

County Government Structure

A publication of the Association of Minnesota Counties.

History of County Government

The 87 counties in Minnesota are rapidly changing 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, in their infancy, were 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 rapidly moving into other 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. Relief for the poor is generally provided by the federal and state governments through the income maintenance programs.

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.

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	75
Counties that appoint the county recorder.....	35
Counties with a county administrator position	64
Counties with a county coordinator position	12
Counties with seven governing board members	6

Source: Association of Minnesota Counties

Election and Appointment of County Officials

During the Jacksonian Era and after, it became the practice of county government to increase the number of elective county offices. Appointed positions were changed into elected ones and new elected offices were developed. This caused the list of elected officials to grow from a few such as the coroner and sheriff, to many, including election of the auditor, recorder, treasurer, surveyor, clerk of court, watershed district directors, judge of probate, assessors and attorney.

Since the mid-1960's, counties and the state have gradually reduced the number of elective county offices. Hennepin and Ramsey counties were the first to be given organizational reform by special legislation. Today, the Legislature has allowed counties to appoint the positions of county auditor, treasurer and recorder, on an individual basis. However, the positions of county sheriff, county attorney and watershed district directors, as well as the governing board, continue to be elective positions. In addition, Dakota, Olmsted and St. Louis counties appoint the position of county recorder. (The county auditor/treasurer continues to be an elective position.)

In 1987, enabling legislation was passed to allow Ramsey County to become a home rule charter county. Ramsey County has established the home rule charter, operates under the guidance of the charter and is the only home rule charter county in Minnesota.

In the early 1970's, clerk of courts (now court administrators), county coroners and county surveyors became appointed positions. In 1973, the Optional Forms of County Government was passed. While this offers several major options for the modernization of county government, most counties have instead made structural changes by seeking special legislation.

To date, 60 counties have moved to combine the position of county auditor and county treasurer into one elected position.

Professional County Management

Over the last 30 years, county boards across the state have recognized the need to expand into professional management for the county, 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. 64 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

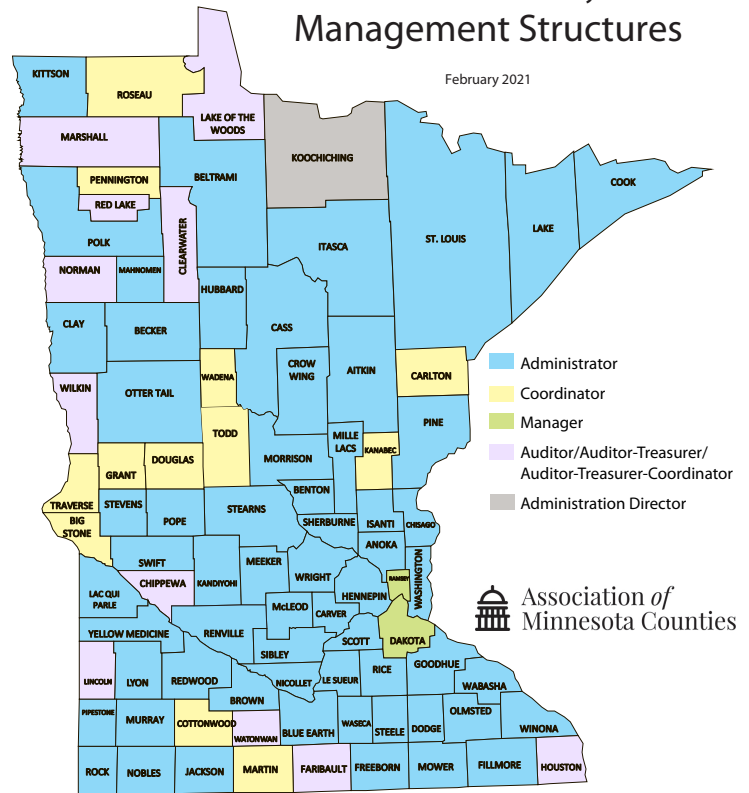
The county coordinator plan is much like the county administrator plan except that the coordinator generally does not have a supervisory role over county department heads, elected or appointed. If required by the county board, the county coordinator must submit an annual budget to the county board and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

February 2021



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.

Updated February 2021



125 Charles Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55103-2108

Main Line: 651-224-6540, Fax: 651-6540

www.mncounties.org