

Understanding the Distinction: Towns and Charter Cities in Arizona

I write to provide clarity and shed light on a topic that often results in confusion among Arizona residents – the difference between towns and charter cities within our state. This subject is not merely a matter of semantics; it involves distinct governance structures and the degree of local control that communities have over their affairs.

In Arizona communities can incorporate as either towns or cities. The primary difference lies in the level of autonomy each enjoys. Towns are governed by a general law structure provided by the state, which outlines how they should operate, including the structure of their government, how elections are conducted, and how they can levy taxes.

Charter cities, on the other hand, have a higher level of self-rule. They are granted the ability to draft their own charters, essentially a local constitution, which outlines the structure of their government, how they will conduct elections, and other local matters. This allows charter cities to tailor their governance to the specific needs and preferences of their residents, providing a degree of local control not afforded to general law towns.

Despite the increased autonomy, becoming a charter city is not a decision to be taken lightly. The process of drafting a charter requires careful consideration and deliberation. Furthermore, once established, a charter city is subject to stricter judicial review in state courts to ensure the charter provisions do not conflict with state law. This can lead to increased scrutiny and legal fees in the long run for these charter cities.

The question of whether to incorporate as a town or a charter city is a crucial one for communities. It is a question of self-determination and the balance of power between local and state governance. It is a decision that should be made with the full participation of the community, with a thorough understanding of the potential benefits and the responsibilities that come with greater autonomy.

I hope this letter provides some clarity on the distinction between towns and charter cities in Arizona. It is essential for residents to understand these differences as the community contemplates incorporation of Vail as a town.

Thank you for providing a platform to discuss this important topic.

By Jonathan Lounds, J.D.