

What are Authorities, Boards, and Commissions?

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Originally published in the *51 Corridor Community Newspaper*, September 18, 2008

Most people are somewhat familiar with the federal, state, and local levels of government. They know the difference between Pennsylvania and Allegheny County. They know whether they live in Pittsburgh or one of the other municipalities. Most people have heard of authorities, boards, and commissions but aren't very familiar with their background or functions.

The US Constitution provides only for the federal and state governments. It doesn't mention lower levels of government at all. So the states have the power to establish, disband, or merge counties, cities, and other local government bodies. Each state controls its own, but they all operate in pretty much the same way. Local governments have only the powers that the states give them, but the local officials – mayors, commissioners, legislators, and others – can have much input into making decisions. Federal courts established this legal principle in 1872 and the US Supreme Court upheld it in 1907.

While municipal governments are fairly standard – cities, townships, boroughs, etc., - there are also other types of local government bodies. They are school districts, authorities, boards, and commissions. Their purpose is to perform a specific function in municipal society. Since that purpose is usually very expensive, it is separated from the main government so that its finances won't interfere with the taxing or borrowing limits on municipalities. They have limited power to impose taxes and fees on local residents and businesses.

The Pennsylvania Constitution permits the creation of school districts to manage the schools in a particular geographic area. One school district may be composed of a single municipality (like Pittsburgh or Brentwood) or it may cover multiple areas (like Baldwin-Whitehall or Keystone Oaks.) State law requires that members of a school board be elected and that they live in the district that they represent. There are 43 school districts in Allegheny County and 501 in Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvania's Municipality Authorities Act controls most local authorities. Allegheny County's 11 authorities include the Airport, Housing, Port, Sanitary (ALCOSAN), Sports and Exhibition Authorities, and others. A board of directors, usually appointed by local government officials, governs authorities. An executive director and other staff manage daily operations.

Allegheny County also has 43 other boards, commissions, and committees including the Regional Assets District Board, the Parks and Recreation Commission, the Property Assessment Appeals and Review Board, the Area Agency on Aging Advisory Council, and the Jail Oversight Board. Each organization's by-laws describe the qualifications and appointment procedures of its members. The members usually have some expertise or special interest in the subject area. Some of these organizations are more active than others. Some simply exist because the law requires it, even though they rarely meet and conduct few activities.

These organizations have governing power only over their own limited special function. For example, the Port Authority managers have no control over Housing Authority operations. Your school board has no authority over your local police department.

You can find detailed information on every authority, board, commission, and committee on Allegheny County's Web site, www.county.allegheny.pa.us/boards.

For more information:

www.county.allegheny.pa.us

www.state.pa.us

www.usa.gov

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