

Who gets to approve the *money*

One mechanism of local government — the difference between spending a council can approve on its own and spending that must go to the voters.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

How This Guide Works

This is part of **Incognati Civics**, applying the field-guide format to local government — city councils, counties, special districts, zoning, and local taxes. Unlike elections or federal law, local structure **varies by state and even by town**: the same title can carry different powers ten miles away. So each specimen names the pattern and the tell, then points you to the one authority that settles it — your own jurisdiction's charter and your state's code — rather than asserting a single national rule. Sources are cross-jurisdiction bodies and representative statutes, listed in full on the references page.

INCOGNATI CIVICS — LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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Bond & Referendum vs. Council Appropriation

Populus An Consilium

Governing precedent / case Local finance and debt-authorization law (varies) **Status** Varies by state; structured

OBSERVED SPECIMEN

LOCAL BUDGETS, BONDS, AND BALLOT MEASURES

*Not all local spending is decided the same way. A council can usually **appropriate** from the annual budget on its own vote. Long-term borrowing — a general-obligation **bond** pledging future taxes — often requires voter approval by referendum, sometimes at a supermajority, because it binds taxpayers for years. Revenue bonds, certificates of participation, and lease-financing can sometimes sidestep that vote, which is exactly why they draw scrutiny. “The council approved it” and “the voters approved it” are different acts with different requirements, and which applies depends on your state's debt-authorization rules.*

THE HOOK

All local spending is treated as one kind of decision, blurring what a council may do alone versus what voters must ratify.

THE MECHANISM

Annual appropriations are council acts; general-obligation debt typically needs voter approval; alternative financings can avoid a referendum. The thresholds are set by state law.

Field mark: when a big local project is announced, ask whether it is a council appropriation, a voter-approved bond, or an alternative financing that skips the ballot — each has different approval rules, set by your state.

See the full references page for complete citations.

References

every source checkable at the link provided; DOIs given where the source has one

CROSS-JURISDICTION AUTHORITY · GFOA

Government Finance Officers Association, best practices on debt issuance and voter authorization.

<https://www.gfoa.org/materials>

Nonpartisan guidance distinguishing appropriations, general-obligation bonds (often requiring referenda), and alternative financings.

REFERENCE · NLC

National League of Cities, “Cities 101 — Municipal Finance” overview.

<https://www.nlc.org/resource/cities-101-municipal-revenue/>

Overview of how local governments raise and authorize funds; specific voter-approval thresholds vary by state.

Reading a Local Spending Decision: A Gut Check

four questions before 'it was approved' tells you who approved it

- 1 Name the instrument**
Appropriation, GO bond, revenue bond, or lease financing?
 - 2 Ask who approves**
Council alone, or the voters by referendum?
 - 3 Watch for a workaround**
Some financings are structured to skip the ballot.
 - 4 Check the threshold**
Supermajority or simple majority is set by state law.
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INCOGNATI CIVICS

The Series Continues

This is Specimen No. 10 of the Local Government section within Incognati Civics — the section built around the fact that local structure varies, so every plate ends at your own charter. It joins Elections, Federal Laws, Official Data Reporting, and Institutional Communications within Civics. The Incognati Atlas catalogs the underlying patterns across all of it.
