority of that board is required to take action.

As of 2019, approximately 100 of California’s 482 cities elected council members by district and all other cities elect members at-large. While many cities are moving to district-based elections, the at-large system is still very common. 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 citywide 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 a large geographic area, not just to people living in your neighborhood.

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 meaning 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 some smaller communities, district elections may also make it difficult to field candidates for local boards.

In several local agencies, 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 Manager

The day-to-day administration of municipal government in California is handled by a manager, sometimes called a general manager, administrative officer or chief executive officer, hired by the local government’s board or council. The manager serves “at the pleasure” of the council and can be removed by a vote of the council. Managers have great influence over government because they

are responsible for organizing and staffing departments. Managers fill key positions such as police chief and directors of planning, public works and other important departments. They coordinate all of the departments, execute policies and enforce ordinances adopted by the board or council. The manager also prepares the annual budget for board or council consideration.

The Clerk

In some local governments the clerk is an elective office. In more and more local governments, the clerk is appointed by the board or council. The clerk's office is responsible for keeping all official records including the agenda, the meeting's minutes, and for processing and distributing legal documents and correspondence. As the local elections official, the clerk is responsible 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 organizations the clerk position is held by the manager or executive.

The Agency's Attorney

The attorney is a part-time or full-time appointed officer who advises agency officials, including the council or board, the manager, department heads and clerks, on legal questions and represents the agency in any legal action. Larger organizations may have elected attorneys. Attorneys may be contracted or work directly for the local government agency.

The Treasurer

In some cities and counties, a treasurer is elected and responsible for the custody and investment of all public funds. In a growing number of agencies 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 board or council to advise or to perform advisory and regulatory functions, subject to appeal to the board or council, in one or more aspects of local government. Commissions are frequently relied upon to advise or help administer such functions as planning, parks and recreation, libraries and traffic. These appointed bodies are excellent settings for residents to participate in local politics. Individuals who ultimately become candidates for board or council seats often have had experience on one or more appointed commissions.

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 residents a chance to participate in their local government. By involving more people, they also improve and expand the quality of discussion on local issues.

Residents interested in serving on a board or commission may view opportunities on agency websites or write to agency officials (clerk, board member, executive officer) to learn how to get started. A commission vacancy may be filled after an interview and formal recruitment process. Generally, such positions are appointed by a majority vote of the local agency's governing body.

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. 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, sometimes, the clerk is elected. 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 or executive officer (CAO/CEO). The CAO or CEO generally selects other key administrators, including the directors of departments like welfare, health, public works and parks.

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 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 community’s business climate is viewed negatively, companies may decide to relocate to another area. 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, television news and social 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. In many parts of California there are too many local governments in any given major media market competing for coverage on television and radio. As a result, social media can have an unusual degree of influence. Local governments may work with media partners to present issues to the public and outreach to the community.
- **Faith leaders.** In many communities, local houses of worship are important meetings place for people. In recent years, faith-based groups have taken a more active role in 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 development projects, the environment or the arts. Members are passionate about their issue and may be familiar with local decision makers.

Making your voice heard

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, special district board, or county 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 or transit fares. You may wish to make your views heard regarding a crosswalk, bike lane or hazardous condition near your school, home or job. You may want your recreation and park district to build a new skate park or soccer field. 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 have considered all sides. Once you do learn all about your issue, you may be in for a surprise: Your view may have changed!
- **Present good information.** If you have done research on an issue, such as starting a recycling program, you have something valuable to share with 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.** Politics is a people business. Clearly communicate about your issue by email or letter and then schedule an appointment with the elected official you wish to influence. Your arguments will be more persuasive when you present them personally so be willing to meet in person with the elected official. 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 larger government agencies, board members or council members may have a staff representative who helps analyze issues and 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 with your elected representative, even if only for a brief time.
- **Engage the media.** It is important to educate the local media concerning the issues at stake. Reporters can easily be identified at most government meetings as the people with video and audio equipment. 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.
- **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 emails and letters and to make calls. Local officials do take note of the written notes 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.

A DAY IN THE LIFE EXERCISE

You have read about some of the important jobs you can find in almost any city, county, or other local government. Jobs like “general manager” or “board member” 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, special district 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 members, 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 may 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. 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. Campaigns are also eager to accept volunteers. If there is a candidate or issue about which you are passionate, consider volunteering for their campaign. Both can be opportunities to contribute to your community, and a great experience.