

Forms of Local Government in North Carolina

Form of government is the “legal basis for assigning authority and functions to officials in government and creates its overall framework.”¹ This reference guide provides mayors, chairs of county boards of commissioners, and governing board members in North Carolina local government with an overview of their roles and responsibilities under state law as well as practical guidance/implications.

North Carolina Municipalities by Population and Form of Government

Form	Population				Total (%)
	< 2,000	2,000–4,999	5,000–9,999	10,000+	
Mayor-Council 	229	45	6	1	281 (50.9%)
Council-Manager 	52	87	43	89	271 (49.1%)

Source: Forms of North Carolina Municipal Government Database, UNC School of Government, accessed June 12, 2026, <https://uncsog.shinyapps.io/forms-of-government/>; U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS), 2019–2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/technical-documentation/table-and-geography-changes/2023/5-year.html>.



Mayor-Council Form

Used in 281 municipalities in North Carolina.

Structure

The elected governing board exercises both legislative and administrative authority; no separately empowered executive mayor exists. The North Carolina mayor-council form does not mirror “executive mayor” systems found in other states.

The Mayor

Formal powers are limited. The mayor

- presides at meetings and votes only to break a tie unless the municipality’s charter provides otherwise (G.S. 160A-69; 160A-101(8));
- serves as official head of the municipality for ceremonial purposes and service of civil process (G.S. 160A-67);
- may call special meetings (G.S. 160A-71(b)(1)); and
- exercises duties conferred by law or by the local governing board, if consistent with law (G.S. 160A-67).

The mayor has **no independent executive authority**.

Administration

G.S. 160A-146 vests the council with broad authority to organize the administration of the municipality through one of three ways:

1. direct supervision of all departments by the council as a whole,
2. assignment of individual council members to oversee specific departments, or
3. standing committees of the council with departmental oversight.

A mayor-council board may also hire an administrator, or chief administrative officer, without amending its charter (G.S. 160A-155). Unlike a manager, who holds powers granted by state statute, an administrator exercises only the authority delegated by the board (see page 3, below).

1. Kimberly L. Nelson and James H. Svara, “Adaptation of Models versus Variations in Form: Classifying Structures of City Government,” *Urban Affairs Review* 45, no. 4 (2020): 544–62, 545, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087409356349>.

At a Glance

North Carolina has two general-purpose local governments: **counties** (of which there are 100 in the state) and **municipalities** (which number more than 550). The two forms of governance used in these local units are **mayor-council** and **council-manager** (sometimes termed **commission-manager** in counties, where elected board members are called commissioners). All 100 counties operate under the commission-manager form. Among municipalities, use of the two forms is nearly evenly split: **281 (50.9 percent) operate under the mayor-council model**, **271 (49.1 percent) under the council-manager form**. The choice tracks closely with population, with larger municipalities overwhelmingly adopting the council-manager form of government.



Council-Manager Form

Used by all 100 counties and 271 municipalities in North Carolina.

Structure

The elected governing board governs, sets policy, and employs a professional manager who serves at the board's pleasure and runs the municipality's daily operations. The board retains legislative authority; the manager exercises delegated and statutory administrative authority. To use a flight-crew analogy: the board sets the destination and altitude and determines acceptable risk, while the manager and staff navigate and run daily controls.

The Board Chair/Mayor

The role of the mayor in municipalities using the council-manager model is the same as the mayor's role under the mayor-council form: chief responsibilities include presiding, tie-break voting (unless otherwise provided), and official-head duties. While most mayors in North Carolina are elected directly by municipalities' voters, a charter may instead provide for the council to select the mayor from among its own members (G.S. 160A-101(8)). In most counties, by contrast, the board of commissioners selects its chair from among its own members at its organizational meeting in December (G.S. 153A-39).

The Municipal Manager (G.S. 160A-148)

Select statutorily prescribed duties include

- serving as chief administrator of the municipality;
- appointing, suspending, and removing employees except as otherwise provided;
- serving as budget officer (G.S. 159-9) and preparing the municipality's annual budget; and
- directing departments and executing policies adopted by the council.

The County Manager (G.S. 153A-82)

Select statutorily prescribed duties include

- attending all council meetings, recommending measures the manager considers expedient, and supporting the council as directed;
- serving as chief administrator of the county;
- appointing employees with the board's approval;
- exercising appointment/removal authority if the board delegates this power;
- serving as budget officer (G.S. 159-9) and preparing the county's annual budget; and
- directing departments and executing policies adopted by the council.

Working Together in Practice

Mayor-Council: Who Does What?

- The council is responsible for both policy and administration; clear delegation creates a consistent direction for department heads or an administrator.
- The elected board sets policy by a majority vote. The mayor typically leads by influence, visibility, and meeting management, not by executive authority.
- Mutual expectations should clarify who gives staff direction, who handles requests from the public, and how concerns return to the full council for consideration.



Council-Manager: Who Does What?

- The board sets policy direction; the manager administers local government services and daily operations.
- The board also sets policy by majority vote; the manager implements board policy and has the exclusive authority to direct staff.
- The board holds the manager accountable through appointment and evaluation. Communicating candidly, clarifying roles, and routing staff concerns through the manager help prevent common tensions.



Choosing or Changing a Form of Government

The term “municipality” includes a city, town, or village. While the name a local government chooses to call itself reflects local preferences and historical traditions, it holds no special significance or difference when it comes to legal powers or status.

Counties

Under G.S. 153A-76, a county’s board of commissioners has broad authority to organize county government. Adopting the commission-manager form is a board decision; all 100 North Carolina counties have done so. The board may grant the manager hiring/firing authority without further board approval (G.S. 153A-82).

Municipalities

The form of government for each municipality is set out in each municipality’s **charter**. A change in that form of government requires a charter amendment or a local act from the N.C. General Assembly under G.S. 160A-101 through -111. Adoption of the council-manager model gives the manager hiring/firing authority over employees not otherwise hired by the council (G.S. 160A-148). A mayor-council governing board retains direct personnel authority, which it exercises through majority vote of the council.

Administrator Option

A mayor-council municipality may hire an administrator (chief administrative officer, or CAO) without amending its charter (G.S. 160A-155). The CAO has the authority delegated to the position by the governing board. Granting full statutory manager powers to an administrator may signal the need for a formal transition to the council-manager form of government.

Statutory Prohibition

G.S. 160A-151 prohibits a mayor or council member from serving as manager, interim manager, or acting manager in a council-manager municipality. A council member who wishes to serve as manager must resign from the council before being appointed manager. *No county equivalent to this limitation exists*—under G.S. 153A-81(2), the board chair or any commissioner may serve as county manager by board action, though that arrangement is rare today.

Choice of Government Form by Population

While the state’s municipalities are nearly evenly split between the two forms, most municipal residents live in council-manager cities. All 100 counties use the council-manager form.

Share of North Carolina Municipal Population by Form of Government

Form	No. of Municipalities Using Form	Population	% of Municipalities Using Form	% of Population Using Form
Council-Manager 	271	5,814,243	49.1%	94.6%
Mayor-Council 	281	330,077	50.9%	5.4%
Total	552	6,144,320	–	–

Source: Forms of North Carolina Municipal Government Database, UNC School of Government, accessed June 12, 2026, <https://uncsog.shinyapps.io/forms-of-government/>; U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS), 2019–2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/technical-documentation/table-and-geography-changes/2023/5-year.html> (providing the total state municipal population figure of 6,144,320).

How North Carolina Boards Are Elected

Counties

All 100 boards of commissioners are elected on a **partisan** basis in even-numbered years. Slightly more than half elect at least some members from districts; the remainder are elected at-large. Boards range in size from five to nine members; sixty counties have a five-member board.



Municipalities

Nearly all council elections are **nonpartisan**, typically on a plurality basis. More than 86 percent of councils are elected entirely at-large; only twelve of 330 municipalities with populations under 2,500 use any electoral districts. Most elections take place in odd-numbered years.

Recent Shifts

Some municipalities have moved municipal elections to even-numbered years to improve turnout. Four-year staggered terms remain the most common arrangement statewide.

The Public’s Role

Beyond voting, the public shapes local government through participating in required **public hearings** (for example, budget hearings under G.S. 159-12 and development regulation hearings under (G.S. 160D-601(a)); **open meetings** access, notice, and minutes requirements (G.S. 143-318.10 and -318.12); **public comment periods** (G.S. 153A-52.1 and 160A-81.1), **public records access** (G.S. 132-6), **advisory board service**, and provide input on **visioning and strategic planning**.

Relevant Statutory Citations

Statute (G.S.)	Subject	Statute (G.S.)	Subject
132-6	Public records inspection/copies	160A-67	Council/mayor authority
143-318.10, .12	Open meetings access, notice, minutes	160A-69	Mayor presiding/voting authority
153A-39	County-chair selection	160A-71	Mayor special meetings
153A-52.1	County public comment periods	160A-81.1	Municipal public comment periods
153A-76	County organizational authority	160A-101 through -111	Charter/form of government changes
153A-81	County board chair as manager	160A-146	Council organizational authority
153A-82	County manager powers/duties	160A-148	Municipal manager powers/duties
159-9	Manager as budget officer	160A-151	Mayor/council member manager prohibition
159-12	Budget public hearings	160D-601	Development-regulation hearings

Other School of Government Resources

Publication: *County and Municipal Government in North Carolina*, 2025 Edition, Christopher B. McLaughlin, ed., “County and Municipal Governing Boards” (chapter 3, by Kimberly L. Nelson) and “County and City Managers” (chapter 4, by Carl W. Stenberg), <https://www.sog.unc.edu/publications/books/county-and-municipal-government-north-carolina-2025-edition>.

Online Resource: Forms of North Carolina Municipal Government Database, <https://uncsog.shinyapps.io/forms-of-government/> (a searchable database containing municipal form-of-government information).

Courses: The School of Government offers many options for officials wishing to pursue continuing education opportunities, including the Essentials of Municipal Government course. Please visit <https://www.sog.unc.edu/courses/> to search our courses or view our *2025–2026 State and Local Government Course Catalog*.

The information in this reference guide was compiled by School of Government faculty member Colt Jensen with assistance from faculty colleagues Kim Nelson, Carl Stenberg, Rebecca Fisher-Gabbard, and Robert Joyce. Source material has been primarily drawn from the Nelson and Stenberg chapters in *County and Municipal Government in North Carolina*, cited in full in the box above.