

How Much is Too Much Local Government?

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Illinois tops the charts when it comes to number of local units of government. According to the U.S. Census of Governments, that number is 6,918. Coming in second place with 5,148 units is Texas. Rounding out the top five are Pennsylvania, California and Ohio.

Counties, townships, school districts and community college districts are among the local government units easily found across the state. It's also common to live in an area served by a municipality, fire protection district and library and park and recreation districts, just to name a few.

As a result of this high density, many Illinois' residents have six or more layers of government serving their local area. That can translate to less transparency and engagement. That number also impacts property taxes.

Cook County is home to between 99 and 543 governmental units. Cook County along with the counties of Bureau, Champaign, Christian, DuPage, Fulton, Henry, Iroquois, Kane, Kankakee, Lake, LaSalle, McHenry, McLean, Madison, Sangamon, St. Clair, Vermillion, and Will are home to the most units of local government in all of Illinois.

Local government is largely funded by property taxes. It's reasonable to assume funding so many units of government can drive up property taxes. In some cases, that's true. However, there are situations where the unit of government closest to the service can meet citizen needs more efficiently and with less cost than a more remote unit.

Township government can be a good example of this. At the township level, many services are performed by part-time or volunteer officials. Performing those same services using county officials would likely come with a higher price tag.

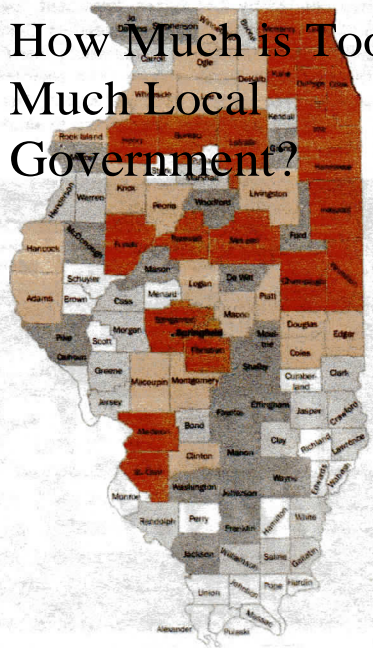
The lack of visibility into government at the local level is also concerning. Even though it's considered the closest to the people, local government's multiple layers and sprawling structure make it difficult for residents and the media to track. In fact, the average citizen is likely more familiar with state and federal

government activities. On the flip side, talking to a local official might be as easy as knocking on your neighbor's door.

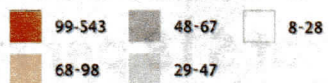
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Census of Governments
The Many Layers of Illinois
Local Government

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Number of Local Governments



U.S. Census Bureau | U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration

Prepared by the Geography Division