

An Introduction to Municipalities



American White Pelican
Photo: Georgia Wilson/ Great Backyard Bird Count

Local government processes may seem difficult to navigate, but this is often the first step in becoming a better advocate. In this document, we introduce the basics of local government structure and function to help familiarize you with common systems and processes¹.

There are 412 municipalities in Florida. These are all Charter/Home Rule cities, meaning that the municipalities can do anything which state law has not prohibited them from doing. Municipalities also do not have any taxing authority except that granted by the state. In addition, the provisions that counties have at their level of government supersede the provisions in city charters.

Structure

MUNICIPAL CHARTERS

Every municipality has a charter that contains basic provisions for their organization and function. A charter should include provisions that are not easily subject to change in order to protect citizens. A charter should also not include very detailed provisions that would be difficult to change without a public referendum².

The charter must be originated within a community and receive a majority vote from citizens to be formally approved. A proposed charter is filed with a county commission and must also be adopted by the Florida legislature via a special act.

Once enacted, charters can be changed or amended. Amendments to the charter can be proposed by the council by an ordinance or by petition from registered voters.

Forms of Local Government*

COUNCIL-MANAGER

- A city council forms policies and sets the budget.
- A city manager is appointed by the council and carries out day-to-day administrative operations.
- A council member is often chosen to be mayor on a rotating basis.

MAYOR-COUNCIL

- A mayor is elected separate from the council.
- The council is elected and has legislative powers.
- A city manager may also be appointed and has limited administrative authority.
- Can either be a strong or weak form:
 - **Strong:** mayor has a strong influence on policymaking and has a fair number of administrative duties.
 - **Weak:** mayor is simply rotated amongst council members, but the council retains the majority of all administrative powers.

COMMISSION FORM³

- Commissioners serve collectively as the policymaking body.
- No mayor or city manager in the traditional commission form.

**Most cities in Florida contain elements from these forms, with council-manager being the most common.*

1 The material in this document was adapted from the Florida League of Cities' "The Florida Municipal Officials' Manual" published in 2013. For more information about Florida League of Cities and to find a list of Florida municipalities, visit the [Florida League of Cities website](#).

2 A general term referring to measures that appear on the ballot publicly.

3 Many municipalities call their city council a "commission" but do not have the commission form of government.

The Policymaking Process

Municipal Actions

There are many types of actions that municipal councils take. One type is a motion that are often verbal and can be made on a range of different topics. A motion can be done on a simple topic or one that is complex, requiring majority approval by the council.

Most council actions, however, involve voting on ordinances and resolutions:

ORDINANCES

Ordinances are rules, laws, or statutes adopted by the municipal delegative body and are enforceable as local law.

RESOLUTIONS

Resolutions are formal expressions of opinion or will but are not legally binding.

There are procedural requirements for councils that are specified in the Florida Statutes. Ordinances and resolutions must be introduced and read on at least two separate days. In addition, at least 10 days prior to a council of adoption, notice of a proposed ordinance must be mentioned in a circulated newspaper with an invitation for public comment.

Enacted ordinances and resolutions that may have a long-term effect are recorded and available for review by any interested party. This record, meeting minutes, and all other municipal records must be available to the public.



Ruby-throated Hummingbird
Photo: Laura Zamfirescu/
Audubon Photography Awards

Council Meetings

Council meetings are generally of two types, legislative and non-legislative.

LEGISLATIVE

Many municipal charters prescribe a schedule for regular legislative meetings and this must be pre-announced. In these meetings, formal action is taken on policy proposals in the form of ordinances and resolutions.

Most municipalities meet either monthly or bi-weekly. There may be special meetings in emergencies or certain situations, but these types of meetings should be well advertised if possible. All legislative meetings are open to the public and press to hear council discussion. They also generally include a period for public comment and often a formal public hearing.

NON-LEGISLATIVE

In these types of meetings, no formal action is taken on ordinances and resolutions. Instead, these are meetings to better discuss topics that will appear in legislative council meetings. There are three kinds of non-legislative meetings:

1. **Workshops:** These can be held on a variety of subjects and are informal sessions for council members to discuss specific topics. These meetings must be open to the public although the public may be limited in their involvement in the discussion.
2. **Public Hearings:** These may be held as required by state or local law or may be held when considering a subject that will have a large impact on the community. These meetings allow for more citizen participation than in other forms of council meetings.
3. **Organizational Meetings:** These types of meetings are held shortly after elections to plan for organizational considerations such as meeting schedules and how business will be conducted.

In all meetings, citizens must be allowed to attend but there is no state or local requirement that they must be allowed to participate in council meetings. However, most municipalities encourage citizen participation during public hearings and legislative meetings. By participating in local municipality meetings and understanding your legislative process, you can move the needle on local climate initiatives and policies.

To learn more about how you can engage with your local municipality to support climate solutions, please email Laura.Aguirre@audubon.org