COUNTY GOVERNMENT OVERVIEW

County Authority

Optional Home Rule: Counties in Maryland may operate under a traditional commissioner form of government, a code home rule form or a home rule charter. Commission counties may become code home counties if the governing body approves. Home rule charter governments have broad legislative authority and autonomy. Home rule charter counties may enact, amend or repeal local laws on a range of matters, while commissioners in traditional commissioner counties have more limited authority. Code counties are not under a charter government, but they have some home rule power and the commissioners may determine their county structures through enactments of local laws.

TOP REVENUE SOURCES FOR MARYLAND COUNTIES

Summary of County Services

Services counties MUST provide:
- Operate an enhanced 9-1-1 system and provide police, firefighting and emergency ambulance services.
- Establish a local organization for emergency management in accordance with the state emergency management plan and program.

Services counties MAY provide:
- Establish a board of health and a health officer.
- Operate a local department of social services.
- Exercise zoning authority and regulate and restrict the use and construction of buildings and spaces.

Services counties CANNOT provide:
- Impose a mineral tax.
- Provide gas and electric utility services.
SUMMARY

Counties with a traditional commissioner form or code home rule form are governed by a board of county commissioners. Counties that adopt home rule charters are governed by an elected county council. There are six counties under the traditional commissioner form and six counties with code home rule. There are 12 counties that have adopted a home rule charter which grants them fairly broad legislative power. Nine of the twelve charter counties also have an elected county executive. In two of the other charter counties, the county council retains both executive and legislative authority. The last charter county equivalent is Baltimore City (with a Mayor/Council form of government), considered both a county and municipality. The executive power of a county depends on its form of government, but all county commissioners must hold a public hearing before they may adopt an act, ordinance or resolution.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Row Officers</th>
<th>Elected/ Appointed</th>
<th>Required/ Optional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clerk of the Circuit Court</td>
<td>Elected</td>
<td>Mandatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judges of Orphans’ Court</td>
<td>Elected</td>
<td>Mandatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Register of Wills</td>
<td>Elected</td>
<td>Mandatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheriff</td>
<td>Elected</td>
<td>Mandatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State’s Attorney (prosecutor)</td>
<td>Elected</td>
<td>Mandatory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

COUNTY STRUCTURE

**Legislative Branch:** A board of commissioners or a county council acts as the legislative decision-making body. Local laws determine the number of members.

**Executive Branch:** In commissioner counties and code counties, the commissioners exercise the executive authority. Nine of the twelve charter counties have an elected county executive. In all other counties, the board or council exercises executive authority.

**Judicial Branch:** Each of Maryland’s 23 counties has a circuit court. Maryland circuit courts are grouped into eight judicial circuits. These courts are responsible for more serious criminal cases and major civil cases, including juvenile and other family law cases such as divorce, custody and child support.

**Optional Forms of Government:**
- Commissioner
- Code home rule
- Charter

COUNTY AUTHORITY

**Executive Power:** The executive power of a county depends on whether a county is governed under a traditional commission, code home rule or charter. The governing body may appoint any needed officers, agents and employees not otherwise provided for by law.

**Ability to Form Partnerships:** Counties may provide materials, services or other assistance to another political subdivision. Additionally, most counties may contract with another governmental entity to jointly perform functions.

**Call a State of Emergency:** A county governing body may declare an emergency. This authority varies in executive/council counties by the specifics of the local charter.

**Special Districts:** There are approximately 164 special districts in Maryland. A county governing body may establish, modify or abolish special taxing districts including commercial districts, districts for infrastructure improvements and street lighting districts. Special taxing districts are usually governed by the county’s governing body or by an authority established by the county’s governing body.
OVERVIEW OF COUNTY SERVICES

Maryland counties must provide most basic services including police, local corrections, health and parks and recreation. Counties must fund public schools, libraries, local community colleges and the circuit courts. Depending on their government form, counties may provide many services also provided by the state. In addition, many counties are directly given unique authorities to deliver certain services. For example, Washington County commissioners may construct and maintain a railroad line for economic development. Most of the services that are detailed below are provided to all Maryland counties.

HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

County Health Department: The governing body of a county may establish a board of health, including a health officer. If a county does not establish a board of health, the county’s governing body must serve as the board of health.

Hospitals: Counties may establish a hospital or join with another county or municipality to establish a hospital. The county’s governing body may contribute up to one-third of the cost of any hospital or related facility through general fund revenues, bonds or other evidence of indebtedness. County-supported hospitals are rare in Maryland.

Senior Care Facilities: Counties may apply to the state for a grant to fund planning, designing, constructing, acquiring, renovating or improving a senior citizen activities center.

Mental Health Facilities: Counties with over 80,000 people must have a local addictions or behavioral health authority. These authorities may function as a unit of county government, a local health department, a quasi public authority or a private, nonprofit corporation.

Child Welfare: The state administers child welfare services; however, Montgomery County administers state-established child welfare programs.

Welfare: Counties must have a local department of social services that is overseen by a local board and managed and funded by the state. One county (Montgomery) has assumed these functions. Code and charter counties may also establish, maintain and manage homeless shelters.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Roads: In unincorporated areas, counties must manage county roads. The governing body may appoint road supervisors and civil engineers to oversee the grading, construction and repair of county roads.

Towing: In code home rule counties, commissioners may regulate licensing, maintenance and operation of towing companies.

Utilities: The state regulates utilities. Counties may provide services, including water and sewage, by establishing a department of public facilities and services.

- Water: Counties may construct, maintain and manage publicly owned water supply facilities.
- Solid waste: Counties may construct, maintain and manage publicly owned sewage facilities and solid waste collection and disposal services.
- Electric: Counties cannot provide electric utility services. The state regulates electric utilities.
- Gas: Counties cannot provide gas utility services. The state regulates gas utilities.
ZONING AND DEVELOPMENT

Zoning Power: Counties have zoning authority and may regulate and restrict the use and construction of buildings and spaces including population density and distribution. The state requires a range of elements to be part of each county’s ten-year comprehensive plan, and compliance with the state’s vision for smart growth.

Housing Authority: Counties may establish a housing authority to manage and operate housing projects that ensure low-income households have access to decent, safe and sanitary housing units. If cities agree, housing authorities may serve these incorporated municipal areas.

Watershed Projects: Counties may carry out, construct, operate and maintain improvements in watershed areas that qualify for federal assistance in conservation, development, flood prevention and other purposes.

Environmental Enforcement: Counties must oversee many environmentally sensitive activities. The state has delegated much of its enforcement and permitting authority to county governments.

PUBLIC AMENITIES

Parks and Recreation: Counties may establish and maintain property for parks or recreational facilities. Some counties may issue permits to establish, operate or maintain a public dance hall, a boxing or wrestling arena, an amusement park or a tourist camp. Counties may also create a parks and recreation unit and associated board or commission to administer programs.

Trailer Camps: Counties may regulate the construction or establishment of trailer camps.

Libraries: Counties may establish and fund a county public library system. Public library systems are governed by a board of trustees.

Junkyards: Counties may regulate licensing, maintenance and operation of junkyards to provide a safe, clean and aesthetically pleasing environment.
**PUBLIC SAFETY**

**Law Enforcement:** Non-home rule counties may provide and set compensation for county police, as well as appoint a special commission to oversee the county police force.

**Jails:** One or more counties may establish and maintain a local correctional facility. Either the sheriff or a correctional administrator is responsible for the safekeeping and care of those detained in or sentenced to the facility.

**Courthouses:** Courthouse construction and maintenance is a varied responsibility based on an array of local laws, practices and agreements between state courts and county governments.

**Fire:** Counties may maintain fire protection services through a combination of career and volunteer companies, with varying degrees of direct and indirect support. Two counties impose a “fire tax” in their property tax bill that solely funds fire services.

**Ambulance and 9-1-1:** Counties must have an enhanced 9-1-1 system. The state has allocated resources to accelerate deployment of “next generation” 9-1-1 services. Counties may enter into agreements for system maintenance, operation and costs.

**Emergency Management Agency:** Counties must establish a local organization for emergency management in accordance with the state emergency management plan and program. The governor appoints a director of emergency management for each county on a recommendation by the county’s governing body.

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**MARYLAND COUNTIES EMPLOY 241,432 GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES**

![Circle diagram showing full-time and part-time employment categories]

**SCHOOLS**

**Education, Generally:** Counties must fund public school functions with state laws and formulas governing many details of this process.

**School Board:** Counties must have a board of education. The county superintendent is the executive officer, secretary and treasurer of the county board. The governor appoints the members of each county board from the residents of that county.

**Community Colleges:** The governing body of any county may request permission to establish a community college through the Maryland Higher Education Commission. There is a board of community college trustees in each county that has one or more community colleges. Currently, every county is served by at least one community college campus.

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**MARYLAND COUNTY GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES BY TOP FUNCTIONAL CATEGORIES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td>169,057</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Justice &amp; Public Safety</strong></td>
<td>28,121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public Amenities</strong></td>
<td>13,264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Water, Sewage and Solid Waste</strong></td>
<td>5,798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Health and Hospitals</strong></td>
<td>5,484</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Source: NACo Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau - Census of Individual Governments: Employment, 2017
OVERVIEW OF COUNTY FINANCE STRUCTURE

County governments receive revenues from two basic sources: own-source revenues, which include locally generated revenues such as property taxes and income taxes, and intergovernmental revenues, which include federal and state funding. Maryland counties have varying degrees of authority of taxation based on their form of government. All counties in the state impose property taxes, income taxes and certain taxes on the sales of goods and services. A county’s governing body must publish an annual summary statement of county expenses. Charter and code counties may borrow money for any public purpose and issue and sell general obligation bonds to evidence the borrowing; commissioner counties must seek authorization from the general assembly to issue bonds.

FINANCES, TAXES AND LIMITATIONS

Real Property: Counties may tax property. Local property tax rates are established individually by each county and by Baltimore City. The state does not limit property tax rates or levies; however, it does limit growth in assessments via the Homestead Credit. The Homestead Credit limits counties and municipalities to a yearly taxable assessment increase of 10 percent or less. In commission counties, commissioners must tax property to support the courts, compensate jurors, pay out pensions established by the county commissioners, pay funeral expenses of the poor and pay and discharge all claims on or against the county that have been expressly or impliedly authorized by law.

Personal Property: Subject to numerous exemptions, counties may tax tangible business personal property. The county tax rate on personal property and operating real property cannot be more than 2.5 times the rate for real property.

Income Tax: Each county and Baltimore City must levy a local income tax. The county income tax sets Maryland apart from other states. Maryland local governments rank first nationally in reliance on personal income tax as a revenue source. Counties may set the local income tax rate from 1 to 3.2 percent. A county may change the county income tax rate by ordinance or resolution, except Howard County may change its rate only by ordinance. A county may not impose a rate above 2.6 percent until after the county has held a public hearing on the proposal.

Sales Tax:

• Food and Beverage Tax in Resort Areas: Counties operating under code home rule may tax food and beverages in a resort area to pay for bonds related to construction, repair, renovation or equipping of a convention center facility in the resort.

• Admissions and Amusement Tax: Counties may tax the gross receipts derived from any admissions and amusement charge in that county. The rate must not exceed 10 percent of gross receipts.

• Hotel/Motel Tax: Counties may tax the sale of renting a hotel or motel room, on top of the existing state general sales tax.

Mineral Tax: Counties cannot impose a mineral tax.

Gas/Fuel Taxes: Anne Arundel County, St. Mary’s County and Prince George’s County may impose a tax on energy and/or fuel. Other counties cannot impose this tax.

Debt and Debt Limit: Counties may borrow money for any public purpose, and they may issue and sell general obligation bonds to evidence the borrowing. For charter counties, the aggregate amount of bonds and other debts may not exceed the sum of 6 percent of the county’s assessable basis of all real property plus 15 percent of the county’s assessable basis of personal property and operating real property. In code counties and commissioner counties, there is no statutory maximum. Code home rule counties cannot issue bonds that mature later than 40 years after the date of issue.

Other Finance Info:

• Coal Tax: Counties must tax surface coal mining at a rate of 30 cents per ton.

• Transfer Tax: Home rule counties may levy a transfer of 0.5 percent or less on property transfers, articles of consolidation or articles of merger.
MARYLAND COUNTIES INVEST $31.3 BILLION ANNUALLY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top Investment Categories</th>
<th>Total Investment</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>$15.34 B</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice and Public Safety</td>
<td>$3.77 B</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Category</td>
<td>$3.13 B</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sewerage and Solid Waste Management</td>
<td>$2.06 B</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Amenities</td>
<td>$1.59 B</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilities</td>
<td>$1.31 B</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NACo Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau - Census of Individual Governments: Finance, 2017

MARYLAND COUNTIES RECEIVE $9.4 BILLION FROM INTERGOVERNMENTAL SOURCES

- County-Generated Revenue: 2%
- Intergovernmental Sources:
  - From State Government: 25%
  - From Local Government: 71%
  - From Federal Government: 3%

Source: NACo Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau - Census of Individual Governments: Finance, 2017