

MASSACHUSETTS MUNICIPAL MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION

Form of Government

The MMMA's motto "Dedicated to the Improvement of Local Government" sums up the membership's commitment towards promoting the principles of democracy, high ethical standards, and professionalism in Massachusetts cities and towns. Provided below are a number of resources to help charter groups and the general public gain a basic understanding of the different forms of local government in Massachusetts, as well as the legal and procedural basis for making changes to them. The MMMA has an active Form of Government (FoG) Committee, the members of which are available to assist charter commissions and study committees in understanding the options, pros and cons, and processes of changing or modifying their existing municipal form of government. Charter groups can request the MMMA's assistance by clicking and completing the online [request form](#).

Overview

There are 351 cities and towns in Massachusetts. Of these, 50 are cities and 301 are towns. There are numerous variations of local government structure. Generally the term "city" refers to a small legislative body such as a Council or Board of Aldermen (which meets frequently) and either an elected or appointed chief executive called a Mayor or Manager. Towns generally have a large legislative body, either an Open Town Meeting or a Representative Town Meeting (which meets at least annually and sometimes a few times a year). Towns also usually have a small (three or five member) elected executive Board of Selectmen as well as an appointed administrator called a Manager or Administrator.

Cities

Most of the cities in Massachusetts operate with a Mayor/Council form of government such as Boston, Lawrence, Springfield, Fall River, Taunton, etc. However, some fairly large cities have a Council/Manager form of government such as Worcester, Cambridge and Lowell. In the last 30 years or so, since the adoption of the Home Rule Amendment to the Constitution, a few medium to larger size towns have adopted a so-called city form of government, either with a Mayor/Council form or a Council/Manager form. In many of these instances the municipality still calls itself a town. Thus for example Amesbury and Greenfield now have a Mayor/Council form of government, while Barnstable and Franklin have a Council/Manager government.

Towns

Most towns (well over 200) operate with an Open Town Meeting where any voter is permitted to attend and vote on legislative matters: budgets, bylaws, zoning, etc. Fewer than 50 towns operate with a Representative Town Meeting where voters vote for representatives to attend town meeting. These representative legislative bodies vary from less than 100 to more than 300. Towns of less than 12,000 may not have a city form of government and towns of less than 6,000 must have an open town meeting. The executive authority in towns is held by elected boards of selectmen together with an appointed chief administrative officer called a Town Manager or Town Administrator.

Resources:

[New - Review of Topsfield's Change in Government](#)
[Overview - Charter Adoption, Revisions & Amendments](#)
[Features, Pros & Cons of the Basic Forms](#)
[Article 89 of the Massachusetts Constitution – Home Rule Amendment](#)
[M.G.L. Chapter 43B – Home Rule Charter Procedures](#)
[Legal Structure of Home Rule in Massachusetts](#)
[Summary of Charter Adoption, Revision & Amendment Procedures](#)
[Summary of Charter Commission Procedures & Decision Points](#)
[M.G.L. Chapter 43 – City Charters & Basic Plans](#)
[Towns with Special Act Charters](#)
[Listing of Forms of Government by Community](#)
[Restructuring City & Town Finance Functions](#)
[Options for Changing Your Form of Government \(MMA Advocate article\)](#)
[Charter Review Options Report, Town of Tewksbury](#)