County Authority

**Dillon’s Rule:** All counties in Nebraska are governed under general law and there is no constitutional or statutory option for counties to adopt a home rule charter. Nebraska counties therefore have only the authority and powers expressly granted to them by the state legislature.

### TOP REVENUE SOURCES FOR NEBRASKA COUNTIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Revenue</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Property Taxes</td>
<td>$690 M</td>
<td>(34%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charges and Fees</td>
<td>$650 M</td>
<td>(32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intergovernmental</td>
<td>$417 M</td>
<td>(21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Taxes</td>
<td>$59 M</td>
<td>(3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.”

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

### Summary of County Services

**Services counties MUST provide:**
- Administer public assistance programs.
- Provide jails and courthouses.
- Establish rural and suburban fire protection districts.

**Services counties MAY provide:**
- Maintain public county roads.
- Establish health departments and hospitals.
- Establish parks, libraries and cemetery districts.

**Services counties CANNOT provide:**
- Administer school systems.
- Contract with townships to construct township roads.
SUMMARY

Nebraska counties are organized under either a township form or a commissioner form of government. The commissioner form is used by 71 counties and the township form is used by 22 counties. Commissioner counties are divided into three, five or seven districts, with one county commissioner elected per district. Township counties are divided into seven districts with one supervisor elected from each district. Counties may organize under the township or supervisor form through a petition and a vote of county electors. Counties may also choose to elect at-large supervisors or commissioners. Counties with a city of the metropolitan class (over 300,000) may have a comptroller to act as the general accountant and fiscal agent for the county.

COUNTY STRUCTURE

**Legislative Branch:** In a commission government, a board of 3-7 commissioners makes legislative decisions. In a township government, this power is held by seven county supervisors.

**Executive Branch:** In a commission government, a board of 3-7 commissioners makes executive decisions. In a township government, this power is held by seven county supervisors. Counties cannot elect chief executive officers or appoint county administrators.

**Judicial Branch:** Nebraska has several local court systems: district courts, county courts, separate juvenile courts, a workers’ compensation court and problem-solving courts. District courts have general jurisdiction over civil and criminal cases while county courts handle a wide variety of matters, such as small claims, guardianship and even preliminary hearings in felony criminal cases. County courts also hear juvenile cases, except in Douglas, Lancaster and Sarpy counties in which juvenile cases are heard by the separate juvenile courts. Finally, the worker’s compensation court mediates workers’ compensation disputes, and the problem-solving courts handle several types of cases, including those related to drugs, domestic violence and community issues.

**Optional Forms of Government:**
  * Commissioner
  * Supervisor-Township

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Row Officers</th>
<th>Elected/ Appointed</th>
<th>Required/ Optional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessor</td>
<td>Elected</td>
<td>Mandatory*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attorney</td>
<td>Elected</td>
<td>Mandatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerk</td>
<td>Elected</td>
<td>Mandatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Election Commissioner</td>
<td>Appointed</td>
<td>Mandatory**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Defender</td>
<td>Elected</td>
<td>Mandatory**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Register of Deeds</td>
<td>Elected</td>
<td>Mandatory***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheriff</td>
<td>Elected</td>
<td>Mandatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveyor/Engineer</td>
<td>Elected</td>
<td>Mandatory****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treasurer</td>
<td>Elected</td>
<td>Mandatory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*For counties with over 3,500 in population.
**For counties with over 100,000 in population, optional for counties with populations from 20,000 to 100,000.
***For counties with over 20,000 in population.
****A county engineer must be elected in counties with a population over 150,000. All other counties must elect a surveyor unless specified otherwise by voters.
Executive Power: In either the commissioner or supervisor-township organization, the county board provides and oversees county functions. Unless one member has been designated as chairperson, the board only has power as a whole. County boards are responsible for county property, funds, roads, adopting zoning resolutions, levying and collecting taxes and all other duties imposed by law.

Ability to Form Partnerships: Counties may exercise any of its powers or perform any of its functions jointly or in cooperation with any other government entity in accordance with state law. If voters approve, the state may allow counties to merge or consolidate.

Call a State of Emergency: Counties may declare a local emergency. Disaster management, organization, administration and operation is then delegated to the emergency management director.

Special Districts: There are around 1,300 special districts in Nebraska, made up of approximately 20 different types. Counties may create special districts to provide specialized services to residents, including cemetery districts, hospital districts and irrigation districts.
OVERVIEW OF COUNTY SERVICES

Nebraska counties have jurisdiction over a range of services including health care, parks and libraries. Counties may work closely with cities or villages to jointly provide services, and they may create certain special districts to provide localized services to county residents. As Nebraska counties are governed under Dillon’s Rule, they may only provide the services that have been explicitly authorized by the state.

HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

County Health Department: In cooperation with the state, counties may establish and maintain a local health department, managed by a health director. Counties may also cooperate with each other to form a joint health department, or with a city to form a city-county health department.

Hospitals: If petitioned, counties may create a local hospital district. Hospitals organized as hospital districts are separate political subdivisions. If a hospital is organized as a county hospital, the county is the legal party in interest.

Senior Care Facilities: The board of trustees of a county hospital may authorize additional health care services, including assisted-living or independent living services.

Mental Health Facilities: Counties may have facilities, programs and services to assist persons who are dependent, aged, blind, disabled, ill or infirm with a mental disorder and persons with an intellectual disability.

Welfare: Counties must maintain an office and service facilities for public assistance programs. Counties must establish guidelines for providing general assistance outside of the welfare program.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Roads: Counties must supervise and control public county roads. The board may establish, improve, maintain and abandon public roads.

Airports: Counties may acquire real or personal property to establish, construct and expand airports and other air navigation facilities.

Utilities: The state regulates and exercises general control over public utilities. Cities and villages may own and operate public utilities and create utility districts. Counties only have jurisdiction over solid waste disposal.

- Water: Municipalities may own and operate a waterworks and sewage system.
- Solid waste: Counties must provide or contract for solid waste facilities and systems in unincorporated areas.
- Electric: Municipalities may own and operate electric generation or transmission facilities.
- Gas: Municipalities may own and operate gas mains and plants.
PUBLIC AMENITIES

Parks and Recreation: Counties may purchase, improve, protect and preserve public grounds and parks.

Libraries: Counties may establish a free public library for county inhabitants. The county board may also contract for the use of an existing public library.

Cemeteries: Counties, in response to a petition and after holding a hearing, may establish an independent cemetery district and board of trustees.

ZONING AND DEVELOPMENT

Zoning Power: In unincorporated areas, the county board may create a planning commission and adopt zoning resolutions to regulate and restrict the use and construction of buildings and spaces, including population density and distribution. The county board may also set fees to issue building and land permits.

Zoning Restriction: Counties cannot prohibit residential structures for the sole reason of being manufactured homes.

Housing Authority: The state establishes a housing agency in each county; however, the agency does not have authority until the governing body of the county declares a need for these services.

Economic Investment: Counties may expend general funds to encourage immigration, new industries and investment and to carry out a publicity campaign.
**SCHOOLS**

Education, Generally: The state department of education has general supervision and administration of the school system. Local education is administered by school districts. The county treasurer collects the fines and all money for school purposes in their county.

School Board: Nebraska school board members are elected by residents of the school district. School boards work with county clerks in coordinating elections.

Community Colleges: Counties are not involved in community colleges. The state is divided into six community college areas. Each community college area is governed by an elected board of governors.

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**PUBLIC SAFETY**

Law Enforcement: County sheriffs must keep the peace and apprehend violators of the state’s criminal laws.

Jails: Counties may construct and maintain a jail. The sheriff has charge and custody of the jail unless a county board of corrections is established.

Courthouses: Counties must acquire, purchase, construct, renovate or provide a suitable courthouse and may borrow money and issue bonds to do so.

Courts: The state is divided into 12 district court judicial districts, each containing one or more counties.

Fire: Counties must establish rural and suburban fire protection districts to include all unincorporated areas.

Ambulance: If voters petition and approve, counties may establish hospital districts. Hospital districts may acquire, maintain and operate ambulances or emergency medical services.

Emergency Management Agency: Counties must participate in a county or interjurisdictional emergency management organization. Counties may appoint an emergency management director.

Flood Control: Counties may appropriate funds and contract with the federal government to provide flood control, watershed protection, water conservation, flood prevention and similar projects.

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**NEBRASKA COUNTIES EMPLOY 15,678 GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES**

![Bar chart showing government employees by functional category: Health and Hospitals 4,718, Justice & Public Safety 4,450, Administrative 2,246, Transportation 1,820, Human Services 1,412]

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

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

![Bar chart showing government employees by functional category: Health and Hospitals 4,718, Justice & Public Safety 4,450, Administrative 2,246, Transportation 1,820, Human Services 1,412]

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

TAXATION/FINANCES

OVERVIEW OF COUNTY FINANCE STRUCTURE

Nebraska counties raise revenue primarily through taxation and shares of state tax revenue. Counties tax real and personal property and may tax hotel occupancy as well. Unless voters approve, counties cannot assess taxes which exceed, in aggregate, $0.50 per $100 of taxable value. In conjunction with other governmental entities, counties may impose sales taxes for public safety services in areas without a city sales tax.

FINANCES, TAXES AND LIMITATIONS

Property Tax: Counties may levy a tax of up to 0.50 percent on the assessed value of taxable real property. Of this tax, 0.05 percent may only be levied to support a joint public agency or interlocal agreement.

Personal Property: Counties may tax personal property as a distinct class.

Income Tax: Counties cannot impose an income tax.

Sales Tax:
- Sales and Use Tax: In unincorporated areas, counties may impose a sales and use tax of 0.50 percent or 1.5 percent.
- Lodging Tax: Counties may adopt an additional tax of up to 4 percent on charges for hotel occupancy. Proceeds are distributed into the County Visitors Promotion Fund or County Visitors Improvement Fund.

Mineral Tax: Counties cannot impose a mineral tax.

Gas/Fuel Taxes: Counties cannot impose a gas or fuel tax.

State Shares: The state shares some tax proceeds with counties, including the Marijuana and Controlled Substances Tax, the Motor Fuels Tax and the Insurance Premium Tax.

Debt and Debt Limit: For counties to borrow money or issue bonds, they must levy an annual tax to pay for the debt’s interest. Debt limit depends on the type of bond.

Misc. Tax Info:
- County Fees: Counties impose a documentary stamp tax on the grantor of a deed to real property at a rate of $2.25 per $1,000. The register of deeds retains $0.50 from each $2.25 collected for the county general fund. The remainder is given to the state treasurer for housing and health services. Counties also charge filing fees, service of process fees, marriage license fees, building permit fees and others.
- County Visitors Promotion Fund: If counties enact a lodging tax, the governing body of a county must hold a public hearing and establish a County Visitors Promotion Fund and a visitors committee. The proceeds of the promotion fund must be used to promote, encourage and attract visitors to visit and use county travel and tourism facilities.
- County Visitors Improvement Fund: If counties enact a lodging tax, the governing body of a county may, after a public hearing, establish a County Visitors Improvement Fund. The proceeds of the fund must be used to improve visitor attractions and facilities, except in institutions for gambling.

NEBRASKA COUNTIES INVEST $1.8 BILLION ANNUALLY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top Investment Category</th>
<th>Annual Investment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health and Human Services</td>
<td>$577 M</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice and Public Safety</td>
<td>$357 M</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>$296 M</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>$113 M</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Amenities</td>
<td>$41 M</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

NEBRASKA COUNTIES RECEIVE $417 MILLION FROM INTERGOVERNMENTAL SOURCES

Intergovernmental Sources:
- County-Generated Revenue: 79%
- From State Government: 17%
- From Local Government: 2%
- From Federal Government: 2%

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