

Small City Resource Manual

Introduction

Small cities are different from their larger counterparts not just in size, but in nature. In these communities, elected officials know nearly everyone in town. At city hall, staff and citizens don't have to deal with a big bureaucracy – but they do have to get along with people with whom they may have longstanding, complex relationships that involve cousins, competitors, or friends.

Indeed, it's the personal, close-knit nature of small communities that make them the historical and cultural bedrock of American life. These are the qualities that big city people often yearn for. But governing a small town isn't easy. In fact, the challenges of self-government are sometimes greater in small communities because they must deal with the ever-more-complex laws and regulations of the 21st century without the specialized staff of larger cities. In small cities, the clerk might be part-time, the mayor could be the chief grant writer, and the public works director; a “one-man show” (if there even is a public works director). Citizens often expect services to be quick and tailored to their personal needs, and they may blame local officials when the complex requirements of state or federal law get in the way of their wishes.

Small cities also often don't get the news coverage they need to keep citizens informed. Citizen education takes place at the local coffee shops, or in the bleachers at a high school football game.






This resource manual is meant to make life a little easier around city hall. It can be used to help orient new elected officials or city staff or when questions arise. It provides a brief overview of key topics, outlining the most important issues. It then provides a list of resources to help you gather additional information. **This resource manual is not meant to provide all needed information on a particular topic nor legal advice. Rather, it's intended to help quickly identify more comprehensive resources.**

Throughout this publication, both small cities and towns are referred to as cities. This manual is intended for officials in cities with a population of less than 5,000. We understand that each small city – from Algona to Zillah – is unique, and that operations at a city of 500 can differ significantly from a city of 5,000.

We also know that not all elected officials and staff access information in the same way. Not all cities have high speed Internet. And some people just prefer “the old fashioned way” to look something up in a book or pick up the phone. This manual was created to help city officials learn about all the available resources in a variety of ways.

Unfortunately, just as soon as this publication goes to print it will become out-of-date. Web links will change, laws will be updated and new trainings will be developed. For the most updated copy, look to our website at www.awcnet.org.

The availability of each resource is indicated by an icon you'll find following the resource's name:

- Publications available in print – 
- Webpages and Internet-based resources – 
- In-person training and conferences – 
- Where to turn (agencies and people to call) – 
- Legal citing – 

The Association of Washington Cities (AWC) and the Municipal Research and Services Center (MRSC) provide expert help, information, insurance, and other resources to help you succeed in your job and to support your city's operations. Here's a brief discussion of the services each organization offers.

Association of Washington Cities

1076 Franklin St SE
Olympia WA 98501-1346
(360) 753-4137 or 1-800-562-8981
www.awcnet.org

Founded in 1933, AWC is a private, non-profit, non-partisan organization funded primarily by service fees from its 281 member cities. A 24-member Board of Directors, elected by AWC members, sets priorities for the organization's work.

What does AWC do?

Headquartered in Olympia, AWC's staff offers you assistance in five focused areas.

- **Representing city interests in state policy-making and regulation:** AWC represents its members before the state legislature, the state executive branch and with regulatory agencies. AWC also works with its national counterpart, the National League of Cities, to address federal issues of significance to cities.
- **Education and training:** AWC offers various courses and workshops, including Basic Training for Clerk/Treasurers, Introduction to Municipal Budgeting, and Labor Relations Institute. There are also many informative workshops and presentations at the AWC Annual Conference, and at the City Legislative Action Conference. A calendar of AWC trainings and events is on the website.
- **Publications, data and research:** AWC publications and resources include the *Cityvision - AWC's magazine*, *Legislative Bulletin*, *Salary Survey*, *Police and Fire Survey* and *State of the Cities* research projects.
- **Technical assistance:** AWC staff is available to answer questions about personnel and labor relations, energy, transportation, budgeting, planning, risk management, employee wellness, general local government, and other issues.
- **Insurance programs:** AWC offers municipal liability and property insurance, worker's compensation, employee drug and alcohol testing, and employee benefits and wellness.

Give Karen Tanner, Leadership Programs Coordinator a call at 1-800-562-8981 if you have questions.

Municipal Research and Services Center

2601 Fourth Avenue, Suite 800

Seattle, WA 98121-1280

(206) 625-1300 or 1-800-933-6772

www.mrsc.org

MRSC is a non-profit, independent organization that provides quick access to legal and policy research, sample documents, free professional advice, and a wealth of historical and contemporary information about local governments. It was created in 1969 to continue programs established in 1934 under the Bureau of Governmental Research at the University of Washington. In 1997, Washington counties joined cities in funding MRSC. In 2007, MRSC began providing services to ports and special purpose districts as well. MRSC is governed by a board of directors drawn from local government and the community. MRSC programs are cooperatively funded out of a portion of the cities' distributions of the Liquor Board profits and the counties' distribution of the liquor excise tax. There is no charge for MRSC services.

What does MRSC do?

Headquartered in Seattle, MRSC's offers a variety of practical resources:

- **Help desk:** You can call or email MRSC for advice and information on municipal law, budget and finance, public administration, planning and growth management, public works and utilities, and local government policies.
- **Website:** www.mrsc.org focuses on local government in Washington State. The site contains weekly news, sample documents, responses to common questions, state statutes and administrative rules, court decisions, and more.
- **Publications:** MRSC publications include educational guidebooks for local officials, and practical publications about emerging issues.
- **E-Newsletter:** Two subscription-based newsletters, *In Focus* and *Ask MRSC*, keep local officials up to date on current issues that affect municipal government in Washington.
- **Library:** The library offers the state's largest collection of local government reference documents and "how to" samples. Materials include local ordinances, codes, budgets and finance reports, comprehensive plans, and documents illustrating virtually every function and operation of local government.