



Town and Township Government in the United States





The National Association of Towns and Townships (NATaT) is the voice for more than 13,000 towns and townships across America seeking to enhance the ability of smaller communities to deliver public services, economic vitality, and good government to their citizens. America's towns and townships seek to partner with the federal government to ensure that public laws, policies, regulations, and resources support our role in fostering local democracy.

Historical Background

Town and township government is the oldest existing form of government continuing to serve in the United States. Brought to America in the 17th-century, townships were established as a pure democratic process to provide people with a direct voice in grassroots government. Today, 20 states have the town or township form of local government. In many rural areas, towns or townships are the only unit of local government available to serve the basic government service needs of the community.

Originally, most towns and townships in the Upper Midwest were based on the original surveying township of six mile by six mile squares (36 square miles), but natural and man-made boundaries (e.g., rivers and county lines), as well as annexation, and sparse population densities have caused some variation. In most states town and township governments generally have jurisdiction over a distinct geographic area, outside of cities and villages.

Local Democracy in Action

Towns and townships represent self-governance in its truest form. Towns and townships are typically governed by a board of three, five or seven members elected at large. Typically, this board is directly accessible to the people with no layers of bureaucracy in between. The board serves as the town or township's legislative body, setting policy, enacting local ordinances, adopting budgets, and levying taxes. Because there is typically no separately elected executive, the board also performs a number of executive functions, such as enforcing ordinances, approving expenditures

Where Will You Find Towns and Townships?

The term "town or township governments" is applied to 16,504 organized governments located in the following 20 states in the Northeast and the Midwest:

- Connecticut
- Illinois
- Indiana
- Kansas
- Maine
- Massachusetts
- Michigan
- Minnesota
- Missouri
- Nebraska
- New Hampshire
- New Jersey
- New York
- North Dakota
- Ohio
- Pennsylvania
- Rhode Island
- South Dakota
- Vermont
- Wisconsin

Finances of Municipal and Township Governments: 2002, U.S. Census Bureau

and hiring employees. Some additional offices, such as clerk or constable, may also be elected.

Small towns and townships may have no formal department structure and only one or two full- or part-time employees. Larger towns and townships may have separate departments for police, fire protection, finance, community services, and parks and recreation. Towns and townships often operate at less cost than larger municipalities due to the services provided by volunteers. The volunteer fire department is part of the living heritage of towns and townships. Town and township government also enjoys a tradition of careful stewardship over even small amounts of public money.

Historically, residents of towns and townships came together to discuss important issues and establish laws at the Annual Town Meeting. Towns and townships in some states continue to hold Annual Town Meetings on the second Tuesday of March or April to vote on operating budgets, property tax rates and other matters of community interest. Democracy doesn't get much more direct than that. This unique tradition of direct citizen involvement may help to explain why towns and townships are effective at minimizing spending and keeping property tax levies down. It may also explain why town and township residents often vigorously fight forced annexations into neighboring cities.



Duties of Towns and Townships

The responsibilities and form of town or township government is specified by the state legislatures. State laws authorize towns and townships to perform a wide variety of functions. The most common duties of towns and townships, which vary somewhat depending on various state laws, include:

- road and bridge maintenance
- property tax administration
- fire and police protection
- emergency medical services
- land use planning and zoning
- garbage collection and recycling
- cemetery management
- elections administration
- environmental protection
- parks and recreation facilities
- operation of food banks, shelters and senior centers.

Towns and townships are primarily funded through property taxes. Other sources of financial support include state shared revenues, user and administrative fees and special assessments.

Myths about Town and Township Consolidation

The town and township form of government has recently come under attack as some state legislatures threaten to merge their functions with cities and counties. According to this “bigger-is-better” theory of government, larger local governments are more efficient than smaller ones. Proponents of eliminating towns and townships promise lower taxes and reduced spending by reducing duplication of services and cutting payroll expenses. In fact, local government consolidations have generally resulted in higher taxes and more spending.

Service sharing can reduce costs, and towns and townships have long embraced local government service sharing arrangements. Towns and townships collaborate with other local government entities on an array of services. Many towns and townships contract with surrounding cities or counties for fire and police protection, and enter into agreements with nearby jurisdictions to share road equipment and purchase supplies.

However, simply combining local government functions does not automatically result in cost savings. Increased costs resulting from expanded administrative oversight can quickly explode local government budgets. Differences between labor contracts, pay scales, operating procedures, and service levels must be negotiated. Unions and employees are unwilling to accept lower pay and less time off, and residents are reluctant to accept lower service levels. Many of the functions that towns and townships perform with volunteers would also require paid staff. For example, the abolishment of towns and townships would lead to the replacement of many volunteer fire departments in more lightly populated areas with the career fire departments typical in urban centers.

Towns and townships are also more responsive to community needs than larger localities because their elected officials are closer to the people and far more accessible to voters. Residents can actually reach their trustees on the telephone. In larger governments, voters have considerably less access to mayors, commissioners and county executives.

Towns and townships already perform very efficiently compared to other units of local government. Most structural reforms will not result in lowering local government expenditures, and instead, are more likely will drive local government expenditures up.

Township government existed more than 140 years before the signing of the Declaration of Independence. May it continue to thrive in the 21st century.



For more information, contact NATaT Federal Director Jennifer Imo at (202) 454-3947 or jimo@tfgnet.com.