

Chapter 1

Overview of a City

How cities and towns came to be

It's easy to think of a city as a stand-alone entity. They have their own borders and unique laws and ordinances. But cities operate within a larger government framework. They were created under the state constitution and general laws as "municipal corporations." In essence, cities are creatures of the state, exercising local powers only within the limitation of state law.

Cities can do many of the same things as an everyday private business: provide services, collect revenue, sue (and be sued), contract with other entities, etc. But unlike other businesses, city functions are wholly public.



Tieton City Hall

Know the law

WA State Constitution

RCW 35 – Cities and towns

RCW 35A – Optional municipal code

RCW 35.02.010 – Authority for incorporation

Resources

Knowing the Territory, MRSC, November 2009 (pdf, 294kb)



Governance webpage, MRSC 

Key to Symbols

 – Legal citing

 – Internet resource

 – Print publication

 – Training/conference

 – Who to call


Know the law


Article 11, Section 10 of WA State Constitution – Charter cities



RCW 35 – The powers and duties of first class cities, second class cities and towns



RCW 35A – The powers and duties of optional municipal code cities


Resources

Classification of WA cities, Governance webpage, MRSC 

A comparison of the powers of a town and a noncharter code city, Management webpage, MRSC 

Code City Handbook, MRSC, March 1997 (pdf, 298kb)  

Initiative and Referendum Powers of Cities and Towns in the State of Washington, MRSC, January 2006 (pdf, 306kb)  

Town Handbook: Handbook for Washington Town Officials, MRSC library loan 

In the appendix

List of city classifications, Appendix B

Cities versus towns – what’s the difference?

The difference between cities and towns is more than just semantics. All cities incorporate under one of four classifications:

- First class cities (population 10,000 or more)
- Second class cities (population 1,500 or more)
- Towns (population 1,500 or less)
- Optional municipal code (no population threshold)

While all cities and towns possess the same basic authority to perform general government functions, there are several distinctions. For example, code cities exercise a broader degree of self government or “home rule” than do others.

The creation of code cities

For many years, smaller cities tried to win changes in state law to give them the same flexibility and autonomy that “first class” cities (originally those with populations of 20,000 or more) were granted by the state constitution.

After much debate, a 1967 law created a new category called “code cities” that gives smaller cities much more local autonomy and flexibility over matters ranging from employee benefits to annexations. Since the law was passed, many small cities have chosen to become “code cities” to take advantage of the increased autonomy this status provides. MRSC’s Code City Handbook contains a detailed summary of the differences between code and charter municipal governments. It also contains information about how to become a code city.

No more new towns

The 1994 legislature made some significant changes to the state laws governing incorporations. As a result of these changes the minimum population now required to incorporate as a city is 1,500. Since a new city cannot be formed unless it has at least 1,500 inhabitants, incorporation as a town is no longer an option (i.e. new cities must incorporate as either first or second class cities or as optional municipal code cities).