

Lesson Plan: The Structure of Virginia Local Government Student Handout – Local Government in Virginia

Basic Terminology

Virginia local governance is based primarily on the *county* and the *independent city*. Like other states, the organization and powers of Virginia local government are almost entirely determined by the state constitution and by state law. Unlike other states, Virginia's cities are not located in counties. Rather, Virginia's 41 cities and 95 counties are territorially separate. However, there are over 189 *towns* that are legally part of the counties in which they are located. Within Fairfax County, for example, there is the independent city of Fairfax and the towns of Vienna, Herndon, and Clifton that are part of the county. Most of the towns in the state are quite small, though there are some exceptions.



Structure

The County

The county in Virginia may be said to be the model of American local governance. Long before American independence, the General Assembly created the first counties in Virginia in the 1630s as "*shires*." Present-day counties are their direct descendants. Later, as America expanded westward, the county served as the basic unit of government in the new states.

The county governing body in Virginia is called the *board of supervisors*. Most counties elect the supervisors from districts, but there are some supervisors who are elected *at large*. In Fairfax County, there are nine supervisors elected by district, and the chairman of the board is elected at large. In most counties, including Fairfax County, the board of supervisors appoints the *county administrator* (known in Fairfax County as the *county executive*), who is the chief executive of the county government and has the responsibility of overseeing all administrative matters not assigned by the state constitution to someone else. Professional training in public administration is generally required of the person who will be the county executive. He or she must oversee the daily operations of county government, inform the board of supervisors and the public about county government matters, supervise personnel, manage county finances, oversee enforcement of local ordinances, and see that county operations are in compliance with relevant state and federal law. It is generally expected that the board will set county *policies* and the executive will see that they are carried out.

The Independent City

The practice of independent cities in Virginia dates back almost to its beginnings, and cities were made fully independent of counties by the Virginia Constitution of 1902. That arrangement anticipated that as land became converted to urban uses, the cities would *annex* such land to provide the services required when large numbers of people live in a small area.

Annexation, as a device to allow city growth, began to decline in the 1950s when counties in the *Tidewater* area successfully sought to be converted to cities themselves to prevent having portions of their territories annexed by neighboring cities. For example, the Town of Virginia Beach and Princess Anne County merged to form the City of Virginia Beach because they feared being annexed by Norfolk.

Annexation is now either impossible or very difficult, depending on the situation in each city. The rapid growth of Virginia's population since the 1950s has taken place mostly in the counties in Northern Virginia, the Richmond area, and Tidewater. The distinctions between city and county that were clear a generation ago are now quite blurred. Some cities include large non-urban areas (for example Virginia Beach and Chesapeake) and others are more traditionally dense in population (for example Richmond and Roanoke). Some counties are very urban in character (for example Fairfax and Arlington), others are "*suburbanizing*" (for example Hanover and Prince William), and many still resemble the traditional Virginia rural county (for example Buchanan and Brunswick).

All Virginia's cities use the "*council-manager*" form of government and have an elected *city council* as the governing body. Council members may be elected by districts (often called "*wards*") or at large. The *mayor* may be elected by the voters or by the city council. The mayor's principal responsibility is presiding over council meetings and representing the city in various ways. The mayor does not have any responsibility for administering the affairs of the city. The direction of the city's administration is the responsibility of the *city manager*. The council-manager form of government was invented in Staunton, Virginia in 1908. Over time, most cities have had larger populations, more physical facilities to take care of, more employees, and larger budgets than most counties, so the tradition of professionalism in public administration is particularly deeply ingrained in the cities. The council appoints the city manager.

Towns

While Virginia's towns vary widely in size and governmental organization, they all have an elected *town council* that acts as the governing body. Large towns like Blacksburg may be larger than many independent cities and have professional managers and an extensive array of services. Small towns like Clifton with just a few hundred people may use a "*mayor-council*" form of government, which relies on the mayor and council to take care of a limited set of municipal concerns.

The distinctive feature of towns is that, unlike cities, they are also part of a county. Consequently, the county will perform some services and governmental functions within the town, and town residents are citizens of both the town and county – paying taxes and voting in both *jurisdictions*.

(Adapted from *Local Government in Virginia – Materials & Resources for Teachers* by the Center for Public Service at the University of Virginia and the Virginia Local Government Management Association)