



TOWNSHIPS TODAY

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Neighbors Helping Neighbors Are What Townships Are About

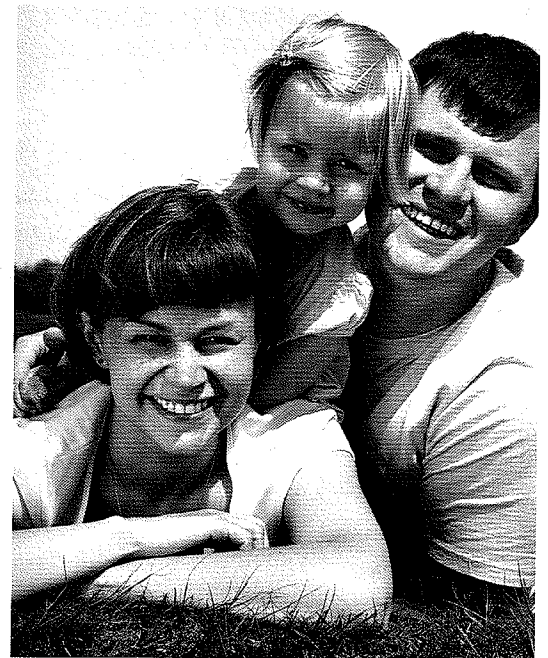
You may read about them in the newspaper or see them along local roads, plowing snow in the winter or patching potholes in the spring.

They're your township supervisors and staff, and while it's possible that you don't know their names, these public servants show up each and every day with one goal in mind: to build a better community for you, your family, and your neighbors.

And as Pennsylvania prepares to celebrate Local Government Week, April 11-15, now is the perfect opportunity for you to get a better understanding of the critical role your township and its officials play in the commonwealth's governing system.

Established to be a direct reflection and representation of the people who live there, townships are places where residents — when they choose to — have a voice in what happens, where every expenditure is scrutinized, and where services don't exceed what the community needs or can afford.

In other words, townships are full-service, grassroots-driven communities overseen by your neighbors, who are dedicated to meeting the specific needs of residents while keeping taxes in check. ➤



As Pennsylvania Local Government Week nears, take a look around your township and realize that all the good things you see — the parks, the well-maintained roads, and the safe environment to raise a family — are possible because your local leaders had a vision and turned it into a reality.

A system that makes sense

Since its inception, Pennsylvania has had three levels of government: state, county, and local. This system, which the Founding Fathers based on a division of labor, made sense then and makes even more sense now.

In fact, the commonwealth's governing system is a lot like a telescope. Open it wide and you'll see the state's big-picture view. Narrow the focus a bit and you've got the county's regional perspective. Narrow the focus even more and you'll see what townships see: the local side of things.

And each of these levels of government has distinct duties, priorities, and responsibilities. In the early days, for instance, township supervisors primarily oversaw the maintenance of local roads. And while this continues to be one of their top priorities, township supervisors today have many more responsibilities.

Jacks of all trades, township supervisors in the 21st century are hands-on local leaders who must be well-schooled in a wide range of complex issues, such as land use management, budgeting, transportation planning, and environmental concerns.

And because they live and may even work in the communities they represent, township supervisors are on call around the clock. In fact, it's not unusual for supervisors to field phone calls from residents during dinner and to plow roads at night and into the early hours of the morning.

Township supervisors hold public meetings at least once a month where they discuss the issues and make the decisions that have the most impact on you and your neighbors. Guided by the township budget, your elected officials spend considerable time weighing the best use of local tax dollars and finding ways to stretch them to build new parks, pave roads, improve public safety, encourage business development, and take on other projects to better the community.

Trust in townships

Under the law, township residents have the right to address the board of supervisors about matters before it. When deciding on a course of action, the supervisors weigh your concerns, along with their responsibilities under state and federal laws.

Just imagine, though, what it would be like if your township didn't exist and your community was managed by a larger, centralized govern-

ment, possibly at the county level.

Under this scenario, which has been proposed in Harrisburg, you would not be able to turn to a neighbor for help. Instead, you would have to approach a more distant board of elected leaders — some of whom may be familiar with your community, some of whom may not — and compete against a much larger pool of individuals to get your voice heard and needs met. In addition to competing against these larger populations and cities for attention, you would also be competing against them for money.

Local democracy, as you know it, would be lost and replaced with a bigger, not better, way of governing.

Does this really make sense for the commonwealth? Not according to the polls, where Pennsylvanians have consistently given high marks to townships and their local government counterparts.

For instance, more than 2,800 people participated in a study by the Allegheny Forum, which collects feedback on municipal government and services, and nearly half, or 47 percent, said they trusted their township, city, and borough officials to make the best taxing and spending decisions. Far fewer said they would trust their county (27 percent) or the state (26 percent).

The findings were similar in a telephone survey conducted by Susquehanna Polling & Research, a Harrisburg-based public opinion polling firm. This study indicated that Pennsylvanians had more faith and confidence in local government (27 percent) than in state (12 percent), federal (15 percent), or county government (11 percent).

A critical layer

Township government isn't just another layer of government. It's the *critical* layer, one that represents you and your neighbors, lives within its budget, and provides the services you've asked for — nothing more and nothing less.

So as Local Government Week draws near, take a look around your township and realize that all the good things you see — the parks, the well-maintained roads, and the safe environment to raise a family — are possible because your local leaders had a vision and turned it into a reality. These things are possible, too, because you asked for them and are willing to pay for them.

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