

Questions September 17, 2014

If you would like to know more about Georgia and Union County there is a great new website, www.georgiaencyclopedia.org with all kinds of information about Georgia and its counties

Q. How many counties does it take to run a state?

A. According to the website, the first state constitution in 1777 created eight counties: Burke, Camden, Chatham, Effingham, Glynn, Liberty, Richmond, and Wilkes. These were carved out of the coastal areas that were settled when Georgia was a British colony. Since then, each revision of the state constitution has increased the number of counties, until the total reached 159, the limit specified in the Constitution of 1983. Only Texas has more counties than Georgia has. Union County was the 81st county.

Q. Why is it necessary for Georgia to have so many counties?

A. According to anecdotal history, Georgia established enough counties so that a farmer traveling by mule-drawn buggy could go to the county seat, take care of business, and return to his farm in the same day.

Politically, it served Georgians, the majority of whom lived on farms in rural areas, to have smaller counties. Each county originally had one State Representative in the General Assembly, the state's governing body. Moreover, many towns wanted to be a county seat, the location of the courthouse and jail and the center of local political activities, social gatherings, and trade. Having a large number of counties gave Georgians more representation in state government and more business in towns.

Q. What services are counties required to provide?

A. Every county conducts local courts of law, voter registration, and elections; sells motor vehicle tags; files official records of property ownership; builds and repairs county roads; probates wills; and administers welfare and public assistance programs. The 1983 Constitution added supplementary powers to this list of county duties. Counties are allowed to provide:

- Police and fire protection
- Garbage and solid waste collection and disposal
- Public health facilities and services, including hospitals, ambulances, emergency rescue, and animal control
- Street and road construction, including curbs, sidewalks, and street lights
- Parks, recreational areas, facilities, and programs
- Storm-water and sewage collection disposal systems
- Water utilities
- Public housing
- Public transportation
- Libraries, archives, and arts/sciences programs and facilities
- Terminal and dock facilities and parking facilities
- Codes, including building, housing, plumbing, and electrical codes
- Air quality control
- Planning and zoning

Q. At one of the Public Hearings you read from a long list of mandated and supplemental services the county must and can provide according to state law. Can we get a copy of that document?

A. Yes, we have provided that to you on our county website, www.unioncountyga.gov. On the home page on the left hand side you will see "Recent News" and County Services: Mandated and Discretionary. Or you can come by our office and pick up a copy. There are over 70 different services that counties provide to you, as per Georgia Law.

Q. What elected officials are counties required to have?

A. Counties were created by a rural society that looked to government to keep the records straight and the justice swift. To help counties administer state programs and conduct state courts, the state constitution originally created four elected county officers: the sheriff, the tax commissioner, the clerk of the superior court, and the judge of the probate court.

In 1868 the state began creating the position of county commissioner to administer the general operations of the county. Today every county has a commissioner; many have a board of commissioners (BOC). As part of general county operations, the BOC must finance all county programs and pay the salaries of constitutional officers and their office operation cost.

Q. What powers does the BOC (or Sole Commissioner) have?

A. Beyond the powers assigned to the constitutional officers, the commissioner (BOC) is the county governing authority. It has the power to adopt ordinances, resolutions, or regulations relating to county property, county affairs, and the operation of local government. Larger, more urban counties distribute governmental responsibilities among many departments, whereas smaller, more rural counties often employ only a few officials, each of whom serves several functions.