Municipal Law -- Research Tips

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Last Updated June 24, 2015

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Municipal Law

Following is a selective presentation of our library holdings and a brief introduction to how you would use our print and electronic resources to answer various questions related to municipal (local government) law. For additional help, you may ask any Reference Librarian for assistance.

1. Catalogs, Indexes and other Databases

Use the Diamond Law Library’s catalog, PEGASUS. Also use the University Libraries’ catalog, CLIO, to find resources at other Columbia libraries. You may also use WorldCat (go to PEGASUS and choose it from the drop down menu under CATALOGS) to find books beyond the Columbia system.

To find law journal articles that may contain articles on domestic municipal law, use Index to Legal Periodicals. You may access it from PEGASUS (click on Periodical and Treaty Indexes, the 3rd entry under the E-RESOURCES drop down menu, and once on the Periodical and Treaty Indexes’ screen, choose the 3rd entry again). You may also use the main library's federated search engine available from http://cliobeta.columbia.edu/.

If you have the citation to a law journal, you may try our HeinOnline collection of electronic journals, which can be accessed from PEGASUS, http://pegasus.law.columbia.edu/ (the 1st and 2nd entries under the E-Resources drop down menu).
Sometimes, to find full-text journals, patrons feel more comfortable using familiar databases, such as JSTOR, Project Muse, ProQuest Direct or ProQuest Historical. They can be accessed through CLIO.

To find New York City local government documents, go to the New York City Documents website at [http://library.columbia.edu/subject-guides/usgd/state_local/nyc.html](http://library.columbia.edu/subject-guides/usgd/state_local/nyc.html).

### 2. Browsing Our Library Shelves

Few of you will use the following way to access our municipal law collection. But, if you are familiar with how a print collection is usually organized, knowing that municipal law sources are usually classified using the Library of Congress classification system (LC) is helpful. Here are some of the LC call numbers you may want to use: KF 5304-5325 for municipal government and municipal services or KF 1302 for municipal corporations as defendants (civil rights litigation). Few municipal law sources will use the Hicks classification system. For example, New York City laws are classified under S NY8-NY85 and some New York City court reports are classified under R NY.

You can search our catalog, Pegasus, by call number. Go to PEGASUS and use the “LC Call#” or “HICKS/SCHILLER Call#” option.

![Pegasus](image)

### 3. Primary Sources in the Law Library

As a general rule the law library carries current municipal law only for New York City and the District of Columbia. New York City municipal law can be found both on the third floor, in the reserve and reference area, and on the fourth floor. Older material is located in a closed-stacks area, and if you need it you will have to page it hours or even days in advance.

**New York City Law:**

On the third floor you can find a substantial part of our collection of NYC legislative and administrative law. Among those sources are: *The City of New York Council Digest*, (a finding-aid tool which contains both chronological and subject-matter indexes of local bills, laws, resolutions and messages), and *The Official Compilation of the Rules of the City of New York* (a subject matter compilation of municipal administrative rules, which is popularly known as *The Rules of the City of New York*).

On the fourth floor, primary sources on New York City do not have a specific location and often are part of more compilations that cover municipal law at the state level. For example, you can find the City local laws within the New York State law collection (each year the last volume of the *Laws of the State of New York* (S NY2) contains local laws by cities, counties and towns). In addition you you find, *The Administrative Code and Charter of the City of New York* (a subject-matter compilation which covers the municipal charter and the municipal legislative law – local laws); and *The New York City Local Laws Advance Service* (a chronological compilation of local laws).
You can find case law pertinent to the City's local laws in two publications: *The New York City Housing Court Reporter* is a subject-matter compilation of decisions handed down in the New York State and New York City Housing Court system.

*Ordinance Law Annotations*, which is currently published by West. Because originally the publisher was different, this source is still popularly known as *Shepard's Ordinance Law Annotations* -KF5313 .S5. It is a comprehensive digest of case law which interprets or applies city and county ordinances.

**D.C. municipal law:**

The library carries both legislative and administrative DC law, *LEXIS District of Columbia Code Annotated* (S D6.5 2001) and *The Code of D.C. Municipal Regulations* (S D6.59 1999), but only the latter is on the library premises. Thus, every time you need to find a source, first use the catalog to see if we have it and if we do, whether you can retrieve it from the shelf or you need to request it.

Exceptionally, our library will have municipal law from other jurisdictions, according to the teaching and research interests of our faculty, but remember that more and more municipal law is freely available on the Internet! By the same token, while the Internet is an amazing source of information, for historical research you may find our bibliographic titles on municipal law codes, such as Municipal Codes of New Jersey, useful.

4. **Secondary Sources in the Law Library**

If our municipal law collection of primary sources is limited to two jurisdictions (New York City because we are located here, and D.C. by default, as DC municipal law has the double status of municipal and “state” law), our municipal law treatise collection is quite substantial because of its constitutional ramifications and political implications. Here are some of those secondary sources that you may find useful in your research.

McQuillin, Eugene. *The Law of Municipal Corporations* (West, 1997-) 4th Floor: KF5305 .M34 This 20-volume treatise (in 30 tomes!) is jurisdiction-based and provides extensive coverage of many aspects of municipal law (it is also available on Westlaw).

Fonatana, Vincent. Municipality Liability: Law and Practice (2007-) 4th Floor: KF1302.A2 F662 This two-volume loose-leaf treatise focuses on civil rights litigation where the defendants are municipal entities. Earlier editions are also available in our collection.

Matthews, Thomas A. Municipal Ordinances; Text and Forms (West Group,1998-) 4th Floor: KF5313.M342 This five-volume source (which counts 12 books!) offers detailed coverage of municipal ordinances. The fifth volume contains useful information about “how to use” and “how to access” both the text of the ordinances and of the forms. It is also available on Westlaw; MUNIORD.


Daniel Finkelstein and Lucas A. Ferrara. Landlord and Tenant Practice in New York (West, 1997-) KFN5145 .F497 This two-volume loose-leaf provides information concerning substantive and procedural issues related to landlord and tenant matters in New York State, and New York City such as nonpayment and holdover proceedings or changes to rent regulations, terminating tenancy and which includes analysis of court decisions, statutes, rules, as well as useful practitioner-created and official forms.
5. Additional Helpful Web Sites (free of Charge)

Municipal Code Corporation available at www.municode.com

Lexis – Municipal Codes Web Library

New York City Housing Court Decisions

New York City Zoning Resolution (from NYC Department of City Planning)

The Center for New York City Law at New York Law School

6. Helpful Research Guides

Though the principles of researching municipal law are the same as for researching either federal or state law (look for a secondary source on the topic, or find the relevant local law or ordinance, if there is one; make sure that you know how agencies have detailed it and courts have applied it, and then update your results), due to its specificity, research guides, whether in print or online tend to be limited to municipalities from a single state.

In the reference area, our library carries a good collection (arranged in alphabetical order) of research guides for 36 states of the union (including DC). For some of those states the library has multiple guides. To find them perform a subject search in Pegasus for “Legal Research -- [name of the state]”. You may start your research with those guides, because some may have a good section on that state’s municipal law.

For example, to find a guide on Illinois municipal law, go to Pegasus and perform a subject search by typing “Legal Research -- Illinois.” First on your result-list is Wojcik’s Illinois Legal Research; its fifth chapter focuses on Illinois municipal ordinances.

Below is a selective list of print and online guides on researching municipal law:


Ellen Gibson wrote the clearest and most comprehensive legal research guide to New York state law. She continued on the same principles and accomplished the task for New York City municipal law as well. This is a must for students, researchers and practitioners interested in our city’s laws. William H. Manz revised this third edition.

Zimmerman’s Research Guides – New York City The user will find this guide a well-organized gem of free sources (and not only) on New York City law, minus city agencies’ information.

MuniNet Guide

7. Lexis Advance, WestlawNext and Bloomberglaw
On LexisAdvance, you cannot find all municipal codes as a single database. The “Browse” feature directs you to individual codes. However, if you type “municipal law” or “municipal codes” in the main search box, you will obtain a few millions results, which will give you a vague idea of the municipal law coverage.

WestlawNext covers municipal law in a very organized, user-friendly manner.
Finally, Bloomberglaw also covers some municipal codes, but no municipal courts cases. To search for municipal law you need to either go to each state codes and identify the municipal codification or to type the title of the municipal code in the main search box.

Written by Dana Neacşu, Librarian & Lecturer. Last Updated June 24, 2015. Please send your comments regarding this research-aid tool to her at dana.neacsu@law.columbia.edu.

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