Forms of Municipal Government in South Carolina

Municipal Clerks and Treasurers Institute
Year 1 | Session A

Charlie Barrineau
Municipal Association of SC
September 17, 2025

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Field Services Managers

Charlie Barrineau
Senior Field Services Manager
cbarrineau@masc.sc | 803.354.4751

Desirée Fragoso
Field Services Manager
dfragoso@masc.sc | 803.354.4795

Rob Wolfe
Field Services Manager
ewolfe@masc.sc | 803.354.4750

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A Reminder of Your Oath

"I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I am duly qualified, according to the constitution of this state, to exercise the duties of the office to which I have been elected (appointed), and that I will, to the best of my ability, discharge the duties thereof, and preserve, protect, and defend the constitution of this state and of the United States. So help me God."

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A Reminder of Your Oath

"As mayor (councilmember) of the (City/Town) of _____, I will equally, fairly, and impartially, to the best of my ability and skill, exercise the trust reposed in me, and I will use my best endeavors to preserve the peace and carry into effect according to law the purposes for which I have been elected. So help me God."

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I pledge to build a stronger and more prosperous community by advocating for civil engagement, respecting others and their viewpoints, and finding solutions for the betterment of my city or town.

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To Be Clear

All municipal governments in South Carolina operate under one of three forms of government: mayor-council, council or council-manager. Each form can be equally effective.

The Municipal Association of South Carolina does not make recommendations on which form a city or town chooses.

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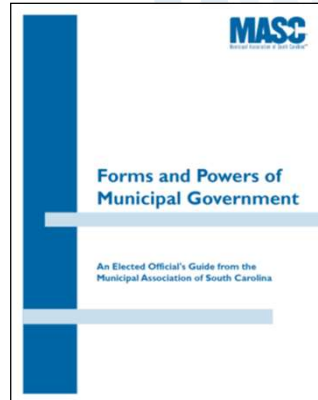
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The Three Forms of Municipal Government in South Carolina

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Forms and Powers of Government
Resources

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Forms and Powers of Municipal Government

An Elected Official's Guide from the Municipal Association of South Carolina

S.C. Code of Laws Title 5
Chapters 5,9,11,13

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Breaking Down the Three Forms of Government

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South Carolina law allows municipalities to organize under one of three forms of government. It also allows municipalities to change the form of government by referendum.

Although each of the three forms have unique structures, some things remain the same in all instances. For example, in all three forms of municipal government in South Carolina, all legislative and policy making authority rests with the council. All councils must meet at least one time per month and comply with the notice and agenda requirements in the SC Freedom of Information Act. In all cases, the mayor, or a majority of council, can call special meetings.

Mayor-council form

The council
- has four or more councilmembers, plus the mayor.
- Holds all legislative and policy power.
- can hire an administrator to "assist the mayor in his office."
- appoints the municipal clerk, attorney and judge.
- adopts the balanced budget, which is prepared for council by the mayor.

The mayor
- votes as a member of council and presides over council meetings.
- serves as chief executive officer, supervising departments, as well as appointing and removing employees in accordance with personnel rules adopted by council.
- prepares and submits the budget and capital program to council, and makes the annual financial report to the public and to council.

Council form

The council
- has either five, seven or nine councilmembers, including the mayor.
- holds all legislative, policy and administrative power.
- can hire an administrator to assist council and can appoint an officer of the city other than a councilmember to administer departments with the direction of council.
- appoints the municipal clerk, attorney and judge.
- prepares and adopts a balanced budget.

The mayor
- has no other additional authority compared to other councilmembers.
- performs administrative duties only if authorized to do so by council.
- presides at council meetings by tradition, not statutory authority.
- may exercise informal authority as leader of council and staff as spokesperson for the council.

Council-manager form

The council
- has either four, six or eight councilmembers, plus the mayor.
- holds all legislative and policy power.
- employs a manager, attorney and judge.
- adopts a balanced budget, which is prepared for council by the manager.

The mayor
- has no additional power compared to other councilmembers.
- has no administrative responsibilities.
- presides at council meetings by tradition, not statutory authority.
- may exercise informal authority as leader of council and staff as spokesperson for the council.

The manager
- serves as chief executive and head of the administrative branch, appointing and removing employees, including the clerk, and setting salaries.
- prepares and administers the annual budget and makes financial reports.
- Advises council on departments and appointments.

Forms and Powers of Government

Policy vs. Administration

Two distinct areas of functional responsibility in local governments regardless of the form

1. Policy
   - Policy = Council
   - The "What" and "Why" of issues
2. Administration
   - Administration / Operations = Staff
   - The "How", "When" and "Where" of issues

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Forms and Powers of Government

What Distinguishes The FOG

The major difference is where the executive and administrative powers and responsibilities of the local government are vested
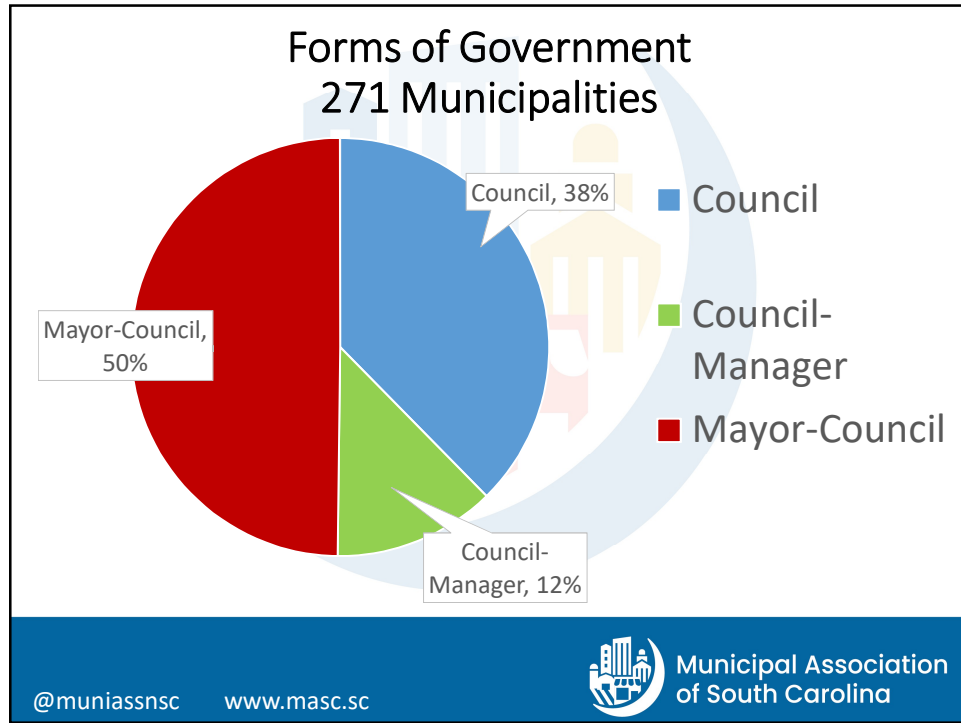
- The legislative function remains with the council under all forms of municipal government
- Powers, roles and responsibilities exercised by the mayor, council and chief administrative officer (CAO) differ among FOG

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Forms of Government
271 Municipalities

Council, 38%

■ Council

■ Council-Manager

■ Mayor-Council

Mayor-Council, 50%

Council-Manager, 12%

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Municipal Form of Government (FOG)

Top 20 of 271 Population

Pop. Rank	Name	2020 Pop.	FOG
1	Charleston	150,227	Mayor/Council
2	Columbia	136,632	Manager
3	North Charleston	114,852	Mayor/Council
4	Mount Pleasant	90,801	Council
5	Rock Hill	74,372	Manager
6	Greenville	70,720	Manager
7	Summerville	50,915	Council
8	Goose Creek	45,946	Mayor/Council
9	Sumter	43,463	Manager
10	Florence	39,899	Manager

Pop. Rank	Name	2020 Pop.	FOG
11	Spartanburg	38,732	Manager
12	Hilton Head Island	37,661	Manager
13	Myrtle Beach	35,682	Manager
14	Greer	35,308	Council
15	Aiken	32,025	Manager
16	Anderson	28,106	Manager
17	Bluffton	27,716	Manager
18	Conway	24,849	Council
19	Mauldin	24,724	Council
20	Fort Mill	24,521	Manager

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Municipal Form of Government (FOG)

Bottom 20 of 271 Population

Pop. Rank	Mun. Name	2020 Pop.	FOG	Pop. Rank	Mun. Name	2020 Pop.	FOG
1	Cope	37	Mayor/Council	11	Troy	83	Mayor/Council
2	Jenkinsville	40	Mayor/Council	12	Luray	98	Mayor/Council
3	Peak	51	Mayor/Council	13	Williams	98	Mayor/Council
4	Smyrna	55	Mayor/Council	14	Smoaks	98	Council
5	Govan	56	Mayor/Council	15	Blenheim	115	Mayor/Council
6	Ulmer	65	Council	16	Windsor	115	Mayor/Council
7	Jamestown	68	Mayor/Council	17	Ward	119	Mayor/Council
8	Plum Branch	72	Mayor/Council	18	Parksville	120	Mayor/Council
9	Tatum	76	Mayor/Council	19	Salem	120	Council
10	Lodge	82	Mayor/Council	20	Lowndesville	120	Mayor/Council

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Let's Dance!

- Servant leadership
- Trust
- Communication
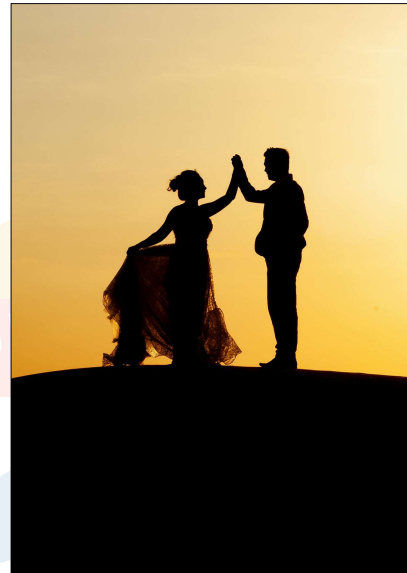
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Forms and Powers of Government
Mayor-Council Form

General Information
- Most utilized form of municipal government in S.C. (135 of 271)
- Often called the strong mayor form because the Mayor is granted by state law the right to exercise legislative as well as executive and administrative authority
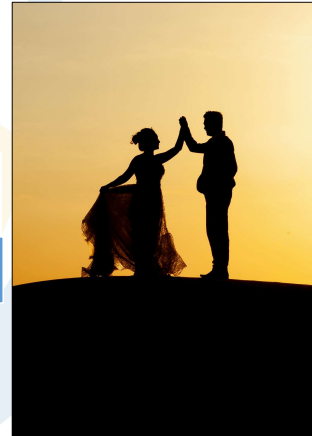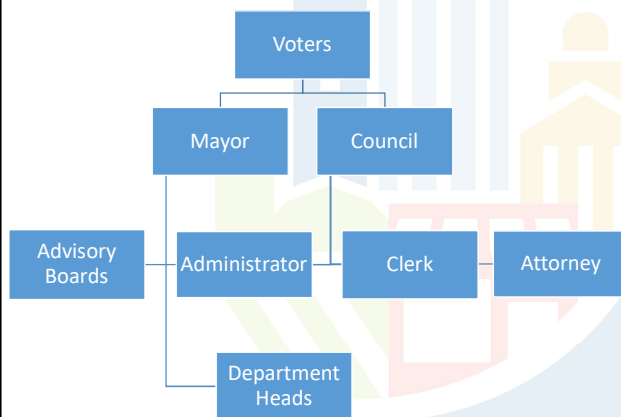
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Mayor-Council Form in SC

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Forms and Powers of Government

Council Form

General Information
- Second most used form of municipal government in S.C. (102 of 271 municipalities)
- Sometimes called the weak mayor form which refers to the Mayor's lack of formal executive authority
- No separation of powers between the executive and the legislative functions
- Often called governance by committee because of shared powers
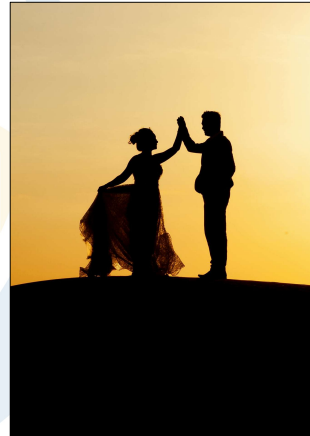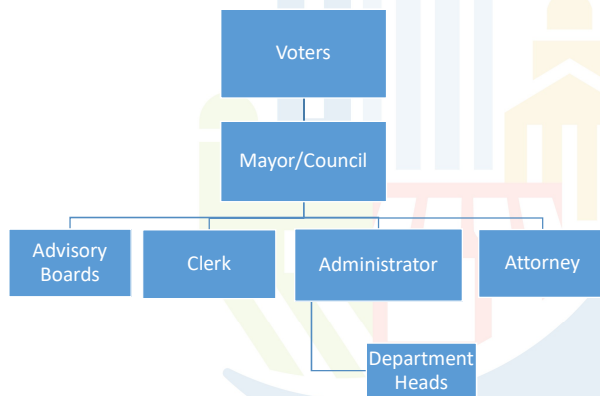
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Council Form in SC

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Forms and Powers of Government

Council Manager Form

General Information

- Third most used form of municipal government in S.C. (34 of 271 municipalities)
- The Council and Mayor are forbidden by law from interfering with the operation of the departments, offices and agencies under the direction of the manager
- No direct involvement in the hiring and firing of employees under the manager or directly dealing with or giving orders to those employees
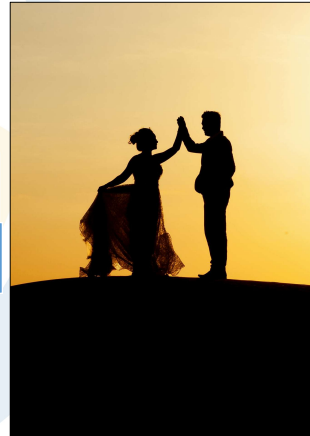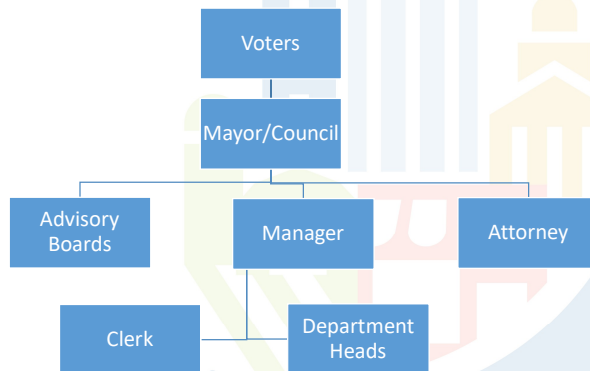
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Council-Manager Form in SC

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Forms and Powers of Government

Change Form of Government

- May only be implemented with approval of the voters via referendum
- Ordinance Method
  - The municipal council calls for referendum by ordinance
- Petition Method
  - Requires the signatures of at least 15% of the municipality's qualified electors
- Another referendum to consider a change in FOG may not be held for another 4-years following the vote

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Who's The Referee?

- Council is responsible for ensuring all of its members play by the rules.
- It is important for council to act as soon as problems arise to prevent a situation from escalating.
- Look to S.C. Attorney General opinions for guidance.

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10. Share the same info with everyone
9. Don't surprise anyone at a meeting
8. Stay in touch with staff contacts
7. Avoid engaging in debates on social media
6. Understand the city's finances

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FIELD SERVICES MANAGERS

TOP TEN TIPS
FROM THE ROAD

5. Build trust with fellow councilmembers
4. Obtain your agenda packet early
3. Actually, read the agenda packet
2. Remember: You're part of a team
1. Celebrate the wins

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Interactive Case Studies

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Case Study #1

The City of Civility has just experienced major flooding on Main Street and some residential areas. Residents are demanding immediate action. The mayor holds a press conference promising emergency repairs. A council member does a "Facebook Live" blaming the city for not being more proactive. Confusion spreads among departments heads and residents.

❑ Who holds the executive authority in this situation?
❑ What are the risks of role confusion during a crisis?
❑ How could clearer structure and communication have helped?

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Case Study #2

The City of Collaboration is facing a budget shortfall. The finance director proposes cuts to recreation programs. The mayor wants to protect public safety funding. Other council members want to increase utility fees instead. Residents are angry, and staff morale is dropping. Who decides what?

❑ Who drives the budget process under each form of government?
❑ What role should staff play in presenting options versus making recommendations?
❑ How do politics and governance impact difficult financial decisions?

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