What Counts as a Municipality in Vermont?

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Introduction

Surprisingly often, VLCT is asked "How many municipalities are there in Vermont?" It seems to be a very simple question, so "It depends" is an unexpected answer. Most people think of a municipality as a geographically defined territory, such as a city or town, that maintains roads, provides services, administers elections, levies taxes, creates and manages budgets, is governed by elected officials, and employs staff. That is all true, but few people know this is only the tip of the municipal iceberg. Before we can count them, we need to define what a municipality is, and that in itself is not easy.

Vermont has many types of municipality. Vermont Statutes Annotated includes a definition of municipality in Title 1 "General Provisions" that serves as a common standard and is the most expansive in Vermont state law:

"Municipality" shall include a city, town, town school district, incorporated school or fire district, or incorporated village, and all other governmental incorporated units. 1 V.S.A. § 126

While the terms city, town, and town school district seem straightforward, the rest invite questions. What is an incorporated school district or an incorporated fire district? Is an incorporated village different from an unincorporated one? What constitutes "all other governmental incorporated units"? Do they include water or wastewater districts, telecommunications districts, regional planning commissions, and solid waste districts? How are any of these related? What are gores?

> [A] great deal of imprecision and arbitrariness went into the creation and development of our municipalities. — D. Gregory Sanford

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It's also important to keep in mind that Vermont laws include different definitions of "municipality" depending on the purpose or subject matter of a title or chapter. Be sure to check the definitions section of the law for clarification. For example, Vermont's Municipal Code of Ethics defines a "municipality" to only mean "any town, village, or city." 24 V.S.A. § 1991(13), whereas a "municipality" for purposes of Vermont's Municipal Regional Planning and Development Law is much broader and includes, "a town, a city, or an incorporated village or an unorganized town or gore." 24 V.S.A. § 4303(12).

To unravel this tangle and attempt to answer these and other questions at a high level, we've compiled information about individual categories, starting with the easiest to identify as municipalities and moving to those of increasing complexity. If you're interested in taking a deeper dive into the messy history and evolution of municipalities, we recommend reading the fascinating "Vermont Municipalities: an Index to their Charters and Special Acts(opens in a new tab)" by former State Archivist D. Gregory Sanford. (Find links to this and the other resources cited here and used in writing this resource at the bottom of this webpage.)

Getting back to counting, let's acknowledge the elephant in the room: What about Vermont's 251 Club(opens in a new tab)? Isn't that the total number of Vermont municipalities? The 251 Club's roots reach back to a 1954 issue of Vermont Life Magazine encouraging visits to the state's organized cities and towns and five "unorganized" towns of Averill, Ferdinand, Glastenbury, Lewis, and Somerset. The club acknowledged that the total number increased to 252 in 2022 when the City of Essex Junction was created, but the club is keeping its original name.

What to make of "All Other Incorporated Units" in 1 V.S.A. § 126? Without a clear definition from the legislature, identifying what is meant by this phrase is somewhat open to interpretation. In the introduction to his 1986 index of the state's municipal charters and special acts, D. Gregory Sanford asserts that the "…problem [of] how to

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define 'municipality'" is unavoidable, saying:

If ... it sound[s] as if a certain amount of imprecision or arbitrariness occurred in compiling the following index, we must plead guilty. In defense we can only argue that a great deal of imprecision and arbitrariness went into the creation and development of our municipalities.

Sanford provides these quirky examples and seeks his audience's "indulgence":

- Dummerston operated for well over a century under the wrong name.
- One village, Peacham, was created under a law that was subsequently declared unconstitutional.
- The towns of Chittenden, Essex, and Washington are not located in the counties that bear the same names.
- The Legislature created two Washington Counties, one of which was in New Hampshire.
- Because the Legislature felt that the Town of Warren (Washington County) did not contain enough land, it granted the town its own gore in Essex County.
- The act changing the name of the town of Wildersburgh to Barre was purportedly introduced as the result of a fist fight.

Given this occasionally chaotic approach to municipal legislation, ...we do not assume that we escaped the occasional errors and omissions that marked earlier efforts. We again beg the reader's indulgence and urge you to notify us of mistakes so we can make the necessary corrections in later editions.

As it was for Mr. Sanford in 1986, so it is with VLCT in 2026: despite our best efforts to compile a complete and accurate count of Vermont's current municipalities, there are certainly still some unknown or missed entities, and some errors may have crept into our assessment. The municipal landscape is continually evolving as new entities are created and existing entities dissolve or merge. We welcome any information you

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would like to share – corrections as well as updates – to help keep our list as accurate as possible. Please send these to Heather Law at hlaw@vlct.org(opens in a new tab).

VLCT's Two Types of Membership for Municipalities(opens in a new tab)

- **Full** – All 247 organized Vermont cities and towns are eligible for full VLCT membership. This membership allows voting privileges at the annual meeting and input on policy development and adoption, as well as access to all League services.

- **Associate** – Available to Vermont public entities that are not cities or towns, including villages, counties, housing authorities, solid waste districts, fire districts, regional planning agencies, communications union districts, and other political subdivisions of the State of Vermont. Associate members are entitled to the same services provided to full members except voting privileges at our annual meeting. More benefit and eligibility information(opens in a new tab).

Categories of Municipality in Vermont

Cities (Organized) = 10

Cities are recognized by the legislature through charters and their organizational details are published in statute: see Title 24 Appendix(opens in a new tab) for the list of chartered cities (atop the other municipal charters). Surprisingly, there is nothing in the law that distinguishes a city from a town or a village or some other municipality other than what a municipality decides to

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call itself in its governance charter. Unlike in other states where a municipality is considered a city because it exceeds a certain threshold in population or geographic size, in Vermont a municipality is a "city" because that's what its voters decided to call it. For example, Vergennes is a city despite being one of the smallest cities in the U.S. – and smaller than some Vermont towns in both population (2,588) and size (2.0 square miles). The one thing all Vermont cities have in common is the word city in their legal names. For more information, see the Vermont State Archive and Records Administration's Vermont's Ten Cities(opens in a new tab) webpage.

Cities = 10

Vermont gained a new city in 2022 when the Village of Essex Junction formally incorporated as the City of Essex Junction. See History of Essex Junction(opens in a new tab) for more information.

Towns (Organized) = 237

A municipal town is a political territory that provides its residents with services, holds elections, collects taxes, and runs the day-to-day operations within the physical boundary of that place. There are 237 organized towns in Vermont. Several have adopted governance charters; see Title 24 Appendix: Municipal Charters(opens in a new tab).

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Unorganized Towns

However, in Vermont, there are named geographic areas called towns (also grants and gores) that do not have independent political structures due to low or no resident population. These may also be considered "municipalities".

There are six unincorporated territories in Essex County (Avery's Gore, Warren Gore, Averill Town, Lewis Town, and Warner's Grant) that ***do*** have a political governance structure and are served and managed by a unique supervisory organization known as the Unified Towns and Gores of Essex County (UTG).* This entity is also considered a municipality but is not defined as a town.

Additionally, there are other named unorganized towns and gores – such as Buel's Gore and the towns of Lewis, Glastenbury, and Somerset – with "supervisors" appointed by the governor. *Title 24 chapter 43 of the Vermont Statutes Annotated*(opens in a new tab). While they're not "municipalities" for purposes of 1 V.S.A. § 126, they are defined as a "municipality" for specific statutory purposes (for example, transportation impact fees in land conservation and development (10 V.S.A. § 6102(opens in a new tab)), retention of ownership of leased lands (24 V.S.A. § 2409(opens in a new tab)), and Payment In Lieu of Taxes payments (32 V.S.A. § 3708(opens in a new tab)). Any residents vote in nearby towns.

- **Municipal Towns = 237**
- **Unified Towns and Gores* = 1**

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*Formerly the Unorganized Towns and Gores of Essex County.

Incorporated Villages = 28

There are two primary types of village in Vermont – incorporated and unincorporated – but only incorporated villages are considered municipalities under 1 V.S.A. 126.

Incorporated Villages

Incorporated villages are a unique form of local government. 24 V.S.A. § 1301 (opens in a new tab). Many villages provide both standard and specialized government services to a subset of town residents (usually in the most densely populated areas). These entities have their own elected officials, host annual meetings, and may collect taxes. They may also enter into agreements with other municipalities to provide services or other governmental and non-governmental bodies. Their citizens are legal voters of both the village and the town where they reside.

Though some incorporated villages provide specialized services for their residents (and occasionally other municipalities), that's not why they were formed. Villages were created to provide residents of population-rich geographic areas with their own governance and service structures to increase those already received from the town.

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Notably, villages can't exist separately from the towns of which they are a part. The Vermont Supreme Court has recognized this relationship, stating "villages have no separate grand lists of their own upon which to assess taxes, nor have they any authority to make such lists". Instead, village taxes "are assessed on that part of the town grand list comprising the taxable polls and property within the village limits". ***Village of Hardwick v. Town of Wolcott***, 98 Vt. 343 (1925)

Furthermore, while there are numerous village corporations that provide utility services (e.g., water, wastewater, stormwater and electric) to their residents, they are not the only entities that have the authority to provide these services. Towns and cities can also form their own corporations for those purposes. See 24 V.S.A. § 3301(opens in a new tab), 24 V.S.A. § 3604 (opens in a new tab), and 30 V.S.A. § 2902(opens in a new tab).

The number of incorporated villages fluctuates. In 2024 the Village of Lyndonville opted to merge with the Town of Lyndon and the Village of Westbury was created. As mentioned above, Essex Junction Village sought and attained cityhood in 2022. There may be more changes coming soon: the Town and Village of Poultney and the Town and Village of Jericho are contemplating respective mergers. For more information on the disappearance of incorporated villages, see the ***Vermont History Journal*** article by Edward T. Howe "Vermont Incorporated Villages: A Vanishing Institution (opens in a new tab)", 73, Winter/Spring 2005, pp 16-39.

Incorporated Villages = 28

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Unincorporated Historic Villages (Historic Districts)

Unincorporated historic villages are territories that have no independent form of government. They are not municipalities. They primarily describe geographic boundaries or town centers that by convention retain their historic names. Citizens of these “hamlets” may vote in one or more towns. An example of this is the small village of Adamant, which used to have an autonomous government, and the geography of which was later divided between the two towns of Calais and East Montpelier. Adamant residents within the village may be citizens of either the Town of Calais or the Town of East Montpelier depending on which side of the town boundary they live on.

School Districts = 130

School districts can either be union municipal, consolidated, or “town” districts (representing schools in one town).

School districts are served by an independent member-based organization called the Vermont School Boards Association (VSBA). While they are municipalities, they are not members of the Vermont League of Cities and Towns (VLCT).

There are four primary types of school district in Vermont, though their actual structures may vary. The purpose of these entities is to provide for the sharing of resources, oversight, and management to save costs and resources. A

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supervisory union oversees the governance of various school districts in a particular region. These regions are generally, but not exclusively, defined by county.

- **Independent school districts** are entities that provide elementary or elementary and middle school to a single town or city.
- **Unified school districts** combine elementary and secondary schools for a single town or city.
- **Union high school or elementary school districts** are primary or secondary schools that serve multiple towns
- **Modified union districts** are combined elementary or secondary school districts serving multiple towns or cities.

School Districts = 130

Fire Districts = 94

Fire districts are quasi-corporate entities that provide services to one or more towns or village areas. The term “fire district” is a bit of a misnomer. While a handful of fire districts do provide fire suppression and rescue or emergency services, most were formed to provide water and/or sewer services for one or more municipalities.

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Fire Districts* = 94

*It is difficult to calculate how many fire districts exist in Vermont because they are not required to submit articles of incorporation to the Secretary of State or file paperwork with any state agency – although some do appear in legislative charters. We have constructed a list from various sources such as the Vermont Fire Academy; VLCT membership rolls; and the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation (VT DEC), as fire districts that provide water or sewer services are required to file permits with DEC.

And the Rest = ?

As former State Archivist Sanford noted, defining some Vermont municipalities is clear, but defining others is not. While some political subdivisions of the state must comply with state laws that also apply to municipalities, they may not in and of themselves be a municipality. Vermont statute definitely lacks clarity on the meaning of the terms "other incorporated governmental units," "political subdivisions of state," "instrumentalities," "public entities," and others.

District Entities

There are several types of district entities in Vermont – union municipal districts; consolidated districts (generally water and/or sewer); and special purpose districts – any of which may or may not be municipalities. The

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corporate and governance structure and regulatory requirements for these organizations is determined by the purpose for which they were created, the geographical relationship of the municipalities involved, the services provided, and the type of corporate structure adopted.

Union Municipal Districts

Union municipal districts (UMDs) are formed by more than one municipality for a specific purpose – typically the provision of a service or set of services (solid waste, school, communications union districts– or for shared oversight of a regional asset.

UMDs are incorporated entities with autonomous governance boards (i.e., a political body with corporate powers) such as a board of directors, commissioners, committees, or trustees that manage the oversight and operations of the district. 24 V.S.A. § 4865(opens in a new tab). Day-to-day operations are generally conducted by an independently elected and/or professionalized staff. Districts manage their own budgets, though they may receive a portion of their revenue from the budgets of member municipalities. Governance charters for UMDs are found in Title 24 Appendix: Municipal Charters(opens in a new tab).

One of the major reasons for forming such districts is that they constitute a separate legal entity from the municipalities that created them. This allows the entity, rather than the municipalities, to have the accountability and autonomy to sue and be sued, hold and convey real and personal estate, employ their own employees, etc., divesting the municipalities of any liability

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exposure associated with the provision of the services.

This is the count we came up with, but there could be more.

- Solid Waste Management Districts = 11
- Communications Union Districts = 10
- Parks and/or Recreation Districts = 6
- Transportation Districts = 1
- Insect/Pest Control Districts= 3

Total Union Municipal Districts: 31

Consolidated Water and Sewer Districts

When two or more adjacent towns enter an agreement to provide water and/or sewer services (and possibly electric services) for their communities, these are known as consolidated districts. Their purpose is to develop, acquire, or improve systems for supplying their communities with potable water or sewage treatment and disposal services. 24 V.S.A. § 3341(opens in a new tab)**.** Oversight is conducted by commissioners, who are elected officers of the participating towns. These entities can set rates and collect fees, but any indebtedness or additional expenses are the financial responsibility of the

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member towns. These entities likely fall under the category of “all other incorporated units” under 1 V.S.A. 126, and their formation is defined in 24 V.S.A. § 3341.

Utility Districts (water, sewer, electric) = 9

Library Districts

Vermont library districts, of which there is only one (Jericho-Underhill Library District), are incorporated public libraries formed by two or more municipalities and served by a board of trustees. These entities are similar in function and form to Union Municipal Districts but are governed by the laws laid down in Title 22 chapter 3(opens in a new tab) of the Vermont Statutes. For more information on Vermont Libraries refer to the Vermont State Libraries publication Laws that govern your work revised.pdf(opens in a new tab).

Library District = 1

Other “Special” Districts

For additional research we have identified a few other novel municipal entities that may or may not be classified as municipalities depending on the statute applied: special assessment districts, special purpose districts, and

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community justice centers (there may be others we missed). Due to ambiguity in the way they are defined and organized, no totals are listed.

Examples:

- Special Assessment or Special Purpose Districts
- Property Assessed Clean Energy Assessment Districts (PACE) 24 V.S.A. §3261(opens in a new tab)
- Other Assessment Districts (Education and Property Taxes) 32 V.S.A. § 5403(opens in a new tab)
- Special Purpose District (Westminter Charter) 24 V.S.A. ch 165, §4(opens in a new tab)
- Regional Economic Development Initiative (REDI Districts) Vermont Laws Act 77 (2017)(opens in a new tab)
- Community Justice Centers 24 V.S.A ch. 58(opens in a new tab)
- Tax Increment Financing Districts 24 V.S.A., ch. 53, subchapter 5(opens in a new tab)

Political Subdivisions of the State

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Vermont state government may form districts, authorities, and 'political subdivisions' as well, that are public entities but not local governments. Examples are regional planning commissions 24 V.S.A. § 4341(opens in a new tab), conservation districts, and emergency services districts, all of which may serve municipalities and have local government representation on their boards but are not municipalities.

Municipal Authorities

There are various types of "authorities" in Vermont. They are generally formed by one or more municipalities to address a significant public health, social, or safety need (such as affordable housing, transportation, or policing services), and they may be municipalities falling under "all other incorporated units" of 1 V.S.A. 126 or elsewhere in statute.

Types of municipal authority:

- Housing = 7 24 V.S.A. § 4003(a)(opens in a new tab)
- Public Safety*= 1 24 V.S.A. ch.9, §3(opens in a new tab)
- Transportation = 1 24 V.S.A. § 5103(opens in a new tab)

Total Municipal Authorities = 11

*In 2018 six out of seven towns and cities in Chittenden County voted to create the Chittenden County Public Safety Authority(opens in a new tab) to

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consolidate emergency dispatch services.

Additional Notes

The Difference Between Founding Land Grant Charters and Legislative Charters

A legislative charter is different from a founding land grant charter. Founding charters created the original physical boundaries of a place, and not all of them became the basis for political entities known as municipalities. For example, the towns of Somerset and Glastenbury, which were disincorporated in 1937(opens in a new tab), are named towns in Vermont that have no independent political governance (and no or very low population) and are instead home to acres of forest land which are overseen by supervisors appointed by the governor.

Title 24 Appendix: Municipal ChartersLegislative or governance charters outline deviations from generally applicable statutory authority; "seek legislative authorization for particular actions";* or codify the formation of new incorporated entities such as villages, union municipal districts, or fire districts. Legislative charters must be approved by the state legislature and codified in statute to take effect. They are included in Title 24 Appendix: Municipal Charters(opens in a new tab).

For more information on the history of municipalities, charters, and political corporations, refer to the Secretary of State's Vermont Archive and Records Administration (VSARA) resources listed in the reference section below.

What is a Gore?

Gores originated as remnants of land leftover from surveying discrepancies.

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Designated Village Centers

While not independent municipalities, village centers are state-designated areas within a town that are eligible for certain tax credits and incentives based on select criteria such as walkability and commercial density. To learn more about Designated Village Centers, visit Village Centers | Agency of Commerce and Community Development.(opens in a new tab)

Solid Waste Management Districts

The most recognizable examples of the union municipal district form of government are the state's solid waste management districts. These organizations typically have a board of supervisors appointed by the district's member municipalities, an appointed clerk, and an appointed treasurer. Most also hire a manager or executive director to oversee operations of the district. The board of supervisors adopts an annual budget and sets fees and rates for district services. In most instances, district expenses are covered by the fees charged for district services, yet union municipal districts are authorized to charge assessments to the member municipalities to offset revenue shortfalls.

Resources for a Deeper Dive

Vermont Municipalities: An Index to their Charters and Special Acts(opens in a new tab), by D. Gregory Sanford for the Vermont Secretary of State (1986)

Vermont municipal charters in state law(opens in a new tab), Vermont General Assembly

Why Do Municipal Charter Proposals Go To the General Assembly?(opens in a new tab), Vermont Secretary of State

List of Incorporated Villages(opens in a new tab), Vermont Secretary of State

Town & Village Mergers(opens in a new tab), Vermont Secretary of State

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Vermont's Ten Cities(opens in a new tab), Vermont Secretary of State

Map of and contact information for Vermont's natural resources conservation districts (opens in a new tab), Vermont Association of Conservation Districts (VACD)

Map of and links to Vermont's eleven regional planning commissions(opens in a new tab), Vermont Association of Planning & Development Agencies (VAPDA)

Directory of Housing Organizations(opens in a new tab), Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development

List of VLCT members, Vermont League of Cities and Towns — available on request

List of Vermont fire departments, Vermont Fire Academy — available on request

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