

APPENDIX A

COUNTY GENERAL AND SPECIAL REVENUE

UNRESERVED FUND BALANCES

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Appendix A - County General and Special Revenue Unreserved Fund Balances

Minnesota counties report their unreserved fund balances at the close of their fiscal year, which ends December 31. This may create an impression that counties have an excessive amount of funds held in reserve. In reality, county fund balances should be relatively large at the end of the year because of local government cash flow cycles. Counties must rely on their fund balances to meet expenditures during the first five months of the next fiscal year, until they receive the first property tax payments (May) and aid payments from the state (July).

Unlike state government, which collects income tax withholding and sales tax receipts regularly throughout the year, many counties do not have a constant flow of revenue from which they are able to fund local government operations. Property tax levies, state aid, and property tax credits comprise the majority of county discretionary revenues. Minnesota laws govern the flow of these major revenue sources into county treasuries:

- The first half of property taxes from property owners is due by May 15 of each year, and is distributed to counties generally by the end of June or early July.
- Counties receive the first half of their state aid and property tax credits from the state on July 20 of each year.
- The second half of property taxes from property owners is due by October 15 of each year, and is distributed to counties generally by the end of November
- Counties receive the second half of their state aid and property tax credits from the state on December 26 of each year.

Given this state-controlled flow of revenue, county fund balances (which are measured on December 31) are the primary source of funds available to counties for their operating expenditures during the first five months of the next fiscal year. An adequate fund balance will provide counties with the cash flow required to finance expenditures and avoid short-term borrowing.

Unique Circumstances of Each County Determine the Size of Fund Balance

While counties must rely on the unreserved fund balances for cash flow purposes during the first five months of a year, the unique circumstances of each county will determine the size of a fund balance that must be maintained to avoid the need for short-term borrowing and to operate effectively.

Numerous factors must be considered when determining the level of reserves necessary to avoid short-term borrowing:

- If counties receive relatively large amounts of revenue from sources such as fees, fines, charges for services, other intergovernmental grants and aids, or interest on investments during the first five months of the calendar year, then they will be less dependent on their fund balances for cash flow purposes.
- Counties are often able to delay certain purchases until after the initial property tax and state aid payments are received. While payments for employee salaries, wages, and most benefits cannot be delayed during the first five months of the year, purchases of supplies and capital equipment may be delayed.

The individual cash flow needs of a county will determine the minimum fund balance that is necessary for it to operate effectively. Counties may need less reserves in their General and Special Revenue Funds if they have unreserved fund balances in other governmental or proprietary funds from which they may borrow or transfer resources, or if they receive significant revenues from sources other than property taxes and state aid payments (i.e., charges for services). Conversely, counties that rely heavily on property taxes and state aid for the majority of their revenues will need relatively large fund balances to meet their cash flow needs from January 1 through June 1 of every calendar year.

While there are many factors that help determine the minimum fund balance needed to maintain financial health, the Office of the State Auditor recommends that at year-end, local governments maintain unreserved fund balances in their General Fund and Special Revenue Funds of approximately 35 to 50 percent of operating revenues, or no less than five months of operating expenditures.¹ If the local government's unreserved fund balance is less than or greater than this recommendation, the local government should be able to explain the reason for the difference.

¹ Although this section discusses only one type of fund balance, Minnesota counties actually report three different classifications of fund balances in the General Fund and Special Revenue Funds. The ***unreserved, undesignated fund balances*** include all funds remaining at the close of the fiscal year for which no legally binding commitment has been made, nor has the governing body passed a resolution designating those funds for a specific purpose. The ***unreserved, designated fund balances*** include all funds remaining at the close of the fiscal year for which no legally binding commitment has been made; however, these funds have been designated by the governing body for a specific future use. The ***reserved fund balances*** include all funds remaining at the close of the fiscal year for which there is a legally binding external commitment of those funds, such as a signed contract for services or equipment.