



TOWNSHIPS TODAY

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Pennsylvanians Are Choosing to Live in Townships, But What Do You Know About the Place You Call Home?

As many as 5.4 million Pennsylvanians live in townships, and you're one of them. But what do you really know about the place you call home? Do you know the names of your township supervisors? Have you ever been to one of their meetings? Do you know where the municipal building is and have you ever visited it?

If you are shaking your head "no," you're not alone. Townships remain a mystery to some people, despite the fact that nearly half of the state's population has put down roots there.

So what exactly is a township? Well, here is some valuable information to help you better understand this form of local government.

Townships are in a class by themselves

Before discussing townships, though, it's probably best to start with an overview of Pennsylvania's entire local government system, which is divided into four types of political subdivisions: cities, counties, boroughs, and, of course, townships.

Pennsylvania's founder, William Penn, established these units of government, which share the same basic statutory powers and public service responsibilities. Under law, the commonwealth's political subdivisions are

divided into classes, which are based strictly on population. Currently, there are nine classes of counties, four classes of cities, and two classes of townships. Boroughs are not classified.

Pennsylvania has 1,456 townships of the second class, which encompass more land and have more residents — 5.4 million — than any of the state's other political subdivisions. ➤



Your township is served by a board of supervisors, whose members are elected to make decisions that are in the best interest of the municipality. These local officials value your input. Therefore, by simply speaking up at a township meeting, you and your neighbors can have a profound impact on what happens in your community.

“Townships are *the* choice of Pennsylvanians,” says Richard Hadley, president of the Pennsylvania State Association of Township Supervisors and a supervisor for Cranberry Township in Butler County. “Why? Because people can live the American Dream there. The land is plentiful, the homes affordable, and the quality of life exceptional.”

An elected board of supervisors, whose members serve six-year terms and must live in the township, governs your community. Although each board has a chairman, this person has no more power than the other supervisors.

Townships are the oldest form of municipal government in the United States and have a deep-rooted history in Pennsylvania, with some dating back to the 1600s. In the early days, 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.

Always on call

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 into the early hours of the morning.

Township supervisors hold public meetings at least once a month, and it is at these sessions that they discuss the issues and make the decisions that have the most impact on you and your neighbors. Under the law, citizens have the right to address the board about matters before it. When deciding on a course of action, the supervisors will weigh your concerns along with their responsibilities under state and federal laws.

“Township government is the government closest to the people,” Hadley says. “Residents can speak up at a township meeting and have a profound impact on what happens in their community. This happens every day in Pennsylvania because township supervisors are responsive to the needs and concerns of their neighbors.”

To help with the administrative side of running a local government, most townships have full or part-time secretaries, secretary-treasurers, or managers. And depending on their size, they may also have additional staff, including road workers, police officers, zoning and code

enforcement officers, engineers, and park and recreation professionals, to help with the township’s day-to-day operations.

Is bigger really better?

Still, despite their popularity with Pennsylvanians, townships have come under fire in recent years. Special-interest groups claim that the commonwealth has too many local governments and would be better served by a centralized system of fewer, bigger governments.

This, however, goes against the grain of what the public says it wants.

According to a survey of registered Pennsylvania voters by the Lincoln Institute of Public Opinion, 80 percent of the respondents said that their local government should not be replaced with a countywide government; 81 percent said that merger decisions should be made locally and should not be required by the state; and 70 percent said that their municipality should not merge with a surrounding one.

“Pennsylvania has so many local governments because that’s what the citizens want,” says Lowman Henry, chairman and CEO of the Lincoln Institute.

Wendell Cox, a government consolidation expert who has studied Pennsylvania, agrees, saying that state lawmakers should listen to their constituents and reject proposals that would FORCE local governments to consolidate with larger, urban areas. Why? No one would benefit, especially taxpayers, Cox says. In fact, the only thing that forced consolidation would do, he says, is spread the higher costs and inefficiencies of the larger jurisdiction over a larger area.

Cox’s conclusion: “When you amalgamate, it’s not the best that emerges; it’s the worst.”

‘A crucial mistake’

Howard Husock of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University supports Cox’s conclusions.

“In the U.S., the amalgamation idea is seen as a means to redirect some of the wealth of current suburban jurisdictions to our deteriorated inner-city neighborhoods,” Husock says. “At the same time, it’s claimed that bigger cities will be better able to compete economically, presumably by recruiting big employers.

“Crucial to this point of view is a crucial mistake, the mistaken idea that bigger government can be more efficient and effective government,” he adds. “Yet, study after study has shown that the efficiency gains of bigger government do not materialize.”

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