



The LUCHA Library

The Land Use Colonia Housing Action [LUCHA] initiative is a partnership of organizations and organized colonia residents to build leadership capacity, expand technical knowledge, change land use and development policy, and build relationships between colonia residents and local, state and federal authorities. The goal of the LUCHA initiative is to build power by supporting community organizing efforts, inform colonia leaders on key issues, and provide opportunities for engaged conversations with regional experts.

The LUCHA Library is part of the larger LUCHA initiative. The Library is a collection of community education resources that seeks to provide Rio Grande Valley residents with easy to understand technical information around key community issues. Developed with the members of LUPE and ARISE, the LUCHA Library is designed to support community organizing efforts in the region by empowering residents with information.

LUCHA
LAND USE COLONIA
HOUSING ACTION
AN INITIATIVE OF LUPE AND ARISE

Educational Library

Governance

Housing

Drainage

Public Services | Level 1 | Public Services in Texas

Planning



Exploring Public Services

Public Services in Your Community

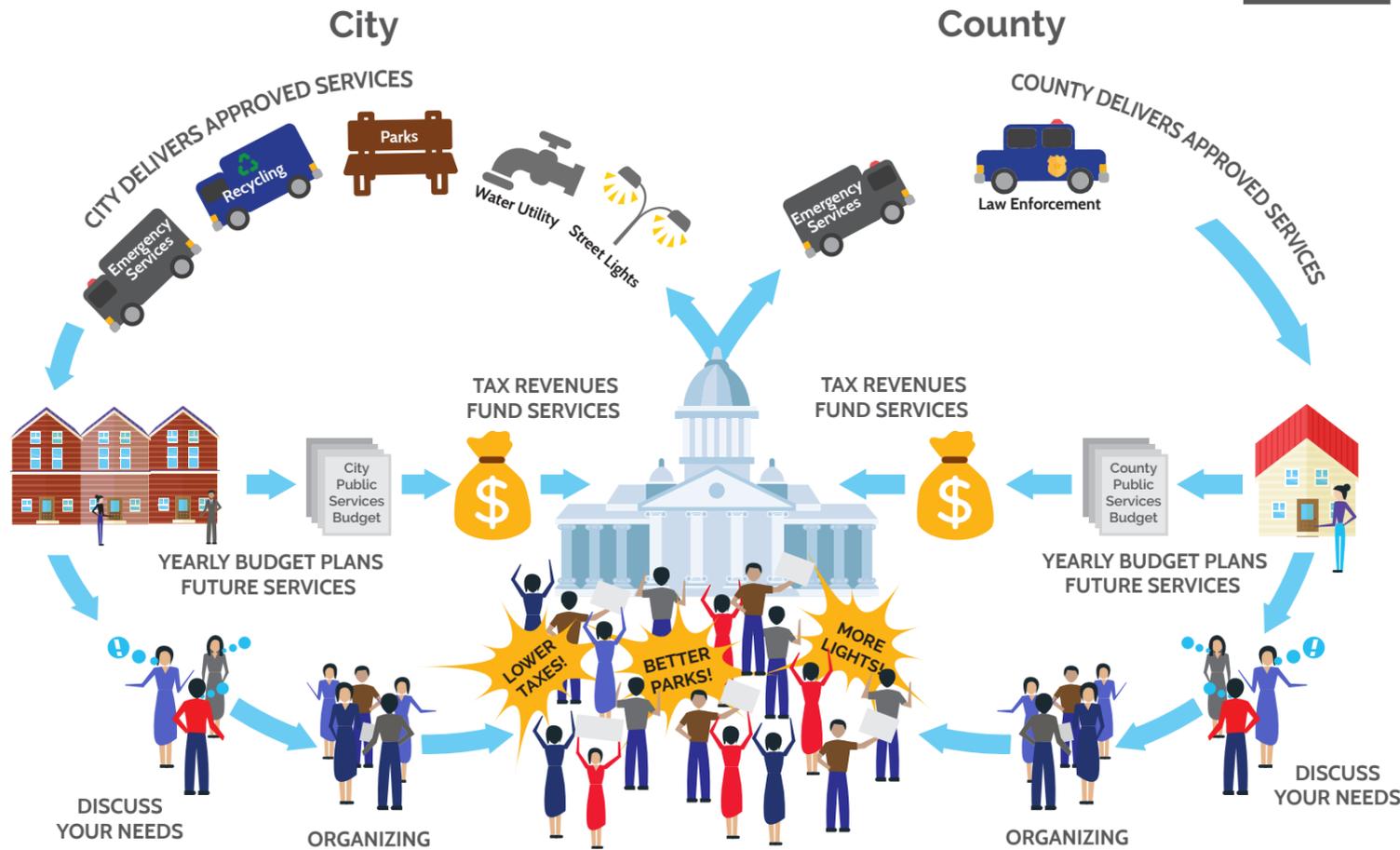
Public services are services provided by a local government to its residents, regardless of income. Most public services are valuable for the whole community, and believed to raise the quality of life in an area. Local governments can vary widely in what public services they provide residents. What level of public services should a community have?



In Texas, local governments are responsible for ensuring justice, basic public safety, health and welfare, and maintaining public records. Most local governments provide more services than is required, but when deciding what services to provide every local government must determine:

- ▶ The Public Services budget
- ▶ Which services to provided
- ▶ How the services will be provided

Each jurisdiction makes their own decisions based on community input and available funds. Counties are more restricted than cities in the taxes and fees they can collect, which often reduces the level of services they can afford to offer.



Required	Neighborhood	Community	Infrastructure
Services required by the Texas State Constitution	Types of services common to neighborhoods	Types of services offered by the state, your region, county, or city	Types of infrastructure that offer community benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Justice: Police, Local Courts ★ Health & Safety: 911, Fire, Ambulance ★ Public Records ★ Waste Management/Landfills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🏠 Trash Pickup 🏠 Animal Control 🏠 Recycling 🏠 Street Lights 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 👥 State of Texas Health and Human Services Helpline 👥 Community Resource Centers 👥 After School Programs 👥 Arts and Culture Programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🚒 Fire Hydrants 🚶 Sidewalks 🌳 Parks 🚲 Bike Lanes 🚰 Sewer Systems

Who Builds Infrastructure?

Neighborhood infrastructure like streets, drainage, sidewalks, and streetlights are commonly built by the developer when the neighborhood is first created, and maintained by a combination of the local government and the property owner. Parks are most commonly built and maintained by the local government. Some neighborhoods build and maintain parks on their own.

In border counties, new developments are required by the State of Texas to have access to essential utilities like electricity, fresh water, and wastewater management. How they are provided can differ across Valley. For example, some municipalities sell water to residents, and manage the wastewater or sewer systems, while in other areas all of the essential services are provided by private companies.

Common Challenges for Providing Public Services in the RGV

One of the biggest challenges to providing public services is the cost. Providing services and infrastructure to rural areas is typically more expensive than more populated areas. This is particularly true when you divide the cost per resident. The cost of providing public services or building infrastructure is roughly the same in both rural and populated areas. However, since there are fewer people in a rural area the cost per resident is higher. Rural areas also tend to have lower property values and tax rates, which affects the local government's ability to pay for public services.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Building infrastructure in rural areas where homes are spread out typically costs much more per household than areas where homes and buildings are closer together. This includes infrastructure like roads, water, sewer, drainage, and even sidewalks and curbs. In some very low density areas, the costs of the construction and maintenance infrastructure was 10 times the cost per household than a high density area.

INCONSISTENCY

There is no standard when it comes to what services are provided, how they will be provided and by whom. As a result, residents across the Valley experience varying levels of services and amenities, such as streetlights, fire hydrants, and trash pick-up, etc, based on the municipality or county they live within.

EMERGENCY SERVICES

Some rural residents have difficulty with 911 responders being able to find them. This is due to a variety of factors, including the Postal Service switching from Rural Route addresses to physical address, has left many people with multiple official address - making it difficult for 911 responders to find them in an emergency. Residents can register their phone number and physical address to support responder speed and accuracy.

FIRE HYDRANTS

It is common for neighborhoods in the unincorporated areas of the Valley to either not have hydrants, or if they do they are marked non-functioning. These non-functioning hydrants are often painted black or have some other marker. Most new subdivisions are being required to include hydrants, but the private water companies that supply the water are responsible for them being usable. Some hydrants are marked because they no longer work, and others are marked because the company can't ensure they are providing the hydrant with the required water pressure.

FUNDING

Funding is always a challenge. Local governments typically prioritize how to spend the funds they have, and sometimes those priorities do not align with what your community wants. You can learn more about how your community can engage and advocate for your needs in Level 3.

Why Do Public Services Differ Across the RGV?

When talking about public services, the most common divide mentioned is the one between the services offered in municipalities and those in the county. Most residents have noticed that the types of public services available (local fire departments, neighborhood sidewalks, weekly trash pick-up, fire hydrants) are different across the Rio Grande Valley, based on where you live. Let's explore some of the reasons for those differences:

The City (Urban)

POPULATION & DENSITY

The cost of providing services actually becomes less expensive per person when you have more people in a smaller geographic area. When people and businesses are closer together, providing services becomes more efficient and often less costly.

FUNDING

Municipalities and counties that collect more money from local taxes are able to spend more of their budgets on public services. The differences you see across the Valley, relate to size of each local government's budget, and how much they spend on services.

The County (Rural)

PRIVATE SERVICE PROVIDER

Another strategy for providing services is granting private companies exclusive rights to operation in an area in exchange for providing more affordable service. Garbage collection is a common example of this. The local government grants a company the exclusive right to provide garbage pickup in the area, and residents can choose to pay for the service, as opposed to residents in other areas who are charged a fee for garbage collection without the option to choose.

CONTRACTING SERVICES

To address cost and funding issues, many smaller or rural areas have found it more affordable to pay a private company or neighboring municipalities to provide public services. This is commonly referred to as contracting services. Emergency response services, like fire and ambulance are one of the most commonly contracted service. Others include smaller entities buying their fresh water from a larger entities.

VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER

Volunteer departments, like a volunteer fire department have also offered less populated or smaller areas the ability to provide local public services. Typically, a local government will purchase and maintain all equipment, while the service is provided by residents on a volunteer basis.

Key Take-aways

- ▶ Public services are provided by your local government and funded by local taxes and fees
- ▶ Your local commissioners or council members approve all spending or fees for public services
- ▶ The cost of providing public services and building infrastructure is affected by the density of your municipality or county.