

# The Law in Your Community

Note that many lessons have fostered discussion amongst the teachers who have used them. You can join these discussions, and gain access to many additional features, just by signing up for an ePortfolio!

**This lesson is most appropriate for High School classrooms.**

**Theme:** What kinds of ordinances are made at the local level

**MCF Benchmark:** Evaluate how effectively the federal government is serving the purposes for which it was created.

**Other benchmarks this lesson targets include:** none

## Materials needed:

- internet access for the teacher and students
- copies of local ordinances, either from the community's website or in hard copy from the city, village, or township clerk's office
- ordinances from other communities and sample ordinances from the Michigan Municipal League and the Michigan Townships Association, all available on-line
- ordinances proposed for passage by the local community, available on-line or from the clerk's office
- cable television service, including the local government access channel, a VCR, and television set

## Methodological procedure:

Provide to students in hard copy or via the internet a list of the range of topics covered by local ordinances, which is available from the Michigan Municipal League and the Michigan Townships Association (see WEB SITES below for links). Discuss briefly how each type of ordinance achieves the common good by promoting residents' health, safety, and welfare and that the word 'welfare' is used in the sense of the general well-being of citizens ('to promote the general welfare' from the Preamble to the United States Constitution).

Introduce students to local ordinances by providing them copies of at least one local zoning ordinance and one dealing with a police power (noise, blight, animal control, etc.). It is crucial that to whatever degree possible, the ordinances chosen be recent,

interesting, and relevant to high school students (it may be necessary for the teacher to excerpt sections of a longer document). Emphasize that these ordinances were enacted by local officials elected by the citizens, illustrating popular sovereignty (ultimate authority over public officials and public policy belonging to the people) and representative government (the interests of citizens being represented by elected officials).

Students may also use the internet to browse the entire code of ordinances of their local community (if available), other communities' ordinances, and sample ordinances, using the MML and MTA websites and those of several communities (listed in WEB SITES below) which include local ordinances.

Establish for students a basis on which to evaluate an ordinance by giving it a letter grade (A, B, C, D, or F) based upon the following criteria:

- is there a need in the community for this regulation?
- does this ordinance promote residents' health, safety, or welfare?

Using two local ordinances or sections of ordinances, one for zoning and one for police powers, ask students to assign each a letter grade.

Once the grades have been assigned, ask students to go to one of five locations in the classroom where the letters A, B, C, D, and F have been posted and stand or sit by the letter they have assigned to the zoning ordinance. By random selection, ask two students in each location to explain the grades they have assigned, and encourage students as they hear arguments pro and con to move from one letter to another if they change their minds.

Follow the same procedure for the ordinance dealing with a local police power.

After hearing evaluations of both ordinances, ask students to return to their desks and write reflectively for ten minutes in response to the following prompt.

'Based on your original evaluation of the two ordinances and the rationale you heard expressed by other students in your class, assign a final grade to each of the two ordinances and provide your rationale for that grade.'

Provide to students copies of an ordinance or ordinances which are scheduled for consideration by your local governing body (city council, village council, or township board). Again, look for proposals which are interesting and relevant to high school students.

Divide the class into groups of five students or less and ask each group to discuss the ordinance, applying the evaluation criteria used earlier. If only one proposal is being used, all groups will consider the same one. If multiple proposals are appropriate and available, different groups will be working with different documents. The optimal situation would be to have a different local ordinance proposal for each group.

Give students the following writing assignment, due at the beginning of the next class period.

'Based on discussion of the proposed ordinance in your group, write a letter to your local governing body advocating your position on the proposal and providing rationale.'

Inform students that after their letters have been reviewed by their group, all the letters will be submitted to the teacher.

For the remainder of the class period, teachers may utilize the related Michigan Civics Institute lesson 'What is the procedure for passing a local ordinance?'

At the beginning of the next class period, have each group reconvene, review the letters written by group members, and develop a group letter, either by adopting the letter written by one student or creating a new letter using sections of different ones.

By random selection, choose one person from each group to make a brief oral presentation to the entire class including:

- a summary of the proposed ordinance (only if different groups considered different documents)
- the group's advocacy position as expressed in its group letter

Give each group the option of advocating their position by sending the letter to the local governing body or by appearing at the meeting at which the ordinance is to be considered. Encourage students to select the appearance option, perhaps by offering extra credit. Emphasize the importance of having all members of the group attend, and provide the time, place, and location on the agenda. If students choose to voice their opinions at the meeting, the letter becomes the basis for the oral presentation.

### **Author's notes:**

Although this lesson should use no more than 90 minutes of class time, it does not fit into two successive 45-minute periods or one 90-minute block. The consideration of current ordinances, both zoning and general police powers, is appropriate for one 45-

minute period. The timing of the second activity, the consideration of a proposed ordinance, will be dictated by the schedule and agenda of the local governing body and should consist of the group consideration of the issue on one day and the other activities during the next class period, with the individual letter writing assignment in between.

If the meetings of the local governing body or bodies are carried on cable television, the teacher can videotape portions of meetings dealing with ordinance consideration and public comment to acquaint students with the process, and if students choose to advocate their positions at the meeting, playing the videotape of that appearance will be an interesting and appropriate wrap-up activity.

### **Assessment strategies:**

Randomly selected students will be asked to orally defend the grades they have assigned to two local ordinances, one dealing with zoning and one with general police powers.

All students will write reflectively regarding their evaluation of two local ordinances after hearing rationale from other students who have assigned each ordinance a grade from A to F.

All students will write a letter to the local governing body advocating or opposing enactment of a proposed ordinance and providing clear rationale for that position.

Randomly selected students, one representing each group, will explain the group's position on a proposed local ordinance and its rationale for that position.

### **Enrichment suggestions:**

Students may be interested in moving beyond advocacy regarding an ordinance which has been proposed to developing their own proposal for a new ordinance or amendment to an existing ordinance.

Students should review the entire range of ordinance topics available on the MML, MTA, and city web sites listed below. Students may also review the Michigan Youth Caucus and Highest Wire web sites (see WEB SITES below) for issues which apply to their local community. Using sticky notes, have students jot down an area in which they believe there is a need for regulation in the local community. After students place all the notes on a wall, have a few students organize them into groups by topic (zoning, noise, environment, blight, animal control, etc., etc.).

Have the entire class take a look at the groups and select by consensus three to five for further investigation.

Instruct students to visit the city, village, or township clerk's office to determine whether the local community has adopted regulations in those areas and if so to secure a copy of the ordinance.

Students should then work in groups in class to develop the main points of a proposed new ordinance or an amendment to an existing ordinance. Each should be presented to the entire class for review and modification and then submitted to the local governing body for consideration, with students appearing at a meeting to advocate the new ordinance or amendment they have developed.

Again, playing the videotape of the meeting and the students' appearance on behalf of their proposal in class will be an appropriate activity and an excellent illustration of the way in which any citizen can impact local government.

### **Suggested web sites:**

- [Michigan Municipal League](#)  
sample ordinances from various cities
- [Michigan Townships Association](#)  
sample ordinances
- [City of Wyoming MI](#)  
city Code of Ordinances
- [City of Alma MI](#)  
city Code of Ordinances
- [City of Ann Arbor MI](#)  
city Code of Ordinances
- [City of Marquette](#)  
city Code of Ordinances
- [Michigan Youth Caucus](#)  
Developed by Michigan Civics for use by students around the state, the Michigan Youth Caucus is an organization of, by and for 15-22 year-olds, representing the interests of Michigan youth in state policy matters. Deliberation about the MYC platform, and many other amazing activities, are conducted online. Check out the "projects" area for more information!