

Section 1: Local Government

Chapter 2: Structure of Local Government

Villages

The basic difference between a city and a village is that wherever an area is incorporated as a village, it stays within the township. Village residents participate in township affairs and pay township taxes in addition to having their own village government. Incorporation as a city, however, removes an area from township government. City dwellers participate in county elections and pay county taxes as do village residents but are removed from township units.

Villages in Michigan are organized primarily to establish local regulatory ordinances and to provide local services such as fire and police protection, public works, and utilities. Certain local duties required by the state are performed by the embracing township, including assessing property; collecting taxes for counties and school districts; and administering village, county, state, and national elections. Most villages (206 of 252) are still governed under the General Law Village Act. Charters for villages are the exception, although any village may adopt a home rule document under the Home Rule Village Act.

Cities

Cities must perform the basic, state-required duties as well as provide their own services. In addition to being responsible for assessing property and collecting taxes for county and school purposes, cities are responsible for registering voters and conducting all elections within their boundaries. The greater independence of cities in maintaining local regulations and functions and state-imposed duties accounts for the creation of many small cities in Michigan. The trend has also developed in villages to seek incorporation as cities whereby they achieve a separation of jurisdiction from the township. As of 2024, Michigan had 281 incorporated cities and 252 incorporated villages—a total of 533 municipalities. Of this total number, 323 had adopted home rule charters.

In 1895, adoption of the Fourth Class City Act created two types of cities: those of 3,000 to 10,000 population, which came under the Act, and all others which remained “special charter” cities. As of 2024, all but one “special charter” city (Mackinac Island) has reincorporated as home rule cities. As of 2024, four cities continue to be governed by the Fourth Class City Act.

Home Rule

Home rule generally refers to the authority of a city or village to draft and adopt a charter for its own government. Under Michigan's Constitution, the Legislature must provide for the incorporation of cities and villages by general law. Michigan's Legislature did this by enacting the Home Rule City Act and the Home Rule Village Act, both of 1909. These limit the rate of taxation and restrict the borrowing of money and contracting of debt. The voters of each city and village have the power to frame, adopt, and amend charters in accordance with these general laws. Through their established representative government, they may pass laws and ordinances pertaining to municipal concerns subject to the constitution and general laws.

By 2024, 277 cities and 46 villages had adopted home rule charters, making Michigan one of the leading home rule states in the nation.

Charters

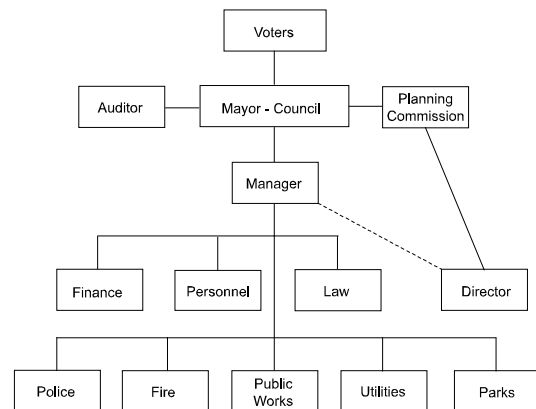
The responsibility for enacting charters lies with locally elected charter commissioners, subject to legal review by the governor under statutory requirements. Since charters must be adopted by local referendum, the voters themselves make the final determination about the design of their government. The Michigan Municipal League renders informational assistance on charters through its inquiry service, and several municipal attorneys have become specialists in drafting charters.

Form of Government: Cities

Council-Manager Form

Among Michigan home rule cities, close to 200 use the council-manager form, in which the elected council appoints a professionally trained and experienced manager to administer day-to-day operations and make recommendations to the city council. The council makes all policy decisions, including review, revision, and final approval of the proposed annual budget. The council may dismiss the manager if duties are not being performed satisfactorily.

Council-Manager Form

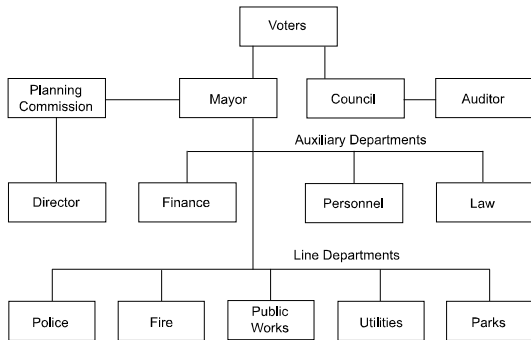


Mayor-Council Plan

Two forms of the mayor-council plan are used by a number of Michigan home rule cities:

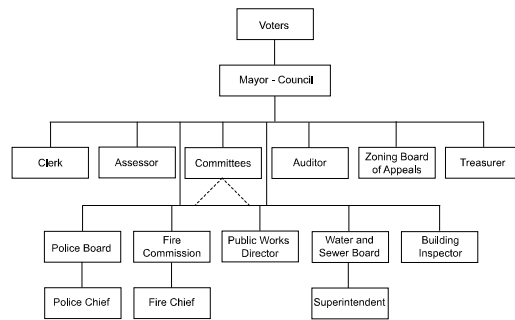
The **“strong” mayor form** is most often found in larger cities where the directly elected mayor, who is not a member of the governing body, appoints and removes the key administrative officials (those who, by charter, report directly to and assist the mayor); often has variations of veto power over council decisions; is usually salaried; and is expected to devote full-time to mayoral duties.

Strong Mayor Form



The **“weak” mayor form** is found generally in smaller cities and villages. The mayor (city) or president (village) is a member of the governing body, chairs council meetings, and normally is the municipality’s chief policy and ceremonial official by virtue of the position of mayor rather than through any specific authority extending beyond that of the councilmembers. The mayor also serves as chief administrative official, although department heads often operate more or less independently with only general coordination. There is no central administrator by formal title, such as city manager.

Weak mayor form



Election/Selection of Mayor

Mayors in about half of Michigan’s home rule cities are chosen directly by the people, in at-large elections (including all strong mayor communities). In the remaining cities, council chooses the mayor from among its ranks to serve a one- or two-year term.

City councilmembers and village trustees are typically elected to two-year or four-year terms, about half at each election, to preserve some continuity of personnel, experience, and perhaps policy. Often a charter calls for electing half the council at each election, plus the mayor for a term half as long as the councilmembers, preserving continuity but making possible a shift of majority at any election.

Most Michigan cities have at-large elections rather than ward elections where voters in each ward (geographic section of the city) elect a councilmember or members.

Selection of Administrative Officials

The trend in Michigan home rule charters is to appoint, rather than elect, administrative officials who must have technical competence. In council-manager cities and villages, the

manager appoints and removes department heads, sometimes with council approval, depending on charter requirements. In the weak mayor form, council approval of appointments is generally required.

Form of Government: Villages

General Law Villages

Of the 252 villages in Michigan, 46 have home rule charters, and 206 are governed under the General Law Village Act (1895 PA 3). Under the GLVA, all the then existing villages in Michigan were reincorporated and standards were set for future incorporations. The general law village, still the most common by far, has the typical weak mayor-council form of government.

Village presidents are elected at-large, serve two-year terms, and are full voting member of the council. In 1974, the Act was amended to provide for four-year terms for the six trustees—three of whom are elected biennially, unless a village exempted itself prior to January 1, 1974. Further significant amendments to the GLV Act passed in 1998—the option to reduce council from seven to five members and to appoint the clerk and treasurer.

Home Rule Villages

The Home Rule Village Act requires that every village so incorporated provide for the election of a president, clerk, and legislative body, and for the election or appointment of such other officers and boards as may be essential. However, the president and clerk need not be directly elected by the people but may be “elected” by the village council. Of the 46 home rule villages, only 18 have a village manager position.

The home rule village form of government offers flexibility that is not found in the General Law Village Act. Home rule village charters in Michigan are as diverse as the communities that adopt them.

Chapter by League staff.