

Wisconsin

Wisconsin ranks 11th among the states in number of local governments, with 3,048 as of June 2002.

COUNTY GOVERNMENTS (72)

There are no areas in Wisconsin lacking county government. The county governing body is called the county board of supervisors.

SUBCOUNTY GENERAL PURPOSE GOVERNMENTS (1,850)

The 1,850 subcounty general purpose governments in Wisconsin comprise 585 municipal (city and village) governments, and 1,265 town governments.

Municipal Governments (585)

The term “municipality,” as defined for census statistics on governments, applies in Wisconsin only to cities and villages. Towns, to which the term “municipality” is applied by some Wisconsin statutes, are counted for census purposes as township rather than municipal governments (see below). Cities and villages exist outside the area of any town. Cities are divided into the following four classes:

- First class—150,000 inhabitants or more
- Second class—39,000 to 149,999 inhabitants
- Third class—10,000 to 38,999 inhabitants
- Fourth class—fewer than 10,000 inhabitants

Villages outside a metropolitan area must have a population of 1,000 and a density of 500 per square mile before obtaining city status. The minimum population requirement for incorporation as a village is 150. For incorporation of cities within a metropolitan community (an area containing a city, or two cities with borders no more than five miles apart, with an aggregate population of 25,000 or more), the requirements are a minimum population of 5,000, an area of three square miles, and a density of at least 750 persons per square mile. For incorporation of villages within a metropolitan community, the requirements are a minimum population of 2,500 for an area covering two square miles, and a population density of at least 500 persons per square mile.

Town or Township Governments (1,265)

Units in Wisconsin designated as “towns” are counted in census statistics as township governments. Towns encompass the entire area of the state, except for areas within

the boundaries of cities or villages. The entire territory of Milwaukee County, however, consists of cities and villages. The entire territory of Menominee County constitutes one town, but the tax levies imposed by the town of Menominee are separate from those imposed by Menominee County. The town of Menominee is thus counted as a separate government in census statistics on governments.

Each town is governed by a town board of supervisors. Towns may exercise the powers of a village by resolution of the town meeting.

PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS (446)

School District Governments (442)

Only the following types of school districts in Wisconsin are counted as separate governments for census purposes:

- Common school districts
- Unified school districts
- Union high school districts
- School districts in first class cities
- Technical college districts

School districts in first class cities were created under general law with special application. All four types of school districts above are administered by elected school boards. The school boards may issue bonds and levy local property taxes. The taxes to be levied for common and union high school districts are determined at the annual district meeting.

The technical college districts are administered by boards selected by the governing bodies of the participating school districts, or by the chairpersons of the county boards of supervisors of participating counties. The districts may levy property taxes and issue bonds. There are 16 such districts that encompass the entire state.

Dependent Public School Systems (4)

Wisconsin statutes provide for the following types of dependent public school systems:

- Systems dependent on county governments (4):
 - County children with disabilities education boards

County children with disabilities education boards are established by the county board of supervisors. Members of the education boards are also appointed by the county board of supervisors. These boards receive the proceeds

of county tax levies and state grants, but budgets of the boards are subject to county approval. These boards are classified as dependent agencies of county governments, and are not counted as separate governments. As of June 2002, four county children with disabilities education boards were reported in operation.

Other Educational Activities

Wisconsin statutes provide for the establishment of cooperative educational service agencies that act primarily as intermediaries between the state and the local school districts. Each of these cooperative educational service agencies may furnish services on request to any or all of the school districts within its boundaries on a contractual basis. A board of control, chosen by and from the constituent school district boards, governs each agency. These agencies receive payments from underlying school districts and state aid. For census statistics, cooperative educational service agencies are classified as joint educational service agencies of the participating school districts, and are not counted as separate governments. As of June 2002, 12 cooperative educational service agencies were reported in operation.

SPECIAL DISTRICT GOVERNMENTS (684)

Wisconsin statutes authorize the creation of a variety of special districts or authorities that are counted as governments. These are discussed in detail below.

Community Development Authorities

These authorities provide public housing and urban renewal. They are established by resolution or ordinance of the governing body of any city. A board of seven members appointed by the mayor, two of whom are members of the city council *ex officio*, governs each authority. Community development authorities may fix charges and rents, accept donations and grants, and issue bonds.

County Drainage Boards and Drainage Districts

Wisconsin statutes authorize the following types of drainage districts and boards:

County drainage districts with appointed boards.

These districts are authorized under 1963 legislation effective January 1, 1965. Beginning in 1965, the former farm drainage districts were abolished and the drainage projects thereunder converted to the county drainage boards. A county drainage board, appointed by the circuit court, supervises and directs the operations of all drainage districts and projects in the county. County drainage boards may levy benefit assessments and, upon approval of the circuit court, may issue bonds for drainage purposes.

Drainage districts with option to elect district

board. Legislation permitting these districts to be formed was repealed effective January 1, 1965. Districts then in operation, however, may continue to operate under the repealed law if the voters approve at an election called for this purpose by the county court. A three-member board appointed by the circuit court or elected by the voters governs these districts. These districts may levy benefit assessments and issue bonds.

Drainage districts governed by the city, village, or town governing body *ex officio* are not counted as separate governments. See “Subordinate Agencies and Areas,” below.

Family Care Districts

Districts to provide health care services are established by the county board of supervisors upon recommendation by the local long-term care council. A board of commissioners governs the district. For single county family care districts, the board consists of 15 members selected by the county board of supervisors, or when applicable the county administrator or county executive. For multiple county family care districts, up to 21 members are selected to the board in the same manner as single county family care districts. The district may accept grants and aid, fix charges for services, and operate a resource center or a care management organization.

Housing Authorities

Wisconsin statutes provide for the creation of city or village housing authorities by resolution of the city or village governing body, and of county veterans’ housing authorities by resolution of the county board of supervisors or on petition of resident veterans. In addition, 1961 legislation authorized cities to establish housing authorities to provide housing for elderly persons. The authorities are governed by boards of commissioners appointed by the mayor, the village board, or the county supervisors. The authorities may issue bonds, fix rents and charges and accept donations. Some city housing authorities, however, have been reorganized by ordinance and now operate as a department of the city government rather than as an independent housing authority.

Joint Local Water Authorities

A local government unit may establish a joint local water authority by contracting out services with another local government unit, upon approval by the secretary of state. A board of commissioners governs each district, with the selection of board members and length of terms decided by the creating local government unit. The district board may issue bonds and collect fees for services provided to the jurisdiction.

Local Cultural Arts Districts

Local cultural arts districts created by first class cities are established by resolution to the governor from the mayor

and sponsoring city of where the majority of the district is to be located. These districts oversee the development of cultural arts through funding by issuing bonds and collecting charges for services. A board of commissioners governs each district, with the selection process of the board members determined by the city council in which the district resides.

Local cultural arts districts that are established by second class cities or lower are governed ex officio by state and local elected officials, and are considered dependent.

Local Professional Baseball Park Districts

A local professional baseball park district is created by resolution of a county with more than 600,000 population, subject to approval by the governor. The jurisdiction of a local professional baseball park includes the county from which the baseball park resides and any contiguous county. A board of commissioners governs the district, and members of the board are selected by the governor, the chief executive officers of each county in the jurisdiction, and the mayor of the most populous city in the jurisdiction. The district may issue revenue bonds, levy a sales and use tax, collect charges for services, and accept gifts or grants.

Local Professional Football Stadium Districts

A local professional football stadium district is created by resolution of a county with more than 150,000 population that already has a stadium with a professional team, subject to approval by the governor. A board of commissioners governs the district, and members of the board are selected by the chief executive officers of the most populous city in the county, the county in which the stadium resides, and any municipality in the jurisdiction. The district may levy a sales and use tax, issue bonds, and collect charges for facilities.

Metropolitan Sewerage Districts (except the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District)

Proceedings to create these districts are initiated by resolution of any municipality. Following a public hearing, the state Department of Natural Resources may order the creation of such a district. A board of five commissioners governs each district; the county board appoints the commissioners unless the cities, towns, and villages comprising the district agree to appoint the commissioners or provide for their election. The district may issue bonds (approval of the voters is required for bond issues if petitioned for), levy direct annual taxes that the participating governments collect, levy special benefit assessments, and fix charges for services.

Metropolitan Transit Authorities

The law creating metropolitan transit authorities was repealed in 1999.

Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District

This district to provide sewage disposal facilities was originally established under a 1921 general law with special application. Effective April 1982, the governing body of this district was reorganized as a single 11-member commission, with seven members appointed by the mayor of Milwaukee and four members selected by a council of chief executives of other cities, towns, and villages in Milwaukee County. Legislation effective in 1982 gave the district the power to levy ad valorem taxes and issue bonds.¹ The district may receive revenue from user charges and from the sale of fertilizer, may impose assessments on cities, towns, and villages in the district, and may contract out its services to governments located outside the county.

Municipal Electric Companies

Municipal electric companies may be established by two or more cities, villages, or towns to contract with each other for operation of facilities for generation, transmission, or distribution of electric power and energy. Copies of these contracts are filed with the secretary of state. Upon receipt, the secretary of state records the contract and issues a certificate of incorporation. The governing board consists of a board of directors, with one member appointed by each contracting municipality. Other details regarding the establishment and the operation of the boards of directors are in the contract. Municipal electric companies may sell secured or unsecured bonds, and fix and revise fees, rates, rents, and charges. The Badger Power Marketing Authority, Wisconsin Public Power, Inc., and the Western Wisconsin Municipal Power Group were created under this law.

Public Inland Lake Protection and Rehabilitation Districts

These districts (often called “lake districts”) may be created by resolution of the governing body of a city, village, or town, or by a county board after petition, hearing, and approval of boundaries. A five-member board of commissioners governs each district; three members are elected, one member is appointed by the county board, and one member is appointed from the governing body of the town, city, or village within which the largest portion by valuation of the district lies. The district may borrow money, issue bonds, impose special assessments and user charges, and levy ad valorem taxes.

Districts administered by city, town, or village governing bodies ex officio are not counted as separate governments. See “Subordinate Agencies and Areas,” below.

¹Prior to 1982, Milwaukee County issued bonds on behalf of the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District, and levied taxes to pay principal and interest on those bonds. Effective in 1982, the district levies taxes to pay the county for principal and interest on outstanding county bonds issued on behalf of the district.

Solid Waste Management Boards

Boards to provide for solid waste collection disposal are created by resolution of one or more county governing bodies. Except in counties that have more than 500,000 in population, members of the boards are appointed by the governing bodies of the county or counties served. The boards may charge and collect fees for its services and facilities, receive state and federal grants, levy ad valorem taxes.

Town Sanitary Districts

These districts are created by authority of the town board or by a petition of the landowners living within the proposed district to the town board for the purpose of providing a sewerage system. A board of three commissioners appointed by the town board or by the department of natural resources governs each district. A sanitary district may collect charges, levy special assessments, levy an ad valorem tax and may issue municipal obligations.

Districts administered by a town governing body *ex officio* are not counted as separate governments. See “Subordinate Agencies and Areas,” below.

SUBORDINATE AGENCIES AND AREAS

Shown below are various governmental designations in Wisconsin that have certain characteristics of governmental units but that are treated in census statistics as subordinate agencies of the state or local governments and are not counted as separate governments. Legal provisions for some of the larger of these are discussed below (see “Public School Systems,” above, regarding educational agencies of this nature).

City redevelopment authorities (municipal). These authorities may be established by the city council. A board of seven commissioners appointed by the mayor governs each authority. No more than two of these commissioners may be city officers. An authority may issue bonds, accept appropriations and grants, and lease its facilities. Its budget, however, is subject to review and amendment by the city council.

Land conservation committees (county). These districts, formerly known as soil and water conservation districts, are established by resolution of the county governing body. Each committee consists of the chairperson of the county agricultural stabilization and conservation committee, and at least two members of the county committee on agriculture and extension education. The land conservation committee may include any number of county board members and up to two persons who are not members of the county board. The committees may receive federal, state, and county funds, and may require contributions from landowners for benefits received.

Wisconsin Health and Educational Facilities Authority (state). This authority was created by act of the legislature to finance health care and post-secondary education facilities. A board of seven members appointed by the governor governs the authority. The authority may fix rents, fees, and charges, and may issue revenue bonds.

Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority (state). This authority, formerly the Wisconsin Housing Finance Authority, was created to provide mortgage credit for low and moderate income housing. The authority is governed by a board of nine members, six of whom are appointed by the governor with the consent of the senate, the secretary of commerce or his or her designee, the secretary of administration or his or her designee, and the chairpersons of the senate and assembly committees on local affairs. The authority may receive contributions, fees, and charges, make mortgage loans, and issue revenue bonds.

Wisconsin State Building Commission (state). This commission was established primarily to administer the building program of the state and to supervise the leasing of new state buildings. The commission consists of the governor, three state senators, three representatives to the assembly, and one citizen member appointed by the governor. The commission receives funds from state appropriations.

Other examples include:

State²

- Bradley Center Sports and Entertainment Corporation
- Flood control boards
- Forest protection areas
- Fox River Navigational System Authority
- Public purpose corporations
- Turnpike corporations

County

- Boards of harbor commissioners
- County park commissions
- County transit commissions
- Dane County Lakes and Watershed Commission
- Industrial development agencies
- Mosquito control districts
- Planning and zoning authorities

Municipal

- Boards of harbor commissioners
- Boards of public land commissioners
- City or village drainage districts with *ex officio* boards

²Functions of the Wisconsin Community Development Finance Authority were transferred to the Wisconsin Housing and Development Authority in 1987.

City park boards
City sewerage districts
City transit commissions
Local cultural arts districts (Second class or lower)
Local exposition districts
Plan commissions
Public inland lake protection and rehabilitation districts
with ex officio boards
Public recreation boards
Utility districts
Village and town transit commissions

Town

Boards of harbor commissioners
General zoning districts

Public inland lake protection and rehabilitation districts
with ex officio boards
Public recreation boards
Town drainage districts with ex officio boards
Town park commissions
Town sanitary districts with ex officio boards
Utility districts
Village and town transit commissions

Wisconsin law also provides for various types of local areas for election purposes and administration of justice.