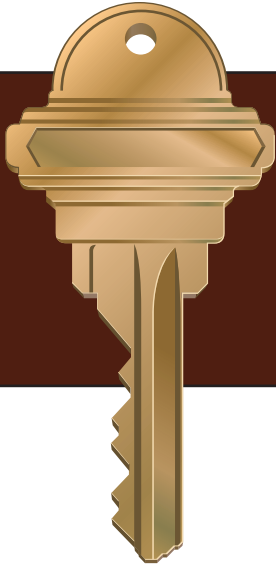


# Chapter 2

## *Primary Services Offered by County Government*



Scurry County Courthouse



## Chapter Two: Primary Services Offered by County Government

Developmental Assets:	4.Caring neighborhood 9. Service to others
Life Skills:	Concern for Others, Contribution to Group Effort
TEKS:	Grade 7, 113.23 (23), use problem-solving and decision-making skills, working independently and with others, in a variety of settings Grade 12, 113.35 (15), understand the difference between personal and civic responsibilities
Objectives:	Students will: -understand the auxiliary services provided by county governments -understand how to access these services to enhance their lives and communities

**M**any county government services are specifically spelled out in state law. For example, counties were established to ensure that justice is administered uniformly and to maintain key public records. But the Texas legislature has granted counties limited authority to provide other discretionary services according to local needs. Over the years, the Texas legislature has expanded county regulatory authority so that counties can address local problems.

In order for counties to function, there must be *revenue* from taxes and from fines, fees and other sources. One of the services a county can provide is attracting new businesses to employ county residents. This, in turn, increases the number of taxpayers. To do this, counties can form *economic* development corporations. These organizations try to attract new industries and businesses, to increase the local tax base and labor force, to pursue new housing developments, and to promote tourism. By providing adequate roads and highways, libraries, parks and other services, counties attract new businesses and industry.

One of the major functions of county government is to build and maintain a network of roads and bridges in unincorporated areas of the county. In many counties, commissioners supervise the roads in their precincts. Some counties hire a supervisor or engineer to plan, construct and maintain county roads. To construct roads, the county may need to acquire land. Sometimes this requires using the power of *eminent domain*, which is the taking of private or public land for a public purpose. This tool is used as a last resort. A county must pay the landowner fair market price for the land taken.

***Revenue—income***

***Economic— relating to business activities***

***Eminent domain— inherent power of the state to take private or public property for a public purpose***

Counties are authorized to provide public parks and other recreational facilities (such as swimming pools and tennis courts) within the county and to promote recreational activities (such as organized athletics, individual participant sports and indoor and outdoor games of various kinds). The goals of a county parks and recreation department might be to provide a high-quality park system for the residents of the county; to develop and maintain regional parks and community centers; to preserve natural and historic resources; and to provide recreational programs and activities for youth, adults and senior citizens.

Counties may also establish library systems to serve the citizens. Counties may administer the public libraries within the county and assist with expansions and special collections. The county library system promotes reading programs for children and adults and may coordinate with other educational, cultural and social groups in the community.

Counties also are responsible for the regulation of wild animals. Texas law requires county governments to either regulate or prohibit the ownership of “dangerous wild animals”—including lions, tigers and bears—and all wild animals. Because most counties have neither the expertise nor the money to regulate the conditions in which wild animals are kept, some counties are choosing to simply ban them. Once animals are declared illegal, their owners are forced to move them, euthanize them, or find them homes at zoos or rescue centers. Counties that take on the responsibility of regulating the ownership of wild animals have the authority to hire a qualified animal control officer or authorize the sheriff as agent-in-charge of inspecting facilities.

Some of Texas’ fastest growing counties contain large unincorporated areas next to major cities. Ranching and farming traditionally have dominated the *unincorporated* areas. In some high-growth counties, county officials have enacted limited authority to regulate property development to encourage orderly growth. A county’s authority to deal with such issues is limited by the Texas Constitution and by state law.

***Unincorporated— not organized into a corporation or municipality***

A Texas county has some responsibility to prepare for and cope with public disasters—both man-made and natural. Each county is required to maintain an emergency management plan. The county’s plan may describe when and how people will be evacuated. It may also include rules for curfews and access to disaster areas, as well as plans for maintaining county services during a disaster. The county judge’s declaration of a disaster puts local emergency plans into effect.

Fire prevention services in a county can be done by the county itself, by a city contracting with the county, by a volunteer fire department, by a rural fire prevention district, or by certain water districts. A volunteer fire department is an association of individuals, sometimes incorporated, who are willing to fight and prevent fires without getting paid. A county can help local departments through state scholarships, grants and loans. Counties can issue burn bans during times of extreme drought and limit the sale or use of fireworks.

Texas counties have the responsibility of ensuring the health and welfare of persons within the county. Counties can establish hospitals to provide health care and collect taxes to pay for county hospitals. Counties can establish Emergency Medical Service districts and set up 9-1-1 Emergency Telephone Systems.

Some counties have medical clinics where people can receive preventive care such as checkups and immunizations, and care for minor illnesses. Like all other county services, the county health department is the local service provider for the state of Texas. Programs like WIC (Women, Infants and Children) may enroll families through the county health department and then provide payments or services from state funds.

One key service provided by counties is the veterans' services office. This office coordinates pensions, loans, transportation and other services for veterans and their families.

A county has to decide where to put trash—either to keep it in the county or pay to ship it to a landfill somewhere else. Some counties operate solid waste departments and provide waste disposal for citizens and businesses throughout the county. The service may also be offered to municipalities within the county. Rather than operating their own solid waste departments, some counties contract with private companies that provide this service. A county enforces laws against the illegal dumping of trash.

The county can operate waste collection stations to serve residents. Waste deposited at the collection stations, along with that collected by the various municipalities and commercial businesses, is disposed of at the landfill. In an effort to protect the environment and reduce cost, many counties have instituted recycling programs that now accept batteries, paper, glass, tires, and used oil and filters and take these items out of the waste stream.

Every day, someone in Texas needs help, from finding an after-school program to getting assistance for an aging parent. But people may not know how to get help. How do you know where to go to get all these county services? In Texas, you can dial 2-1-1 to get connected to all the important community services and volunteer organizations in your area.

The Texas Association of Counties Web site ([www.TexasCounties4U.org](http://www.TexasCounties4U.org)) explains how to access county services and has a directory of local county Internet pages. You'll also find more information about counties at <http://vgyi.tamu.edu>.

Look in the front of the phone directory for emergency numbers in your area. Most phone books also list government offices. Often they will list both county offices and elected officials. Also look in the white pages under the name of your county.

Sometimes friends and neighbors can tell you where to go for help. You can also ask local law enforcement, your county Extension office, or your local library. These people want to help and that is their job. They will give you confidential information and guidance.

Finally, visit your courthouse. Many courthouses have directories to tell you what services are available and where to go to access those services. If you don't find a directory, ask!

# County Services

## **Social Assistance**

*veteran pensions, medical treatment, elderly assistance, welfare programs, temporary emergency relief programs, food stamps, mental health/mental retardation centers, burial of paupers, mothers' aid, probate code-incompetents*

## **Road and Bridge**

*sources of road revenue, public roads, neighborhood roads, drainage, utility lines, road administration, engineer, construction and maintenance, eminent domain for road purposes, traffic regulations, county road districts, road utility districts*

## **Civil Defense**

*Texas Disaster Act, law enforcement and martial law, quarantines, fiscal implications, military zones, state militia*

## **Health Care**

*indigent medical care, county health officer, medical examiner, county hospital, health districts, hospital districts, county mental health care, alcoholism programs, emergency medical services, health facilities developmental corporations*

## **Housing**

*county housing authority, Housing Finance Corporation Act, Housing Rehabilitation Act, federal government cooperation, urban renewal, low income housing corporations, manufactured housing standards*

## **Transportation**

*railroads, airports, transit authorities, Rural and Urban Transit Act, ferries*

## **Fire Protection**

*fire protection and equipment, county fire marshal, county fire code, rural fire prevention districts, volunteer fire departments, fireworks*

## **Education**

*management of school lands as trustee, county school administration, county superintendent of schools, school district boundaries, county junior colleges*

## **Sanitation**

*county sanitary landfill, Solid Waste Disposal Act, recycling, littering and health nuisances, sewerage, septic tanks, water quality, wastewater program, mosquito control districts, junkyards, enforcements*

## **Parks and Libraries**

*general authority, concessions, recreational fees, cemeteries, county fair grounds, county historical commission, sport and community venue districts, libraries, taxing and library districts*

## **Agriculture**

*experimental farms and stations, Extension agents, agricultural development corporations, scales, weights and measures, soil and water conservation districts*

## **Wildlife**

*local and special game laws, registration of dogs, regulation of wild animals, estrays, wildlife conservation, livestock tax*

## **Veterans**

*county service officer, Veterans Land Board committee, burial of veterans, veterans organization tax exemptions*

## **Regulated Entertainment**

*sale of alcohol, mass gatherings, bingo, horse racing, charitable raffles, shooting ranges*

## **Utilities**

*water, placement of utility lines, county natural gas systems*

## **Subdivision and Land Use Controls**

*plat approval, permits, extraterritorial jurisdiction, enforcement of subdivision requirements, mobile home regulations, county lake zoning*

## **County Reclamation**

*constitutional flood control taxation, eminent domain, flood plain zoning, drainage corporations*

## **Water Districts**

*district creation, management of districts, recreational facilities, general law districts, groundwater conservation districts, municipal utility districts*

## **Business and Commerce**

*industrial development corporations, enterprise zones, county board of development, civic centers, antitrust violations, research and development authorities, municipal management*