

Local Government is Democracy in Action

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Senator Smith writes about the different levels of local government and the importance of ensuring that the legislature funds them adequately.

MADISON - “Where do you live?”

There are a lot of ways to answer that question. I live in the United States, in the state of Wisconsin, in Eau Claire County, and in the town of Brunswick. Each of these jurisdictions is a “unit of government” and each has its own powers and responsibilities.

The term “local units of government” can mean cities, villages, towns or counties. Each of these local subdivisions has its own role and its own kind of authority. Each has limits to its powers, as determined by statute, and there are differences in the way each is governed and operated.

Seventy percent of Wisconsin’s population live in a city or village. Cities and villages are both

created by the state, which delegates authority to local units of government. Our constitution describes these units of government as “home rule,” which means they have the ability to govern themselves as they see fit, so long as they abide by the state and federal law.



Home rule is meant to ensure that cities and villages are able to be responsive to local concerns. Villages and cities have their own legislative branches, known as city councils or village boards. Members of the council or board can determine policy locally, as long as it does not conflict with the state or federal constitutions.

Many cities, like La Crosse, elect a mayor who works with the council. Others, like Eau Claire, operate with a hired city administrator who answers to the elected city council. In cities, city council members can be elected at-large (representing the entire city) or by districts.

Most Wisconsin villages elect a board president and board members. The Board of Trustees or village board, which acts as the legislative branch, is generally elected at-large.

In contrast, Wisconsin towns are not home rule entities, but their authority is granted by state law. Voters elect a town board, but citizen participation may be exercised at annual meetings and special meetings called for specific purposes.

Voters in a town can exercise direct powers, such as approving a tax levy to fund an improvement for the community or reorganizing local government. State law also allows town voters to grant authority to the town board to acquire property or exercise zoning authority.

I highly recommend you attend one of these meetings. They offer great examples of direct democracy in action. This kind of direct participation in democracy is a rare experience, otherwise only experienced by those who have been duly elected and sworn in.



While cities and villages have constitutional powers of home rule, and towns offer more power to citizens in special meetings, counties are very different. Counties are the administrative arms of our state government. The members of the legislative body of the county are usually called county supervisors.

As in cities, some counties have an elected county executive, while others have a county administrator appointed by the county board of supervisors. While the method of appointment differs, responsibilities are the same across the state. Counties only perform functions that are expressly allowed or mandated by state statute or the constitution.

The state gives counties responsibility for a broad swath of services mandated by the state. These include road maintenance, jail and law enforcement, court administration, public health, human services, libraries, vital records, land conservation, property tax collection and elections.



The problem comes when the state's requirements are not supported by the funding necessary to fulfill those services. In areas like education and criminal justice, there are many examples of the legislature mandating services but not funding them. This impedes the ability of local units of government to provide essential services to our citizens.

As we enter into this year's budget deliberations, it's important to consider all that we expect from our local units of government and provide the resources they need to meet those expectations. As state legislators, as county supervisors, as city alderpersons, as village board members and as town supervisors, we are all elected to make sure the citizens of Wisconsin prosper. Let's make sure we are doing everything we can to make that possible.

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