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## The Role of Township Government in Today's Society and the Future

Township government plays a vital role in rural communities across Illinois, providing essential services that directly affect residents' daily lives. Although some state officials have proposed dissolving the township government to reduce costs, local leaders and organizations including the Township Officials of Illinois argue that townships remain the most efficient and responsive form of local government. Hutsonville Township serves as a clear example of how the township government supports infrastructure, social services, community development, and civic participation while also facing challenges that will shape its future. I sat down with Hutsonville Township Supervisor Toni Earleywine to discuss this topic and gain more knowledge in the area.

The Hutsonville Township is divided into two separate districts: the township and the road. The State of Illinois mandates that townships must perform three primary duties. First, they must maintain all township roads and bridges. This includes mowing, removing snow, patching potholes, repairing damage, and resurfacing roads. In rural areas, where residents often rely heavily on local roads for commuting and farming, these services are critical. Without township oversight, responsibility for these roads would shift and result in slower response times as well as reduced attention to local needs.

Townships are also required to provide General Assistance programs for residents who meet specific qualifications. This financial support helps individuals and families cover essential

expenses such as rent, utilities, and groceries. Even if relatively few people use the program, the state mandates that it must be available to ensure help for those in need.

Another mandated responsibility is property tax assessment. Townships help determine the Estimated Assessment Value (EAV) of properties, which directly affects how much residents pay in property taxes. Smaller townships, such as Hutsonville, are allowed to share assessment services with neighboring townships to reduce costs. Hutsonville joined Lamotte and Montgomery Townships for this purpose, demonstrating how township governments can cooperate to remain financially efficient while still fulfilling state requirements.

Beyond state-mandated duties, townships often take on additional responsibilities that benefit the community. Hutsonville Township maintains eight cemeteries, a task assigned to townships by the state in the 1950s. Maintaining burial grounds preserves local history and provides a dignified resting place for community members. According to Township Supervisor Toni, cemetery care is a very large part of her job, highlighting how township services often extend beyond what residents immediately see.

Township government also contributes to community development and public safety. Hutsonville Township has supported the local fire department by helping purchase new air packs, donated resources to the community park, and assisted with the early warning system. These contributions improve quality of life and safety, especially in smaller communities where funding sources are limited. Such efforts demonstrate that townships serve not only as administrative bodies but also as active partners in strengthening the community.

Despite these benefits, township governments face an uncertain future. The State of Illinois has repeatedly considered dissolving townships, arguing that consolidation would save

money. However, research from TOI suggests that eliminating townships may simply shift responsibilities to counties or municipalities rather than eliminating them. Supervisor Earlywine, who has served nearly ten years, believes dissolving township government would be harmful, particularly because townships provide local control and direct accountability to residents.

A major concern for the future is declining civic participation. Hutsonville Township's board consists of five voting members who meet monthly, along with an annual township meeting where residents can vote on major financial decisions. Toni notes that fewer citizens are attending meetings, volunteering, or running for office compared to previous generations. She believes maintaining township government depends on renewed community involvement, as local government functions best when residents actively participate.

In conclusion, township government remains an essential part of rural governance in Illinois. It provides critical services such as road maintenance, financial assistance, property assessment, cemetery care, and community support initiatives. While proposals to eliminate townships continue, evidence from communities like Hutsonville shows that they offer cost-effective, locally focused solutions to everyday needs. The future of township government will depend not only on legislative decisions but also on citizens recognizing its importance and choosing to remain engaged in their local communities.