

## The History of County Government

The word county is from the French word “conte”. It means the domain of a count. However, the American county, as defined by Webster, is “the largest territorial division for local government within a state...” That definition is based on the Anglo-Saxon county of England dating back to about the time of the Norman Conquest. Counties were brought to America by the colonists and were later established in the central and western parts of the nation by the pioneers as they moved westward.

Early Oregon county governments were very limited in the services they provided. Their primary responsibilities were forest and farm-to-market roads, law enforcement, courts, care for the needy and tax collections. Today, counties face a far more complex task because of the increasing demands of a growing population and diverse society.

Contemporary county government is involved in a wide range of important public services in addition to the traditional services that have always been provided. Today, county government responsibilities include public health, mental health, community corrections, juvenile services, criminal prosecution, hospitals, nursing homes, airports, parks, libraries, land-use planning, building regulations, refuse disposal, elections, air-pollution control, veterans services, economic development, urban renewal, public housing, county fairs, museums, animal control, civil defense, senior services and many others.

Until recently, counties functioned almost exclusively as agents of the state government. Their every activity had to be either authorized or mandated by state law. A 1958 constitutional amendment authorized counties to adopt “home rule” charters. A 1973 state law granted all counties power to exercise broad home rule authority, with or without a charter. As a result, the National Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations identified county government in Oregon as having the highest degree of local discretionary authority of any state in the nation.

Currently, Oregon has three forms of county government:

### Home Rule Counties

A 1958 constitutional amendment authorized counties to adopt “Home rule” charters. Home rule counties write their own charter, and can do whatever their charter allows. Nine Oregon counties have adopted home rule charters. That means voters have the power to adopt and amend their own county government organization.

### General Law Counties

A 1973 state law granted all counties power to exercise broad home rule authority. The general law counties have the ability to write ordinances on any subject not preempted by the state.

### County Court

Years ago, the state authorized some counties to run the juvenile justice and probate courts in their counties. Some of these counties have returned that authority to the state over the years. Four counties maintain the juvenile justice court function. Six retain probate. And three retain both.

Twenty-eight Oregon counties, including the nine with home rule charters, operate under a “Board of Commissioners” with three to five elected members. The other eight, mostly less populated counties are governed by a county court consisting of a county judge and two commissioners.