



Civics Lesson

What government does in Tennessee is not always obvious

As you read the headline of this article, you may have rolled your eyes. Surely the things government does don't have to be explained, do they?

In fact, they do. Students and adults alike get confused these days about what the government does and doesn't do.

First for the simple things: If you go to a public school, your teachers are paid by the government. Your city's or county's library system is run by government employees. The police officers who patrol the streets work for the government.

This doesn't mean that every teacher, every book expert and every person in uniform works for the government, however. If you go to a private school, your teachers don't work for the government (they work for the school). If you go to a bookstore, the people who work there don't work for the government (they work for the store). And if you go visit an office building, the security guards at the front desk probably don't work for the government. They may look like police officers, but they probably work for a private company.

Many of the things government does may have never occurred to you: Government makes sure the gasoline pump is giving you a gallon of gas when it says it does. It checks the quality of the water that comes out of your faucets at home. It tests the bridge you ride across every day to make sure it isn't in danger of collapsing anytime soon. It runs the rest areas on the side of the interstate and prints the road map you pick up free there (but not the one you pay money for at a gas station).

Are you a fan of the Tennessee Volunteers? The state of Tennessee (through a board of trust it appoints) owns and operates the University of Tennessee and even built Neyland Stadium. But the state does not own Vanderbilt University, which is a private institution run by a board of trust.

Do you like to hike? Chances are, the park you hike at is owned and operated by the government. But which government depends on which park. For instance:

The FEDERAL (U.S.) government runs the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and Shiloh National Military Park.

The STATE (Tennessee government) runs Montgomery Bell State Park and Sycamore Shoals State Historic Park.

Meanwhile, some parks are run by local (city) governments. The biggest park in Nashville is, by far, Percy Warner Park, run by the Metropolitan (Nashville) Parks and Recreation Department. Audubon Park in Memphis is run by the city of Memphis.

And who do you think paved the roads you drive on? You guessed it. The government. The only exceptions to this rule are driveways and some roads built in private residential subdivisions. If you live in a gated community, for instance, the government probably didn't build the roads there.

Now for some really tricky ones:

What about the trash cans people take down to the street? Does the government pick those up?

What about the drinking water coming out of the tap at home? Does the government make that happen?

And what about LP Field in Nashville, where the Tennessee Titans play? Does the government own that?

We're going to take these one at a time.

Trash pickup is not a state government function; it's a local (city or county) government function. In many cities, especially the large ones, people who do curbside trash pickup work for the local government. Sometimes they work for companies hired by the government to pick up the trash.

However, many people in Tennessee live in areas where the government does not provide trash pickup. Those people pay a private company to get their trash.

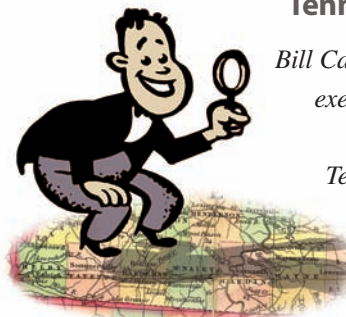
Knoxville is an interesting example. If you live within the city limits of Knoxville, the government comes to your house once a week to get your trash. But if you live just outside the city limits, the government doesn't get your trash; you have to pay a company to get it. And by the way, the city limits of Knoxville in some places go right through existing neighborhoods. So there are places where the city provides trash collection to a house on one side of the street but not to the house on the other side of the same street.

Drinking water is also one of those things the government sometimes provides and sometimes doesn't. In most of Tennessee's cities and towns, the government, or a government-related entity, provides drinking water (among the larger water producers in Tennessee are Memphis Light, Gas and Water and the Metro Nashville Water Services). But in the city of Chattanooga, a private company called Tennessee American Water provides the water that comes out of the tap.

Professional football doesn't seem like the kind of thing a government would worry about. But a few years ago, the city of Nashville and the state of Tennessee wanted a pro football team so badly that they made an unusual arrangement that resulted in the construction of a stadium in downtown Nashville and the bringing to Nashville of the Tennessee Titans.

In short, the city and the state (together) built the stadium (which means that the taxpayers paid for it). It is owned by the city of Nashville and operated by a government-related entity called the Nashville Sports Authority. That authority, in turn, leases (or rents) the stadium to the Titans and other users such as Tennessee State University.

So ... you see? What government does in Tennessee ISN'T so obvious ... is it? ☹



Tennessee History for Kids

Bill Carey is a Nashville author and executive director of "Tennessee History for Kids," an online Tennessee history textbook. For more great stories of Tennessee history, go to www.tnhistoryforkids.org.