

Chapter 1

Structure of Local Government in Michigan

by MML Membership Engagement Department

The present status of cities and villages in Michigan is the result of historical tradition, of the home rule provisions of the Constitutions of 1908 and 1963, of the home rule acts of 1907, and the initiative of individual communities.

During the nineteenth century, the state legislature recognized the need to incorporate the densely settled communities within the basic pattern of counties and townships. The system of local government written into Michigan's 1908 and 1963 constitutions recognized the continuing existence of counties and townships, with the voluntary incorporation of the more densely settled areas as cities and villages. An innovation in the 1908 constitution was a provision for city and village home rule charters—a change which was to have many repercussions.

Villages

The basic difference between a city and a village is that whenever and wherever an area is incorporated as a village, it stays within the township. The villagers 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 take part in county elections and pay county taxes, as do villagers—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 of the local duties required by the state are not demanded of the village but are performed by the embracing township including assessing property; collecting taxes for counties and school districts; and administering county, state and national elections.

Most of the villages (206 of 252) are still governed under the General Law Village Act, 1895 PA 3 as amended. Charters for villages are the exception, although any village may adopt a home rule document under 1909 PA 278, the Home Rule Village Act.

Cities

A city, being withdrawn from the township, must perform the basic, state-required duties as well as its own services. In addition to being responsible for assessing property and collecting taxes for county and school purposes, the city also becomes solely responsible for registration of voters and conduct of all elections within its boundaries.

The greater independence of the city, in maintaining local regulations and functions and state-imposed duties in one integrated unit, accounts for the creation of many small cities in Michigan during recent decades. The trend has also developed in villages to seek incorporation as cities whereby they achieve a separation of jurisdiction from the township.

As of 2025, 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 2025, all but one of the "special charter" cities have reincorporated as home rule cities. As of January 1, 1980 all fourth class cities became home rule cities by virtue of 1976 PA 334 (see also OAG 5525, 7/13/1979), which continued the Fourth Class City Act as the charter for each former fourth class city until it elects to revise its charter. As of 2025, four cities continue to be governed by the Fourth Class City Act.

Standards of Incorporation

For incorporation of a home rule village, a population of 150 is the minimum, but there must be a minimum density of 100 to the square mile. There is no statutory requirement that a village must become a city when it experiences a rapid growth in population. Once incorporated, villages may seek reincorporation as fifth class home rule cities, providing their population is between 750 and 2,000. Alternatively, they may seek reincorporation as home rule cities if their population exceeds 2,000 with a density of 500 per square mile. For years, the Home Rule City Act required 2,000 population and density of 500 per square mile for city incorporation. A 1931 amendment permitted fifth class city incorporation at 750 to 2,000 population with the same 500 per square mile density requirement, but authorized villages within this range to reincorporate as cities regardless of density.

There is no basic difference between a fifth class home rule city and a home rule city, except the population differential and the statutory requirements that fifth class home rule cities hold their elections on an at-large basis. If all the territory of an organized township is included within the boundaries of a village or villages, the village or villages, without boundary changes, may be incorporated as a city or cities as provided in 1982 PA 457.

Unincorporated territory may be incorporated as a fifth class home rule city provided the population ranges from 750 to 2,000 and there is a density of 500 persons per square mile. The same density rule applies to the incorporation of territory as a home rule city if the area has a population of more than 2,000. There are no other methods of city incorporation today. A new city must be incorporated under the Home Rule City Act.

State Boundary Commission

Under 1968 PA 191, the State Boundary Commission must approve all petitions for city and village incorporation. The Boundary Commission is composed of three members appointed by the governor. When the commission sits in any county, the three members are joined by two county representatives (one from a township and one from a city), appointed by the probate judge.

In reviewing petitions for incorporation, the Boundary Commission is guided by certain statutory criteria: population; density; land area and uses; valuation; topography and drainage basins; urban growth factors; and business, commercial and industrial development. Additional factors are the need for governmental services; present status of services in the area to be incorporated; future needs; practicability of supplying such services by incorporation; probable effect on the local governmental units remaining; relation of tax increases to benefits; and the financial capability of the proposed municipality (city or village). In other words, the Boundary Commission review centers on the feasibility of the proposed city or village.

After reviewing based on criteria, the Boundary Commission may deny or affirm the petition. (Affirmative action may include revision of the proposed boundaries on the commission's initiative.) Once the Boundary Commission has issued an order approving incorporation, a petition may be filed for a referendum on the proposal. The referendum permits the voters to accept or reject the incorporation. If incorporation is approved by the voters, the incorporation may be finally accomplished only through the existing process of drafting and adopting a city or village charter.

Home Rule

Home rule generally refers to the authority of a city or village under a state's constitution and laws to draft and adopt a charter for its own government. This contrasts with legislative establishment of local charters by special act, which results in mandated charters from state capitals. Home rule frees cities and villages to devise forms of government and exercise powers of local self-government under locally prepared charters adopted by local referendum.

Constitutional home rule is self-executing in some states and not so in others. Non-self-executing home rule, which Michigan leaders wrote into the 1908 Constitution, leaves it up to the state legislature to implement the home rule powers. Michigan's legislature did this by enacting the Home Rule City Act and the Home Rule Village Act, both of 1909.

In turning to home rule when it did, Michigan became the seventh state to join in a movement which now includes 37 states. It was more than a national trend which motivated the Michigan Constitutional Convention early in this century. Under the special act system of the nineteenth century, Michigan cities were, according to one observer writing closer to the time, "afflicted by their charters with an assortment of governmental antiquities." *Robert T. Crane, Municipal Home Rule in Michigan, Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Convention of the Illinois Municipal League (Urbana, 1917), pp.62-65.*

The Legislature, under Article VII (Sections 21-22) of the 1963 Michigan Constitution, must provide for the incorporation of cities and villages by general law. Such general laws of incorporation must limit their rate of taxation and restrict their borrowing of money and their contracting of debt. The voters of each city and village have power to frame, adopt and amend charters in accordance with these general laws.

Through regularly constituted authority, namely their established representative government, they may pass laws and ordinances pertaining to municipal concerns subject to the constitution and general laws. By January 2003, 264 cities and 48 villages had adopted home rule charters. The total of 312 charters so adopted makes Michigan one of the leading home rule states in the nation.

Charters

The Michigan Municipal League, versed in the needs of cities and villages, renders informational assistance through its charter inquiry service. A few Michigan attorneys have become specialists in drafting charters. The quality of city and village charters has improved steadily. No longer is it necessary for elected home rule charter commissioners to search for model charters elsewhere, since many good charters exist in Michigan.

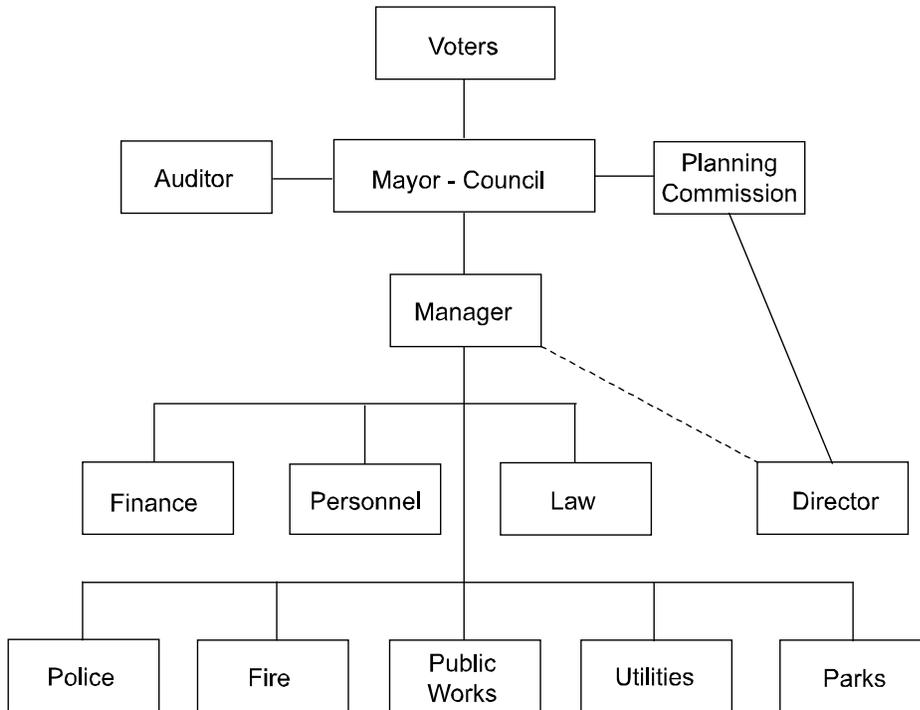
With some exceptions, Michigan charters have been influenced by nationwide trends in municipal practices such as the short ballot, the small council, election of councilmembers at-large, nonpartisan nominations and election of councilmembers. Chief executives of either the appointed kind (a manager) or the elected type (a mayor) are favored. Localities have shown their ingenuity in searching for what is most appropriate to their needs. No longer is the Legislature burdened with enacting individual charters. The responsibility lies with locally elected charter commissioners, subject to legal review by the governor under statutory requirements. Since charters must be adopted only by local referendum, the voters themselves make the final determination about the design of their government.

In the process of charter drafting and in the local referendum, civic energies are released. Charter commissioners, elected by their fellow citizens, show themselves to be progressive yet careful when carrying out their trust.

Form of Government: Cities

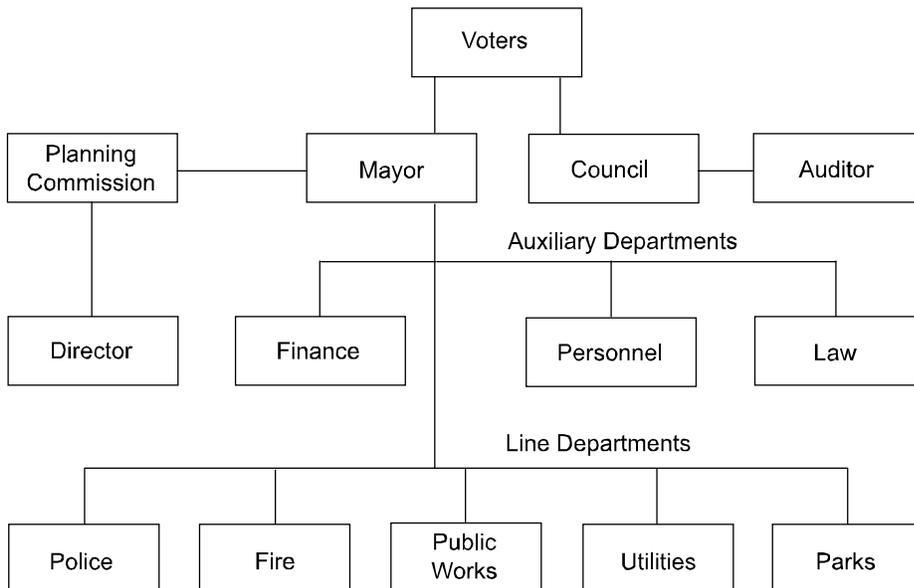
Council-Manager Form

Among Michigan home rule cities, more than 175 use the council-manager form, in which the elected council appoints a professionally trained and experienced manager to administer the day-to-day operations of the city, and to 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 (sometimes called city administrator or superintendent) if duties are not being performed satisfactorily.



Mayor–Council Form

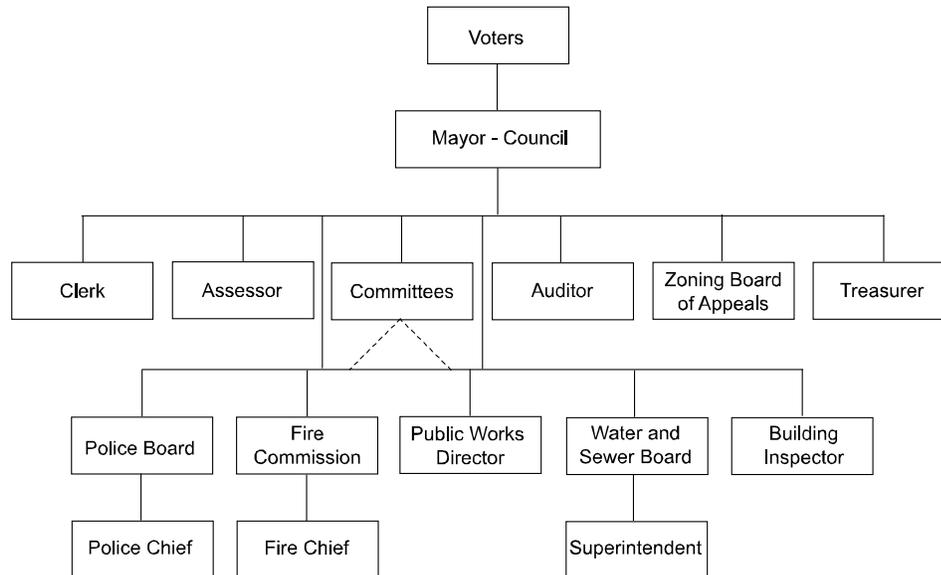
Two forms of the mayor–council plan are used by a number of Michigan home rule cities: **The “strong” mayor form** is most often found in larger cities where the directly elected mayor, who is not a member of the governing body, appoints and removes the key administrative officials (those who, by charter, 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.



The “weak” mayor form is found generally in smaller cities and villages. The mayor or president 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.

Under the weak mayor form there is no central administrator by formal title such as city manager. Some smaller cities are fortunate to have key long-serving staff who sense the overall cooperation needed to carry out the city's programs and informally proceed for the city's betterment.



Election/Selection of Mayor

Mayors in about half of Michigan's home rule cities are chosen directly by the people, in at-large, city-wide elections (including all strong mayor communities). In the remaining cities the councilmembers typically choose the mayor from among their ranks to serve a one- or two-year term. A trend to call the members of a city's governing body councilmembers rather than commissioners is at least partially to avoid citizen confusion with county commissioners.

City councilmembers and village trustees typically are elected for two-year or four-year terms, about half at each election, to preserve continuity of personnel, experience, and perhaps policy. Often a charter calls for election of half of 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 for councilmembers, rather than ward elections where voters in each ward (geographic section of the city) elect a councilmember or members. Only a few Michigan cities have partisan elections where major political party labels on the ballot identify candidates.

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—but more often without—council approval, depending on charter requirements. In the weak mayor form, council approval of appointments is generally required.

Form of Government: Villages

Of the 261 villages in Michigan, 48 have home rule charters, and 213 are governed under the General Law Village Act (1895 PA 3). Under that Act, all 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 in the 213 general law villages are elected at-large, village-wide. The statewide act governing general law villages, Act 3 of 1895, was amended in 1973 to provide for two-year terms for the president and made the village president a full voting member of the village 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. General Law Village elections are held on the second Monday in March, in even-numbered years.

The most recent amendments to the General Law Village Act were passed in 1998. These included the ability to reduce council from seven to five members, allowed for the appointment of a clerk and treasurer, and allowed for nonpartisan elections.

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.

The home rule village form of government offers flexibility that is not found in the 1895 General Law Village Act. Home rule village charters in Michigan are as diverse as the communities that adopt them.

Interesting Municipal Facts:

Who's the oldest? Who's the newest?

- Sault Ste. Marie is the oldest community, founded in 1641. However, Detroit was the first incorporated "town" in 1802 and then as a city in 1815; followed by Monroe in 1837 and Grand Rapids in 1850.
- Grosse Pointe Farms is the only municipality incorporated from a detached territory (from Grosse Pointe Village in 1893).
- Village of Lake Isabella is the most recent incorporation from an unincorporated area, in 1998.
- The most recent incorporation as a city from a village is Manchester, in 2023.
- Whittemore changed from a Fourth Class City to a Home Rule City in 2005.
- Mackinac Island is the only special charter city.
- Remaining Fourth Class cities (population)
 - Harrisville (437)
 - Omer (274)
 - Sandusky (2,709)
 - Yale (1,903)
- The only city/city/village consolidation in Michigan occurred in 2000 when Iron River, Stambaugh, and Mineral Hills merged.

Cities Incorporated from Townships

- Auburn Hills, 1983
- Burton, 1971
- Farmington Hills, 1972 (also included the villages of Quakertown and Woodcreek Farms)
- Livonia, 1950
- Norton Shores, 1967
- Portage, 1963
- Rochester Hills, 1984
- Romulus, 1968
- Southgate, 1958
- Sterling Heights, 1966
- Taylor, 1966
- Warren, 1955 (was a village plus incorporated Warren Township when it became a city)
- Westland, 1964

Michigan Population Facts

1820: 8,767 (in the Michigan Territory, which included much of Ohio and Indiana)

1837: Michigan admitted to the Union as 26th state

1840: 212,267
2000: 9,938,444
2020: 10,077,331

Michigan Form of Government Facts

83 Counties

1,115 General law townships

127 Charter townships

281 Home rule cities

4 Fourth Class cities

1 Special charter city

206 General law villages

46 Home rule villages

Most and Least

- Tuscola County has the most villages with 10
- Wayne County has the most cities with 33
- Oakland County has the most cities and villages with 39
- Keweenaw, Luce, Montmorency, Ontonagon, and Roscommon Counties each have one incorporated area, a village
- Crawford, Schoolcraft, and Alpena counties each have one incorporated area, a city