

# Understanding Government: State to Local Power Explained

In Maryland, local government plays a direct and powerful role in shaping the quality of life for its residents. From funding public schools and maintaining roads to managing public safety, parks, and libraries, decisions made at the county and municipal level affect daily life in immediate and tangible ways. Understanding how local government works empowers citizens to participate in these decisions, whether by voting in local elections, attending public meetings, or communicating with elected officials. Because Maryland's system of government grants significant authority to counties and municipalities, informed residents have a unique opportunity to influence policies that impact their neighborhoods, property taxes, community development, and essential public services.

Local government in Maryland operates through a combination of elected bodies—such as county councils, commissioners, and mayors—and various boards, agencies, and departments. Each plays a specific role in shaping policies and enforcing laws at the local level. By learning how these systems function, residents can better navigate processes like zoning changes, budget allocations, and public hearings.

This knowledge not only makes civic participation more effective but also helps ensure government accountability and responsiveness to community needs. In a state with diverse counties ranging from rural to urban, understanding local governance is essential for advocating for your community's priorities and making sure your voice is heard where it can matter most.

The Maryland Constitution was adopted in 1776, during the American Revolution, shortly after the Declaration of Independence. Maryland became an independent state, moving away from British colonial rule. Read on to see how Maryland Government is structured.

Click here to read: [The Maryland Constitution](#)

## Maryland State Government

The Maryland Constitution established a **bicameral legislature**, with a Senate and House of Delegates. It included a Declaration of Rights.

Three significant changes were made during 1851, 1864, and 1876 (Current). The current version was adopted in reaction to changes made in 1864, during the American Civil War.

The current Maryland Constitution provides for three branches of government: Executive (Governor), Legislative (General Assembly), and Judicial (Court of Appeals and others).

It places a strong emphasis on **county home rule**, allowing counties significant autonomy.

There have been many efforts in the intervening years to rewrite it completely, but they have failed. Most recently the **1967 Constitutional Convention**, which voters rejected.

## Maryland State Government Power Structure

### I. Executive Branch

#### *Governor*

- Chief executive of the state
- Enforces state laws
- Proposes the state budget
- Can sign or veto legislation
- Appoints heads of departments and judges (with Senate approval)

#### *Lieutenant Governor*

- Elected on the same ticket as the Governor
- Performs duties delegated by the Governor

### *Executive Departments and Agencies*

- Carry out policies and programs (e.g., Department of Health, Department of Education, etc.)

### *Attorney General*

- Chief legal officer of the state
- Represents Maryland in legal matters

### *Comptroller*

- Chief financial officer
- Oversees tax collection and state revenue

### *Treasurer*

- Manages state investments and debt
- Selected by the General Assembly

## II. Legislative Branch (General Assembly)

### Bicameral Legislature

#### *Senate (47 members)*

- Approves gubernatorial appointments
- Elected every 4 years

#### *House of Delegates (141 members)*

- Introduces and passes laws
- Elected every 4 years

### *Powers and Responsibilities*

- Passes state laws
- Approves the state budget
- Has the power to override gubernatorial vetoes (3/5 majority)
- Can impeach state officials

## III. Judicial Branch

### *Court of Appeals (Supreme Court of Maryland)*

- Highest court in the state
- Handles appeals and constitutional issues

### *Appellate Court of Maryland*

- Intermediate appellate court

### *Circuit Courts*

- Trial courts for serious civil and criminal cases

### *District Courts*

- Handle minor cases, such as traffic violations and small claims

### *Judicial Selection*

- Judges are appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the Senate
- Subject to retention elections

Understanding Maryland's government structure means you now know which level of government—and which official—has the authority to address your concern.

## **Government at the County Level in Maryland**

Carroll County, Baltimore County, and Howard County each have distinct local power structures that shape how decisions are made, and services are delivered, yet all operate within Maryland's broader framework of county government.

Understanding these connections—between elected officials, administrative departments, and advisory boards—is essential for navigating how policies are developed and implemented in your community. Knowing who holds decision-making authority, whether it's on a State level or county level, enables residents to effectively address concerns and advocate for change.

## **Carroll County, Maryland**

Carroll County's government can be seen as a "power pyramid," with different branches responsible for different aspects of governance. Carroll County is a **non-home rule** county, meaning it does not operate under a charter. Instead, under **Dillon's Rule**, the county only has powers explicitly granted by the state. Carroll County is governed by an elected five-member Board of County Commissioners.

## Board of County Commissioners

- Serves as both the legislative and executive branch.
- Five elected commissioners, each representing a district.
- Responsibilities:
  - Make legislative and executive policy decisions affecting county agencies.
  - Set the tax levy and oversee the county budget.
  - Provide leadership, define policy, and enact community programs.
  - Oversee daily operations, assisted by an administrative office.

## Contact Information

- Commissioner Joe Vigliotti – District 1 | [jvigliotti@carrollcountymd.gov](mailto:jvigliotti@carrollcountymd.gov)
- Commissioner Kenneth Kiler – District 2 | [kkiler@carrollcountymd.gov](mailto:kkiler@carrollcountymd.gov)
- Commissioner Tom Gordon III – District 3 | [tgordon@carrollcountymd.gov](mailto:tgordon@carrollcountymd.gov)
- Commissioner Guerin – District 4 | [mguerin@carrollcountymd.gov](mailto:mguerin@carrollcountymd.gov)
- Carroll County Office Building | 225 North Center Street, Westminster, MD 21157 | Phone: 410-386-2043

## Local Municipalities & Public Participation

- Municipalities within Carroll include Westminster, Taneytown, Hampstead, and others.

- Each has its own mayor and council but remains affected by county-level policy.
- Public participation opportunities include hearings, advisory boards, and submitting public comments.

## **Baltimore County, Maryland**

Baltimore County operates under a **Charter Government** with an **Executive–Council model**. Authority is divided between the elected County Executive and a seven-member County Council.

### County Executive

- Chief executive officer; elected to a four-year term.
- Manages the executive branch and presents the county budget.
- Can veto legislation (subject to Council override).
- Appoints department heads and board/commission members.

### County Council

- Seven members, one from each district (four-year terms).
- Serves as legislative body; adopts annual budget.
- Can override the County Executive’s veto with a five-member vote.
- The County is transitioning from 7 to 9 Districts.

### Departments and Agencies

- Operate under the executive branch and provide various services to county residents.
- Heads of departments are appointed by the County Executive.

### Boards and Commissions

- These entities, as with the Board of Appeals and the Planning Board, play advisory, regulatory, or adjudicatory roles in specific areas.
- Members are appointed, often subject to County Council approval.

The County Executive enforces laws and runs operations; the County Council makes laws and budgets. This system ensures checks and balances.

## Howard County, Maryland

Howard County is also a **Charter County** with a two-branch structure: Executive and Legislative.

Here's a breakdown of the power structure:

### County Executive

- Elected to a four-year term.
- Proposes/administers the budget, carries out legislative policies, and addresses resident concerns.
- Assisted by the County Administration.

### County Administration

- Fosters interdepartmental coordination and provides support for efficient government operations.
- Enacts laws, authorizes budgets, and provides constituent services.
- Also serves as zoning authority and regulates alcohol licensing/enforcement.

### Legislative Branch

- Serves as the legislative body, enacting laws, authorizing budgets, and providing constituent services.
- Council consists of five members, each representing a separate district, and serving four-year terms.
- Council also acts as the zoning authority and the licensing and enforcement authority for alcoholic beverages in the County.