
Minnesota statutes use a number of terms to refer to local governmental units, and from one law to another they may not mean the same thing. This is a summary of commonly used terms.

City: statutory or home rule charter; classification

There are two types of cities in Minnesota: statutory and home rule charter. A statutory city is governed by statute and any special laws enacted for that city. A home rule charter city is governed by its charter and any special laws enacted for that city. Also, if the home rule charter is silent on a matter that is addressed for statutory cities by general law, and general law does not prohibit a city charter from addressing the matter or expressly provide that a city charter prevails over general law, then the city may apply the general law on the matter. [Minn. Stat. § 410.33](#).

“In any law adopted after July 1, 1976, the word ‘city’ when used without further description extending the application of the term to home rule charter cities means statutory cities only.” [Minn. Stat. § 410.015](#).

Classification: Cities are divided, for legislative purposes, into four classes based on population. Changes in classification take effect after the federal decennial census. [Minn. Stat. § 410.01](#). For more information, see the House Research publication *Classification of Cities*.

“Village” and “borough” are obsolete terms. All villages and boroughs in the state became statutory cities in the early 1970s.

County

“County” rarely needs additional definition except to limit its application or to define it as a shorthand reference to the county board or some other entity covered by the law.

Governing body

For a city, the governing body is the city council. For a county, it is the county board of commissioners. For a town it may be the electors or the town board of supervisors.

Incorporated; unincorporated

In the context of governmental units, “incorporated” means a city and “unincorporated” means a town, whether organized or unorganized. See [Minn. Stat. § 414.011](#), subd. 3.

Local government

“Local government” usually refers to counties, towns, and cities. Single- or multi-purpose special districts or entities, such as school districts, are frequently included in the term “political subdivision” but are less often defined as local governments. Sometimes, absent a definition, only the context of the law will indicate what entities are meant to be included.

Metropolitan area

There are at least two definitions of “metropolitan area” used in state law. One means the seven-county area of Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey, Scott, and Washington counties that is within the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan Council. [Minn. Stat. § 473.121](#), subd. 2.

Another definition used in state law is metropolitan statistical area (MSA), defined by the federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) using OMB standards applied to U.S. Census Bureau data. In some statutes, the MSA is tied to the MSA as of a specific date. See e.g., [Minn. Stat. § 466A.02](#). As of July 2023, the Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington MSA includes 13 Minnesota counties (Anoka, Carver, Chisago, Dakota, Hennepin, Isanti, Le Sueur, Mille Lacs, Ramsey, Scott, Sherburne, Washington, and Wright), and the Wisconsin counties of Pierce and St. Croix.

Municipality; municipal corporation

“Municipality” generally means a city but many statutes define it to include other entities. *State, Dep’t of Highways v. O’Connor*, 289 Minn. 243, 183 N.W.2d 574 (1971). For example, the Uniform Municipal Contracting Law defines “municipality” to mean “a county, town, city, school district or other municipal corporation or political subdivision of the state authorized by law to enter into contracts.” [Minn. Stat. § 471.345](#), subd. 1.

“Municipal corporation” is typically a broader term than “municipality.” *Danculovic v. Zimmerman*, 184 Minn. 370, 372, 238 N.W. 695, 696 (1931). However, the term can be narrowed to or made broadly inclusive of certain governmental units for the purposes of a law.

Political subdivision

“Political subdivision” is probably the broadest term used to describe any public body that is not state or federal government that has a prescribed area and authority for subordinate local government. *Winberg v. University of Minnesota*, 499 N.W.2d 799, 802 (Minn. 1993). However, a statute may define the term to mean specific entities.

Public corporation

In the context of local government, “public corporation” means an entity created for the administration of public affairs, an instrumentality of the state, and may include counties, cities, towns, and special purpose entities, such as the Metropolitan Airports Commission. [Minn. Stat. § 473.603](#), subd. 1. It also applies to quasi-governmental entities, created in law and often exempt from some laws that apply to state agencies. See, e.g., Enterprise Minnesota, Inc. [Minn. Stat. § 1160.03](#), subd. 1.

Town and township

“Town” and “township” have been used interchangeably in Minnesota law, but “town” is the correct term to refer to an organized governmental unit and “township” is the term to refer to the geographic area. In county areas without organized town government, the term “unorganized territory” is also used. As in other states, Minnesota towns are based on the congressional townships—generally 36 square miles. Organized towns are the primary local government units for unincorporated areas. Urban towns are those towns that have been granted some of the same powers as statutory cities. [Minn. Stat. § 368.01](#).



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