

New York City Government

New York City has a strong mayor-council type government, which means that the mayor is the executive and administrative head of the city, and the council is the policy making body. This model gives more power to the mayor than some other forms of city government. In addition, the City's government is comparatively centralized. That doesn't mean that it's simple. Below are some of the major players in NYC's government, and how they can be relevant to you on a day-to-day basis.

THE CITY CHARTER

By nature, NYC's government is fluid. Because it operates according to the rules set out by the City Charter, and the Charter is subject to periodic review and change, the City's government is not entirely set in stone. The Charter is important because it establishes the authority and responsibilities of elected officials – it determines who does what. The Charter was reviewed very recently. The review was led by the Charter Revision Commission, which was appointed by the Mayor.

Before this last review, it was reviewed in 1989, during which time there were major changes such as the abolition of the Board of Estimate, which used to be responsible for land-use and budget decisions (those powers have been redistributed mostly to the City Council and the Mayor). Since then, one major change has been a decrease in the power of borough presidents, who used to sit on that board.

CITYWIDE OFFICES

New York has three citywide offices: the *Mayor*, the *Public Advocate*, and the *Comptroller*. **The Mayor** is responsible for working with borough presidents to prepare and submit a budget, signing or vetoing all legislation passed by the City Council, and appointing heads of city agencies and departments. One form of Mayoral power that's important to note for our purposes is his ability to appoint people to powerful decision-making boards such as the City Planning Commission and the Landmarks Preservation Commission – both boards that make decisions affecting the character of our neighborhoods.

The Mayor's Office's primary interface with us is the Community Affairs Unit and 311. CAU is designed to act as an intermediary between the Mayor's Office and the community; their representatives are familiar faces at community board meetings, and they coordinate "quality of life" initiatives like graffiti-free NYC. 311 is the non-emergency hotline where you can register complaints, get answers to who-does-what, etc. It can also be a useful organizing tool, say, if you are part of a tenant group making a case against a corrupt landlord, because calls made to 311 become a matter of public record. You can access these statistics through the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications.

The Public Advocate functions as a go-between for people having trouble with city services, reviews and investigates complaints, monitors compliance of city agencies with the City Charter, votes in council in event of a tie, and pursues investigations of city agencies.

In essence, the role of the Public Advocate is to be a voice for the community, but the only way that is possible is if community groups participate and make themselves aware of the services offered by Advocate's office. Additionally, make the Advocate aware of what you're doing. Their constituent services department is set up to handle complaints in a casework fashion but be forewarned – you may be put on hold for a long time. You can also email them, they will get back to you in 7 business days. This may be a better option for those of us who can't stand being on hold!

The Comptroller makes sure that city agencies are performing efficiently, advises the mayor, council, and public advocate on the city's finances, issues financial reports, and maintains the city's bank accounts. The current Comptroller is John Liu.

The Comptroller's *Community Action Center* is another resource for people who are looking to solve problems in their communities. The CAC sponsors events such as Foreclosure Intervention and Homeowner Assistance Clinics. Among the services it provides is assistance to taxpayers involved in disputes with the Department of Finances and the Department of Environmental Protection concerning real estate taxes and water and sewer bills.

THE CITY COUNCIL

The City Council operates as a check on the Mayor's power (ideally). It is composed of 51 members from 51 council districts, and these members also serve on 35 committees, such as consumer affairs, land use, aging, etc. The City Council also approves the city budget. Council Members are elected every four years and are limited to three consecutive terms in office. The Council Speaker, currently Christine Quinn, is a particularly powerful post in New York City Government, as she is responsible for setting the agenda at Council meetings.

Because the City Council has final budget approval powers, and as the budget is the centerpiece of policymaking in government, it is important to keep track of budget priorities and to hold your council member accountable. You can look to the Independent Budget Office or a media source like Gotham Gazette to keep track of these issues. The City Council also has a powerful role to play in Land Use decisions, which can greatly affect our neighborhoods, as they have the power to approve zoning changes, housing and urban renewal plans, community development plans, and the disposition of city-owned property. Each council member has at least one office in their district and an office at 250 Broadway, across from City Hall. The Stated Meetings of the Council are held twice a month at City Hall. Members of the City Council sit on at least three of the standing committees, which convene the initial discussions about proposed legislation and get input from the public and other parts of government. The committees have regular meetings and also hold public hearings on pending legislation – these meetings are a forum for your group to express its opinion. See council.nyc.gov for updates about public hearings.

BOROUGH PRESIDENTS

In addition to the three citywide offices and the City Council, each borough has a borough president. This has been a largely ceremonial position since the Board of Estimate was eliminated. Still, borough presidents do work with the Mayor to prepare the executive budget and to propose budget priorities to the City Council. They are also part of the land use review process and preside over "borough boards," which consist of city council members from that borough along with community board chairs. Additionally, they have a small amount of discretionary funds to use for special projects within their boroughs.

COMMUNITY BOARDS

Community Boards are an important part of a New Yorker's relationship to the City government. Community Boards were developed in the '70's as part of a larger trend towards the decentralization of city government – they were conceived of as a way to give neighborhoods a voice. They are not a lawmaking body, but they do serve an important advisory role and their public meetings are good opportunities for community members to organize and possibly meet representatives from City Agencies and staff of elected officials. The Community Boards consist of up to 50 unsalaried community members who are officially appointed by borough presidents. Half of these members must be recommended by City Council members.

The matters in which community boards have the most say are land use and zoning issues, the City budget, municipal service delivery, and other matters closely related to community welfare (such as traffic or deteriorating housing). Furthermore, community boards can initiate plans for community growth and improvement, and they meet with city agencies to make recommendations in the City's budget process.

CITY AGENCIES

City agencies can be seen as the engines of the city. They carry out city services. Some of the agencies that are most relevant to community groups are the Department of Parks and Recreation, the Department of Sanitation, the Department of Transportation, the Department of Environmental Protection, the Department of Housing Preservation and Development, and the Community Affairs Unit. Each agency has its own office with varying levels of-- staffing and organizational complexity.