

The
Citizen's
Handbook

**YOUR COMMON SENSE GUIDE
TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT**



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TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS

Mayor - Randall Woodfin

President - Darrell O'Quinn - District 5

President Pro Tem - Wardine Alexander - District 7

District 1 Clinton Woods

District 2 Hunter Williams

District 3 Valerie Abbott

District 4 J.T. Moore

District 6 Crystal Smitherman

District 8 Carol Clarke

District 9 LaTonya Tate



Dear Citizen,

Welcome to civilization. We're glad to have you here on earth, a planet that is ruled by a multitude of governing bodies, both large and small. This is your tool for understanding how your local government works and how you can help.

At first glance "The Government" can be a tangled and disorienting landscape - permitting, agendas, Robert's Rules of Order, red tape for miles. Who do I talk to about that pothole around the corner that swallowed my Cadillac? And who is Robert?

Think of your mailbox as your tether to "The Government." It connects you to all the representatives you voted for (or didn't) on the local, state and federal level. The politics that influence your life start at your door and balloon outward. You wouldn't call the White House to fix that pothole, or at least you shouldn't. So when it comes to "The Government," think small and you can make a big change.

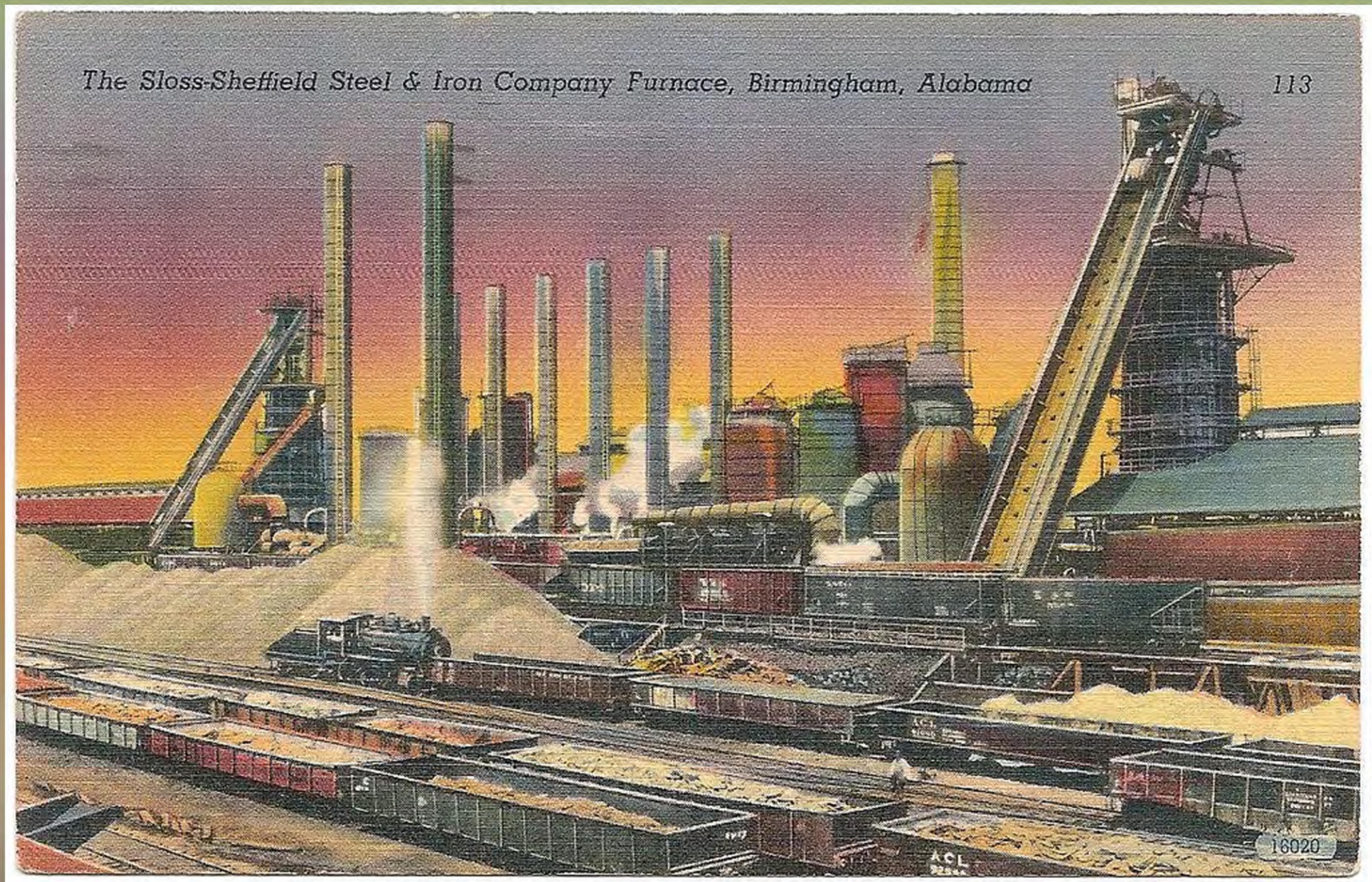
Here's your common sense guide to local government.



THIRTY SECOND HISTORY LESSON

In 1871, Birmingham sprang to life as the entire country tried to piece itself back together following the Civil War. It's known as the South's Reconstruction era. The population boomed and in the 1890s, Birmingham became an industrial center in the South thanks to the rich mineral seam under Red Mountain. The growth happened so quickly Birmingham earned the nickname The Magic City.

After being governed by a revolving door of mayors for nearly 40 years, in 1910 the city switched to a three-member commission system. In 1962, voters passed a referendum adopting the Mayor-Council Act, and we're still rocking that today.



Vintage postcard of Sloss Furnaces

Did You Know?

Birmingham is the only place in the world where the raw ingredients to make Steel (Limestone, Iron Ore and Coal) are located naturally within a ten mile radius.



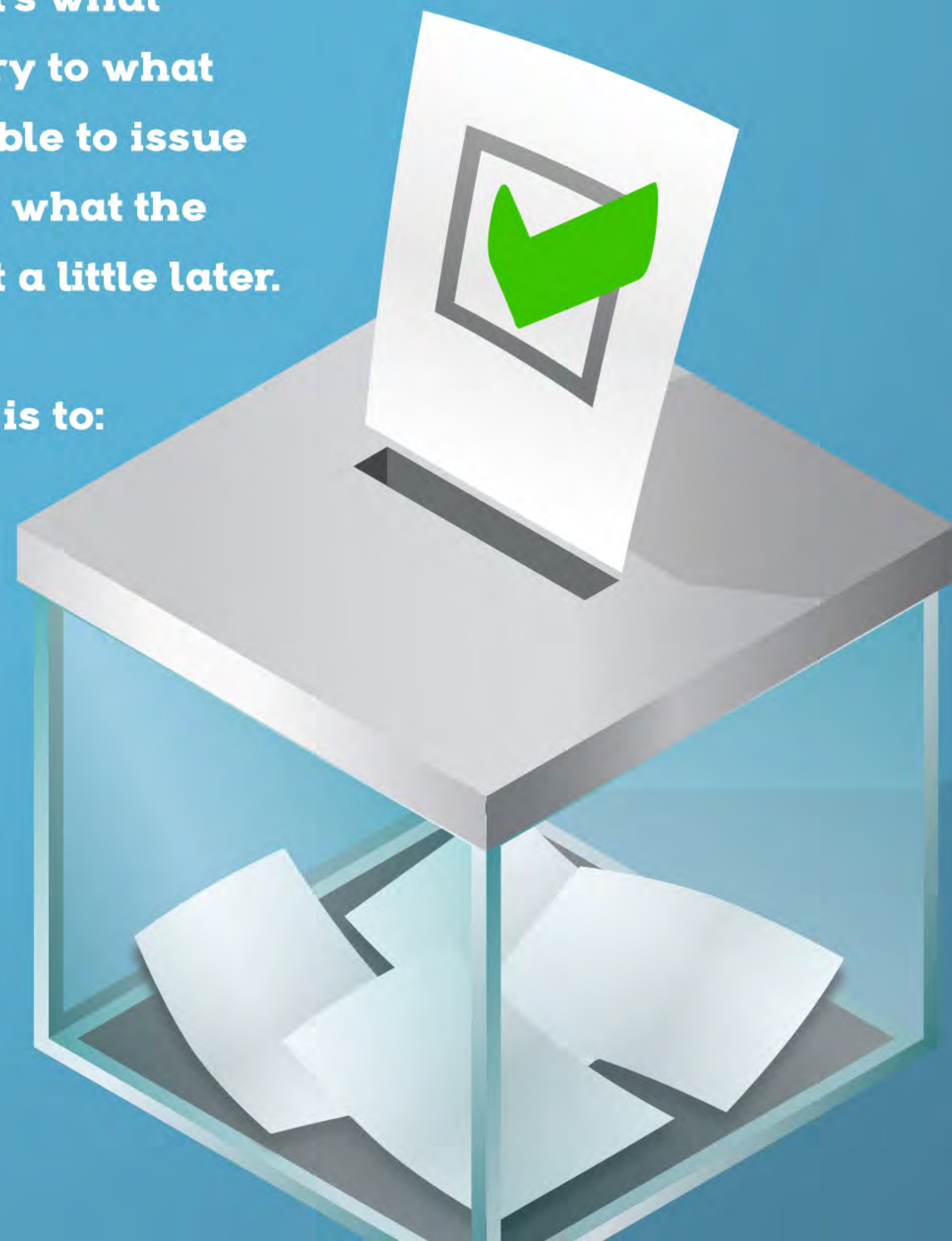
MAYOR COUNCIL ACT

The good people of Birmingham's nine districts elect a City Councilor to represent their community's best interests. The City Council is the legislative body of Birmingham -- imagine them as Birmingham's own little version of Congress, but much more approachable and non-partisan. No one runs for a city office as a Republican or Democrat.

Sometimes people come to speak at the City Council meetings and give their representatives a piece of their mind -- often with impassioned speeches that would make our Founding Fathers tip their caps in admiration. And that's what democracy is all about, y'all! Contrary to what some may think, the Council is not able to issue directives to city departments. That's what the Mayor does. But we'll get into all that a little later.

Above all else, the Council's mission is to:

- Legislate**
- Advocate**
- Pass a Balanced Budget**
- Appoint Members to Boards and Agencies.**



The City of Birmingham provides many opportunities for citizens to get involved with public service. The City Council and Mayor's Office regularly appoint members to the City's many boards and agencies, which help recommend items covering every area of life and business in Birmingham. The applications are always open to the public, and vacancies are regularly announced on the City's Boards and Agencies online portal

www.birminghamal.gov/boards-and-agencies

Every two years, a City Council President and President Pro Tem are elected by a majority of the nine Councilors. The President is the person who keeps the meetings moving and makes sure everyone has an opportunity to speak. Imagine your local Government as a space ship, orbiting around all the other planets that make up our universe. The Council President would be like Mission Control, helping guide the crew of the space ship in the right direction. Because let's face it, there are a lot of distractions out there in space and someone needs to keep everyone working together - To Infinity And Beyond!





The President also has the responsibility of appointing members and a chairperson to oversee to the 11 committees within the City Council. These committees discuss, debate and vet the ordinances, contracts, and other items that are slated to come before the full Council. Think of the committees as an entry point for future legislation. The three members in each committee vote to either recommend or not recommend the item; they don't have the power to "kill a bill."

An illustration featuring several hands of different skin tones pointing towards the center of the page. The hands are positioned around the perimeter, with some pointing directly at the text and others pointing towards the center. The background is white with yellow diagonal stripes. There are also icons of coffee cups, glasses, a watch, and a pen scattered around the text.

City Council Committees



Administration Committee

The Administration/Education Committee makes recommendations to the full Council regarding the City Council's personnel, and receives updates from Birmingham City Schools and the Birmingham Public Library.



Budget and Finance Committee

The Budget and Finance Committee makes recommendations to the full Council on matters pertaining to budget and taxing ordinances, public revenue, bonds, tax officials and collectors, Department of Finance and licensing and pension funds.



Committee of the Whole

The Committee of the Whole is comprised of the entire membership of the City Council convened by the President of the Council to discuss items of general interest. At the conclusion of its deliberations the Committee of the Whole reports its recommendations.



Economic Development & Tourism

makes recommendations to the Council for appointments to various Boards including; Industrial Development Board, Birmingham Trade Mart Authority and more.



Education Committee

The Education Committee makes recommendations for appointments to the Library Board, Citizen Participation Election Contest Committee, Jefferson County Department of Human Resources Board, Educational Building Authority and more



Governmental Affairs and Public Information Committee

The Governmental Affairs and Public Information Committee makes recommendations to the full Council regarding legislative policies to enhance the city's overall productivity .



Parks and Recreation Committee

The Park and Recreation Committee makes recommendations to the full Council for matters regarding Birmingham's parks and recreation facilities.



Planning and Zoning Committee

The Planning & Zoning Committee makes recommendations to the full Council related to zoning, planning functions, comprehensive development and land use plans.



CENSUS 2020 Redistricting Committee



Public Improvements Committee

The Public Improvements and Beautification Committee makes recommendations to the full Council on issues that affect: condemnation or demolition of dilapidated structures, engineering projects, inspection services, street and sanitation matters, and landfills.



Public Safety Committee

The Public Safety Committee makes recommendations to the full Council regarding public safety, which includes: Liquor license applications, Birmingham Police Department, Birmingham Fire Department and Emergency Management.



Transportation Committee

The Transportation Committee makes recommendations to the full Council on matters pertaining to transportation, generally; airport and aviation; traffic engineering; parking facilities, and the Birmingham Transit Authority.



Utilities/Technology Committee

The Utilities/Technology Committee reviews constituents' complaints relative to existing utilities within the city limits and coordinates with utilities liaisons to bring about solutions.

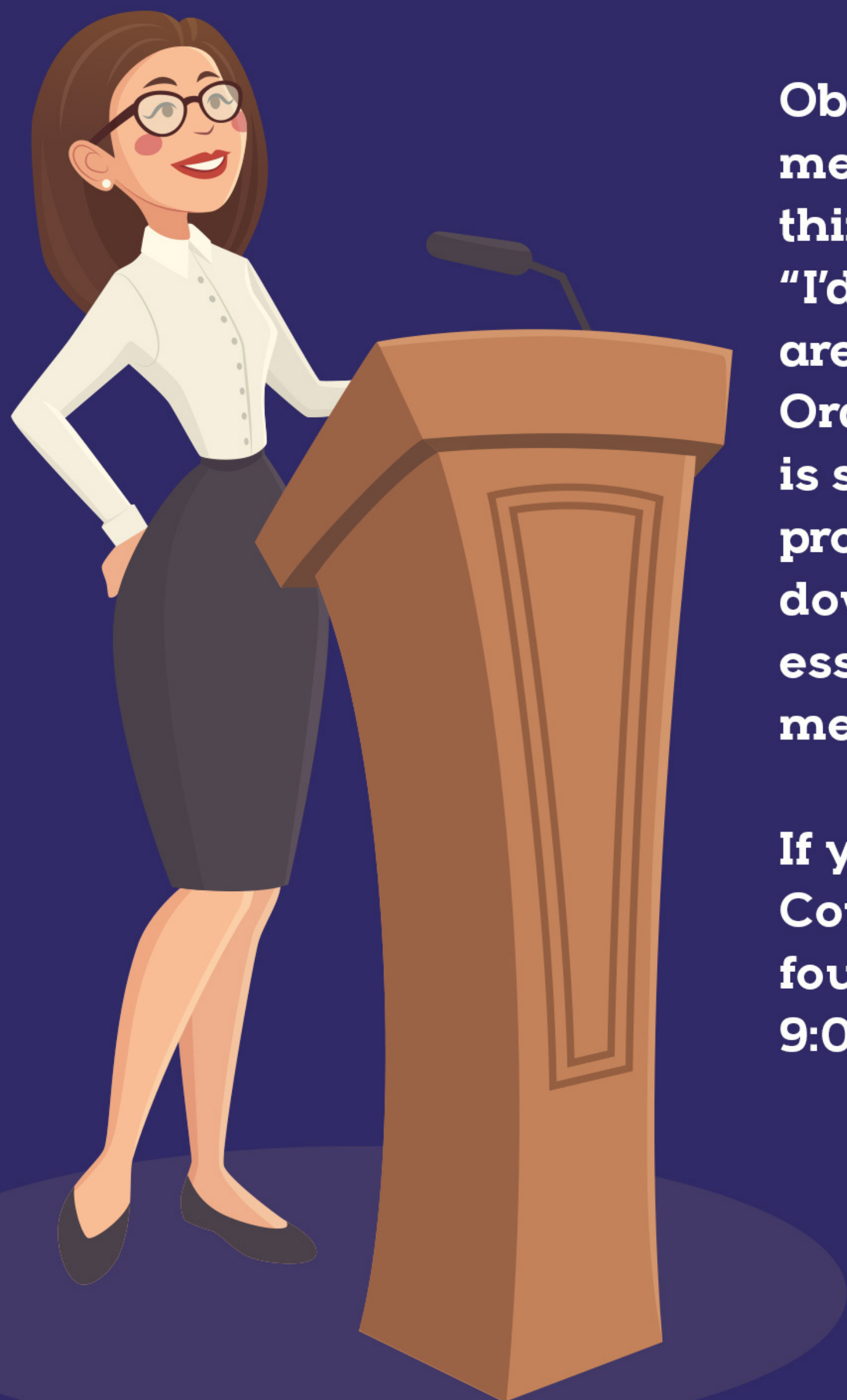


CITY COUNCIL MEETINGS

Typically, most of the agenda items are labeled as “Consent” meaning they are non-controversial and there is no need to discuss them at length. Basically it’s the way the City Council streamlines their business. Each Councilor is given the opportunity to add or remove items from the Consent agenda as they deem necessary.

In order for a meeting to begin, there must first be a quorum -- five of the nine councilors must be present for this to happen and at no point should fewer than five Councilors be on the dais (where they sit) once a meeting is called to order.

PUBLIC MEETINGS



Observers of any kind of municipal meeting may have, at some point, heard things like “I’d like to make a motion,” or “I’d move for us to table this item.” These are fundamentals of Robert’s Rules of Order, a book first published in 1876 that is still a road map to parliamentary proceedings. We won’t get too bogged down with the specifics, but it’s essentially the rulebook for how public meetings are held.

If you want to come speak at the City Council meetings, a sign in sheet can be found outside the Council Chambers at 9:00 a.m. sharp.

An illustration of a city park scene. In the foreground, a wooden park bench sits on a paved path. To the left of the bench is a large, rounded green tree with a brown trunk. To the right is a smaller, rounded green bush. In the background, several stylized city buildings of various heights and colors (teal, blue, grey) are visible under a light teal sky with soft, white clouds. A street lamp with a yellow globe is positioned to the right of the bench. The overall style is flat and modern.

NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATIONS

No matter where you step foot in Birmingham, you'll find yourself in one of Birmingham's 99 neighborhoods. Every square inch of Birmingham is in a neighborhood, and each of those neighborhoods has an elected group of leaders who help advocate for the best interests of their fellow neighbors, and lead their monthly Neighborhood Association Meeting.

Each of Birmingham's 99 Neighborhood Associations has received money from the City for over 40 years, and is able to vote on projects it wants to spend its money on.

The Neighborhood Associations serve an important role in making sure the types of businesses, events, and developments that seek to locate in a particular neighborhood are in lined up with the character of the neighborhood, and with the desires of those who live there.





Additionally, Birmingham's 99 Neighborhoods are split among 23 Communities. Each Community also has elected leadership, and the Presidents of the 23 Communities get together once a month at the Citizens' Advisory Board. At that meeting, the 23 Community Presidents decide on the things they want to advocate for, and bring their ideas to the Birmingham City Council.

There are 99 Neighborhood Associations that meet once a month. These meetings are as close as Democracy comes to your door. Don't want that empty lot across from your house rezoned for a nuclear power plant? Go Vote! The Council and the Committees strongly consider the votes that are taken at neighborhood meetings when an item comes before them.

Something to keep in mind is that the two main items that come before Neighborhood Associations for a vote are typically rezoning requests and liquor licenses.

KNOW DID YOU KNOW?

If you're interested in running for a neighborhood office position, you must attend at least 4 neighborhood association meetings in the 12 months previous to the next scheduled election, which take place every 2 years.



**WHAT DOES THE
GOVERNMENT
DO?**

Consider this: In the movie Jaws, Amity Island Mayor Larry Hayes recklessly put people's lives at risk when he refused to close the beaches following a bunch of scary shark attacks. In spite of this, he somehow remained in office and is still the Mayor in Jaws 2. This is one example of why it's important to vote in local elections. Voting can help keep public officials accountable for mishandling their duties, whether it's spending money irresponsibly or letting big scary sharks run amok.

In Birmingham, like many cities in America, voter turnout is typically very low. During the 2017 municipal election, 26.95 percent of registered voters in Jefferson County showed up to the polls. During the runoff election six weeks later, roughly 35 percent cast a ballot.

To understand why it's important to vote, ***you need to understand what your government does.***



Let's
start at
the top.

**What exactly
does the
Mayor do and
why should
you care?**

Perhaps most importantly, the Mayor is tasked with submitting a budget to the Council each year. This is the best way to get a glimpse into what the administration's priorities are. That budget process begins in March every year in order for discussions and compromises to take place before the new Fiscal Year begins on July 1st. If a budget is not passed in time, don't worry, the city won't shut down its services. Instead the departments operate based off the previous year's budget.

As the chief executive of the city, only the Mayor can direct city departments. The City Council is not allowed to issue directives, contrary to popular belief. If the Department of Public Works accidentally cuts down someone's prized rose bush, the City Council can only advocate for that poor citizen. They can't direct Public Works to go plant another rose bush.

If something the mayor wants to purchase for the city costs more than \$10,000 the City Council will need to approve of spending that much. If it's less, the Mayor can authorize it.



Quick
Examples
of How
You Can
Make a
Difference

Some things are beyond the scope of your local municipal government, but there are many issues that City Hall can address.

Let's say you're concerned about safety at a busy intersection with no stop sign. You've seen too many close calls, and maybe even an accident occur at that intersection. This is something City Hall can help with.

Here's the process: If you want to see a stop sign added somewhere, call the City's Department of Transportation at 205-254-2450. After you tell the friendly voice on the other end of the line about the location of the dangerous intersection, they will send someone out there with a device that tracks the traffic. The Department of Transportation uses formulas to determine if adding a stop sign at an intersection will actually be beneficial or not to the flow of traffic and public safety, and will report back with their findings to you. If they determine that installing a stop sign is indeed the best course of action, the city will install one.

On any given week, over 700 blighted structures go through the City's condemnation process, and around 350 become ready for demolition.

In order to report a vacant property you would like to see demolished, you should call the City's 311 hotline and report it. Here's what happens after a property is reported:

**Inspection of the property to determine if it poses a threat to public safety.
The City conducts a title search to find and contact the owner(s).**

The City sends a letter to the owner(s), and gives them 30 days to make repairs. If significant repairs are made, the City will grant a 30 day extension.

If there is no response, then the property is placed on the City Council agenda for demolition.



If you notice an abandoned car that you believe to be a public nuisance, you can report it to the City's Communications Department by dialing **3-1-1**.

After the car is reported, City inspectors will come record it and:

-Within two weeks, a letter will be sent to the vehicle owner. If the owner does not respond, they will be summoned to Birmingham's Municipal Court within 30 days.

If the owner fails to respond, or does not appear in court, another letter will be sent giving them an additional 30 days before the City Council approves the towing of the car.





WHAT DO
COURTS DO?

In the Big Government, there are three separate branches: **Executive** (President), **Legislative** (Congress) and **Judicial** (Supreme Court).

On a smaller scale, those three branches still exist, but serve different purposes. Unlike the Supreme Court, a **Municipal Court** doesn't rule on major cases that affect the whole country, like *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ended school segregation.

Have you ever gotten a speeding ticket? That is a case for the **Municipal Court**. You can show up for your day in court and try and make a case for why you shouldn't be fined for going 100 mph in a 25 mph school zone.

It's not just speeding tickets, the **Birmingham Municipal Court** also handles misdemeanor criminal cases that occurred within the city limits and violated local laws.

DRUG COURT

The Court doesn't just hand out fines and put petty criminals behind bars, there are also programs that offer help to people who are stuck in the hamster wheel of our criminal justice system.

For people dealing with drug addiction, the **Municipal Court** offers a **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Program**, which is the only one of its kind in Alabama. No other municipality in the state has been able to maintain a drug court program that helps to treat addicts instead of sending them to jail.

RENEW Program

The program has helped hundreds of residents recover their driver's licenses after legal circumstances or financial constraints had previously prevented them from being able to do so. If a person's license has been suspended and they can't afford the fines, a Judge will make a decision to admit them into the RENEW Program where they will work with a court-appointed attorney to get their license back.



NOTES



A series of horizontal lines for writing notes, spanning the width of the page below the header.

This Handbook Belongs To

**a caring and engaged citizen of
Birmingham, Alabama.**