Municipal Government 101

Rhode Island is made up of 39 municipalities; there are 8 cities and 31 towns. Rhode Island and Connecticut are the only states that do not have additional county-wide government bodies. Rhode Island has a municipal government system, which means that each city and town can propose and enact their own ordinances. This information is also available at www.riaclu.org/municipalGov101.

1) Government Structure: City/Town Councils

In Rhode Island, municipalities have either a **city or town council** made up of elected officials.

In some places, councils are elected by, and represent, voters in **wards** (equivalent to districts at the state level). Alternatively, the members are **"at-large"** and are elected and represent voters across the whole municipality. Councilors also serve on **committees** and **approve municipal budgets**.

Municipalities also often have an **elected mayor** or **appointed town administrators or managers**. Mayors have the power to veto council ordinances, but councils can override a veto with a supermajority (often two-thirds) vote. Town administrators or managers are appointed by the Council, and act only as the municipality's chief administrator without legislative power.

2) How Laws are Made: Ordinances and Resolutions

Municipal governments pass laws by way of **ordinances or resolutions.** Both are legally binding, but ordinances are considered more powerful. Like legislation at the state and federal level, ordinances are introduced, discussed, and voted on.

3) Public Comment

During public comment periods, you can voice your opinion. Depending on your municipality, public comment periods could happen at the beginning, middle, or end of the meeting, or some combination. Public comment periods happen every meeting and are different than a public hearing. Public hearings are a specifically scheduled discussion time about a proposed ordinance, resolution, or vote.

Tip: **Check the public comment rules of your municipality before attending a council hearing.** You may be required to sign up in advance, or at the beginning of the meeting, to speak during the public comment period. Some councils also allow remote participation by the public. Instructions on speaking may appear on the meeting agenda itself.

4) How Ordinances are Passed: "Readings"

Ordinances are often considered **twice** before they are formally voted on. This means ordinances can take weeks to months to pass.

- **"First reading":** When the ordinance is formally introduced and discussed among the council and the public. After a first reading, the proposal may be assigned to a council committee for review where the public may have an opportunity to comment.
- **"Second reading":** When the council deliberates on the ordinance and votes on it.

5) How to Find Council Information

While municipality rules vary, councils are required to post notice of meetings, agendas, and meeting minutes. The Secretary of State's website (www.opengov.sos.ri.gov/openmeetings) has information about meeting dates and agendas. You can also sign up on that website to receive advance notice of your council's meetings.

To find your city or town councilmembers' contact information, go to your city or town's website, call your city or town clerk for information, or go to the Secretary of State's municipal directory.

6) How and When to Take Action

You are a constituent of your elected officials, and **your voice matters**. You can contact them via phone, mail or email to express your views.

- **Before a meeting** you can contact your councilors about specific agenda items.
- **At public hearings** you can speak directly to the council to share your opinion or personal experience, and urge them to take a specific action.
- **After a vote** you can thank your councilor(s) for listening to your views, or urge them to vote differently in the future.

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