

ABOUT THE COUNTY BOARD

Primary Duties

The Illinois Constitution mandates that a county board be elected in each county. The number of members of the county board are set by ordinance in each county with limitations provided by law. Counties with township organization may see boards between 5 and 29 members, while counties under commission form are governed by a 3 or 5 member board. Voters can establish whether county board members will be selected at large, from single member, or multi-member districts. However, the number of members and the number of districts is decided by the county board, not the voters.

The county board is the legislative branch of county government. As a legislative body, the board enacts ordinances and resolutions that can apply



The office of county board member cannot be eliminated by referendum, as the office is mandated by constitution.

either to the county as a region, including the cities within it, or specifically to the unincorporated area of the county. As the governing body, the county board adopts an annual budget for the county, establishes tax rates, and authorizes bond issues, subject to voter approval. In a quasi-judicial role, the board reviews zoning, planning and land use matters and considers appeals in granting or denying certain permits and licenses. The county board is also empowered to establish and control special districts to provide services in unincorporated areas of the county. In order to effectively supervise operations of the county, the board elects a chairman from its membership who serves as the head of the county government. The chairman facilitates the operations of the county board and the other departments of the county.

Most county boards are organized into committees with members appointed by the chairman. This allows each member to develop greater expertise on a set of issues than would be possible if the whole board dealt with all the details. How the committees are organized and how members are assigned to them varies depending upon the size of the board and the form of the county government. In most instances, the chairman of each committee reports to the full board on the operations of the departments with which they deal. Some of the more standard committees include:

Executive Committee acts in an advisory capacity to all standing committees and is usually composed of the chair of all committees. **Judicial Committee** reviews all matters related to law enforcement, including public safety, criminal justice and the county corrections facilities. **Land Use Committee or Zoning and Building Committee** recommends and enforces all of the county's zoning ordinances and regulations. **Legislative Committee** is responsible for monitoring, reviewing and recommending positions on state and federal legislation impacting local governments. **Transportation Committee** reviews all matters that involve the construction of county highways. It considers and makes recommendations relating to the maintenance and improvement of public road and bridge systems.

Training

The office of county board and county commissioner is open to lay persons. Because of the extent of control which a county board exercises and the diversity of responsibilities associated with the office, board members must remain alert to all issues relative to the county and local governments. Board members must continually review state and federal legislation, technology, and finances to increase the effectiveness of the county. Board members need to have a clear understanding of the Illinois Constitution, the Counties Code, the Illinois Open Meetings Act and the Illinois Freedom of Information Act. A good working knowledge of the rules of parliamentary procedure are also required.

Term

Every ten years, the county board in counties under township form, reapportion the county so that each member represents an equal number of residents. Since county boards are reapportioned every ten years, the length of terms are staggered (four, four, two years or two, four, four years). County commissioners serve rotating six-year terms.

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Major functions of county boards and commissions

Counties' governmental and service functions are broken into two broad categories: (1) functions that are mandated by state law or constitution, and (2) optional, or discretionary, functions that counties may choose to perform or not to perform. The second category is much more extensive than the first.

Mandatory Functions:

- Elect a chairman to conduct meetings, hold meetings at prescribed times, and publish a report of each meeting.
- Furnish space, fixtures, fittings and other necessary equipment for county offices. This includes providing a courthouse, a jail, and other buildings necessary for the operation of the courts and other county administrative offices.
- Adopt an annual budget that appropriates funds to cover expenditures for various county offices and functions. Included in the overall budgeting responsibility is the obligation to prepare an annual financial report.
- Evaluate all claims made on county funds, and prosecute or defend lawsuits brought by or against the county and any officers thereof. In the event that a lawsuit results in a judgment against the county or one of its officers, the board or commission is responsible for paying any damage awarded by the court.

Discretionary Functions:

- May assume general management responsibility for obtaining and administering federal funds, for levying and collecting taxes on real property and on the sale of goods and services, and for issuing bonds to provide funds for acquisition or construction of capital equipment projects.
- Have broad discretionary authority in the area of public and environmental health and safety. The county board may act as a board of health or establish a health department; provide for various emergency services; make available clinics, hospitals and shelters; and engage in environmental health activities.
- May engage in land use planning and zoning, including participating in regional planning, and may regulate in the area of building and safety codes, building permits, and subdivisions regulations.
- May provide public parks and open spaces, museums, historic preservation activities, county libraries, county fairs, and funding of soil and crop improvement associations.



Reporters are a conduit to the public at large. County board members should develop a professional relationship with the local media to keep citizens informed of decisions.

- May provide social services, including making grants to community action agencies and providing services for youth, the aging, the mentally deficient, and neglected or delinquent children. Many counties in Illinois have provided funding to establish veterans' assistance agencies.
- Have some authority to engage in emergency services planning, to provide ambulance services, to provide for police and fire communication systems, and to work closely with other public agencies in the provision of emergency services.
- Have extensive power to provide for the construction of highways, roads, bridges, lighting, culverts, etc.; to organize county unit road districts; to establish a road naming or numbering system; to construct and operate parking facilities; and to operate an airport.
- May support the local elections authority with regard to all aspects of the election process: voter registration, fixing election districts and polling places, appointing election judges, providing for balloting boxes, etc.

Discretionary Functions that may fall to the board if there is not an elected county executive:

- May oversee the care and custody of county-owned property, including museums, animal control facilities, waste treatment plants, recreational facilities and sanitary landfills.
- May provide employment procedures, personnel policies, maintenance of property record system, business and economic development, and various types of insurance.