

In preparation for writing this essay, I interviewed Mr. John Griffin, Barnett Township Supervisor, and Trustee Mr. Dave Steward.

Township government is the most local and personable of all levels of government. Being originally established in Illinois during the 1850s, it has served people of all ages for generations. This aforementioned serving is through its three main functions: providing general assistance for its constituents, assessing property for taxation purposes, and maintaining roads and bridges.

General assistance includes many different aspects, including providing emergency relief including temporary food and shelter while people are unable to support themselves, providing monetary relief for members of the community in need, and providing social services not otherwise accessible to its constituents. The official language around this is “assistance for the indigent,” but that is far from all it qualifies for. These three functions are mandates, while there are effectively no legal limits on what townships are able to provide if they so choose. That can include nearly anything from youth to geriatric programs, official social groups, activity centers such as parks, or even cemetery maintenance among many others. Property assessments are completed by trained officials from the township who determine property valuations for taxing purposes. The last, and in Barnett Township most often seen function, is road and bridge maintenance. This includes any repairs, new paving, or snow removal not on federal, state, county, or private roads and bridges. This is overseen by the Highway Commissioner and can be completed in any way that is seen fit. The most common method includes the hiring of part time workers to complete any necessary projects. In any case, road maintenance is a major aspect of their duties and where some of the most inter-township cooperation occurs. One example of this in Barnett township is that some equipment is purchased jointly with two neighboring townships, where a contract is signed and they split the cost and use of machinery. This cooperation allows

each township to accomplish more work, such as resurfacing of roads, than they would otherwise complete on their own. Past these, one of the most important aspects of township governance is the fact that it is so local and community based. Because it is the smallest form of government, it is the most accessible. Townships serve relatively small areas, roughly 36 square miles, so township officials simply have less people and properties to focus on. This allows them to provide communities with the most necessary support first, as they are able to see and know the needs and situations of the constituents on a more personal level. It is also more accessible than other kinds of government, as annual meetings are held every second Tuesday of April, where all constituents are able to come to a meeting to vote on and discuss issues specific to their township. As Mr. Griffin stated during his interview, he is “in charge of making neighbors happy.” This shows the essence of township governments: they are definitionally by the people, for the people, as their smaller scale means that all actions have more noticeable effects.

The current position of townships has obvious importance and duties, but the future remains slightly less clear. Recently, there has been a trend with calls for the consolidation or elimination of townships. Many of these proposals do not recognise the flexibility and benefits inherent to smaller and more direct systems of government, such as townships. Some of these proposals have been introduced as methods of cost savings, while in reality the township structure remains as a very efficient means of providing government services. The simple fact that townships have functioned in the nation for over 175 years demonstrates that they have worked effectively and efficiently, and will continue to serve a necessary function well into the future.