

Government Terminology

The language of local government

This list of definitions and acronyms provides easy-to-understand explanations of words, phrases, terms and acronyms commonly used in local government that may not be familiar to citizens or newly elected or appointed municipal officials.

A

ad hoc - for a particular purpose, for a limited time

ad valorem tax - a tax levied on the assessed value of real property

affidavit - a written statement made under oath

agenda - an outlined plan of an entire business meeting

amendment - a change or addition that changes the meaning or scope of an original formal document, usually laws or regulations, but can include plans, specifications, contracts, etc.

annexation - the process by which a municipality, upon meeting certain requirements, expands its incorporated limits

appropriation - a sum of money authorized by a legislative body to be spent for a specific purpose

aquifer - an underground bed or stratum of earth, gravel or porous stone that contains water

B

berm - a mound of earth used to shield and buffer uses such as parking areas; also serves to control the direction of water flow and acts as a dam

block - a tract of land bounded by dedicated streets

bond - an interest bearing certificate issued by a government or business, redeemable on a specific date; used as a measure of raising funds for capital improvements

budget (capital) - a spending plan for improvements and acquisitions of significant value and a useful life of more than one year such as buildings, roads, equipment, etc.

budget (operating) - a comprehensive financial plan to sustain municipal operations during a given year, with related explanation

buffer - a strip of land, vegetation and/or opaque wall that sufficiently minimizes the physical or visual intrusion generated by an existing or future use

C

capital improvement - a government acquisition of real property, major construction project, or acquisition of long-lasting, expensive equipment

certificate of participation - financing in which an individual buys a share of the lease revenues of an agreement made by a municipal or governmental entity, rather than the bond being secured by those revenues

certified copy - a certified extract of an official record sealed by the appropriate government official (City Clerk or Deputy Clerk)

chair - the presiding officer

charrette - a creative, intense work session with public workshops & open houses

charter - a written instrument that creates and defines powers, rights and privileges for a specific jurisdiction or organization; a city's constitution

chicane - a traffic-calming device

code - a systematic statement of a body of law given by statutory authority

collective bargaining - negotiations by an organized group to procure an employment agreement for such items as wages, benefits and working conditions

comprehensive plan - the basic foundation for local planning; it lays out a community's vision and priorities, and describes where, how, and in some cases when development will occur

condemnation - the process of taking private property for public use through the power of eminent domain

conflict of interest - a term used in connection with a public official's relationship to matters of private interest or personal gain and on which the official must abstain from voting

consensus - quality or condition of being in mutual agreement

consent agenda - a policy of the governing body to approve, in one motion, routine and/or non-controversial items, as determined prior to the meeting; a Councilmember may request that any item be removed for a separate discussion

contiguous - sharing a common boundary

contingency - an appropriation of funds to handle unexpected events and emergencies that occur during the course of the fiscal year

culvert - a ditch or conduit not incorporated in a closed system that carries drainage water under a driveway, roadway, railroad or pedestrian walk

custodian of records - any authorized person having personal custody, maintenance and control of public records

D

debt service - payments to creditors, primarily the holders of municipal bonds; debt service includes principal, interest, and minor incidentals such as paying agents' fees

development plan - specific guidelines, requirements or policies for planned growth

E

easement - an interest in land owned by another that entitles its holder to a specific limited use

eminent domain - the legal power of a government to expropriate private property for the sake of public necessity

enterprise fund - used to account for operations that provide goods or services to the general public on a user-charge basis

F

findings of fact - determinations from the evidence of a case either by the court or an administrative agency, concerning facts alleged by one party and denied by another

foreclosure - procedure by which property is sold to satisfy a lien

franchise - a privilege granted by government approval to an individual or firm to market goods or services in a particular area, generally for an extended period

franchise fee - a percent of profit to the grantor of the franchise

G

general fund - the general operating fund of the municipality used to account for all financial resources except those required to be accounted for in a special fund

general obligation bond - a financial instrument giving borrowing power to a municipality, based upon the pledging of taxing power to retire the debt and pay interest

I

impact fees - set-aside fees collected from citizens and developers for infrastructure adjustments to the community; monies to be used as the development further impacts the municipality

L

lien - a claim or charge on property for payment of debt, obligation or duty

line item - a specific item or group of similar items defined by detail in a unique account in the financial records; revenue, expenditure and justifications are reviewed, anticipated and appropriated at this level

lis pendens - legal notice that a lawsuit is pending

lot - a portion or parcel of land considered as a legal unit

M

master plan - a comprehensive long-range plan intended to guide the growth and development of a community or region and one that includes analysis, recommendations and

proposals for the community's population, economy, housing, transportation, community facilities and land use

metes and bounds - a method of describing the boundaries of land by direction and distance from a known point of reference

mill - a term used to express the property tax rate

minutes - a written summary of actions taken at a meeting and the vote on each item

municipality - a political unit having corporate status and, usually, powers of self-government

O

ordinance - an enforceable municipal law, statute or regulation that applies to all citizens within that municipality; penalty provisions may apply

P

performance bond - bond from a contractor that guarantees the work/services will be performed in accordance with the contract

planned unit development (PUD) - a device that allows a development to be planned and built as a unit

plat - a map representing a tract of land, showing the boundaries and location of individual properties and streets

public hearing - provides citizens the opportunity to express their position on a specific issue, both pro and con, as mandated either by statute or by order of proper authority after due notice

public meeting - any meeting of a governmental body at which public business is discussed or decided or policy formulated

public record - any record retained by a government body as further defined by statute and open to inspection

Q

quasi-judicial - referring to the actions of a governmental entity in which there are hearings, orders, judgments or other activities similar to those conducted by courts

quorum - the prescribed number of members of any body that must be present to legally transact business; the quorum is a majority of all members unless the bylaws state otherwise

R

resolution - a decision, opinion, policy or directive of a municipality expressed in a formally drafted document and voted upon

revenue bonds - bonds sold for which the principal and interest are payable exclusively from the earnings of a specific revenue source and which do not pledge the property credit or

general tax revenue of a city

revenues - monies received or anticipated by a local government from either tax or non-tax sources

rezone - to change the zoning classification of particular lots or parcels of land

right-of-way - a strip of land owned by a government agency over which the public has right of passage such as streets, parkways, medians, sidewalks, easements and driveways constructed thereon

S

section - a piece of land one square mile in area

site plan - a plan, to scale, showing uses and structures proposed for a parcel of land

sole source - an award for supplies or services without competitive bidding when only one source is available

special assessment district (SAD) - a district where the cost of improvements provided by bond proceeds are assessed against property owners benefited by the improvements

special exception - involves a use that is not permitted outright, but may be permitted, with or without conditions, when approved by City Council

statute - a law enacted by the legislative branch of the state or federal government

subdivision - the division of a single tract or other parcel of land into two or more lots (Specific definitions will vary in specific ordinances or regulations)

sunshine law - legislation providing that all meetings of public bodies shall be open to the public (open public meetings law)

survey - the process by which a parcel of land is measured and its boundaries and contents ascertained

swale - a depression in the ground that channels runoff

T

table - to suspend consideration of a pending legislative bill or measure

tax increment financing - funding from net increases in real property tax revenues within a community redevelopment area established pursuant to state statute

tract - a parcel of land, generally held for subdividing

V

variance - an exception to certain development standards such as setbacks, building height, lot dimensions and other zoning code requirements

Z

zone - a specifically delineated area or district in a municipality within which there are regulations for the use, placement spacing, and size of land and buildings

Acronyms and abbreviations

ADA - Americans with Disabilities Act

ADT - Average Daily Traffic

AG - Attorney General

CAFR - Comprehensive Annual Financial Report

CDBG - Community Development Block Grant

CDD - Community Development District

CERT - Citizens Emergency Response Team

CILB - Construction Industry Licensing Board

CIP - Capital Improvement Program

CMC - Certified Municipal Clerk

CO - Certificate of Occupancy

COBRA - Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act

COP - Certificate of Participation

COPS - Community Oriented Policing Services

CRA - Community Redevelopment Agency

DBPR - Department of Business and Professional Regulations

DCA - Department of Community Affairs

DEP - Department of Environmental Protection

DRI - Development of Regional Impact

DROP - Deferred Retirement Option Plan

DROW - Drainage Right-of-Way

EDC - Economic Development Council

EOC - Emergency Operations Center

EIS - Environmental Impact Statement

EPA - Environmental Protection Agency

ERC - Equivalent Residential Connection

ERU - Equivalent Residential Unit

FDEP - Florida Department of Environmental Protection

FDOT - Florida Department of Transportation

FEMA - Federal Emergency Management Agency

FPUA - Fort Pierce Utility Authority

FRDAP - Florida Recreation Development Assistance Program

GASB - Governmental Accounting Standards Board

GFOA - Governmental Finance Officers Association

GIS - Geographic Information System

GO - General Obligation

HIPAA - Health Insurance Portability & Accountability Act

HUD - Dept. of Housing & Urban Development (federal)

IJR - Interchange Justification Report

ISTEA - Intermodal Surface Transportation & Efficiency Act

JPA - Joint Participation Agreement or Joint Planning Agreement

LAP - Local Agency Program

MIS - Management Information Services

MMC - Master Municipal Clerk

MPA - Metropolitan Planning Area

MPO - Metropolitan Planning Organization

MSA - Municipal Service Area or Metropolitan Statistical Area or Medical Savings Account

MSBU - Municipal Services Benefit Unit

MSTU - Municipal Special Taxing Unit

NPDES - National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System

NRCS - National Resource Conservation Service

OMB - Office of Management & Budget

PD&E - Plan, Design & Engineering Study

PSA - Police Service Aide

PUD - Planned Unit Development

RFI - Request for Information

RFP - Request for Proposal

RFQ - Request for Quote

ROW - Right-of-Way

RPC - Regional Planning Commission

RTC - Resolution Trust Company