

## Terms Used in Local Government Legislation

Minnesota statutes and laws use a number of terms to refer to local governmental units, and from one law to another they may not mean the same thing. This is a summary of commonly used terms.

- Local government** “Local government” usually refers to counties, towns, and cities. Single- or multi-purpose special districts, such as school districts, are frequently included in the term “political subdivision” but are less often defined as local governments. Sometimes, absent a definition, only the context of the law will indicate what entities are meant to be included.
- Political subdivision** “Political subdivision” is probably the broadest term used to describe any public body that is not state or federal government. However, a statute may define the term to mean specific entities.
- Public corporation** In the context of local government, “public corporation” means an entity created for the administration of public affairs, an instrumentality of the state, and may include counties, cities, towns, and special purpose entities. It also applies to quasi-governmental entities, created in law and often exempt from some laws that apply to state agencies. See, e.g., Enterprise Minnesota, Inc. [Minn. Stat. § 116O.03](#), subd. 1.
- Municipal corporation** In the narrowest sense, a municipal corporation is a city. However, the term can be defined for the purposes of a law to include other governmental units.
- City: statutory or home rule charter; classification** **There are two types of cities in Minnesota: statutory and home rule charter.** A statutory city is governed by statute and any special laws enacted for that city. A home rule charter city is governed by its charter and any special laws enacted for that city. Also, if the home rule charter is silent on a matter that is addressed for statutory cities by general law, and general law does not prohibit a city charter from addressing the matter or expressly provide that a city charter prevails over general law, then the city may apply the general law on the matter. [Minn. Stat. § 410.33](#).
- “In any law adopted after July 1, 1976, the word ‘city’ when used without further description extending the application of the term to home rule charter cities means statutory cities only.” [Minn. Stat. § 410.015](#).
- Classification:** Cities are divided, for legislative purposes, into classes as follows:
- First class: over 100,000 inhabitants; once a city is defined to be of the first class, it is not reclassified unless its population decreases by 25 percent from the census figures that last qualified the city for inclusion in the class
  - Second class: 20,001 to 100,000 inhabitants
  - Third class: 10,001 to 20,000 inhabitants

- Fourth class: not more than 10,000 inhabitants

Changes in classification take effect after the federal decennial census. [Minn. Stat. § 410.01](#)

“Village” and “borough” are obsolete terms. All villages and boroughs in the state became statutory cities in the early 1970s.

***Municipality***

This term generally means a city but many statutes define it to include other entities. For example, the uniform municipal contracting law defines “municipality” to mean “a county, town, city, school district or other municipal corporation or political subdivision of the state authorized by law to enter into contracts.” [Minn. Stat. § 471.345](#), subd. 1.

***County***

“County” rarely needs additional definition except to limit its application or to define it as a shorthand reference to the county board or some other entity covered by the law.

***Town, township, urban town***

“Town” and “township” have been used interchangeably in Minnesota law, but “town” is the correct term to refer to an organized governmental unit and “township” is the term to refer to the geographic area. In county areas without organized town government, the term “unorganized territory” is also used. As in other states, Minnesota towns are based on the congressional townships—generally 36 square miles. Towns are the primary local government units for unincorporated areas. Urban towns are those towns that have been granted some of the same powers as statutory cities.

***Incorporated, unincorporated***

In the context of governmental units, “incorporated” means a city and “unincorporated” means a town. See [Minn. Stat. § 414.011](#), subd. 3.

***Interpretation of statutes, definitions***

“When a county, town, or city is mentioned, without any particular description, it imports the particular county, town, or city appropriate to the matter.” [Minn. Stat. § 645.44](#), subd. 3.

***Metropolitan area***

There are at least two definitions of “metropolitan area” used in state law. One means the seven-county area of Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey, Scott, and Washington counties that is within the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan Council. [Minn. Stat. § 473.121](#), subd. 2.

Another definition is “metropolitan statistical area” (MSA), defined by the federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) using OMB standards applied to U.S. Census Bureau data. As of July 2015, the Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington MSA includes 14 Minnesota counties (the seven named above and Chisago, Isanti, Le Sueur, Mille Lacs, Sherburne, Sibley, and Wright), and the Wisconsin counties of Pierce and St. Croix.

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