



Your Local Government

A Resident's Guide to Services,
Roles & Good Governance

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
• How to Use This Guide	2
• Glossary of Common Municipal Terms	3
Part I: Understanding Your Municipality: Quick Facts for Residents	4
• Top 10 Things to Know About Your Local Council	4
• Who to Contact for What	6
• How to Engage Respectfully With Your Municipality	9
• Common Questions Residents Ask	11
• New to the Community? What to Know in Your First 30 Days	14
Part II: Understanding Your Municipality	16
• Why Local Government Matters	16
• What Municipalities Do	17
• Canada's Orders of Government	18
Part III: How Your Municipality Is Governed	21
• Governance vs. Administration	21
• Roles in Your Municipality	22
• How Municipal Decisions Are Made	24
• Understanding Municipal Bylaws	25
• Council Meetings & Public Participation	26
Part IV: Reporting Issues, Complaints & Oversight	27
• Reporting Issues & Staying Informed	27
• Bylaw Enforcement: What Municipalities Can and Cannot Do	29
• Appeals: When You Disagree With A Decision	30
• Complaints, Integrity Commissioners & Oversight Bodies	30

Part V: Municipal Finances, Services & Community Growth32

- Municipal Services, Property Taxes & Budgets32
- Property Assessment: How Your Home’s Value is Determined34
- Understanding Your Utility Bill: Water, Wastewater & Stormwater36
- Planning & Development: How Communities Grow37

Part VI: Transparency, Access & Resident Rights38

- Access to Information: What Residents Needs to Know38
- What Municipalities Legally Cannot Do39

Part VII: Engaging in Your Local Democracy40

- Elections, Voting & Running for Office40
- Strengthening Local Democracy as a Resident41
- How to Get Involved in Your Community42
- Myths & Facts: How Local Government Really Works43
- Closing Message: Strengthening Democracy, Together46

Appendices47

- Appendix “A”: Northern and Territorial Municipal Context47
- Appendix “B”: Two-Tier Municipal Government Explained48
- Appendix “C”: Oversight Bodies and Accountability Tools49
- Appendix “D”: Ontario Specific Municipal Structures50

Introduction

Local government shapes many of the services residents rely on every day, yet many people are unsure how municipalities operate or where to go for information.

This guide offers clear, practical explanations to help residents understand how their municipality functions, what services it provides, and how to engage constructively when questions or concerns arise.

Inside, you'll find straightforward descriptions, helpful examples, and simple charts that explain key topics such as reporting issues, attending Council meetings, understanding bylaws, taxes, planning, budgeting, and how communities grow. The goal is to give you the confidence to navigate local government with ease.

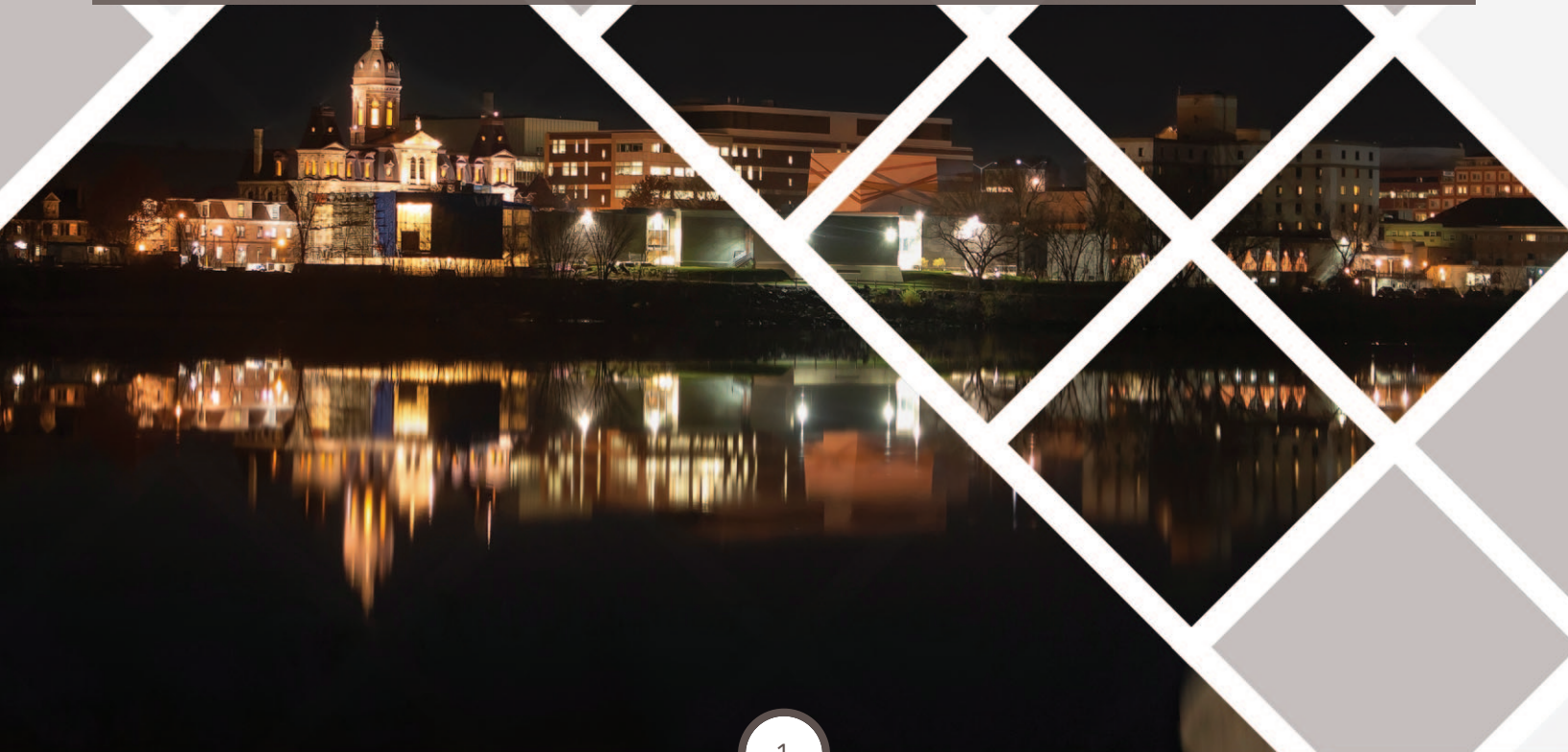
Because municipal responsibilities differ across Canada, notes throughout the guide highlight where Provincial and Territorial rules vary and when to check your local municipality or provincial legislation for specific details. Understanding these foundations, along with roles of Council, staff, and residents, strengthens transparency, builds trust, and supports respectful local democracy.

A Key Governance Principle to Know Up Front

In Canadian municipalities, Council's role is to set policy, approve budgets, and make decisions collectively.

Council's only employee is the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) also called a City Manager or SAO in some jurisdictions. The CAO oversees all municipal staff and day-to-day operations.

Council does not manage staff or direct daily operations.



How to Use This Guide

This guide is designed to help residents understand how their municipality works, where to go for information, and how to engage respectfully. Here's how to get the most out of it:

- **Start with [Part I: Quick Facts](#):** A simple overview of who does what, how decisions are made, and where to report issues.
- **Use the “Who to Contact for What” charts:** They show generally which department, official, or process handles each type of concern.
- **Look for icons and infographics:** They highlight key ideas, definitions, decision-making processes, and what municipalities can and cannot do.
- **Go to Common Questions when something doesn't seem clear:** Snow clearing? Taxes? Permits? Social media? This section explains the “why” behind municipal processes.
- **Check [Part VII](#) if you want to get involved:** Learn how to participate in meetings, consultations, elections, and community initiatives.

How This Guide Applies Across Canada

This guide explains how local government works in most Canadian municipalities, using a standard governance model where Council governs collectively and administration is led by a CAO.

Municipal structures and responsibilities can vary by Province or Territory. For example, some jurisdictions have two-tier governments, different service responsibilities, or additional legislated authorities, such as Strong Mayor Powers in parts of Ontario.

Where meaningful differences exist, they are noted throughout the guide. Additional examples of Provincial, Territorial, and structural variations are included in the appendices to provide context without overcomplicating the main content.

For community-specific information, residents are encouraged to visit their municipality's official website, or contact their Provincial or Territorial department responsible for municipal affairs, which provides plain-language information about how local governments operate in that jurisdiction.

Local rules may differ. Your municipality's website is usually the best and most accessible source for accurate, up-to-date information.

Glossary of Common Municipal Terms

Here are a few key terms you'll see throughout this guide.

- **Assessment:** The value assigned to your property by a provincial assessment authority. Municipalities use this value to calculate taxes but do not set it.
- **Balanced Budget:** A legal requirement in most provinces that municipalities must collect enough revenue each year to cover their operations costs. Municipalities generally cannot run deficits.
- **Bylaw:** A local law passed by Council that applies only within the municipality (for example, noise, parking, zoning, or property standards).
- **CAO (Chief Administrative Officer) / City Manager / SAO:** The municipality's top staff leader and Council's only employee. The CAO oversees all departments and carries out Council's decisions.
- **Capital Budget:** The part of the municipal budget that pays for large, long-term assets such as roads, buildings, water systems, and equipment.
- **Closed (In Camera) Meeting:** A portion of a Council meeting that is closed to the public for specific legal reasons, such as personnel matters, legal advice, or land negotiations.
- **Council Resolution / Motion:** A formal decision made by Council through a vote at an official meeting.
- **Delegation:** A resident or group that appears before Council to speak on a specific issue, following established rules and time limits.
- **Enabling Legislation:** Provincial or Territorial laws that define what municipalities can and cannot do.
- **Fiscal Year:** The 12-month period used for budgeting and financial reporting. For most municipalities, this is January 1 to December 31.
- **Governance:** The role of Council in setting policy, direction, and priorities for the municipality.
- **Integrity Commissioner:** An independent officer (where applicable) who investigates complaints about elected officials' conduct under a Code of Conduct.
- **Mill Rate (Tax Rate):** The rate used to calculate property taxes. It is applied to assessed property values to generate tax revenue.
- **Motion:** A proposal put forward by a Council member for debate and a vote.
- **Operating Budget:** The part of the budget that pays for day-to-day services such as snow clearing, staff, utilities, recreation, and emergency services.
- **Public Consultation:** A process used by municipalities to gather resident input before making decisions on policies, budgets, or major projects.
- **Quorum:** The minimum number of Council members required to be present for Council to legally conduct business.
- **Reserve / Reserve Fund:** Money set aside for future expenses, emergencies, or major infrastructure replacement.
- **Service Request (311 / Reporting Portal):** The official way residents report issues such as potholes, streetlights, noise complaints, or missed garbage collection.
- **Strategic Plan:** A long-term plan approved by Council that sets community goals, priorities, and direction. It guides staff work and budget decisions.
- **Tax Levy:** The total amount of property tax revenue the municipality needs to collect to fund services.
- **Two-Tier Government:** A municipal system where responsibilities are shared between an upper-tier (region or county) and lower-tier municipalities.
- **Zoning:** Rules that control how land can be used, such as where homes, businesses, or industries can be located.

Part I: Understanding Your Municipality: Quick Facts for Residents

This section is designed as a stand-alone overview that municipalities may share independently with residents, new community members, or advisory groups. It provides a clear snapshot of how your municipality works, who does what, how decisions are made, and where to go for help.

Top 10 Things to Know About Your Local Council

Local government affects your daily life more than any other level of government. The following ten principles highlight how Council makes decisions, the role of administration, and how residents can engage effectively.

Here are the top **10 principles** every resident should know about how their Council operates.

Key Principle	Explanation
1. Municipalities Operate Under Provincial/Territorial Law	Cities, towns, villages, and rural municipalities must follow rules set out in Provincial or Territorial legislation. These laws define how Council must operate, how budgets are approved, what services local governments can provide, and the limits of municipal authority. Local governments cannot “just do whatever they want”—their powers are clearly outlined in legislation.
2. Council Sets Direction – Administration Makes It Happen	Council debates issues, sets policy, passes bylaws, approves budgets, and establishes the municipality’s overall direction. Staff, led by the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), carry out those decisions. Council does not manage staff or day-to-day operations.
3. The CAO Is the Municipality’s Top Staff Leader	The CAO is the only staff person of Council, and the municipality’s top administrative leader. They ensure the organization is professionally managed by overseeing all departments, providing impartial and evidence-based advice to Council, ensuring that laws and regulations are followed, and implementing Council’s decisions. The CAO is the administrative head of the municipality – not Council.
4. The Mayor/Chair Leads Meetings – Not the Entire Government	Under the standard governance model followed in most Provinces and Territories, the Mayor/Chair serves as the spokesperson for the municipality and presides over meetings, ensuring discussions follow rules of order. They do not have executive authority on their own. Decisions are made collectively by Council—a majority vote determines the outcome.

Key Principle	Explanation
5. Councillors Represent the Community	Councillors bring forward community priorities, discuss options, debate issues, and vote on decisions that affect the municipality. While they listen to residents, they must make decisions that serve the whole community—not just individual interests.
6. Council Makes Decisions as a Group	No single member—including the Mayor—can make decisions or direct staff. Council authority only exists when the group is meeting and voting together. Once a decision is made, all members are expected to respect and support the outcome.
7. Council Meetings Are Public	Agendas are posted in advance, meetings are public, and decisions are recorded for transparency. Council can only meet privately for specific reasons allowed by law, such as legal, personnel, or confidential contract matters.
8. Respect Matters – Online and In Person	A healthy democracy requires civil, constructive dialogue. Personal attacks, harassment, and threats toward Council members, staff, or fellow residents are unacceptable. Codes of conduct apply to elected officials and staff, and residents are expected to behave respectfully when engaging with their municipality. Citizens should expect their elected officials to act with respect and integrity and engage in constructive debate in order to advance the needs of the municipality efficiently and effectively.
9. Good Governance Has Clear Principles	Strong local government relies on five principles: • Transparency: Decisions and processes are open and accessible. • Accountability: Officials are responsible for their actions. • Integrity: Decisions are made ethically. • Respect: People treat each other professionally. • Role Clarity: Council governs; staff administer. When these principles are followed, residents benefit from stable, reliable, and fair local government.
10. Your Voice Shapes Your Community	Democracy is strongest when residents get involved. You can: • Contact your Councillor. • Attend meetings or watch live streams. • Participate in public consultations including budget discussions. • Report service issues through official channels. • Volunteer on committees. • Vote in municipal elections. Your municipality works best when you stay informed and engage respectfully.

Who Does What in Local Government



Council (Governance)

- Sets direction and policy
- Approves budgets
- Passes bylaws
- Represents the community



CAO (Administration Leader)

- Top staff leader
- Reports to Council
- Oversees and directs all municipal staff
- Provides impartial advice
- Implements Council decisions
- Ensures law and policies are followed



Staff (Operations)

- Runs day-to-day services
- Maintain roads, water, parks
- Review permits and inspections
- Manage recreation programs
- Provide technical expertise



The Public (Community Voice)

- Attend meetings
- Participate in consultations
- Report issues
- Vote in elections
- Provide feedback

Municipal staff report to the CAO, who is responsible for overseeing and directing all administrative operations.

Who to Contact for What

Knowing who handles what at your municipality can save frustration and ensure your concern reaches the right person the first time. Municipal departments are responsible for a range of services, while councillors, staff, and oversight bodies each play distinct roles. This section provides a simple guide to help you quickly identify where to go—whether you're reporting a pothole, asking about bylaws, seeking information on elections, or raising a governance concern.

Quick Tip for Residents: Use the municipality's official reporting portal whenever possible. It creates a record, directs your concern to the appropriate department, and helps ensure timely follow-up.

If your concern is about...	Contact	Why
Service Issues & Day-to-Day Operations		
Road conditions, potholes, snow removal	Service Request Portal / 311 / Municipal Operations	These teams are responsible for maintaining roads and dispatching crews.
Water interruptions, drainage, sewer issues	Service Request Portal, 311 / Water & Wastewater Services	Technical staff diagnose and repair infrastructure issues.
Garbage, recycling, compost, waste collection	Service Request Portal / 311 / Solid Waste Services	Staff manage collection schedules and service complaints.
Property standards or bylaw enforcement	Service Request Portal / Bylaw Enforcement / Compliance Officers	These officers investigate and enforce municipal bylaws.
Community Issues & Policy Matters		
Municipal policies, bylaws, budgets, priorities	Your Councillor	Councillors set policy and represent community interests.
New ideas or neighbourhood concerns	Your Councillor	Councillors bring community perspectives forward to Council.
Governance, Meetings & Elections		
Council meeting procedures	Municipal Clerk / Legislative Services	They ensure meetings follow legal and procedural rules.
Agendas, minutes, open or closed meetings	Municipal Clerk	The Clerk administers all official Council records and processes.
Municipal elections, voting, voter information	Municipal Clerk / Elections Office	They oversee elections and voter requirements in some Provinces/Territories.

If your concern is about...	Contact	Why
Ethics, Conduct & Accountability		
Suspected conflict of interest	Integrity Commissioner (where applicable) or Clerk/CAO's Office	Not all municipalities have an Integrity Commissioner; staff can advise on proper processes under local legislation.
Code of Conduct concerns	Integrity Commissioner / Ombudsman (where applicable) or Clerk/CAO's Office	Where oversight officers do not exist, staff can guide residents to the appropriate complaint process.
General governance or procedural concerns	Municipal Clerk	The Clerk is responsible for governance processes, bylaws, and meeting rules.
Planning, Development & Building		
Zoning, development, land use	Planning Services	Planning decisions are regulated and technical.
Building permits or inspections	Building Services / Development Services	Staff ensure construction meets safety and legal standards.
Finance & Taxes		
Property taxes or billing	Finance Services	They manage tax rates, billing, and payments.
Budget questions	Finance Services	Staff explain financial plans, impacts, and timelines.
Emergencies		
Life-threatening emergencies	9-1-1	Immediate response for police, fire, or medical emergencies.
Municipal emergency alerts or infrastructure failures	Municipal Emergency Line / Official Alerts	The municipality coordinates urgent infrastructure and public safety responses.

• **Department names and service structures vary by municipality. This guide uses common, general terms.**

Quick Tip for Residents:

If your concern is about a service (roads, water, garbage, or snow clearing), municipal staff handle it – not your Councillor. Councillors can raise issues but cannot assign work or direct staff.

How to Engage Respectfully With Your Municipality

Local government works best when residents, elected officials, and municipal staff treat each other with respect. Every interaction, whether in person, online, or at Council – helps shape the tone of civic life. These principles support constructive dialogue, fair processes, and a healthier community for everyone.

Start with Respect – Online and In Person

Municipal staff and elected officials are people who care about their community. Using courteous language, even when frustrated, helps ensure your concern receives a fair and timely response.

Respectful communication also protects staff from harassment and supports a safe workplace - a legal requirement for every municipality.

Go Through Official Channels

Service requests must be tracked and responded to through proper systems, such as 311, service portals, or departmental contacts. This ensures: your issue goes to the right team, it is logged and monitored, and decisions remain fair and consistent for everyone.

Councillors cannot direct staff and should not bypass official processes.

If information cannot be shared informally, residents may choose to use their Province or Territory's access-to-information process, outlined later in this guide.

Ask Questions Constructively

Municipal processes are guided by legislation, safety standards, budgets, and long-term plans.

Instead of assumptions or accusations, try:

- "Can you help me understand why...?"
- "What is the process for...?"
- "Who is the best contact for this issue?"

Constructive questions allow staff to give accurate, complete answers.

Why Municipalities Can't Fix Everything

Municipalities play an important role in delivering local services, but they cannot fix every issue. Some matters, such as policing, property assessment, labour relations, or laws set by provincial or federal governments, are outside municipal authority.

Understanding these limits helps reduce frustration and ensures concerns are directed to the level of government best positioned to address them.

Share Information Responsibly Online

Digital platforms spread information quickly, but not always accurately. Before posting or sharing, verify sources, avoid speculation, be mindful of tone, and remember that staff cannot comment on human resources, legal, or privacy-protected matters. Digital civility helps keep municipal channels safe and productive for all users.

Recognize That Staff Must Follow Laws, Policies & Timelines

Many processes – permits, planning, snow clearing, and budgeting follow steps required by provincial legislation, technical standards, or safety rules. These timelines ensure fairness, transparency, and accountability, even when they take longer than expected.

Focus on Issues, Not Individuals

Concerns about decisions, services, or bylaws are valid, but personal attacks, harassment, or targeting individuals undermine respectful dialogue and violate codes of conduct.

Participate in Ways That Strengthen, Not Strain, Local Democracy

Healthy municipalities rely on community involvement that is informed, respectful, open-minded and solutions focused. Attend meetings, ask questions, share feedback, and vote – these actions strengthen the system for everyone.

Assume Good Intent – Most Municipal Work Happens Behind the Scenes

Staff often need time to research, coordinate across departments, or ensure accuracy before responding. Patience allows municipalities to provide correct information rather than rushed or incomplete answers.

Remember: We're All Working Toward the Same Goal

Residents, staff, and Councillors all want a safe, well-run, thriving community. Respectful engagement creates a foundation of trust and collaboration – the heart of strong local democracy.

Quick Tip for Residents: Online comments and emails are permanent records. Before posting, re-read your message to ensure it reflects the tone you intend.



Case Study: How Respectful Engagement Improved a Neighbourhood Project

When a neighbourhood in a mid-sized Canadian municipality raised concerns about speeding near a school, several residents contacted their Councillor, who directed them to the proper reporting channel for traffic calming requests.

Municipal staff completed traffic counts, reviewed safety data, and presented options based on engineering standards. At a public meeting, residents, staff, and the Councillor discussed the findings respectfully and explored solutions together.

As a result, Council approved:

- new signage
- refreshed crosswalk markings
- a raised intersection at the school
- a resident education campaign
- a follow-up evaluation after implementation

Residents appreciated the transparent process, staff expertise, and the Councillor's role in representing community priorities while respecting municipal procedures.

Why This Matters:

Because everyone worked through the proper channels and engaged constructively, the neighbourhood achieved meaningful safety improvements that were supported by evidence, aligned with municipal policies, and approved legally by Council.

Common Questions Residents Ask

Many questions that residents ask—about snow clearing, taxes, development, or Council processes—are completely understandable. Municipalities work within strict laws, safety standards, and long-term planning requirements that aren't always visible from the outside. This section explains the most common questions people have and offers clear, plain-language answers to help you better understand why municipal processes work the way they do.



Roads, Snow, Traffic & Day-to-Day Services

Why does snow clearing take so long?

Snow operations follow a priority system based on safety, traffic volume, emergency access, and available resources. Many municipalities also have defined service standards or snow control plans that set out priorities and response timelines. In some communities, these plans may be informal or still evolving, which can affect timing and prioritization.

Quick Tip for Residents: If it looks like your street was missed, check municipal updates or service notices first. Snow and road crews often work in cycles, and your area may still be in the queue based on priority and service standards.

Why can't the municipality fix every road right away?

Road repair timelines depend on budget, safety priorities, underground infrastructure work, and contractor or staff availability. In many areas, limited contractors, tight budgets, and long distances can also affect how quickly repairs can be completed.

Why does garbage or recycling sometimes get missed?

Weather, equipment issues, blocked bins, or contamination can delay collection. Missed routes are prioritized next day.

Quick Tip for Residents: If garbage or recycling is missed, report it through the official system before contacting your Councillor – it ensures the crew is notified immediately.

Why can't the municipality stop speeding in my neighbourhood?

Speed enforcement is the responsibility of police. Traffic calming measures must be supported by engineering studies and meet strict safety standards, and public education is an important part of the process.

Why can't the municipality put a stop sign where I want one?

Stop signs are installed based on engineering warrants. Improper placement can make intersections less safe.

Why can't the municipality stop construction noise?

Construction is regulated by bylaw. Work that follows permitted hours cannot be legally stopped.

Taxes, Assessments & Staffing

Why can't the municipality just lower taxes?

Municipalities must balance their budgets each year to fund essential services and infrastructure. Taxes tend to rise due to inflation, community growth, aging assets, and required service standards.

Why is my property assessment higher/lower than my neighbour's?

Provincial assessments are determined through a legislated process by a provincial or municipal assessment authority, depending on the jurisdiction. Municipalities apply a tax rate but do not set individual property values.

Why can't the municipality just hire more staff?	Hiring staff increases ongoing costs and must be approved through the annual municipal budget, balancing service needs with available funding.
Why is the municipality spending money on "nice-to-have" projects instead of lowering taxes?	What some residents view as "nice-to-have" projects are often debated community priorities. Some are funded by grants, development charges, or legally restricted reserves that cannot be used to reduce property taxes. Council reviews and debates these priorities each year through the public budget process.
Development, Permits & Growth	
Why do developments take so long to approve?	Planning requires engineering, environmental, legal, safety, and public consultation reviews that are mandated by law.
Why does my permit take so long to process?	Permits must be checked against zoning, building codes, engineering standards, and provincial regulations.
Why can't the municipality stop development in my area?	If a proposal meets zoning and provincial planning rules, municipalities may be legally required to approve it.
Why does it feel like the municipality moves slowly?	Municipalities must follow legislation, safety standards, and long-term planning requirements.
Governance, Roles & Decision-Making	
Why can't Councillors direct staff to fix my issue?	Councillors do not manage staff. Service requests must go through official channels for fairness and tracking.
Why can't Council respond to me immediately?	Councillors receive high volumes of correspondence and cannot interfere with operational decisions. Council members, who are often part-time, and municipal staff receive a high volume of emails, calls, and service requests. While they do their best to respond as quickly as possible, many questions require research, coordination between departments, or consultation with legislation or policies. Patience and understanding allow staff to provide accurate, complete information, and ensures every resident receives a fair and informed response. Respecting time and process helps municipalities work more efficiently and improves the quality of service for everyone.
Why does Council meet privately sometimes?	Closed sessions are required by law for personnel, legal, and privacy-protected matters.

Communications, Social Media & Privacy

Why doesn't the municipality respond quickly on social media?

Municipalities must verify information before responding and ensure compliance with legal and privacy requirements. Not every community has full-time staff available to monitor social media, and responses must be accurate and professional, which can take time.

Why are comments sometimes disabled on municipal social media?

Municipalities often limit or disable comments to reduce harassment, misinformation, and defamatory content. Social media platforms do not always provide effective moderation tools, and municipalities are legally responsible for content that remains on their official pages, even when posted by the public.

What does "Digital Civility" mean, and why does it matter?

Digital Civility means engaging online in a respectful, factual, and constructive way. Online platforms can amplify misinformation and misunderstandings when context is lost or emotions run high. When dialogue remains courteous, staff can respond more efficiently and municipal communication channels remain safe, accessible, and welcoming.

Why can't the municipality comment on human resource or personnel issues?

Employee matters are protected by privacy laws and cannot be discussed publicly.

New to the Community? What to Know in Your First 30 Days

Moving to a new community can feel overwhelming. Municipalities provide many essential services and knowing where to find information helps new residents settle in quickly. Below are common things new residents often look for and where to find them.

Note: Some services are provided directly by municipalities, while others may be delivered by provincial, regional, or shared service organizations. Your municipal website is usually the best starting point.

Topics	What You Need	Where to Find it
Setting Up Services	Water, wastewater, or utility billing	Visit the municipal website under Utilities, Water & Sewer, or Online Services. Many municipalities offer online setup or list phone numbers for billing.
Waste & Recycling	Waste, recycling, and compost schedules	Look for Garbage & Recycling, Waste Management, or Collection Calendar pages. Some communities also offer mobile apps or email reminders.

Topics	What You Need	Where to Find it
Seasonal & Parking Rules	Snow-clearing expectations and winter parking restrictions	Usually found under Public Works, Roads & Streets, or Winter Operations.
Pets & Licensing	Pet licensing requirements	Search for Animal Services, Pets, or Bylaw Services on your municipal website.
Recreation & Community Life	Registration for recreation programs	Check Recreation, Parks & Leisure, or Activity Registration portals.
	Getting a library card	Visit your local library's website or drop by a branch with ID.
	Parks, trails, and community centres	Listed under Parks & Recreation, often with interactive maps.
Local Rules & Expectations	Noise bylaws, outdoor fire rules, parking regulations	See the Bylaws or Community Standards section of the municipal site.
Schools	School locations and registration	Visit your local school board's website (schools are not managed by municipalities). Look for Find My School, Registration, or Schools Directory.
Reporting Issues	Report potholes, water concerns, streetlights, or service issues	Use 311 (where available), municipal apps, Report an Issue, or the online service request portal.
Staying Safe & Informed	Emergency alerts	Sign up under Emergency Management, Alerts, or Public Safety.
Transit	Bus passes and schedules	Visit the local Transit or Public Transportation page for fares, passes, routes, and schedules.
Other Community Services	Public health, community housing, long-term care, social services, paramedic services, senior services	These services may be provided by municipalities, regional authorities, or provincial government. Start with your municipal website or contact the municipal office for guidance.

Part II: Understanding Your Municipality

Local governments shape much of the day-to-day experience of living in a community, yet many residents are unsure how municipalities work, who makes decisions, or why certain processes take time.

This section gives a clear, practical overview of what your municipality does, how services are delivered, and how local decisions are made. By understanding the roles, responsibilities, and limits of municipal government, residents are better equipped to navigate services, engage respectfully, and participate in building a strong, thriving community.

Why Your Local Government Matters

Municipal government is the level of government that affects your daily life the most. It shapes the services you rely on, the spaces you use, and how your community grows. Municipal decisions influence things like:

- your drinking water
- road safety and maintenance
- garbage, recycling, and snow clearing
- where homes and businesses can be built
- parks, trails, libraries, and recreation
- fire protection, emergency planning, paramedic services (where provided), and bylaw enforcement
- how your taxes are spent
- how neighbourhoods develop over time

Because municipalities provide so many essential services, understanding how they work helps residents see the reasons behind decisions, engage respectfully and constructively, reduce frustration and confusion, understand roles and limits, hold leaders accountable, and strengthen local democracy.

Municipal choices—about housing, roads, water systems, parks, and emergency services—shape taxes, service levels, and long-term community wellbeing. Planning decisions define neighbourhoods for decades.

Residents also help shape their communities by participating in consultations, speaking with Councillors, reporting issues, and voting.

What Municipalities Do

Municipalities deliver services that residents depend on daily. While responsibilities differ by Province or Territory, core services include:



Infrastructure & Public Works

- Road construction, repair & maintenance
- Sidewalks, traffic lights, parking management
- Snow clearing & ice control
- Stormwater systems
- Wastewater treatment

Water Services

- Drinking water treatment
- Water distribution
- Water testing and safety compliance

Recreation, Culture & Community Life

- Parks, playgrounds, trails
- Arenas, pools, recreation centres
- Community programs
- Libraries, museums, cultural services
- Festivals & events

Safety & Emergency Services

- Fire services
- Emergency management
- Bylaw services
- Local policing (in many communities)

Planning & Development

- Building inspections
- Construction permits
- Land use planning
- Zoning decisions
- Downtown revitalization

Waste & Environmental Services

- Garbage collection
- Recycling and composting
- Landfill and transfer stations
- Environmental protection programs

Community & Social Support (May vary by jurisdiction)

- Housing partnerships
- Social planning
- Accessibility programs
- Diversity & inclusion initiatives

Municipalities must balance essential services with long-term planning, limited resources, and growing community expectations.

*Public health services are delivered by municipalities in some Provinces, most notably Ontario. In other jurisdictions, public health is provided by provincial, regional, or shared service organizations.

Canada's Orders of Government

Canada has **three orders of government**, each with different responsibilities.

Federal, Provincial/Territorial, and Municipal

In Canada, there are three primary orders of government: federal, Provincial/Territorial, and municipal. The Library of the Canadian Parliament notes:

"The federal government creates laws and manages programs and services that tend to affect the whole country, the provincial and territorial governments have powers to make decisions relating to areas of law that affect their Province and Territory directly, and the municipal order of government is responsible for establishing bylaws and services that are administered in a specific city, town or village."

Important Context on Variability:

While each order of government has typical areas of responsibility, the delivery of specific services can vary significantly across Provinces and Territories. For example, municipalities in Ontario may be responsible for long-term care or social services, whereas these remain under provincial jurisdiction in other Provinces. Municipal responsibilities are shaped by provincial legislation and can differ greatly in scope and complexity.

Furthermore, in some jurisdictions, the provincial or territorial government may download responsibilities to municipalities that were historically handled at the higher order—such as ambulance services, housing, or public health. This trend has increased municipal workloads and financial pressures in certain regions.

Who Provides What? Municipal vs. Provincial vs. Federal Services

Residents often contact their municipality about services that are actually delivered by other agencies or levels of government. Understanding who is responsible for what helps ensure your questions or concerns go to the right place.

The table below outlines the key responsibilities of each order of government.

If you're ever uncertain, contact your municipality first and staff will guide you to the correct department or government agency.

Municipal Government (City, Town, Village, District, or Regional Municipality)	Municipal government is the level of government closest to residents. It delivers many of the services people use every day and makes decisions that shape how communities grow and function. Common Municipal Responsibilities • Roads, sidewalks, traffic lights, and parking • Snow clearing and ice control • Drinking water and wastewater services • Garbage, recycling, and composting • Parks, trails, recreation centres, and libraries • Fire services and emergency management • Bylaw enforcement and community safety • Planning, zoning, and building permits • Local transit (where available) • Economic development and downtown revitalization Public Safety (Varies by Jurisdiction) • Municipal police services (in some cities) • Contract policing (e.g., provincial or RCMP services) • Bylaw enforcement and local safety programs In Some Municipalities (Varies by Province) Especially in regional or upper-tier municipalities, responsibilities may also include: • Long-term care and nursing homes • Paramedic services • Community housing and homelessness programs • Social and family support services • Public health programs* *Public health delivery varies by Province and Territory. How Municipalities Raise Revenue • Property taxes (municipal portion) • User fees (water, wastewater, recreation, permits) • Development charges (growth-related costs) • Grants from other governments • Reserves (restricted for specific purposes)
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Provincial / Territorial Government

Provincial and Territorial governments are responsible for areas set out in law and, in the case of Provinces, the Constitution Act, 1867. They also set the legal framework that municipalities must follow.

Common Provincial / Territorial Responsibilities

- Education and school systems
- Health care and hospitals
- Provincial highways and transportation rules
- Social services and income supports
- Environmental protection
- Municipal legislation and oversight
- Courts, corrections, and justice systems
- Provincial policing (in some Provinces)
- Property assessment systems*

*Assessment delivery varies by Province.

How Provinces and Territories Raise Revenue

- Income taxes
- Sales taxes
- Provincial fuel and excise taxes
- Transfers from the federal government

Federal Government

The federal government focuses on issues that affect the entire country or cross provincial boundaries.

Common Federal Responsibilities

- National defence and military
- Border services, immigration, and citizenship
- Employment Insurance and pensions
- Banking, trade, and national economic policy
- Criminal law
- Federal courts and correctional facilities
- Indigenous affairs (shared responsibilities)

How the Federal Government Raises Revenue

- Federal income taxes
- Federal sales taxes
- Customs and excise duties

Responsibilities can vary by Province, Territory, and municipality, but this guide reflects what is most common across Canada.

Part III: How Your Municipality is Governed

Local governments work best when residents understand who does what, how decisions are made, and where to bring questions or concerns.

This section explains the roles of Council, the CAO, and municipal staff; how governance differs from administration; how bylaws are created; and how residents can participate in decision-making. With a clear understanding of these processes, community members can engage respectfully, navigate issues more easily, and play a meaningful role in local democracy.

Governance vs. Administration

A strong local government depends on a clear distinction between governance and administration. Council provides leadership, sets policy, and represents the community's interests. Administration, led by the CAO, implements those decisions and manages daily operations. Understanding this separation helps residents know where to bring questions, concerns, and ideas.

Council decides WHAT the municipality will do



Council (Governance)

- Represents the public interest
- Sets policy and long-term vision
- Passes bylaws
- Approves budgets
- Makes decisions collectively
- Hires and evaluates the CAO

Administration decides HOW it will be done



Administration (Operations)

- Led by the CAO
- Runs day-to-day operations
- Manages staff, infrastructure, and services
- Provides technical expertise
- Ensures legal compliance
- Implements Council decisions

Roles in Your Municipality

Elected Officials: Mayor/Reeve/Warden/Chair & Councillors

Across Canada, municipalities use different titles such as Mayor, Reeve, Warden, or Chair, but the core responsibilities are consistent. These roles work together to provide leadership, make policy decisions, and represent the community.

The Mayor and Councillors cannot direct staff, but they can support residents by forwarding concerns to the appropriate department or advising on the proper reporting process. However, they must not interfere in operational decisions.

Roles at the Council Table: Who Does What?

Role	Mayor/Reeve/Warden/Chair	Councillors
Primary Role	Provides leadership at the Council table and presides over meetings	Represent residents and participate in Council decision-making
Representation	Represents the municipality publicly and ceremonially	Represent constituents and community interests
Council Meetings	Presides over Council meetings and ensures orderly debate	Attend meetings, debate issues, and participate in votes
Decision-Making	Has one vote on Council decisions. In some municipalities, the Mayor or Chair votes only to break a tie, depending on provincial legislation or local rules	Each Councillor has one vote on Council decisions
Policy & Bylaws	Votes on bylaws, budgets, and resolutions as part of Council	Vote on bylaws, budgets, and resolutions
Agenda Setting	Works with the CAO and Clerk on meeting agendas (varies by municipality)	May request items be brought forward through established processes
Leadership Role	Provides leadership, direction, and facilitates discussion	Bring forward ideas, concerns, and perspectives from the community
Authority Over Staff	Cannot direct staff or act unilaterally, except in rare, legislated cases	Cannot direct staff or act individually
How Work Gets Done	Acts as part of Council – decisions are made collectively	Acts as part of Council – decisions are made collectively

Key Takeaway for Residents

No individual member of Council, including the Mayor, can act alone or direct staff.

Council decisions are made collectively, and municipal staff carry them out through the CAO.

The Role of Municipal Staff

Municipal staff are the professionals who run day-to-day operations. Their work follows legislation, safety standards, engineering requirements, and provincial regulations.

Common departments include:

- Public Works & Engineering
- Water & Wastewater
- Emergency Services (Fire, Police, Paramedic – where provided municipally)
- Planning & Development
- Recreation & Culture
- Solid Waste / Environmental Services
- Transit / Transportation Services (where available)
- Human Resources
- Finance
- Clerk's Office / Legislative Services
- Communications
- IT & Digital Services
- Economic Development
- Bylaw Enforcement
- Public Health / Health Department (where delivered municipally)
- Facilitates & Asset Management

Staff provide expert advice to Council and deliver services to the entire community.

The CAO: Senior Leader of Municipal Operations

The Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), also known in some regions as an SAO or City Manager, is the top non-political staff member and the only employee directly hired by Council. The CAO oversees all municipal operations, implements Council decisions, and serves as the link between elected officials and staff.

The CAO ensures:

- efficient service delivery
- supported and well-led staff
- compliance with laws and policies
- responsible budget management
- accurate, impartial advice to Council

This role is essential for good governance and organizational stability.



How Municipal Decisions Are Made

Municipal decisions are guided by Council's strategic plan, which sets long-term priorities and goals for the community. Staff recommendations, budgets, and operational decisions are aligned with this plan to ensure consistency, accountability, and responsible use of public resources.

Municipal decisions follow a consistent, transparent process: identifying an issue, researching options, debating in public, voting, and then implementing the decision. This structure ensures accountability, fairness, and well-informed choices, giving residents confidence in how their local government works.

Municipal decisions follow a transparent, step-by-step process.

Step 1

An issue or opportunity arises

From residents, staff, Councillors, or new legislation.

Step 2

Staff research and prepare a report

Reports include:

- background
- options
- recommendations
- financial implications
- legal considerations

Step 3

Council debates the issue

In a public meeting.

Step 4

Council votes

Decisions are made by majority.

Step 5

Staff implement the decision

Through programming, infrastructure, or operational changes.

Step 6

Updates are communicated

Through the website, newsletters, meetings, or media.



Understanding Municipal Bylaws

Bylaws are local laws passed by Council to regulate safety, land use, services, and community standards. They help keep neighbourhoods safe, organized, and consistent with long-term community plans.

Common bylaw topics include:

- noise
- parking
- property standards
- pets and animal control
- business licensing
- zoning and land use
- fire prevention
- parks and public spaces

How Bylaws Are Created

Council discusses an issue, reviews staff recommendations, and votes on a proposed bylaw during official Council meetings.

In most municipalities, a bylaw must receive multiple “readings” before it is adopted – typically three readings over at least two separate meetings, with the final reading recorded as a formal vote. Public notice or public hearings may also be required, depending on the type of bylaw.

Procedures vary across provinces and territories, as municipalities must follow the legislation that governs them.

Once adopted, the bylaw becomes enforceable within the municipality.

Municipal bylaws must comply with provincial or territorial legislation. Municipalities cannot pass bylaws outside the authority granted to them.

Quick Tip for Residents: Before starting a project such as a fence, deck, shed, fire pit, driveway change, or home renovation, check your municipality’s bylaws or permit requirements. This helps prevent delays, fines, or re-doing work that doesn’t meet local standards.

Why This Matters for Residents

Understanding how bylaws work helps residents know:

- what the rules are
- why the municipality enforces them
- how to raise concerns or request changes
- what to expect if a bylaw complaint is made

Clear understanding builds respectful engagement and helps the community function fairly for everyone.



Council Meetings & Public Participation

Council meetings are designed to be open, organized, and accessible so residents can understand and take part in local decision-making.

Council meetings must follow strict procedures:

- published agendas
- recorded minutes
- formal voting rules
- open meetings (with specific exceptions)
- respectful conduct
- opportunities for resident input

Residents can participate in local governance by:

- speaking as a delegation
- submitting correspondence
- watching livestreams or archived videos
- attending open houses
- completing surveys
- joining advisory committees

Your participation helps shape decisions.

Part IV: Reporting Issues, Complaints & Oversight

Residents play an important role in helping their municipality function smoothly. Knowing how and where to report issues, how bylaw enforcement works, and what oversight bodies exist ensures concerns are handled fairly, efficiently, and by the right people.

This section explains the proper channels for service requests, how enforcement and investigations operate, and the independent processes in place to review complaints about staff or elected officials. Understanding these pathways helps residents get faster resolutions, reduces frustration, and supports a respectful, accountable local government.

Reporting Issues & Staying Informed

Reporting issues through official channels helps ensure they are logged, tracked, and resolved fairly. Service issues—such as potholes, water concerns, streetlight outages, garbage or recycling problems, snow clearing, noise complaints, or bylaw concerns, must be reported to municipal staff, not to Councillors.

Quick Tip for Residents: When reporting an issue, include the exact location, nearest address, or a photo. Clear location information helps staff respond faster and prevents delays.

Why This Matters

- Staff track and manage issues through formal systems
- Reporting tools ensure proper logging, follow-up, and fairness
- Councillors are not operational managers and cannot assign work to staff
- Proper reporting leads to faster, more accurate responses
- Issues submitted informally (texting a Councillor or DMing on social media) often get lost and cannot be tracked

How to Report Non-emergency Issues

Not all municipalities use 311. Official channels may include online service portals, customer service lines, municipal email addresses, or reporting apps.

Most municipalities offer several options, such as:

- 311 phone lines
- Online service request portals
- Mobile reporting apps
- Email or customer service call centres
- Live chat or web-form tools

Quick Tip for Residents: Before submitting a service request, check your municipality's service standards (e.g., snow removal timelines, pothole repair windows). Many services have required timeframes based on safety, weather, and staff capacity. This reduces frustration and unnecessary follow-ups.

For emergencies, always call 911.

Quick Tip for Residents: Sign up for municipal emergency alerts now, not during an emergency. It ensures you receive critical updates when you need them.

Staying Informed & Emergency Alerts

Municipalities also provide tools to keep residents informed during emergencies, major events, or service disruptions. Common options include:

- Emergency alert systems (text, email, app-based notifications)
- Municipal websites and newsroom updates
- Social media channels
- Community email newsletters
- Road closure and service interruption alerts
- Weather-related notices (flooding, storms, wildfire smoke, extreme heat)



**Emergency
Text/Email Alerts**



Mobile Apps



**Official Social Media
Updates**



Website Notifications

Staying connected to these channels helps residents receive timely updates, understand service changes, and stay safe during emergencies.

Bylaw Enforcement: What Municipalities Can and Cannot Do

Bylaw enforcement protects public safety, quality of life, and community standards. Officers respond to concerns such as noise, parking, weeds/grass, and property standards. However, bylaw enforcement is governed by legislation—and municipalities cannot act outside these rules.

What Municipalities Can Do

- ✓ investigate complaints
- ✓ enforce local bylaws
- ✓ issue warnings or fines
- ✓ require compliance with standards
- ✓ direct property owners to resolve safety issues
- ✓ work with police for serious offences

What Municipalities Cannot Do

- ✗ enforce neighbourhood or condo rules
- ✗ intervene in neighbour disputes not covered by bylaw
- ✗ enter private homes without legal authority
- ✗ act on anonymous complaints in some Provinces/Territories
- ✗ immediately remove tenants or landlords (provincial jurisdiction)
- ✗ override provincial laws or policing decisions

Why Enforcement Takes Time

- due process is required
- officers must gather evidence
- property owners must be given a chance to comply
- safety concerns may require coordination with fire or police
- court orders may be needed for serious cases

Bylaw enforcement focuses on fairness, education, and compliance—not punishment. Timelines depend on legal processes, evidence requirements, and the need to provide reasonable time for compliance.

Quick Tip for Residents: Attach photos or details when reporting a bylaw concern – clear information helps officers respond faster and more accurately.

Appeals: When You Disagree With a Decision

Sometimes residents disagree with a municipal decision, such as the denial of a development permit, zoning decision, or planning approval. In these cases, **an appeal process may be available**.

Appeals are formal legal processes, governed by Provincial or Territorial legislation. They are different from service complaints and cannot be handled through Councillors or service request portals.

Common examples of appealable decisions include development or building permit denials, zoning or land-use decisions, and certain planning approvals.

Appeal processes have strict timelines, require written submissions, and may involve independent boards or tribunals.

If you believe a decision can be appealed, contact municipal staff or the Planning Department immediately to understand your options and deadlines. Speaking to a Councillor does not replace an appeal process.

Complaints, Integrity Commissioners & Oversight Bodies

Residents may encounter concerns ranging from service issues to staff conduct or the behaviour of elected officials. Each type of concern follows a specific pathway to ensure it is reviewed fairly and by the right authority. **Residents can raise concerns in several ways:**



Service-Level Complaints

(e.g. garbage pickup, snow removal, potholes)

Contact municipal staff or use official service channels (311 or a reporting portal).



Staff Conduct Concerns

Manage through Human Resources and privacy-protected processes.



Council Conduct/ Code of Conduct Issues

Referred to an Integrity Commissioner, Ombudsman, or similar oversight body.

These officials independently review conflict of interest, ethical concerns, behavior of elected officials, and compliance with Codes of Conduct

This system helps ensure fairness, professionalism, and accountability.

Informal vs. Formal Concerns

Residents sometimes raise concerns informally by speaking with a Councillor or contacting staff. While this can be helpful for understanding an issue, informal conversations do not replace formal processes.

Formal processes, such as service requests, written complaints, appeals, or Code of Conduct processes, ensure concerns are documented, reviewed fairly, and handled by the appropriate authority.

Councillors may listen and provide guidance, but they cannot resolve service issues, override decisions, or intervene in formal complaint or appeal processes.

Reporting Fraud or Serious Misconduct

Some municipalities offer confidential reporting mechanisms, such as fraud reporting or whistleblower lines, to raise concerns about suspected fraud, misuse of public funds, or serious misconduct. Where available, these tools are designed to protect confidentiality and ensure concerns are reviewed independently. Municipal staff or the municipal website can advise residents on whether such a process exists and how to use it.

Why Respect Supports Better Outcomes

Raising concerns is an important part of democracy, and municipalities take every complaint seriously. Approaching the process with respect toward staff, elected officials, and fellow residents, helps ensure that issues are reviewed objectively and efficiently. Constructive communication allows everyone involved to focus on solutions, reduces misunderstandings, and strengthens trust between the community and the people who serve it.



Part V: Municipal Finances, Services & Community Growth

Municipalities deliver the services residents rely on every day, and those services are closely linked to how a community grows, how infrastructure is built, and how local budgets are managed.

This section explains how municipalities raise revenue, how operating and capital budgets work, why taxes and utility fees change over time, and how property assessments influence your share of the tax levy. It also describes how planning and development decisions are made—shaping neighbourhoods, parks, housing, roads, businesses, and long-term infrastructure needs. With a clear understanding of how municipal finances and planning work together, residents can better see how their tax dollars support daily services, fund future growth, and help build a safe, thriving, and well-planned community.

Municipal Services, Property Taxes & Budgets

How Municipalities Raise and Manage Finances

Municipalities must balance their budgets each year. They cannot run operating deficits, so they must collect enough revenue to pay for essential services like roads, water, recreation, and emergency response. To do this, municipalities rely on several approved sources of revenue—mainly property taxes, user fees, permits, licensing, government grants, and the sale of assets or services.

Municipalities are also required to manage their finances responsibly. They must balance the operating budget, fund multi-year capital plans, maintain aging infrastructure, and follow strict financial legislation set by their Province or Territory.

Operating vs. Capital Budgets

Municipal budgeting is divided into two major components: operating budgets and capital budgets. Understanding the difference helps residents see how tax dollars are used and why some decisions cannot simply be shifted from one area to another. The operating budget covers the day-to-day costs of running the municipality while the capital budget funds large, long-term investments that last many years.

While both budgets are approved by Council, **operating and capital funds are not interchangeable**. Operating budgets fund day-to-day services, while capital budgets support long-term infrastructure.

In northern and remote communities, per-capita costs are often higher, access to borrowing may be limited, and debt financing may require territorial or federal guarantees. As a result, capital funding decisions can be more complex and constrained than in larger urban centres.

Operating Budget

Funds day-to-day services such as:

- snow clearing
- parks
- emergency services
- roads
- waste
- bylaw enforcement
- libraries

Capital Budget

Funds long-term infrastructure such as:

- Water plants
- bridges
- roads
- pipes and sewers
- arenas

Asset Management: Planning for the Long Term

Municipalities are responsible for managing billions of dollars in public infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, water systems, buildings, and recreation facilities. Asset management is the process of planning for the maintenance, repair, and replacement of these assets over their full life cycle.

Asset management helps municipalities plan infrastructure investments responsibly, avoid sudden service failures, spread costs fairly over time, and protect public safety.

This long-term planning is why municipalities maintain reserves for future repairs and replacements, even when assets may appear to be working today.

Why Municipal Budgeting Is Complex

Municipal budgeting requires difficult trade-offs. Municipalities must balance aging infrastructure, increased service expectations, climate-related costs, and limited revenue sources—all while keeping taxes affordable. Decisions often involve weighing immediate needs against long-term community benefits.

Consider a common scenario: Council may have to choose whether to invest in a new community pool, fix a deteriorating major roadway, or build a new fire station. All are valid priorities, but limited resources require Council to make tough choices, often among options that each have strong public support.

Why Taxes Sometimes Increase

Taxes may rise due to a number of factors, including:

- inflation and rising costs
- aging infrastructure that needs replacement
- community growth and expanded service demands
- new responsibilities downloaded from higher levels of government
- emergencies such as storms, floods, or wildfires

Public Input - How Residents Influence the Budget

The annual budget is approved publicly by Council. Many municipalities also offer opportunities for residents to learn about the budget and share their views through:

- community surveys
- open houses and information sessions
- online budget tools
- public presentations at Council meetings

Resident input helps Council understand community priorities and expectations.

Property Assessment: How Your Home's Value is Determined

Property assessments are one of the most misunderstood parts of municipal finance. Understanding how they work can reduce frustration and confusion during budget season.

In Canada, property assessment is either carried out by a provincial assessment authority or managed by municipalities under strict provincial rules. Assessments determine the value of properties using standardized methods set by the Province or Territory. Municipalities then apply a tax rate to those assessed values to calculate property taxes.

What Assessment is

Assessment is the estimated market value of your property on a specific date set by provincial law. It helps determine your share of the total tax levy.

What Assessment is not

Assessment is NOT:

- the price you would sell your home for
- the amount your taxes will automatically increase by
- something your municipality controls

How the Budget, Assessment, and Tax Rate Work Together

Municipal property taxes are calculated using three separate elements:

- **Municipal Budget** – the total amount Council needs to fund services and infrastructure.
- **Property Assessment** – the value of your property, determined by the provincial authority
- **The Tax Rate (Mill Rate)** – the rate Council applies to assessed values to generate the required revenue.

In simple terms:



Changes to any one of these elements do not automatically mean your taxes will increase. Your tax bill depends on how your property's assessment compares to others and the budget approved by Council.

Why Your Assessment May Differ from Your Neighbour's

Factors include:

- home size, age, and renovations (such as a finished basement or new pool)
- lot characteristics
- neighbourhood sales trends
- property class (residential, commercial, industrial)

Why Assessment Changes Don't Always Mean Higher Taxes

Taxes depend on:

- your assessed value compared to everyone else's
- the municipal tax rate chosen during budget approval

If your assessment rises at the same pace as the community average, your taxes may not change much.

For concerns about assessments, residents should contact the provincial assessment authority responsible in their Province or Territory. In some jurisdictions, assessments are conducted by a provincial agency, while others are handled by municipal assessments offices. Municipal staff can advise residents where to direct assessment questions in their community.

Understanding Your Utility Bill: Water, Wastewater & Stormwater

Municipal water, wastewater, and stormwater systems must meet strict provincial regulations for safety, environmental protection, and long-term sustainability. Utility fees ensure these systems remain reliable and properly maintained.

What Utility Fees Pay For

- water treatment and testing
- pumping and distribution
- wastewater collection and treatment
- stormwater drainage systems
- maintenance of underground pipes
- energy and chemical costs
- emergency repairs and replacements

Utility revenue must stay within the utility system.

In some Provinces, such as Newfoundland and Labrador, legislation allows water and sewer revenues to be transferred to operating reserves. Residents should check local bylaws and policies to understand how utility revenues are managed in their municipality.

Why Your Bill Has Both Fixed and Variable Charges

Understanding your utility bill becomes easier when you know why charges are structured the way they are. Municipal water systems must be built, maintained, and ready to serve the community at all times—even when little or no water is being used.

Many utility bills include two types of charges:

- Fixed charges help pay for the availability of water services. This includes the pipes, treatment facilities, pumps, testing, staffing, and emergency readiness required to ensure safe, reliable service is always available to your property.
- Variable charges are based on how much water you use and encourage conservation and responsible use.

Not all municipalities use both fixed and variable charges. Billing structures reflect local infrastructure needs, legislation, and Council policy.

Why Costs Increase

- aging infrastructure
- provincial water safety regulations
- climate-related impacts (storms, flooding)
- required replacement of pipes and treatment equipment
- inflation and chemical costs

These pressures require long-term investment, so the system remains safe and dependable for the whole community.



Planning & Development: How Communities Grow

Communities grow through intentional planning, not by accident. Planning decisions determine where homes, parks, and businesses go, how neighbourhoods look and feel, and what infrastructure is needed to support growth.

What Planning Shapes

- where homes, businesses, and parks are built
- neighbourhood design and character
- traffic flow and transportation options
- environmental protection
- long-term growth and infrastructure needs

How Planning Works

Municipalities use planning tools such as zoning, community plans, engineering standards, and environmental rules to ensure growth is safe, legal, and sustainable. These tools guide how land can be used and what development must include.

Why Planning Takes Time

Even simple applications must be reviewed for:

- safety and engineering requirements
- zoning and legal compliance
- environmental impacts
- infrastructure capacity
- public input

Municipalities cannot approve projects unless all standards and laws are met.

Quick Tip for Residents: If something seems “approved too quickly,” check the timeline as many planning steps (engineering, legal, safety, environmental reviews) happen behind the scenes long before a public meeting.

Who Makes Decisions

Planning decisions, such as rezonings or subdivisions, are made by Council or by an authorized decision-making body, depending on the municipality. These decisions are based on staff’s technical reviews, Provincial or Territorial legislation, and adopted planning policies. All decision-makers must follow the law, even when opinions differ.

How Residents Can Be Involved

Residents may participate through:

- public hearings
- open houses or information sessions
- online engagement
- written submissions

Quick Tip for Residents: If you’re concerned about a development, the public hearing is where your input becomes part of the official record. Written submissions are also accepted.

Your input helps shape how the community grows over time.

Part VI: Transparency, Access & Resident Rights

Residents have the right to know how their municipality operates, how decisions are made, and how public funds are used. Access-to-information laws ensure transparency by giving people the ability to request municipal records, while also protecting sensitive personal and confidential information.

Understanding how these laws work, and the limits they place on what can be released, helps residents navigate the process, know what types of information are available, and understand why some details must remain private.

Access to Information: What Residents Need to Know

Municipalities must balance transparency with protecting personal privacy. Each Province and Territory has its own access-to-information and privacy legislation, such as RTIPPA in New Brunswick, MFIPPA in Ontario, Alberta's Access to Information Act and Protection of Privacy Act, and ATIPPA in Newfoundland & Labrador, which sets out what information can be released and what must remain confidential.

Residents can request municipal records such as reports, emails, plans, budgets, or meeting documents through their Province's access-to-information process.

Some information cannot be released, including:

- personal information about other individuals
- confidential HR or personnel matters
- legal advice protected by solicitor-client privilege
- active investigations or enforcement files
- commercially sensitive or proprietary information

Municipal staff follow strict rules to ensure personal information is collected only when necessary, stored securely, and used appropriately. Understanding your Province's access-to-information rules helps residents know what they can request, and why some details must remain confidential.

Quick Tip for Residents: Access to Information laws can only release documents, not explanations or opinions. If you need clarity, contact staff after you receive the records.

Tip Before Filing a Formal Request: Many records and answers can be provided informally by municipal staff without going through a formal access-to-information process. Asking first, and being specific about what you are looking for, can often save time and avoid the formal 30-day request process.

What Municipalities Legally Cannot Do

Residents often ask why their municipality “can’t just fix” an issue. In many cases, the answer is simple: municipal governments are limited by provincial legislation.

Here are common areas where municipalities have no **legal authority**:

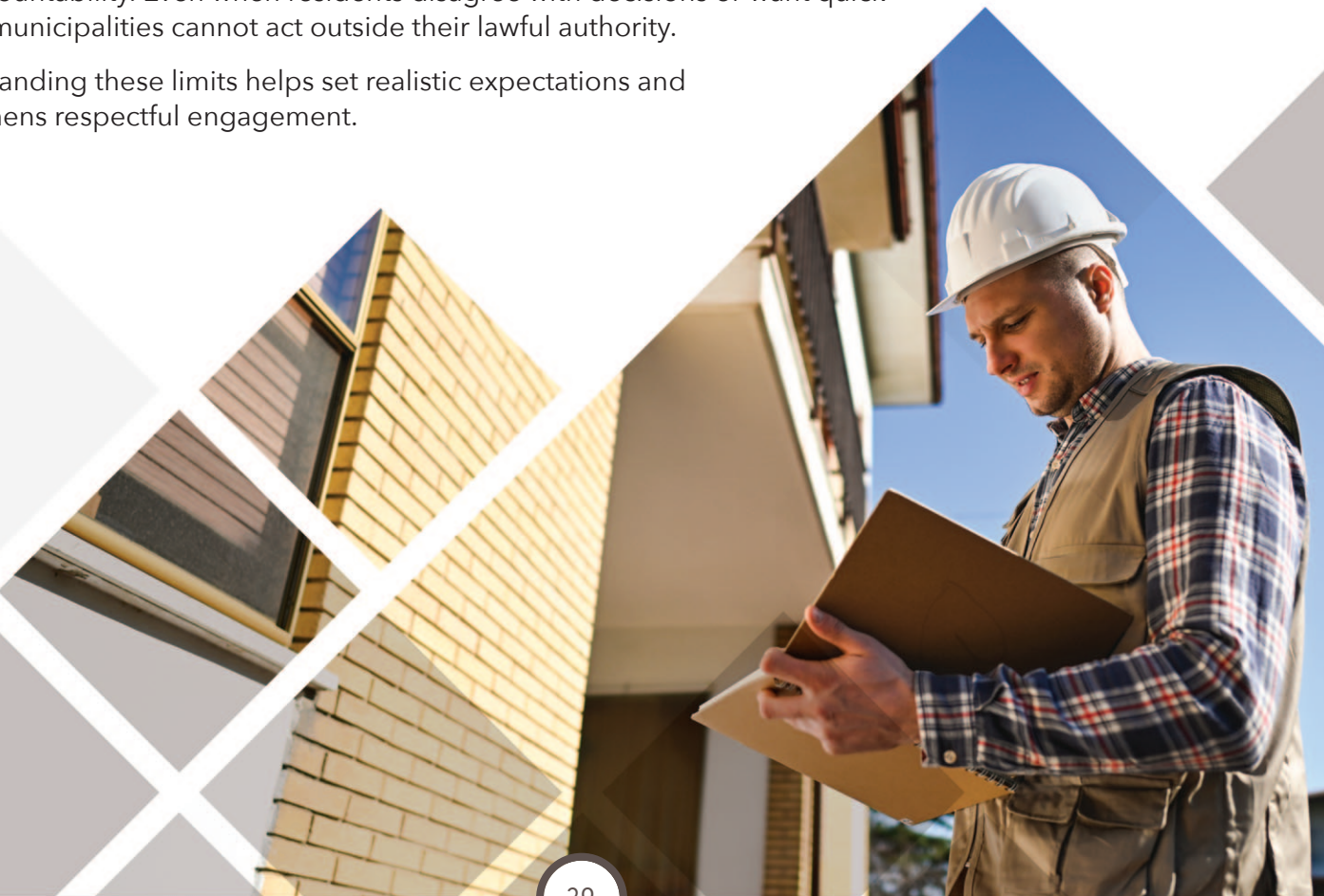
- override provincial or federal laws
- change property assessments outside the legislated assessment and appeal process
- force private developers to build certain types of housing
- stop development that complies with zoning and planning laws
- control police operations or enforcement decisions
- remove elected officials (except in rare provincial processes)
- comment publicly on human resources/personnel matters
- spend restricted utility reserve funds on other services
- take sides in civil disputes between neighbours
- make decisions outside Council meetings

Quick Tip for Residents: When unsure which order of government handles an issue, call your municipality first – staff can point you in the right direction.

Why This Matters

Municipalities must follow legal frameworks designed for fairness, transparency, and accountability. Even when residents disagree with decisions or want quick action, municipalities cannot act outside their lawful authority.

Understanding these limits helps set realistic expectations and strengthens respectful engagement.



Part VII: Engaging in Your Local Democracy

Local democracy works best when residents understand how their municipality functions and take part in the processes that shape their community.

From voting in elections to asking questions, reporting issues, attending public consultations, or even running for office, residents play a vital role in ensuring decisions reflect the needs and values of the people who live there. This section explains how municipal elections work, how residents can participate in civic life, and how respectful engagement strengthens transparency, accountability, and good governance. By learning how to get involved, and separating myths from facts, you can help build a stronger, more informed, and more collaborative community.

Elections, Voting & Running for Office

Municipal elections allow residents to choose the Mayor/Chair and Councillors who will represent the community, set priorities, and approve municipal budgets. Across Canada, the administration of municipal elections varies:

How Elections are Run:

- In many Provinces and Territories, municipalities run their own elections, including nominations, voting locations, ballot counting, compliance, and campaign finance reporting.
- In others, especially smaller or northern communities, the Province or Territory oversees major parts of the process or administers the election directly.

Regardless of who manages it, all municipal elections follow the same principles: fairness, transparency, and accessibility.

What Municipalities May Oversee

- candidate nominations
- voting locations and staffing
- advance polls
- mail-in or special voting options (where permitted)
- election compliance
- campaign finance reporting

If a responsibility is not handled locally, it is managed under Provincial/Territorial legislation or by the election authority.

Thinking of Running for Office?

Prospective candidates should contact the municipal Clerk or their Provincial/Territorial election authority for information on eligibility, nomination steps, deadlines, and required documentation.



Strengthening Local Democracy as a Resident

Residents play a vital role in supporting a healthy local democracy. Staying informed, participating in civic processes, and communicating respectfully help create a transparent, accountable, and collaborative municipal government.

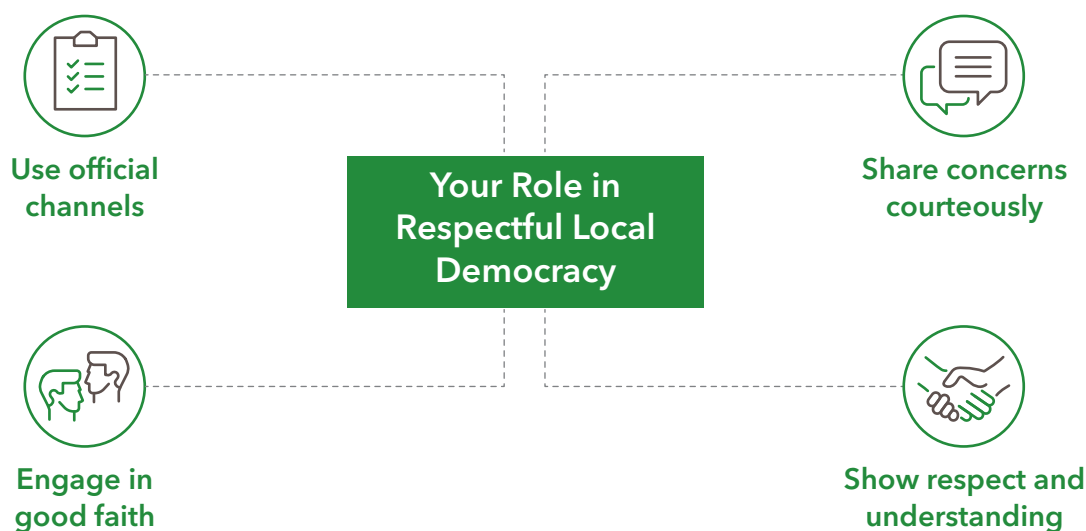
Residents strengthen democracy when they:

- engage respectfully
- learn how decisions are made
- follow reporting processes
- participate in consultations
- seek reliable information
- understand the roles of Council and staff
- vote in municipal elections

Local democracy works best when residents contribute in informed and constructive ways. Everyday actions like asking questions, attending meetings, reporting issues through official channels, and sharing concerns thoughtfully, help keep decisions clear and conversations productive.

A healthy civic environment depends on how residents choose to engage. Using proper reporting channels, seeking accurate information, and approaching discussions with courtesy and curiosity ensure issues are addressed fairly and efficiently.

By listening openly, showing patience, and engaging in good faith (online or in person) residents help create an atmosphere where staff can focus on solutions, Council can make well-informed decisions, and every voice can be heard.



How to Get Involved in Your Community

There are many ways residents can contribute to building a stronger, more connected community. Getting involved helps shape local decisions, builds relationships, and strengthens the democratic process.

Ways to participate include:

- attending Council or committee meetings
- joining municipal advisory committees or task forces
- taking part in public consultations, surveys, or open houses
- volunteering for community events, festivals, or recreation programs
- joining neighbourhood associations or community groups
- participating in local boards (library, heritage, arts, parks)
- supporting community initiatives like cleanup days or tree-planting
- staying informed through newsletters, social media, and municipal websites

Quick Tip for Residents: Attend one Council meeting – even virtually. Seeing how decisions are made gives clarity to how local government really works.

Pro Tip: Share positive experiences or highlight municipal services you value. Elected officials often hear concerns more than compliments, and knowing what residents appreciate helps guide decisions, especially when tough trade-offs arise during budget time.

Even small actions like reporting an issue, attending a consultation, or sending constructive feedback help ensure the community reflects the needs and priorities of its residents.

Myth & Facts: How Your Local Government Really Works

Local government can be complex, and many common assumptions, while understandable, don't reflect how municipalities operate.

Here are the most frequent myths, paired with clear facts to help residents navigate their local government with confidence.

Myth	Fact
Council Authority & Decision-Making	
"The Mayor can overrule Council."	The Mayor/Chair leads meetings, but decisions require a majority vote of Council. In some jurisdictions, provincial legislation grants additional powers to the Mayor; however, Council decisions must still follow the law and established governance processes.
"Council can make decisions anytime they want."	Council can only make decisions at official Council meetings where votes are recorded.
"Councillors can direct staff to fix my issue."	Councillors cannot direct staff. Direction comes from Council as a whole through the CAO, and service issues must go through official reporting systems.
"Staff make political decisions."	Staff provide professional, non-political advice; Council makes the decisions.
"Closed (in-camera) meetings are secret and suspicious."	Closed meetings are required by law for topics such as personnel, legal matters, land negotiations, and privacy-protected issues.
"Municipalities can spend 'extra money' however they want."	Most funds are restricted and must be used for specific purposes (infrastructure, utilities, reserves).

Myth	Fact
Staff, CAO & Municipal Administration	
"Staff make decisions on their own."	Council sets direction: staff implement Council's decisions.
"The CAO is a politician."	The CAO is a non-political public servant hired by Council to run administration.
"The Mayor is the CAO's boss."	The CAO reports to Council as a whole, not to any single member.
"Council members can hire/fire staff."	Council's only employee is the CAO. All other staff are managed by Administration (except in jurisdictions with Strong Mayor Powers, where legislation may assign additional employment authority to the Mayor).
"Staff don't care or aren't trying."	Staff operate under legislation, safety standards, engineering rules, and financial limits, and most work very hard to deliver essential services every day.
"Municipal taxes only pay for administration."	Administration is a small portion of the budget; most taxes fund frontline services like roads, water, fire, parks, and snow removal.
Reporting Issues, Engagement & Public Input	
"If I tell my Councillor, that's enough."	Councillors can pass concerns along, but official reporting systems (311, service portals) trigger action and tracking.
"If a meeting is live-streamed, I can say anything in the chat."	Online comments are still subject to codes of conduct and defamation laws, and individuals may also be held accountable under Human Rights and Charter legislation.
"My comment at a meeting obligates Council to act immediately."	Council considers all input but must follow legal requirements, budgets, and policies when making decisions.

Myth	Fact
Laws, Bylaws, FOI & Transparency	
"Municipalities can make whatever bylaw they want."	Bylaws must comply with Provincial/Territorial law, the Charter, and planning legislation.
"Freedom of Information means the City must release any document."	FOI laws protect personal, legal, security, and employee information, so not everything can be released.
"Planning decisions should be quick."	Planning is highly regulated and technical, involving engineering reviews, safety standards, environmental checks, legal compliance, and public input.
Planning, Development & Land Use	
"Municipalities can approve or reject any development they want."	Decisions must align with the Official Plan, zoning bylaws, engineering standards, servicing capacity, and provincial law.
"Development is always political."	Many planning decisions are technical and legal, involving planners, engineers, and provincial requirements.
Who Delivers Which Services?	
"All government services are municipal."	Many services are provincial or federal (healthcare, income support, education, highways).
"Municipalities control income tax or income assistance."	These are provincial/federal responsibilities.
"The municipality owns all the roads in town."	Some roads are provincial highways or privately owned.
Money, Taxes & Spending	
"Municipalities can spend leftover money on anything."	Many revenues must be spent on specific services (utilities, roads, reserves).
"Taxes only pay for administration."	Property taxes fund a wide range of essential frontline services, from fire protection to water, winter control, parks, and more.
"Municipalities can run deficits like other governments."	Unlike federal and provincial governments, municipalities must balance their budgets every year. They cannot run a deficit, which is why responsible reserve planning is essential for major repairs, emergencies, and long-term projects.

Closing Message: Strengthening Democracy, Together

Local government works best when residents, Council, and municipal staff understand one another's roles and work together with respect. Thank you for taking the time to learn how your municipality operates. Your engagement, whether reporting an issue, participating in consultations, contacting your Councillor, or voting, helps build a stronger, more informed, and more connected community.

When we understand the system, we can contribute to solutions, reduce frustration, and support a healthier local democracy for everyone.



Appendices

Appendix “A”: Northern & Territorial Municipal Context

Municipal governance in northern and territorial regions of Canada operates within a distinct geographic, economic, and cultural context. While governance principles remain consistent across the country, the realities of service delivery and funding can differ significantly.

Coexistence of Municipal and Indigenous Governments

In many northern and remote communities, municipal governments operate alongside Indigenous governments, jurisdictions may overlap or operate in parallel, and collaboration and respectful partnership are essential to service delivery and community wellbeing. These relationships are shaped by treaties, self-government agreements, and Territorial legislation.

Unique Financial Realities

Northern and Territorial municipalities often face limited local tax bases, heavy reliance on Territorial and federal transfers, higher per-capita service delivery costs, and increased transportation, construction, and maintenance expenses.

Infrastructure projects may require external guarantees or special funding arrangements due to limited access to capital markets.

Seasonal Economies

Many northern communities operate within seasonal economic cycles, which can affect employment levels, revenue stability, service demand, and construction timelines.

These realities influence municipal planning, budgeting, and long-term infrastructure decisions.

Service Delivery Challenges

Distance, climate, and limited workforce availability can affect emergency response times, infrastructure maintenance, recruitment and retention of skilled staff, and access to specialized services.

Municipal staff often perform multiple roles and must balance limited resources with high community expectations.

Key Takeaway for Residents

Northern and Territorial municipalities deliver essential services under unique conditions. Understanding these realities helps explain why costs may be higher, why timelines can differ and why long-term planning is especially critical.

Municipal decisions are shaped by geography, climate, and funding structures beyond local control.

Appendix "B": Two-Tier Municipal Governments Explained

Some Canadian municipalities operate within two-tier systems, where responsibilities are shared between two levels of local government. Understanding this structure helps residents know where decisions are made and which body delivers specific services.

Upper-Tier Municipalities

Upper-tier municipalities may include:

- Regions
- Counties
- Districts

They often deliver services that benefit multiple communities, such as:

- Regional roads
- Social services
- Public health
- Waste management
- Paramedic services

Upper-tier Councils may be composed of:

- Mayors from lower-tier municipalities, or
- Councillors elected specifically to the upper tier

Note: Municipal governance structures vary across Canada. For example, in New Brunswick municipalities operate within a system of Regional Service Commissions (RSCs), which coordinate certain regional services such as planning, solid waste management, and regional collaboration.

Lower-Tier Municipalities

Lower-tier municipalities include:

- Cities
- Towns
- Townships
- Villages

They typically provide:

- Local roads and sidewalks
- Recreation facilities
- Libraries
- Fire services
- Local bylaw enforcement
- Planning and development services (in many cases)

Why This Matters

In two-tier systems, taxes may be collected by one level and shared, decisions may involve multiple Councils, and service responsibility may not align with local political boundaries. This can sometimes make it harder to identify where to raise concerns or direct questions.

Key Takeaway for Residents

If you are unsure which level of government is responsible for a service contact your local municipality first and staff can guide you to the correct department or governing body.

Appendix "C": Oversight Bodies & Accountability Tools

Municipal accountability is supported through a range of oversight mechanisms, which may vary across Provinces and Territories. Not all municipalities have the same tools, but all operate within legislated frameworks designed to ensure transparency and fairness.

Common Oversight Bodies

Depending on the jurisdiction, municipalities may have access to:

- **Integrity Commissioners** – oversee elected officials' conduct
- **Ombudsmen** – review complaints about administrative fairness
- **Auditors General** – conduct independent audits and value-for-money reviews
- **Municipal Clerks** – ensure procedural compliance and transparency

Some municipalities share oversight services or rely on provincial offices.

What Oversight Bodies Do

Oversight bodies may:

- Review complaints
- Interpret Codes of Conduct
- Investigate procedural issues
- Make recommendations

They do **not**:

- Overturn Council decisions
- Direct staff operations
- Act as advocates for individuals

When Oversight Bodies Do Not Exist

In municipalities without formal oversight officers, established complaint processes still apply, Clerks or CAOs can advise residents on appropriate next steps, and Provincial legislation provides accountability mechanisms

Key Takeaway for Residents

Oversight structures vary, but accountability is a core principle of municipal governance. Using official processes helps ensure concerns are reviewed fairly and objectively.

Appendix “D”: Ontario Specific Municipal Structures

Municipal government across Canada follows many common principles, but Ontario has a number of unique governance and service-delivery structures that can look different from those in other Provinces and Territories. This appendix provides high-level context to help residents understand why municipal roles, services, and decision-making may appear more complex in Ontario communities.

Two-Tier Municipal Government

Many Ontario municipalities operate within a two-tier system consisting of:

- Upper-tier municipalities (regions or counties), and
- Lower-tier municipalities (cities, towns, townships, or villages)

In these systems:

- Certain services are delivered by the upper tier (such as social services, public health, or major roads).
- Other services are delivered by the lower tier (such as local roads, recreation, libraries, and bylaw enforcement).
- Some Councils are made up of Mayors from lower-tier municipalities, rather than Councillors elected directly to the upper tier.

This structure can make it less clear which level of government is responsible for a particular service or decision.

District Social Services Administration Boards (DSSABs)

In many parts of Ontario, District Social Services Administration Boards are responsible for delivering services such as public housing, social assistance, childcare services, and homelessness programs.

These boards operate separately from municipal Councils and have their own governance structures, even though municipalities often help fund them.

Expanded Municipal Responsibilities

Unlike most Provinces, Ontario municipalities may be responsible for long-term care homes, paramedic service, and certain public health functions.

In other Provinces, these services are typically delivered directly by provincial governments. This difference can significantly affect municipal budgets, staffing, and service expectations.

Strong Mayor Powers

Some Ontario municipalities operate under legislated Strong Mayor Powers, which may grant the Mayor additional authority related to directing certain staff functions, budget preparation, and organizational structure.

These powers are defined by provincial legislation and apply only in specific municipalities. Even where Strong Mayor Powers exist, Councils continue to operate collectively, and municipalities must follow provincial law.

Key Takeaway for Residents

Ontario municipalities may appear more complex because services are shared across multiple bodies, decision-making authority may be distributed differently, and responsibilities can differ significantly from other Provinces.

Residents are encouraged to consult their municipality's website or Clerk's Office to understand how local services and governance structures apply in their community.

