

Stronger When Working Together

Defining roles of Chicago's mayor and its City Council

Unlike other American cities of its size, Chicago started out as a “strong council - weak mayor” form of government. Today with “home rule,” giving it some independence from control by the state legislature and as Chicago grew in size and stature, the city council and state legislature ceded some authority to the mayor, creating an executive branch modeled after the federal government.

However, even though the council is a legislative body, it also has executive functions sometimes referred to as aldermanic prerogative. In practice, alderpersons, who each represent approximately 55,000 people (about the same as a mid-sized city), are considered the “mini-mayors” of their ward. When something goes wrong on your block, or when someone wants to get something done that requires city approval, the usual first step is to call or email the alderperson's office.

Alderman (Aldersperson) is the title given to a member of Chicago's City Council. There are 50 of them in the city, and they have a surprising amount of jurisdiction over what happens in their wards.

Each serves an area that contains 2 percent of the city's 2,746,388 residents, called a ward. Residents of each ward vote for their alderperson every four years along with the mayor, City Clerk and City Treasurer. After the U.S. Census every decade, the ward boundaries are redrawn to reflect changes in the constituency.

Once elected, an alderperson becomes a member of the City of Chicago City Council. Alderspersons get an annual budget from the city of more than \$1 million to spend on capital improvement projects in their ward, like repaving roads, replacing traffic signals, or upgrading street and alley lighting. It's called “menu money”.

Most alderspersons know their wards best and should have a say in what projects get priority. Alderspersons also can weigh in on issuing liquor licenses for stores and restaurants that want to serve alcoholic beverages as well as facilitate permits to host block parties, parades, sidewalk sales and any event that requires a street closure.

When there's a bigger project, like a developer who needs permission to build a new high-rise apartment building or a new grocery store, the entire City Council approval is needed.

But in practice, the aldersperson of that ward normally has the final say on any big development as other alderspersons almost always will defer to the aldersperson of the ward in which the project is proposed. Alderspersons meet once a month to vote on the mayor's agenda and their own proposals.

Notwithstanding that most of the recent Chicago city councils have delegated away many of their functions to the mayor either through fiat or action by the state legislature as the State of Illinois granted Chicago a city charter with a “weak mayor – strong council” structure. In such a system, the council acts as both a city-wide legislative body and, occasionally, as an executive body in matters that only concern their wards. Council members must (or should) approve almost every action the mayor takes unless the state legislature says otherwise.