



The Municipality of Anchorage: A Brief Overview

The Municipality of Anchorage is a unified home rule municipality, established in 1975 after a majority of voters in the City of Anchorage and the Greater Anchorage Area Borough (which included Eagle River, Girdwood and Glen Alps) voted to merge. “A home rule municipality is a municipal corporation and political subdivision. It is a city or a borough that has adopted a home rule charter, or it is a unified municipality. A home rule municipality has all legislative powers not prohibited by law or charter.” AS 29.04.010. Anchorage encompasses 1,961.1 square miles and contains 40% of Alaska’s population.

As a home rule municipality Anchorage has a home rule charter, which is essentially a local constitution that contains a Municipal Bill of Rights. Anchorage is governed by an elected Mayor (Executive Branch) and 11-member Assembly (Legislative Branch). Ballot Proposition 12 (AO 2019-82), approved by a majority of voters during the April 7, 2020 municipal election, amended the Charter to require six two-member Assembly districts, which will increase the number of Assembly members to 12. This change will become effective with Assembly reapportionment following the 2020 decennial U.S. Census.

Anchorage has a strong-mayor form of government. A Municipal Manager appointed by the Mayor and confirmed by the Assembly generally runs the day-to-day operations of the city. Some local governments in Alaska have a strong manager form of government, where much of the governing authority rests with an appointed city manager.

The Municipality of Anchorage has a system of checks and balances that is written into its Charter. The Mayor can veto items approved by the Assembly; the Assembly can override the Mayor’s veto with a super-majority of 8 votes. Municipal codes are enacted by ordinance, and the Assembly must approve all ordinances for them to become law. The Assembly by ordinance may adopt by reference a standard code of regulations or a portion of the statutes of the State of Alaska. All ordinances require a public hearing, except that emergency ordinances may be introduced and adopted at the same meeting, upon the affirmative vote of all Assembly members present, or three-fourths of the total membership, whichever is less.

The Assembly has the power of the purse. The Mayor proposes an annual budget; the Assembly must approve and can amend the budget. Public hearings on the budget are required before the Assembly takes final action. The Anchorage School Board approves an annual budget, which is then forwarded to the Assembly for approval. Public hearings are required before the Assembly takes final action on the School District budget. The Assembly may increase or decrease the budget of the School District only as to total amount. If the Assembly fails to approve the School District budget and make the necessary appropriations within the required timeframe, the budget proposal becomes the budget and appropriation for the School District without further Assembly action.

All resolutions reducing or increasing appropriations by more than \$500,000.00 require a public hearing. Resolutions reducing or increasing appropriations in any amount may be subject to a public hearing at the discretion of the Assembly. Resolutions appropriating categorical grants (including donations) or contributions within approved operating budgets, regardless of amount, do not require a public hearing. The Charter requires that all Municipal public meetings must allow “adequate” opportunity for the public to be heard (except for executive sessions).

The Charter's system of checks and balances includes the voters; by initiative the voters may enact a measure by a vote of the people, without Assembly action, and by referendum the voters may vote to repeal an ordinance or resolution, without Assembly action. The sponsors of an initiative or referendum must submit an application for a petition to the Municipal Clerk, on the form provided by the Clerk. Within 10 business days of receiving a completed application the Clerk must verify the sponsors' qualifications, and after consultation with the municipal attorney, determine whether the measure proposed in the application may be submitted to the voters by initiative or referendum, or whether it must be denied. The Clerk's decision to deny an application may be appealed to the Superior Court. Upon certification of an application the Clerk will provide a petition master form to the primary or alternate contact person for the application. The sponsors then have 90 days to have the petition signed by the number of qualified voters equal to ten percent (10%) of the voters who cast ballots in the last regular mayoral election. Initiatives and referendum petitions do not apply to ordinances establishing budgets, fixing mill levies, authorizing the issuance of bonds, or appropriating funds.

The legislative branch of Anchorage's Municipal government encompasses the Assembly, Municipal Clerk's Office, Office of the Ombudsman, and Assembly Counsel's Office. The Board of Ethics, Board of Equalization, Board of Adjustment, Salaries & Emoluments Commission, and the Election Commission are under the legislative branch. The executive branch of government encompasses all other Municipal departments, agencies, and boards and commissions. The Mayor appoints Municipal department and utility directors, subject to confirmation by the Assembly. The directors serve at the pleasure of the Mayor.

The Anchorage Equal Rights Commission is an independent enforcement agency; the Executive Director serves at the pleasure of the Commission, and reports to the Mayor and the Assembly. The Internal Auditor is appointed by the Mayor and confirmed by the Assembly and is responsible to both. The Chief Equity Office is appointed by the Mayor and confirmed by the Assembly and is responsible to both.

The Anchorage Home Rule Charter contains provisions that encourage the input and participation of residents, and a fair and equitable process, including:

1. Municipal Ombudsman: Anchorage's Home Rule Charter mandates that the Municipality have an Ombudsman, and the Charter's Bill of Rights states that the people of Anchorage have the right to the services of an Ombudsman. The Municipal Ombudsman's Office was established "in addition to other remedies or rights of appeal, as an independent, impartial municipal office, readily available to the public, responsible to the Assembly, empowered to investigate the acts of Municipal agencies and the Anchorage School District, and to recommend appropriate changes toward the goals of safeguarding the rights of persons and of promoting higher standards of competency, efficiency, and equity in the provision of municipal services" (AMC Chapter 2.60). The Ombudsman's Office was formally established when enabling legislation was enacted in 1977 (AO 1977-94). The Ombudsman's Office has no enforcement powers; the office offers opinions and makes recommendations. The Assembly, Mayor and departments are not required to follow the recommendations of the Ombudsman's Office but do so in most instances. By code, the Ombudsman's Office cannot inquire into actions of the Mayor, the Assembly, and the School Board.

2. Municipal Boards & Commissions: To maximize public involvement in the local government process, the authors of the Charter mandated a system of boards & commissions. Persons apply to serve on one of the more than 30 city boards & commission; their applications are reviewed, applicants are selected, and the Mayor submits their name(s) to the Assembly for confirmation. Terms of office are generally 3 years. Most boards & commissions are advisory and provide advice and recommendations to the Mayor and the Assembly, although there are several boards and commissions listed under AMC 4.40 that have regulatory and/or adjudicatory powers and duties. Members of boards and commissions are subject to the provisions of the city's ethics code and are not compensated for their service. Applicants to boards & commissions do not have to be U.S. citizens to serve. However, applicants must be residents of Anchorage, and if eligible to vote, a registered voter.

3. Community Councils: Anchorage's system of community councils is another avenue for persons to participate in the local government process. Community councils are independent, nonprofit, voluntary, self-governing associations composed of residents, property owners, business owners, nonprofits, and other entities located within geographical areas (districts) designated by the assembly. Community councils serve in an advisory capacity to the Assembly, the Mayor, and the administration. The councils provide the Mayor and Assembly with an annual list of prioritized capital projects they would like to see implemented in their council districts. Anchorage's community councils are the grassroots of democracy in Anchorage. You do not have to be a U.S. citizen to become a member of a community council, nor do you have to own your home or other real property. The purpose of community councils is to provide a direct and continuing means of participation in the government process and local affairs. Community councils are recognized in the Charter and authorized through AMC 2.40 – Community Councils. The Assembly recognizes each council district by ordinance. *While community councils are not part of local government, they are an important part of the local government process.*

The Federation of Community Councils, Inc. (FCC) is recognized by the U.S. Internal Revenue Service as a 501(c)3 exempt organization and receives the majority of its operating revenue through a grant from the Assembly. The FCC provides services to Anchorage's independent community councils. The FCC is not recognized in the Charter or municipal code; the organization is contracted by the Assembly to provide support to the community councils. The FCC is governed by a board composed of representatives of each community council. There is no statutory relationship between the community councils and the FCC, or between the FCC and the Municipality.

This document was prepared by the Municipal Ombudsman's Office in January 2021, and only provides a brief overview of Anchorage's Municipal government. To learn more about the Municipality of Anchorage and Municipal government, visit www.muni.org. To view Anchorage's Home Rule Charter and Municipal Codes online, visit https://library.municode.com/ak/anchorage/codes/code_of_ordinances