

MINNESOTA

COUNTY GOVERNMENT OVERVIEW

Counties

87

Government Form

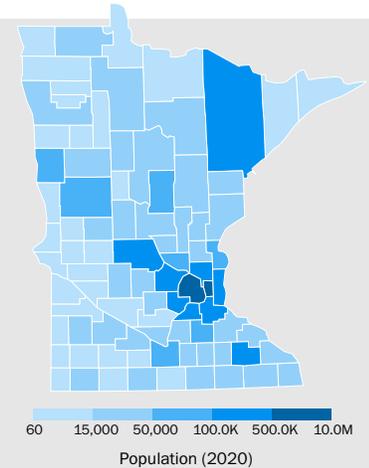
Mixed¹

Governing Body Size

5-7

Population (2020)

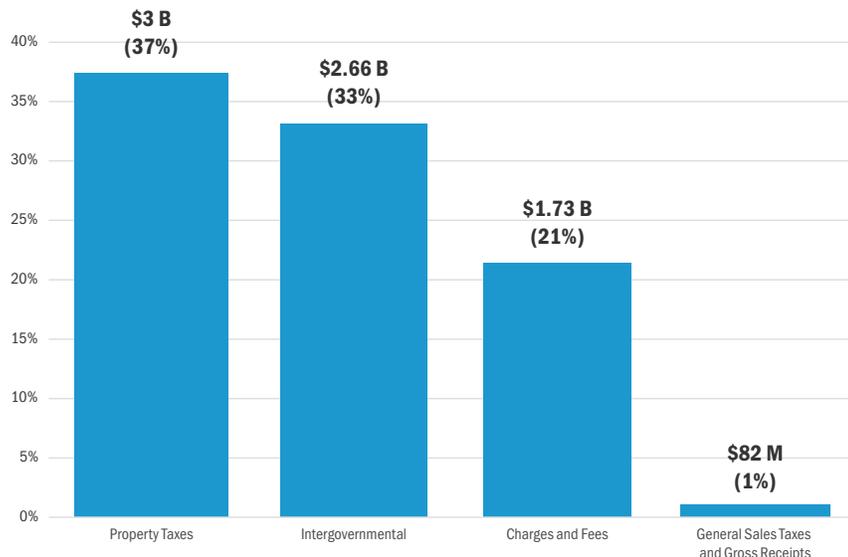
5.7 million²



County Authority

Mixed/Restrictive (Mostly Dillon’s Rule): All county governments, except for Ramsey County, are under general law and therefore only have the powers and structures prescribed to them by Minnesota state law. Ramsey County has a home rule charter, enabling it to determine its local affairs and government if consistent with state law.

TOP REVENUE SOURCES FOR MINNESOTA COUNTIES



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

¹“Government Form” refers to the distribution of executive decision making authority in a county.

“Traditional” county states mandate that counties exercise executive decision making power solely through the board of elected officials (commissioners, supervisors, etc.). “Reformed” county states mandate that counties employ an elected or appointed county executive, manager or similar position to take on at least some of the county’s executive decision making authority. “Mixed” county states means that some counties in that state are “traditional” and some are “reformed.”

²NACo Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau - 2020 Decennial Census

Summary of County Services

Services counties MUST provide:

- Establish a board of health.
- Own and maintain county roads and bridges that fall under the county state-aid highway system.
- Establish a local social services agency either independently or jointly with another county.

Services counties MAY provide:

- Construct hospitals and appoint a hospital board.
- Develop and operate a community-based corrections programs.

Services counties CANNOT provide:

- Establish local public school systems.

STRUCTURE/AUTHORITY

SUMMARY

Most Minnesota counties have a board of five commissioners with four year terms. Counties with a population over 100,000 may have a seven-member board of county commissioners. Currently, Anoka, Hennepin, Ramsey, Dakota, Olmsted and St. Louis counties have a board with seven members. The board of commissioners serves as the sole legislative decision-making body for all counties. Most Minnesota counties appoint a chief executive to manage county operations and execute board decisions. The chief executive has different powers and responsibilities depending on the model decided by the board. Most chief executives fall into the following models: administrator, coordinator, manager or auditor-treasurer-coordinator.

Row Officers	Elected/ Appointed	Mandatory/ Optional
Attorney	Elected	Mandatory
Auditor	Elected or Appointed	Mandatory
Recorder	Elected or Appointed	Mandatory
Sheriff	Elected	Mandatory
Treasurer	Elected or Appointed	Mandatory



COUNTY STRUCTURE

Legislative Branch: A board of five or seven county commissioners acts as the legislative decision-making body.

Executive Branch: Counties are led by a board of county commissioners who, in most counties, appoint an executive to manage the administration. State statute also includes an elected executive and an auditor administrator plan of government; however, no county has adopted either of these models.

Judicial Branch: The 87 counties of Minnesota are divided into 10 judicial districts. The court system oversees and has original jurisdiction over criminal, civil and family cases.

Optional Forms of Government: Ramsey County has adopted a charter. County boards may adopt any of the following additional leadership positions to complement the board:

- At-large Chair
- Elected Executive (not adopted by any counties)
- Elected Auditor-Administrator (not adopted by any counties)
- Appointed County Administrator
- Appointed County Manager
- Appointed County Coordinator



COUNTY AUTHORITY

Executive Power: The county board of commissioners holds the executive power for the county. County boards may exercise any powers conferred to them. Counties may acquire and hold real and personal property, as well as sell, lease and convey real or personal estates.

Ability to Form Partnerships:

Counties may form partnerships with other counties, other government entities or other private parties to enact its powers.

Call a State of Emergency: The chair of the county board of commissioners may declare a “local emergency” for preventing or addressing disasters.

Special Districts: Counties may form special districts to finance airport authorities, watersheds, hospital districts, housing authorities, development authorities and libraries.

OVERVIEW OF COUNTY SERVICES

While Minnesota counties may provide several services such as community health boards, housing authorities and libraries, many services are authorized only on a county-by-county basis. Counties have limited authority over zoning and have almost no power to regulate, provide or acquire utilities and energy services. Some of the more uncommon services that counties may provide include broadcast facilities, social services agencies and community action agencies. The board of county commissioners may also fund nonprofits providing services such as senior citizen centers and youth centers.



HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

County Health Departments: Counties **must** establish a community board of health. A board must serve at least 30,000 people or at least three adjacent counties. Multiple counties and municipalities may establish joint community health boards.

Human Services Boards: The county boards for one or more adjacent counties **may** designate a human services board to manage county resources and plan or directly deliver social services, mental health services and more.

Social Services Agencies: Counties **must** establish and contribute to a local social services agency, either independently or jointly with another county. The agency must support child protection, delinquency prevention and the state's family assistance responsibilities. The agency must also administer social services and financial assistance through a public child welfare program.

Hospitals: Counties **may** construct or acquire a hospital if residents approve. The county board of commissioners may appoint a superintendent or hospital board to run the hospital.

Nursing Homes: Counties **may**, either individually or jointly with other counties, establish a nursing home. A county that owns a nursing home may also establish and operate a related facility to provide supportive services to elderly persons who do not yet require the services of a nursing home.

Senior and Youth Facilities: Counties **may** appropriate money from their general fund to support a public or private, non-profit senior citizen center or youth center.



INFRASTRUCTURE

Roads: Counties **must** own and maintain county roads and bridges that fall under the county state-aid highway system. The state must approve these activities if county roads intersect with the state highway system.

Railroad Authorities: Counties **may**, either independently or jointly with another county, establish a regional railroad authority. This action may also be requested by municipalities within those counties.

Broadcast Facilities: Although there are no counties currently exercising this power, counties **may** fund a noncommercial television broadcast facility.

Utilities: The **state** regulates and oversees utilities. Counties **may** contract with energy providers and purchase energy generation facilities.

- **Solid Waste:** Counties **may** conduct a solid waste management program, either independently or jointly with another county. Counties may acquire property and facilities for these programs.
- **Water:** Municipalities construct waterways.
- **Sewers:** Municipalities construct sewage systems.

SERVICES, CONTINUED



PUBLIC AMENITIES

Parks and Recreation: If one or more counties have a population of at least 350,000, counties **may** form a parks and recreation district. These districts are subdivisions of the state and acquire, develop and maintain parks and wildlife or forest reservations.

Libraries: Counties **may** establish library services. If established, the county board of commissioners must appoint a library board with either five, seven or nine members.

County Fair Land: Counties **may** purchase or condemn land to hold agricultural fairs and exhibitions. Counties may not spend over \$25,000 for fairs, unless voters approve.

Veteran Memorials: Counties **may** fund a monument or other memorial to veteran soldiers and sailors.

Community Action Agencies: Counties **may** contract with a community action agency to plan for an effective community action program, develop information on the problems and causes of poverty in the community, establish efficient use of resources and more.

Emergency Employment Program: Counties with high unemployment **may** establish an emergency employment program to support economically disadvantaged and unemployed residents.



ZONING AND DEVELOPMENT

Zoning Power: Counties, except for Hennepin and Ramsey, **may** have zoning discretion. Counties may develop community-based comprehensive plans to coordinate development and land use with the incorporated areas of the county. A 5 to 11 member planning commission may be appointed to hold public hearings on zoning matters and advise the county board.

Zoning Restrictions: Counties **must** provide natural heritage data from the county biological survey in their comprehensive plan for the county. Additionally, counties must consider airport safety zones and open space/environmental protections within their planning.

Preservation: Counties **must** preserve lands for public parks, recreational use, wetlands, forest areas, sewage disposal, floodplains, agricultural lands, essential wildlife and reclamation of nonmetallic mining lands.

Housing Authorities: The **state** establishes housing authorities in each county; however, the governing body of the county **must** approve of the housing authority to exercise its powers.

Economic Development: Counties **may** fund an incorporated development society or organization to promote, advertise, improve or develop economic and agricultural resources.

SERVICES, CONTINUED



PUBLIC SAFETY

Law Enforcement: Counties **must** elect a sheriff to provide law enforcement services; however, municipalities must operate and fund police departments within their jurisdictions.

Jails: Counties **must** establish a county jail within the county seat and the sheriff must have charge and custody of the prisoners in the jail.

Courthouses: Counties **may** maintain a courthouse and may incur a maximum debt equal to a levy of 0.0403 percent of estimated market value, unless a higher rate is approved by voters. All counties, except for Hennepin and Ramsey, may partner with a first-class city to administer a joint courthouse.

Fire: Counties outside of the Twin Cities metropolitan area **may** appropriate general funds or use state and federal funds to provide grants to cities and towns to construct and operate fire departments.

Ambulance: The **state** must contract to provide ambulance services across Minnesota and must assess the effectiveness of the statewide system.

Emergency Communication System: Counties **must** provide, operate and maintain a 911 emergency communication system.

Community Corrections: Counties **may** develop, implement and operate community-based corrections programs, including preventive or diversionary correctional programs, conditional release programs and community corrections centers for detention, care and treatment.



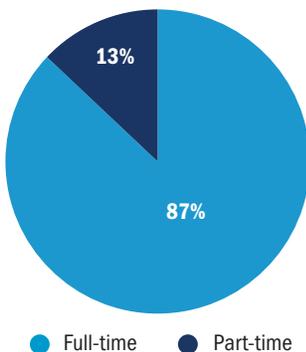
SCHOOLS

Education, Generally: The **state** establishes a public school system and levies taxes to support it.

Funding: Counties do not have a role in school funding. In addition to state funding, school district boards may take on debt to upgrade or provide school services.

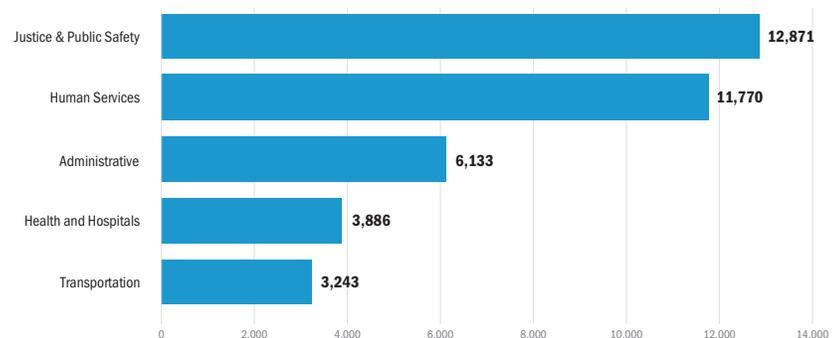
School Districts: Local school districts may jointly form an education district with at least five formerly local school districts. Counties **may** join an education district once it has been established; however, no counties have ever put this into practice.

MINNESOTA COUNTIES EMPLOY 42,346 GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES



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

MINNESOTA COUNTY GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES BY TOP FUNCTIONAL CATEGORIES



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

OVERVIEW OF COUNTY FINANCE STRUCTURE

Property taxes are both the largest and most important source of locally levied funding for counties. The board of county commissioners may levy property taxes on all land not excluded under general law. Counties also benefit from dedicated shares of state mineral taxes set aside for the county in which the mineral mining occurs. In addition, county boards may authorize county officers to access and use government credit cards for county purchases. Each county board may transfer any surplus beyond the needs of the current year from one county fund to another to supply a deficiency. Additionally, the board of county commissioners may levy transportation taxes to fund transportation projects. Lastly, counties collect taxes on energy generation from solar and wind facilities. This revenue source is relatively new and growing quickly, with \$14.5 million collected in 2020.



FINANCES, TAXES AND LIMITATIONS

Property Tax: Counties **may** tax real and personal property, except for tribal lands and any land specifically excluded by state legislature. The county treasurer collects and distributes property tax to the county funds accordingly.

Income Tax: Counties **cannot** tax income.

Sales Tax:

- **Transportation Sales Tax:** Counties, either independently or jointly, **may** impose a sales tax of 0.5 percent. The county must use the proceeds of the tax exclusively to fund a specific transportation project or the operation of safe routes to school programs.
- **Local Sales Tax:** If the state approves, counties **may** impose a local sales tax. Boards of commissioners must declare a specific rate and purpose for this tax.

Mineral Tax: Counties **cannot** impose a mineral tax. However, the **state** allocates portions of statewide mineral taxes to the counties in which the minerals are produced.

Gas/Fuel Taxes: Counties **cannot** impose gas or fuel taxes.

Debt and Debt Limit: Counties **may** issue a capital gains bond of up to 0.12 percent of the estimated value of all taxable property within the county. They may issue municipal bonds to fund the upkeep of county buildings

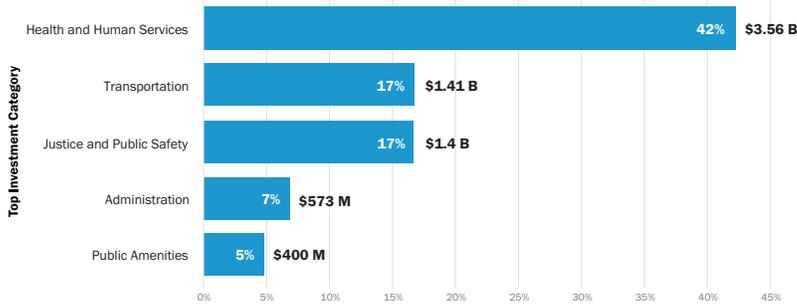
and facilities, general government facilities and all other purposes defined under state law. County boards may issue and sell debt certificates to raise money for specific funds. These certificates may be up to 75 percent of the uncollected taxes previously levied for the fund.

Other Finance Info:

- **Tax on Energy Generation Facilities:** Counties **may** collect taxes on energy generation from solar and wind facilities.
- **Environmental Trust Fund:** Counties **must** deposit the money received from the sale of land into an environmental trust fund.
- **Capital Improvement:** Counties **may** adopt a capital improvement plan which prepares for improvements for the next five years or more. If voters approve, counties may issue bonds to finance capital improvements under an approved capital improvement plan.
- **County Building Fund:** Counties **may** establish a county building fund and may also levy an additional property tax to add to the fund.
- **Surplus Funds:** Counties **may** transfer a surplus from one county fund to another to supply a deficiency.

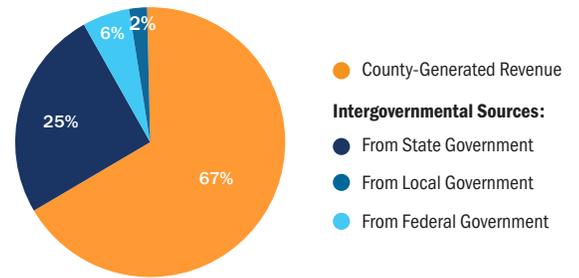
TAXATION/FINANCES, CONTINUED

MINNESOTA COUNTIES INVEST \$8.4 BILLION ANNUALLY



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

MINNESOTA COUNTIES RECEIVE \$2.7 BILLION FROM INTERGOVERNMENTAL SOURCES



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