



How municipal governments work...



...and how you can help

People make it work

New Jersey has 564 municipalities with five different types of local government: borough, township, city, town and village. Regardless of the form of government, it's people who keep municipalities running smoothly.

Elected officials

In all 564 NJ municipalities, voters elect council members who have many responsibilities, including adopting laws and policies, establishing the municipal budget and making appointments. The mayor, who heads local government, may be elected by voters or, in townships and villages, is chosen by fellow council members.

Municipal staff

Paid staff members serve in administrative and functional roles. These include the municipal clerk,

who acts as secretary and custodian of all minutes and documents of the town, and various departments, such as public works (DPW), planning and zoning, police, engineering and health.

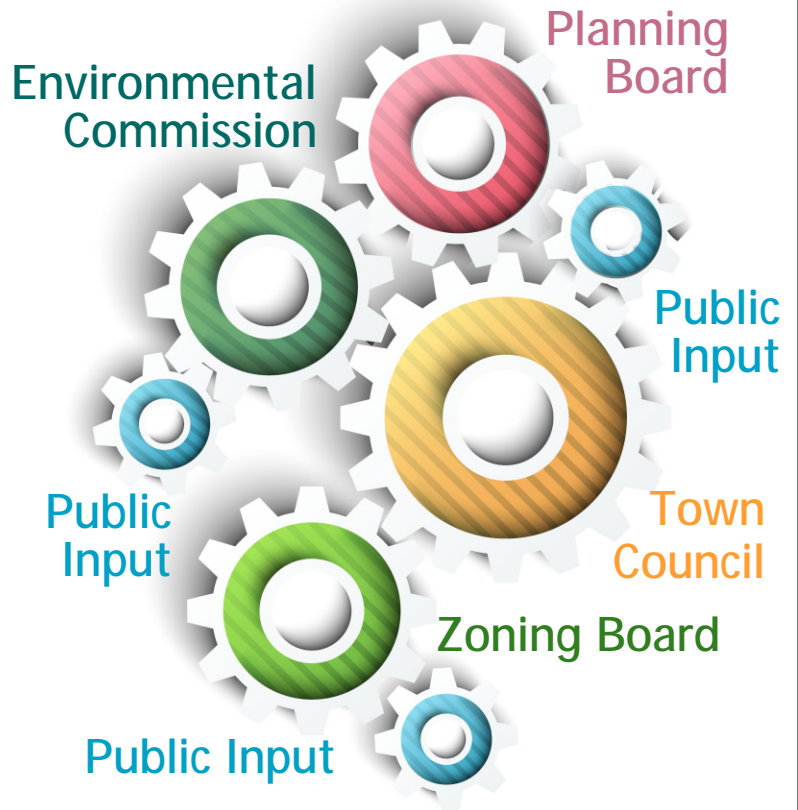
Boards and commissions

The mayor and/or council appoint the members of numerous boards and commissions, such as the environmental commission (EC), planning board and zoning board of adjustment. Unlike committees and task forces, like the Green Team or Recycling Advisory Committee, boards and commissions are established by ordinance and members are appointed for specific terms with defined responsibilities established by New Jersey's Municipal Land Use Law (MLUL)*. These unpaid volunteers offer thousands of hours of time, energy and talent to their municipalities.

continued inside

Working together for a better community

All the elements of the municipality work together to power the engine of local government. The municipal Master Plan is prepared by the Planning Board (PB) with input by the Environmental Commission (EC) and after public (P) input sessions. Guided by the Master Plan, the Council passes ordinances, often advocated by the EC, and with the input of the public. Development proposals are approved or denied by the PB after review by the EC and with public input. Zoning variances are granted by the Zoning Board of Adjustment (ZB) after input from the EC and public. The EC also educates and informs the public about environmental matters with approval of the Council.



Land use in NJ

New Jersey's *Home Rule Act* grants municipal governments broad authorities to enact ordinances and regulations providing for the public welfare and order.

In keeping with home rule, the state's *Municipal Land Use Law (MLUL)* empowers municipalities to identify, evaluate, designate and regulate development, planning and zoning.

The MLUL offers important tools to help your town achieve the vitality and unique identity it aspires to.

THE MASTER PLAN is a blueprint that gives local officials and citizens a long-term vision for how the town should be developed, with planning approaches to achieve community objectives. The planning board relies on the master plan to guide proper land use, meet local housing and service needs and protect important natural resources. The planning board must reexamine the master plan at least every ten years to adapt to changing circumstances.

ZONING -- Based on the broad goals and policies set up in the master plan, land use and zoning ordinances enable the town to implement spe-

cific requirements for how development can take place. The town's Zoning Board of Adjustment can grant a waiver to a property owner to deviate from existing zoning laws. This doesn't modify the existing zoning but can change or adjust the allowed use under unique circumstances.

SITE PLAN AND SUBDIVISION REVIEW by the planning (or land use) board, ensures that everyone follows the rules whenever something new will be built or significantly altered. A site plan shows proposed changes to a lot, such as new buildings, driveways, utilities, grading and landscaping. A subdivision plan will indicate new streets and utilities, but not buildings. Reviewing site plans for potential environmental impacts is one of the important responsibilities of the environmental commission.

ORDINANCES establish rules for local government operations and public activity. Some ordinances safeguard the environment and/or public health and safety, like those intended to control stormwater runoff, avoid pollution, protect trees, discourage habitat loss, promote environmental justice and foster species diversity.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION is important in creating an effective ordinance. After it is first introduced at a public meeting of the governing body, a new ordinance must be announced in the local newspaper, indicating the date and time of a public hearing, where interested parties can be heard and ask questions. After a second reading before the town council, the ordinance can be passed with a two-thirds majority vote, rejected or set aside for further study and/or amendment. *continued on back*

State and federal laws and regulations affecting municipalities

Federal agencies like the Environmental Protection Agency issue regulations to interpret and implement laws passed by Congress. The *Clean Water Act*, for example, establishes water quality standards and sets a structure for regulating discharges of pollutants into US waters.

Similarly, state agencies like the NJ Department of Environmental Protection, with public input, create regulations and permit requirements to implement laws passed by the NJ Legislature. (For more info on how state laws are passed, see https://pub.njleg.gov/publications/Student_Guide_Legislative_Process.pdf) *continued on back*

The five types of municipal government

TOWNSHIP



In this form of government, a township committee, comprised of three or five elected members, takes the lead in governing. The committee members, who serve staggered three-year terms, elect the mayor each year to serve as chair of the committee.



TOWN

In municipalities with a town government, voters elect the mayor and council, who typically serve two-year terms. Two council members are elected from each of four wards, and every year one seat from each ward is up for election. The mayor chairs the town council and may vote on and veto ordinances.



CITY

In city governments, the mayor typically is elected to a four-year term and serves as chief executive. The council is the legislative body and consists of seven members with six elected from wards for three-year terms and one elected at-large for a four-year term.



BOROUGH

The borough is the most popular form of local government in NJ. The mayor is elected to a four-year term and six council members are elected to staggered three-year terms. The Borough is often referred to as a "weak mayor-strong council" form. While the mayor presides over council meetings and can vote in case of a tie, the council is the legislative body and has all executive responsibilities not assigned to the mayor by local law.

VILLAGE



Villages operate like townships for the most part. The governing body is a five-member board of trustees elected for three-year, staggered terms of office with one member chosen by the board to serve as president.

continued from inside

Protecting the environment in your town

Most communities in New Jersey have an Environmental Commission or similar environmental advisory group, comprised of five to seven residents whose responsibilities include:

- advising local officials on environmental issues;
- making recommendations to municipal land use boards about environmental impacts of proposed development;
- advocating for local open space planning and preservation;
- creating and maintaining an updated inventory of environmental resources and a map of environmentally sensitive areas of the municipality;
- investigating natural resource issues for the town and recommending solutions; and
- informing and encouraging the public about protecting the local environment.

The Environmental Commission's efforts can yield significant long-term impacts for the protection of the community's natural resources, public health and quality of life. As decreed by state statutes (N.J.S.A. 40:56A), the EC is established by local ordinance and cannot be disbanded without passing a new ordinance. See more info about ECs at <https://anjec.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Municipal-Environmental-Commissions-in-NJ.pdf>.

What you can do

There are many ways you can help protect the environment in your town.

- Stay informed about natural resources in your town and get involved in efforts to protect them. For example, attend environmental commission meetings and learn more about your local watershed.
- Volunteer for a position on the environmental commission, open space committee, shade tree commission or other local group that safeguards natural resources.
- If your community does not have an EC, contact ANJEC at info@anjec.org about creating one.
- Get involved in citizen science and invite your friends and family to join in the fun. Find out more at <https://libguides.rutgers.edu/citizenscience/getinvolved>.

Make your EC more effective

- If you are an EC member, keep your mayor and governing body informed about all the great work you do.
- If your EC is inactive or needs a boost of new energy, ANJEC can help. Contact us at info@anjec.org.
- Get training and resources to help you be an effective, well-informed protector of the local environment. Find tools and resources at <https://anjec.org/past-training-resources/> and check out the ANJEC library at <https://anjec.org/library/>.
- Support local and state laws to protect NJ's natural resources. Follow ANJEC Action Alerts at <https://anjec.org/action-alerts/>.
- Become an ANJEC member and enjoy the many benefits of being part of the ANJEC community. Find out more at <https://anjec.org/?s=membership+benefits&id=1777>.

continued from inside

Municipalities also implement state and federal laws, such as those affecting drinking water, stormwater, wastewater, flood hazard areas and solid waste. For example, local planning boards must ensure that development plans comply with NJ stormwater laws.

Municipalities can also have a meaningful influence on NJ state government. For example, after over 100 municipalities passed ordinances outlawing single-use plastic bags, state legislators passed the 2020 *Plastic Pollution Reduction Law*, one of the strictest statewide plastic bag bans in the nation.

MORE INFO

NJ League of Municipalities: Types of Government in New Jersey – <https://tinyurl.com/yeyteebd1>

ANJEC Resource Paper: Land Use Planning in Your Community – <https://tinyurl.com/38e94bm4>

ANJEC Resource Paper: Environmental Commissions in NJ – <https://tinyurl.com/yhfch3t8>

