NORTH CAROLINA
CENTER FOR COUNTY RESEARCH

Basics of North Carolina County Government

In North Carolina, county government is the level of government that most directly impacts every citizen. All North Carolinians live in a county while slightly more than half the population lives within the limits of a city or town.

Counties exist to help enhance the lives of their citizens. County governments do this by providing access to needed services, such as public and mental health care, schools, libraries and support to senior citizens and children in need. Counties establish important local laws (ordinances) and enforce laws that protect citizens from harmful behavior.

History:

County governments were originally created by the state to give citizens greater access to government services. Because it was so difficult to travel in the 17th and 18th centuries, citizens could not reasonably be expected to come to the state capital every time they needed to conduct official business. As a result, the state created counties, and the governor appointed justices of the peace to oversee each county and carry out the mandated policies and services of state government.

After the Civil War, the North Carolina Constitution of 1868 gave citizens more input into electing their local leaders. Citizens were given the power to elect the sheriff, coroner, register of deeds, clerk of court, surveyor and treasurer, as well as the newly created board of commissioners. Commissioners replaced the appointed justices of the peace and were given full financial responsibility for the county, which included adopting the budget and setting the property tax rate.

Today, citizens still elect the commissioners, sheriff, register of deeds and clerk of court, although the court system is now a function of state government. Counties remain an arm of state government and carry out the many services that are mandated by the state and federal governments.

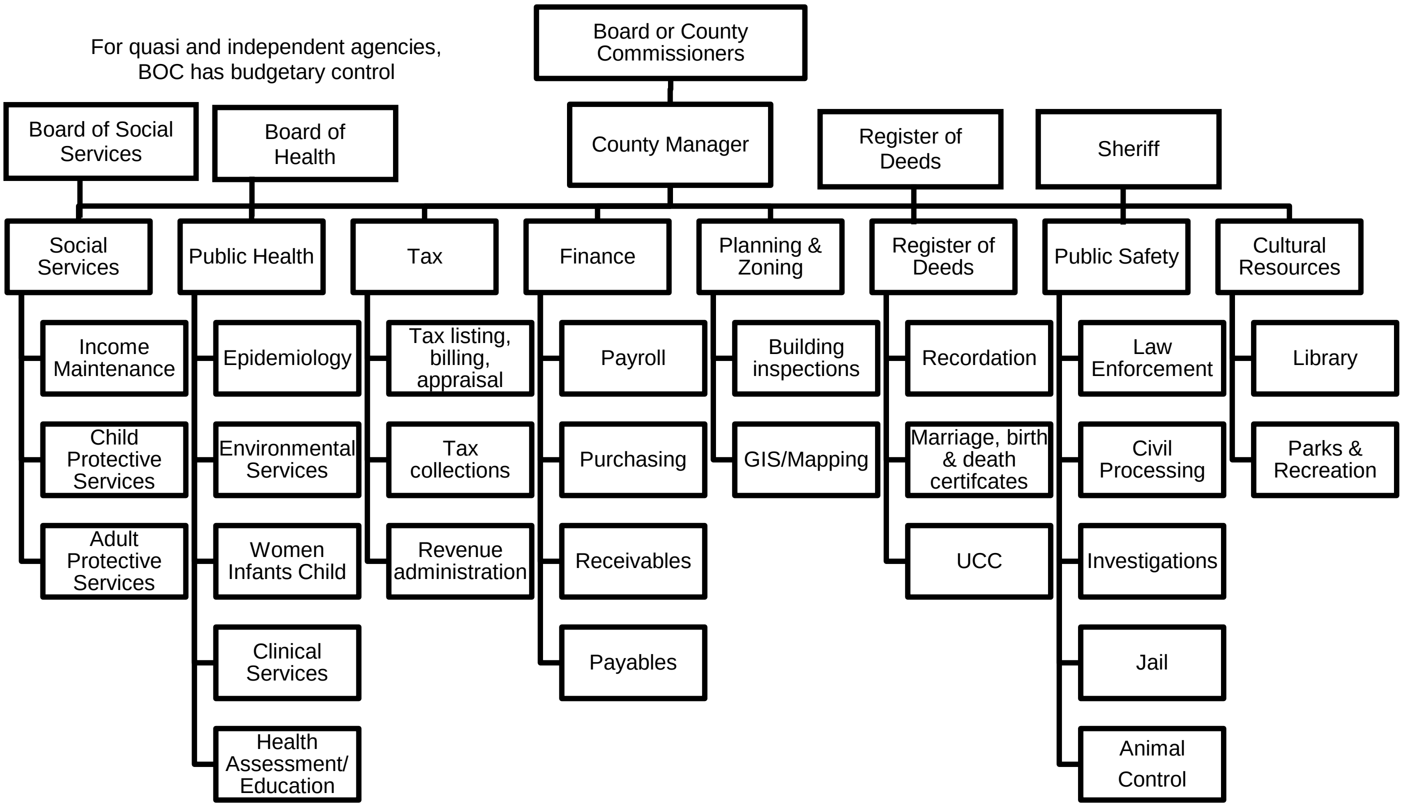
Organization and Function:

Each county is governed by an elected board of county commissioners. These boards range in size from three to nine commissioners. In most counties, commissioners serve four-year terms, but a few counties use two-year terms or a combination of two- and four-year terms.

The board of commissioners sets the county property tax rate and adopts the budget each year. The board also establishes county policies by adopting resolutions and local laws (ordinances).

In North Carolina, all counties use the council-manager form of government. The commissioners hire a professional manager to oversee the day-to-day operations of the county government, while the commissioners focus on county policies.

Commissioners are not the sole policy makers in county government, however. Because the sheriff and register of deeds are also elected officials, they have independent authority to adopt specific policies for their departments. In addition, several independent or nearly independent local boards have responsibility for such areas as alcoholic beverage control, elections, mental health, public health and social services. These boards appoint directors and have the authority to make local policies. Counties were given authority to consolidate human services under the direct oversight of the county board of commissioners and the county manager. School boards are separately elected by the citizens and have responsibility for education policies and setting the school system's budget. None of these other local boards have the power to tax citizens, however. That authority rests solely in the purview of the board of county commissioners.



North Carolina counties administer social services and public health directly within county departments using county employees. This system of human services, county-administered and state supervised, is only present in a handful of other states. Most states administer federally mandated social services programs through regional state offices with state employees.

Another unique responsibility of North Carolina county governments is its funding of public schools. In other states, most school systems have direct property taxing authority. Counties in North Carolina are statutorily required to build and maintain school facilities, although the buildings themselves are owned by the independently elected school boards. Counties also contribute around 28 percent on average of their budgets to fund school classroom expenses.

Counties also function as municipal governments to provide and regulate services for the health and well-being of their residents. Counties have increasingly taken on “city” services, especially in unincorporated areas, for the provision of water and sewer, building inspections, and planning and zoning, to name a few.

One function not performed by North Carolina counties is the building and maintenance of secondary roads. While counties in most other states are charged with this responsibility, the State of North Carolina assumed secondary road construction and maintenance in the early 1930s to assure a statewide, consistent system of transportation. Counties kept responsibility for school construction and some school operations funding, as well as human services provision, areas not financed by county governments in most other states.

Counties are required to adopt a balanced budget, and most counties strive to maintain an adequate “fund balance” (savings account) in case revenues do not meet projections, expenditures are higher than anticipated, or to manage unforeseen emergencies. A county fiscal year begins July 1 and ends June 30 of the following year. State law requires that each board of county commissioners must adopt a balanced budget by June 30.