

UNDERSTANDING NEW JERSEY MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT

JERSEY LOCAL 101

Understanding local government in New Jersey can be complex due to the variety of structures and governance models, but a deep dive into every nuance isn't always needed for effective policy work. Instead, a targeted set of questions can offer a practical and efficient way to grasp key elements of local governance, such as power dynamics, accountability, and public engagement.

These questions act as a strategic shortcut for policy makers, advocates, and reformers to quickly understand how decisions are made, who holds influence, and what mechanisms ensure transparency. This guide provides a focused framework for assessing municipal governance, allowing you to identify the distribution of power and opportunities for meaningful civic engagement. By honing in on what drives local decision-making, you can bypass much of the complexity and concentrate on what truly matters for effective reform.

Electoral Structure

01

- Is the municipality governed through a partisan or non-partisan electoral framework?
- Is the mayor directly elected by the public, or is the position selected by the governing committee or council?
- Are the terms of office staggered, or are all members elected simultaneously?
- What is the length of the term for each office, and how does it compare to the term length of the mayor?
- How many seats comprise the governing body of the municipality?
- Are these seats elected at-large, by district, or through a combination of both methods?

Division of Power

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02

- How is authority distributed between the executive (mayor) and the legislative body (council, committee, or commission)?
- Does the mayor possess voting rights, or is their vote limited to instances where they need to break a tie?
- Does the legislative body have the ability to override the mayor's decisions?

Administrative Authority

03

- Does the municipality employ a professional township administrator or equivalent role?
- Who holds the authority to appoint key municipal officers such as the municipal clerk, tax assessor, tax collector, township administrator, and police chief?

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