

A Quick Civic Review

Just What is a Florida City?

In Florida, a city is a municipal government. The founding citizens choose the name, and in doing so, decide whether to call the municipality a city, town or village. There is no legal difference between the three. In other states, the governing structure is often dictated by the Legislature.

A municipal government is a public corporation. The council, or commission, is the board of directors, elected by the stockholders, who are the citizens. The public corporation is formed to provide self-governance and a variety of services.

The charter, which is a city's constitution, is written to form the municipality and is similar to articles of incorporation. The charter sets forth the boundaries of the municipality, its form of government, the size of the council and certain governmental processes. In Florida, the Legislature approves the incorporation through a special act, and the charter is approved by the citizens through a referendum.

Besides being a public corporation, however, a municipality is an independent, general-purpose local government. General purpose means there is a wide range of services provided by the entity.

City Rights and Privileges

In Florida, a city is recognized with certain rights and privileges as such a government. The most important of these rights is Home Rule. The state Constitution recognizes that cities may enact their own ordinances and self-govern – so long as the city's law does not conflict with the state and federal law.

This Home Rule power was repeatedly sought by early Florida city officials. It was placed into the state Constitution in 1968, and later ratified through legislation in 1973. Municipal Home Rule powers do not extend to fiscal Home Rule, however, because the state reserves all taxing authority to itself.

Cities are not "of" the state, cities in Florida are "in" the state. This is an important distinction between municipal governments and other local governments.

Why Cities Are Formed

Cities are the heart of the social contract. People first lived together for safety. As civilizations were created, people sometimes lived with families, tribes or other communal entities. Scholars often look to Athens in ancient Greece as the first great city, with its democratic involvement of the public in government and its progressive services.

As the centuries passed, safety remained a concern, but people also chose to live near one another for other reasons. Today, when people choose to live near others and to share public infrastructure, such as streets, sidewalks, water and sewer systems and parks, they agree to abide by a set of rules. These rules are known as ordinances, which guide a city's residents.

Living in a city, in Florida, requires choice. As people look for a place to live, many things may affect their decision – such as distance from work, quality of schools, or other things that are important to them and their family. They also agree to become part of the support to this government, to pay their share for utilities and services.



In Florida, this often means they agree to pay city property taxes in addition to those they pay to the county and the school district. With self-governance comes responsibility.

What Are Florida Cities Like?

One of the most fascinating things about the municipalities in Florida is the tremendous difference in them. There are 411 municipalities in the state, and no two are alike. During the decade from 1950 to 1960, more than 100 cities in Florida were incorporated.

More than 9.5 million Floridians reside in a city, town or village – equaling about 51 percent of the state population. The majority of Floridians – by a small percentage – live in unincorporated county areas. City populations range from 8 (City of Weeki Wachee) to more than 800,000 (City of Jacksonville).

Sixty percent of the 411 cities are under 10,000 in population. Florida is a state composed of mostly smaller cities, with the median city population at 5,510.

Florida's cities have a suburban flavor, as none are as large or urban as New York, Los Angeles or Chicago. Many of the cities were planned for retirees and do not have a central business area. A few are completely residential. Some grew up around military bases and popular tourist destinations. The fishing and agricultural industries have also caused the creation of coastal cities, towns and villages.

Every City is Full Service

Just as no two city charters are alike, each city's menu of services is also different. A common practice among chambers of commerce and other promotional agencies is to label city and county governments as "full service." This is an unfortunate label because it is hard to define – each city offers those services desired by its own citizenry.

Some Florida cities do not pave every street, have a centralized water or sewage system, or offer police, fire, or parks and recreation services. Some cities offer each one of these services and also offer natural gas or electric utilities.

For some cities, the most important service is building code standards and inspections, and planning and zoning. Some of these services are also offered by special districts and counties, and are delivered to citizens both inside and outside of city boundaries.

The most important aspect of municipal services is that the services are created to meet the demands of the residents. Each Florida municipality is "full service" to its own citizens because the citizens determine which services will be provided.

The Structure of Governments in Florida

One of the Florida League of Cities' missions, as stated in its strategic plan, is to increase the public's understanding of municipal government in Florida. To do that, we often include information on Florida's overall governmental structure. To truly understand what a city is, it is important to understand the structure of other local governments.

Florida became a state in 1845. Under previous British and Spanish rule, territorial leaders had recognized local and regional governance. Two city charters in particular – St. Augustine and Pensacola – were recognized as municipal governments.

Upon becoming a territory of the United States, two counties were created that split the state into halves. Over time, the number of counties grew as the state sought to provide its services throughout Florida. A county is a sub-state, or arm of the state, and every inch of Florida is within a county. Counties are constitutionally created, and the boundaries can be changed only by the Legislature. Today, Florida has 67 counties – the oldest created in 1821 and

the newest in 1925.

The board of county commissioners is the elected body that oversees a county's governance. Counties must carry out constitutionally mandated responsibilities, and those established by the state. The constitutional services of a county are law enforcement and jail administration, tax collection, property appraisal, state court administration and supervision of elections.

In addition, counties are charged with road maintenance, public health, solid waste disposal and other environmental responsibilities. Other county services are offered as determined by the elected county officials.

Florida has 67 other units of local government – school districts. These constitutionally created districts share the same geographical boundaries as each county, but the school district is a separate government. School districts have elected boards that govern the day-to-day operations of public education for grades K-12. School districts are a special-purpose local government. Funding is provided through property taxes and state revenues.

Florida has another type of local government, the special district. There are two types of special districts: independent and dependent. Independent districts are created by the Legislature for a specific purpose, to be provided in a certain area. The funding and governance of each one is set by the Legislature. Examples of independent special districts include water management districts, fire service, inland navigation, ditch maintenance and the like.

Florida also has dependent special districts, which are created by cities and counties. These districts are governed by the city or county elected commission, and derive their authority, funding and support from that government. Examples of dependent special districts include downtown improvement authorities, community redevelopment authorities and special taxing districts.

There are about 600 independent and 300 dependent special districts throughout Florida.

So, cities are not counties, they are not school districts, and they are not special districts. Cities are publicly created, independent governments designed by their citizens, for their citizens. They are the only voluntary level of local government in the Sunshine State. Cities require choice on the part of their residents, and with that choice comes the benefit of grass-roots democracy, true self-governance, and home rule powers.

The Need for Civic Education

Statewide statistics show that 30 percent of Floridians are natives, while 70 percent moved here from somewhere else. This can greatly affect a Floridian's understanding of state and local government in the Sunshine State.

For most people, their civics lessons were given in high school. Upon moving here, there aren't always opportunities for new residents, especially adults who are out of school, to quickly learn how their governments function.

City officials can play a great part in helping to educate all Floridians about their governments, and the League wants to help make that happen. Everyone benefits from an informed public!