

IMPROVING YOUR TOWNSHIP'S



By Bill Costick,
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You work hard. You know your job. You get things done. You keep your campaign commitments. So why should you have to worry about your township's image in the community? Citizen awareness and interaction between citizens and township officials can have a powerful impact on community opinion, citizens' support for their local government, and their respect for elected and appointed township officials.

Many township officials rank improving and maintaining "image" right along with providing services in importance to the township.

"I can think of nothing more critical to the success of a community than a positive image," said **Cindy King, Van Buren Charter Township** (Washtenaw Co.) supervisor. "One can manage finances appropriately, plan for the future and provide quality services and not necessarily project a good image in the community. Unfortunately, it often takes more than 'taking care of business' to have a good image."

There are several measures township officials can take to enhance their community's image and the level of respect and support both elected and appointed township officials and employees might enjoy. We will explore several ideas, all of which can be done without large budgetary appropriations.

The Challenge of Public Service

The image of public service today is not always positive in the public's eye. Controversies and scandals surrounding public officials can dramatically add to cynicism regarding government. Events at the national and state level can greatly influence how some people label elected officials. At the local level, despite an enormous amount of political apathy, citizens in any sized community can easily become "politically acti-

vated" over zoning, taxes, pay raises, road repairs and even a stop sign.

Achieving resident support—rather than ire—can be as simple as listening to concerns. "Residents may come to board meetings with false expectations," remarked **Bill McFarlane**, supervisor of **Superior Charter Township** (Washtenaw Co.). "If you don't know the answer to their question, take their name, find the answer and call them. If residents feel you truly care, and are doing

your best to help them, a negative answer becomes less important."

In the past, the administrative and policy-making procedures of local government were often a mystery. Now citizens not only expect prompt access to their representatives, they have learned they can make a difference. The politics of problem-solving increasingly are at the neighborhood or local community level, and as government has become more accessible, the opportunities for

citizen involvement and passionate activism have greatly increased. It is against this backdrop that locally elected and appointed township officials must work and try to fairly represent *all* community interests.

A Historical Perspective

A close examination of several societal phenomena, technological advances and the legal framework of some aspects of government over the past 50 years will help explain how much things have changed over the past half century.

In the early 1950s and before, relatively speaking, many public officials lacked accountability when compared with today's standards. Few Americans had access to TVs and both TV and radio news coverage was slow, with little capability to cover local government news stories. Fewer regulations existed to govern the behavior of public officials, and access to government files, reports, agendas and minutes was much more difficult.

In the 1960s, we witnessed great advances in TV news coverage, more governmental regulations, advances in civil rights, new environmental standards and organized public sector labor unions. The '70s brought the Open Meetings Act, freedom of information, Watergate and the beginning of instant global communications. The 1980s were a period of community activism, cable TV coverage of local community meetings is implemented by many, nimby-ism (not in my backyard), the notion that "you can fight city hall," new election law requirements, and much greater public involvement and accountability.

Since 1990, we have witnessed a period of rapid new technological changes with the onslaught of fax machines, cell phones, personal computers, the Internet, Web sites and e-mail—all of which have contributed to a setting where, more often than not, citizens expect an instant response, and local officials are held to a standard of immediate accessibility.

Perceptions Shape Public Opinion

Public opinion and the perceptions citizens hold toward their community can be shaped by a single incident or a number of issues that may often not be under the immediate control of elected township offi-

cial. A negative encounter with the police, strong disagreement over a homeowner's property assessment, or a controversial rezoning are examples of single issues that may shape perceptions about a township or township officials. Other examples that shape attitudes and feelings about local government might be:

- How do township elected officials treat each other in public?
- How safe is the community perceived?
- How acceptable is the township water supply?
- Are the ball fields mowed on time?
- Is there adequate fire protection equipment?
- Are streets smooth and clean?
- Are taxes perceived as too high?
- Does the township listen to its citizens?

There is no question that a positive first step every elected township official can take is to assess how the public perceives you and other board members during public township board meetings. Simply put, do you talk to each other in a respectful manner or are meetings filled with cynical comments, obvious discord, negativism and distrust? While all public bodies experience disagreement, one of the easiest ways to achieve a negative reputation for the community is to allow township board meetings to be conducted with hostility, negativism and rancor.

To overcome these situations, should they exist, look at team-building, or work on developing a strategic plan or conduct goal-setting for an ensuing year. Do something to get people talking positively and working together for the community's future. Experience is clear that where you find a township board filled with disharmony and mistrust, you will find a community that is in serious trouble and has an image problem. To create a positive community image start with evaluating how township board meetings are being conducted.

"Public perception of the way the township is governed has a direct result of being positive or negative in the eye of residents," said McFarlane "Our township board works as a team. Certainly, we don't agree on all issues. Still, we resolve issues professionally with dignity.

"If elected officials want people to think positively of their community, their actions must echo that positive attitude. ... Demonstrate or 'be' the image you want others to have of your township."

***Cindy King, Supervisor,
Van Buren Charter Township
(Washtenaw Co.)***

"A positive image may be reflected when you enjoy going to work at the township hall," he continued. "Resident perception that the township is working for them makes your job a lot easier. A positive image means resident support."

Added King, "If elected officials want people to think positively of their community, their actions must echo that positive attitude. Officials who engage in bickering, grand-standing, or are mean-spirited do not reflect well upon their communities. In other words, demonstrate or 'be' the image you want others to have of your township."

Easier Said Than Done

There is a lot of competition shaping public sentiment today. The public's attitude toward its government can be apathetic and at times cynical. Media news coverage, whether written or televised, regarding national and state politics and issues can create instant impressions that shape public perceptions about government in general and can even impact how all elected officials are viewed. Adding to the list of things that shape public sentiment today are political wrongdoings and misdeeds at the national level, corporate scandals and fraud, crises in church and religious groups, international conflict, and negative media reporting. Is it any wonder that the average citizen who is not involved in any form of community or political activity might have a cynical view of the world?

Don't let that cynicism—or negative media coverage—dictate your township's image.

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“If you don’t make the effort to promote your township, someone else will—sometimes to the negative,” advised **Linda Schwehofer, China Charter Township** (St. Clair Co.) supervisor. “I have maintained a good rapport with our local newspaper, by always making an effort to return calls and talk with reporters. I can call them when something positive happens in the township that I want others to know about. It’s important to stay in the forefront about the good things happening in your township.”

Some political observers describe the perception of public service today as having a political legacy of fragmentation and mistrust. In the United States today, there are an estimated 88,000 units of local government with 15 million employees. With so many governments, citizens are often frustrated with securing answers or easily finding solutions to their problems. Many Americans believe governments are inherently inefficient. Repeated epithets of our pop culture include: “It’s good enough for government work” or “I’m from the government, and I’m here to help.”

Despite these common misconceptions, it’s important to realize that township officials *can* shape public perception of their communities. “As an elected official, you must be the ambassador for your community,” King encouraged. “Toot your own horn, market your efforts.”

Quest for Public Confidence

Against this backdrop, the quest for public confidence has to become an overriding goal of all locally elected and appointed officials. The challenge of gaining public confidence has been placed in five broad categories:

Leadership Challenge: Public leadership occurs in a myriad of settings; in legislatures, deep within state and county bureaucracies, and in township and city halls. Those concerned with the pressures of public governance have long wrestled with how to attract and create opportunities for skilled leaders willing to tackle the tough issues of state and local government.

Workforce Challenge: To provide quality services, a well-trained and skilled workforce is essential. However, competing forces include:

- Economic competition from the private sector for the most talented people
- Lower wages for public employment
- Inadequate training budgets
- Strategies that emphasize productivity yet lack incentives
- Cultural legacy of devalued work

Performance Challenge: Local governments must develop an organizational culture and work environment that focuses on achieving efficient, responsive operational and administrative work procedures and performance. Public employees must work equal to or better than the private sector and strive for continuous improvement.

Fiscal Challenge: At all levels, but especially at the local level, government must manage its fiscal resources with the highest degree of integrity and efficiency. In Michigan today, I would submit that it would be difficult to find a level of government that manages its fiscal resources better than townships. The problem is that citizen expectations are often unrealistic, or worse, the township is blamed for using all property taxes collected. Taxes and public spending will always be a challenge. So how do we create a positive feeling about the efficiency and stewardship of the township’s operations, delivery of services and fiscal integrity?

Ethics and Trust: Our system of democracy and our government institutions are sustained by public trust and a link supported by stringent ethical standards. Those in local government today must represent the highest degree of integrity and be held in the public’s eye as individuals of high ethical standards. When ethical codes of conduct are violated by just one member of a locally elected board it can negatively reflect on the entire township.

What Does This All Mean?

One vital role of public servants today, especially at the township level, is to shape public impressions of their government. Direct contact and public

interaction on a daily basis and performing services that are directly observable (for example, litter and waste removal, roadside cleanup, maintenance of public parks, and conduct of public meetings) create opportunities to greatly influence how the public perceives the image of their township government. A citizen’s image of his or her community can be affected by a host of things, like the appearance of streets and right-of-way, interactions with township employees, articles in local newspapers, or the feeling a person can get just walking along the streets of a town center. A positive relationship between a local government and the citizens it serves is critical to local elected officials.

Public perception of the way the township is governed has a direct result of being positive or negative in the eyes of residents,” McFarlane noted. “Residents want elected officials to champion efforts to maintain the quality of life they desire. Resident support of image can relate to support of millages or zoning changes. The images of a professional staff working for the interest of its citizens establishes trust. Trust translates to support and a positive image.”

Improving Your Township’s Image

Now that the many challenges have been clarified, what will it take to improve your township’s image? Only you can assess what should be changed, what needs to be implemented and what resources are available to truly make a difference. But are we talking a lot of money? The answer is NO! We are talking about “public service,” developing a genuine public service attitude through the delivery of township services

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and through positive and respected personal interaction with the public. Fortunately most of Michigan's townships operate in this capacity—e.g., with a public service attitude—but there are some ideas that are worth revisiting if you truly want to improve your township government's image and the perception held about the community by those you serve.

The challenge is getting to the point where you or your township board, decides to take stock and identify new measures to be implemented towards creating a new image or enhancing the image of your township.

Once you have decided to try something new, the most helpful thing you can do is identify a "vision" for the future. As with any strategic planning process, along with a "vision" will be any number of goals and/or objectives. Your goals do not have to be sophisticated, they can be simple and concise—possibly a list of things to do or to be achieved within a certain time frame. A sample list of basic foundation-type actions might include:

- Establish your new community vision
- Walk the talk—set a positive example
- Clarify your public service expectations
- Hire the right people—optimistic/sensitive
- Inspire and train employees to serve well
- Serve the public with teamwork approach
- Encourage new ideas for continuous improvement
- Swing into action/take care of complaints
- Keep citizens informed through frequent communications
- Solicit citizen input, survey, and follow up
- Under promise—over deliver
- Be paranoid and remain vigilant

Once the "vision" is created and the necessary steps to reach your goals are clear, the organization must develop and maintain a culture of continuous improvement. To attain high quality performance you must find a means of sharing the vision, values and goals through frequent training, interaction and conscientious feedback. Extensive entry-level training and re-training of existing employees is essential to sharing and carrying out your public serv-

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ice goals. These same concepts can be applied to elected officials and appointed citizen volunteers as well.

And remember, it's never to late to start. "Being *proactive* in building a positive image is easier than *reactive* to a negative image," McFarlane reminded. "Your image is only as good as the effort you extend today and tomorrow. The effort from the past is the past."

What Else Can Be Done?

There are clear steps that any local government can take to improve its image and the level of respect and confidence it enjoys within the community, from its citizenry and from an outside public perspective through its reputation. First, it is imperative that township officials see that citizens are informed about their local government and all of its responsibilities. Secondly, it is important that frequent formal interaction with the public takes place. Third, to every extent possible the town-

ship must take care of and respond to requests, concerns and complaints. Fourth, each township must examine and take steps to improve its organizational image. Finally, since the ultimate test is actual performance, you must be particular and demand performance above any standard of average.

Communicate the Importance of Township Government

- Use every opportunity to effectively, in a positive setting, talk to citizen groups, civic clubs, neighborhood associations, etc.
- Promote media relations—use cable TV to your advantage
- Think public relations—photo opportunities for all successful projects
- Speak to senior citizen groups and school children at all levels
- Publish township newsletters and public information project letters

Providing information to residents to key, according to Schweihofer. "It's always good to have too much information, rather than

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not enough," she said, noting China Charter Township distributes a newsletter up to six times a year, saving costs by including it with the township's recreation flier. "We always get great feedback from our newsletter. I've had people comment to me that they find my supervisor's column friendly and personal, and that, through it, they feel like they know me."

Create Opportunities to Interact with the Public

- Do what police and fire departments do—hold a periodic township open house
- Attend and speak at neighborhood meetings
- Host or speak at civic club meetings
- Host or speak to school children and senior citizens
- Get involved with the use of citizen committees
- There are crime and fire prevention programs ... do you have a community-wide spring clean-up or blight prevention program?
- Find reasons to celebrate the community, a business or personal citizen achievements

"Take a few minutes to inventory the good things going on in your township—improvements in services, etc.—and perhaps send out press releases or place notices on bulletin boards in the township hall," King advised. "Provide info, whenever possible, at meetings or other events elected officials are invited to, such as a Chamber of Commerce or Rotary meeting."

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Take Care of Township Business

- Answer requests and resolve complaints as promptly as possible
- If answers must be delayed, call citizens and give them a schedule
- If you must say no, explain why
- If another jurisdiction is responsible, assist citizen with contacts
- Let everyone involved know of action taken to resolve a complaint
- Document complaint resolution for future reference

A professional image when handling township business goes a long way. "The only reason for township government is to be a service provider and help people," McFarlane said. "Citizen complaints can be viewed as opportunities to help residents be successful."

Even if a matter isn't under the township's jurisdiction, the way the township official or

employee handles a citizen request or inquiry makes a difference. "Many residents call the township office with a question that may or may not be the responsibility of the township," he added. "Providing the answer may not be as important as providing the perception of a service provider."

Enhance Your Organizational Image

Take stock of your township as an organization that has a fragile image, one that is dependent on factors that relate to less tangible feelings and opinions regarding service and responsiveness and more tangible measures about appearance and maintenance. Unless you commit to enhancing the visible characteristics of a community, all of the teamwork in the world won't get you to the new image level you may want to achieve. It's the difference we often see in a high-end resort community where streets are clean and properties neatly landscaped, with town center band shells or harbors, decorative fountains and fancy street lights. These things cost money, and often large sums of money, and not every community is a tourist destination. But there are many things every community can do to improve its organizational image, such as:

- What is the public image of the township workforce? Do they possess a positive attitude, a highly visible work ethic, and professional appearance?
- Are township buildings, facilities, parks, pump stations and grounds well maintained? What message do they convey?
- Are public works infrastructure such as

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streets, road sides, signs, drains and parking lots maintained and litter-free?

- Is maintenance equipment used by the township well-maintained? How about fire and police vehicles?
- How do your public road right-of-ways look? If you keep them clean, private property owners will follow suit. This is a proven fact!

Be Particular—Perform Above Average

In today's world, average isn't good enough. If you truly want to improve your image, every opportunity to excel must be exercised. While there is no magical formula to achieve excellence, there are some practical things you may want to consider, such as:

- Examine how you conduct public meetings, especially township board meetings. Is the agenda efficient? Do you make use of a consent portion of the agenda? Are procedures and time limits for public speakers reasonable? Is there a problem with civility? How these meetings are conducted can greatly influence public opinion.
- Consider using "information meetings" prior to public hearings for major capital projects, new township programs, special assessment projects (even to kick off initiatory petitions), for controversial zoning or land use issues. These preliminary information meetings can build confidence in township government because they are not subject to the normal public hearing time constraints when part of a regular meeting agenda.
- Hold annual or semi-annual goal-setting or strategic planning meetings as a township board and possibly at certain times with a particular board such as a planning commission.
- Involve 60 citizens in developing a 5 or 10-year township plan. You might be surprised at the positive results.
- Do everything possible to maintain good relations with county road staff—this may be key to achieving your street system maintenance goals.
- Finally, take an objective look at your township, ask yourself if you are proud to show guests around. Today's society places value on making the landscape look good, e.g., flowers, trees, cleaning up

litter, and restoring blighted areas. If the township budget is tight, get civic clubs, garden clubs, the Scouts and other youth groups involved. You would be amazed at how much community pride will evolve from a community clean-up or beautification project.

Allowing citizens to feel involved in their community is critical. "Our department of planning and economic development has held frequent visioning sessions to inform the public about land that is planned for development, or to garner feedback about our parks, etc.," King said. "Operate in an atmosphere of openness; people like to think they know the 'real' or 'true' story about what's going on in their community. Be honest."

Public service is a noble and worthy calling. It is up to those working today in the public sector, in leadership roles in government, to influence and mold perceptions about the level of government they serve. Good luck in making your township government something special! ■



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