

May a Michigan city/village spend funds on flowers for an employee's funeral, for birthday cakes, for employee gifts, or retirement parties?

Generally, a municipality's power to spend money is derived from the state through the Michigan Constitution and state laws. In addition to specific grants of power, cities and villages with home rule authority are also able to rely on the applicable provisions in the Constitution and statutes for the power to spend on municipal concerns. Regardless of the authority, it is generally held, however, that municipalities have the power to expend funds only for a public purpose. One test for determining a public purpose is whether the expenditure confers a direct benefit of reasonably general character to a significant part of the public. It should be noted that the public purpose test has also been limited to the provision of services for which municipalities exist and the powers they have authority to exercise.

With respect to the question raised, neither the Michigan Constitution nor state law grants to municipalities the power to spend public money on employee parties, gifts, etc. Nor can a good argument be made that the expenditures are for a public purpose. Absent a grant of spending authority, and no clear public purpose defined, the expenditure is most likely illegal. Simply put, a municipality cannot give public funds away.

May the city/village purchase and distribute candy for children and fruit baskets for senior citizens at holiday time?

First of all, there is no authority granted by the Michigan Constitution or by statute to make the gifts in question. Nor can a public purpose be identified by virtue of the gifts under Michigan law.

May a Michigan city/village make a charitable donation, gift or contribution to service clubs, charities or public or private social service agencies?

Generally, no. Such expenditures have been held not to be used for a public purpose. Even if the expenditure benefits the public incidentally, the expenditure may be nonetheless invalid if the appropriation is not under control of the city/village. However, MCL 117.3 indicates that the charters of home rule cities shall provide for the public peace, health and safety of persons and property. Specifically, a home rule city may contract with a private organization or another governmental unit for services considered necessary by the legislative body. Operation of child guidance and community mental health clinics; prevention, counseling and treatment of developmental disabilities; and drug abuse prevention, counseling and treatment are indicated to be services for public peace, health and safety. MML has prepared a reference packet on the issue which includes Department of Treasury materials.

May a Michigan city/village fund a fireworks display or pay for holiday celebrations?

A Michigan statute specifically grants municipalities the power to spend money on these celebrations. If the local celebration is for armistice, independence, memorial days, diamond jubilee or centennial the city may appropriate money for the purpose of defraying the expense of the celebration (see MCL 123.851).