

# County Government Structure

A publication of the Association of Minnesota Counties.

## History of County Government

Over the past 30 years, Minnesota's 87 counties transitioned from a purely quasi-municipal corporation of the state to a general purpose form of government which, for many counties, has necessitated a change in the way the county delivers its services and, consequentially, the structure of the county itself. Counties were originally organized to be administrative agencies of the state. In addition to serving as an administrative arm of the state, counties are now providing services to its citizens beyond the original scope of county government.

Traditionally, counties performed state mandated duties which included assessment of property, record keeping (i.e. property and vital statistics), maintenance of rural roads, administration of election and judicial functions, maintaining peace in rural areas, and poor relief. Today, counties are expected to provide additional areas of government support, including social services, corrections, child protection, library services, hospitals and rest homes, public health services, planning and zoning, economic development, parks and recreation, water quality, and solid waste management.

### OPTIONAL FORMS OF COUNTY GOVERNMENT

Minnesota Statutes, Chapter 375A

Allows for the following plans of organization:

- Elected Executive Plan
- County Manager Plan
- At-Large Chair Plan
- County Administrator Plan
- County Auditor-Administrator Plan

Allows for the following organizational options for certain county offices:

- Provides for appointment of county auditor, treasurer, sheriff or recorder by county-wide referendum.
- Provides for the office of county civil counsel by county board action.
- Provides for the consolidation of the county auditor and county treasurer by county board action or county-wide referendum.

Allows for the following miscellaneous plans:

- Provides for the establishment of a county government study commission by county board action or county voter petition.

### MINNESOTA COUNTY GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE OVERVIEW

Counties with combined auditor/treasurer position .....	77
Counties that appoint the county recorder .....	55
Counties with a county administrator position .....	65
Counties with a county coordinator position .....	12
Counties with seven governing board members .....	6

Source: Association of Minnesota Counties

## County Board of Commissioners

County boards are elected by district, serve a four-year term, and are responsible for the operation of the county and the delivery of county services. The number of commissioners on a county board is five. Counties with a population of over 100,000 people may, by board resolution, increase the size of the county board from five to seven members. Six counties—Anoka, Dakota, Hennepin, Olmsted, Ramsey and St. Louis—have boards consisting of seven members.

## Professional County Management

Over the last 30 years, county boards across the state have recognized the need to expand into added professional management for to their counties, mostly as a result of increasing demands placed on counties for the delivery of services. Three forms of professional management currently exist in Minnesota statute: county administrator, county coordinator and county auditor- administrator.

### County Administrator

Under the county administrator plan, the administrator is the head of the county for the management of the county affairs placed in the administrator's charge. If required by the county board, the administrator is the supervisor of all county institutions and agencies, and of non-elected department heads. The administrator also is responsible for the preparation and execution of the county budget, including a long range capital expenditure plan, and serves as the purchasing agent for the county. 65 counties have established the position of county administrator (Ramsey and Dakota Counties use the title of "county manager"). The county administrator serves at the pleasure of the county board.

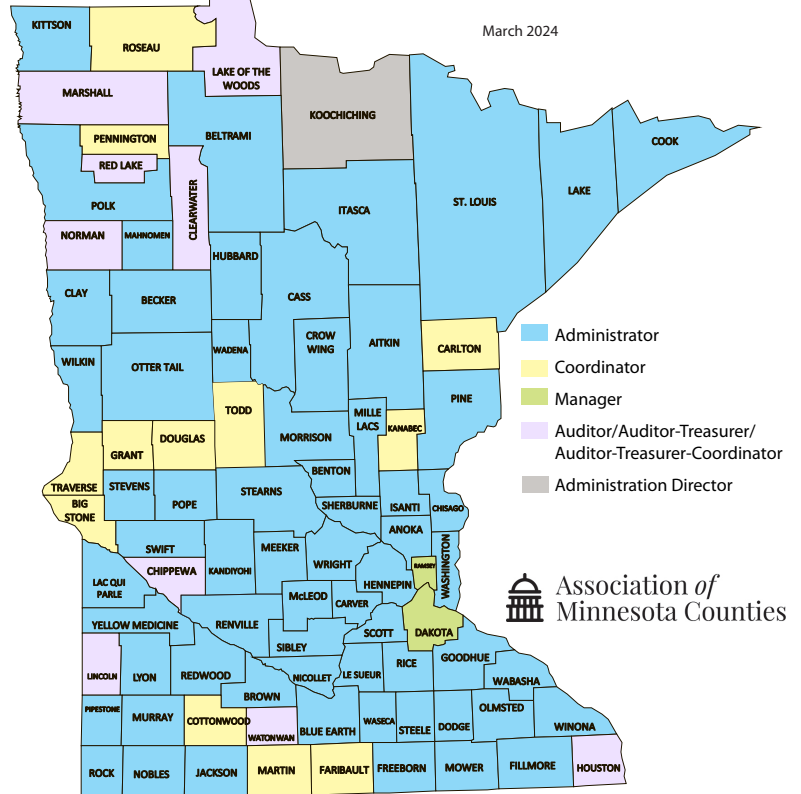
## County Coordinator

The county coordinator plan is much like the county administrator plan except that the coordinator generally does not have a supervisory role over county department heads, elected or appointed. If required by the county board, the county coordinator must submit an annual budget to the county board and manage all affairs of the county which the county board has assigned to the position. Currently, 12 counties have the position of county coordinator or auditor-treasurer-coordinator. The county coordinator serves at the pleasure of the county board.

## Other County Management

The remaining counties generally assign central administrative tasks to a department head within the county, most often the county auditor or auditor-treasurer. In those counties, no central administrative plan has been adopted; rather the duties of central administration falls to the office which has the most contact with the county board. In the remaining counties, positions like the human resources director or board executive assistants perform a number of overall management functions do not necessarily participate in budget preparation or hold a supervisory role.

## Minnesota County Management Structures



## AMC’s Legislative Position

AMC has long held the legislative position that county boards should be granted the necessary flexibility to organize the structure of their county to meet the needs of citizens today in the 21st century. Many counties have found that “doing business as usual” no longer works when citizens are demanding more from government while calling for a freeze on tax increases. AMC also believes that, as technology plays a more visible role in the delivery of county services, the structure of county government must also change. For these reasons, AMC continues to support flexibility for counties in the administration and delivery of services. ■

Sources: Cities, Counties and Towns and State-Local Relations, January 1990, Gary R. Currie, Legislative Analyst.

House Research Information Brief, Revised July 1994, “Optional Forms of County Government,” Gary R. Currie, Legislative Analyst.

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