



from your Executive Director

By Bryan E. Smith

TOI Executive Director

Annual Town Meeting: It's What We're All About!

WITH THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION campaign upon us, I was recently reflecting on a phrase I heard throughout the last presidential campaign season and expect to hear again this year. I heard many candidates for office use the phrase “town meeting” as *the* way to meet with the public, reach out to them, and hear their ideas. Is the Town Meeting concept something new?

Absolutely not!

Candidates for public office from President to members of Congress, to members of the General Assembly have in more recent years used the town meeting as the way to meet with the public.

The State of Illinois was admitted to the union in 1818. When settlers started coming to Illinois from the New England states, they brought with them the idea of the township as their form of local government. Because of this, the Illinois Constitution of 1848 provided the option for the voters in each county to adopt the township form of government.

I like to refer to the Illinois Constitution of 1848 as the “birth” of township government here in Illinois. In 1848, there were only 99 of the current 102 counties in existence and in 1849, those first-year counties had the opportunity to vote on adopting the township form of government, 24 counties adopted it. Today, 85 of Illinois’ 102 counties operate under the township government system with 1427 townships.

In 1850, most of the townships that we know today probably held what would be considered their first Annual Town Meeting. Ever since that date 170 years ago, every township in the state during the month of April has held its Annual Town Meeting.

When I get asked about the Annual Town Meeting, I always think back to its true meaning. Remember, we live a democracy. Right?

Well, sort of. Most of our governments are representative/democratic. We elect our legislators, for example, to represent our interest in Springfield. With townships, we have the luxury of being a representative government *and* as close to a pure democracy in the United States. Every voter/elector who attends the Annual Town Meeting has one vote in all matters voted upon. You sure don’t find that in any other government!

When I hear folks say the Annual Town Meeting is outdated, they tend to overlook this fact that true democracy is exercised by the residents of each township. With candidates and other elected officials using the “Town Meeting concept” as the way to reach out and hear the people, the town meeting is surely still the best way to hear what the people want and need.

The second Tuesday in April is April 14th and the date of the Annual Town Meeting.* At your Annual Town Meeting take time to listen and hear what your residents want and need. The Annual Town Meeting is the one time a year that residents have a direct say in how their government is run. The Annual Town Meeting is *still* the *foundation* of township government.

Good luck at your Annual Town Meeting.

* Whenever the date of the Annual Town Meeting conflicts with the celebration of Passover, the township board **may** postpone the annual township meeting to the first Tuesday following the last day of Passover. This year, in 2020, this occurs. Because of this the Township Board **MAY** postpone the date of the Annual Town Meeting to the first Tuesday following the last day of Passover. In 2020 this would be April 21st.