

No Surprise: MTA Survey Reveals Broad Cooperation in Delivery of Township Services



Cooperate. Consolidate. Collaborate.

Over the past year, local government has been under intense scrutiny, by state lawmakers and the media. Claims have been made that Michigan's system of local government is ineffective, that bigger government is better government.

At our core, MTA and township officials know that the most efficient form of government *is* township government. We also know that local officials are—and have been—working with neighboring municipalities to offer and enhance services to residents. Cooperation may not always make sense, but when it does, township officials are often willing to step up to the plate and work together to provide the best quality of life possible.

Local government cooperation in Michigan is happening at a high rate, and is delivering everyday services to Michigan residents and businesses.

But while township officials already know that they work with their neighbors, MTA felt it was important to collect current data to better demonstrate the assertion that townships *do* cooperate. We live in a world where “most” and “sometimes” don't cut it. People want facts—numbers and percentages to back up the assertions that we know to be true: Local government cooperation in Michigan is happening at a high rate, and *is* delivering everyday services to Michigan residents and businesses.

From September through November 2007, MTA collected data from townships in eight select counties—Cass, Cheboygan, Kent, Macomb, Marquette, Midland, Oakland and Washtenaw Counties. Some 122 townships—approximately 10 percent of townships in Michigan—were surveyed on a range of cooperative issues.

The counties were selected to be geographically representative of the state, with a focus also being paid to Macomb, Oakland and Washtenaw Counties because of the unique, more urbanized and full-service nature of townships located in southeast Michigan. After looking at the vast variation in population density of the townships surveyed—an average of 18,086 residents for southeast Michigan townships compared to 3,791 for “outstate” townships—survey numbers have been analyzed and separated into two categories.

Once the interviews with township officials were concluded, the numbers were compiled and analyzed in many different ways. The following are key highlights from MTA's findings. While the degree of cooperation certainly varies in order to match the needs of the community, the numbers don't lie: Michigan townships throughout the state are actively cooperating to provide services to residents and businesses. ▶

Survey Highlights at a Glance



OF THE 48% THAT SHARE SERVICES:

- 30% SE Michigan townships share fire protection services.
- 57% Outstate townships share fire protection services.



OF THE 33% THAT SHARE SERVICES:

- 37% SE Michigan townships share parks and recreation services.
- 32% Outstate townships share parks and recreation services.

Providing Assessment Services



OF ALL TOWNSHIPS SURVEYED:

- 43% Contract with assessors who also contract with other local units
 - 26% Employ a full-time assessor
 - 12% Have supervisors who act as assessor*
 - 8% Employ a part-time assessor
 - 5% Contract independently with an assessor
 - 6% Contract assessing services with the county
- Over 63 percent** of townships surveyed report sharing assessing services in some capacity.

*NO southeast Michigan townships have supervisors who act as assessor.



EMERGENCY SERVICES

Fire Protection

- Nearly 48 percent of townships engage in some type of cooperative measures regarding fire protection.
- Some 57 percent of outstate townships have cooperative fire protection.
- More than 30 percent of southeast Michigan townships contract with other units or have joint fire departments.

Police Protection

- Approximately 31 percent of townships contract from either the county or another local unit for some form of additional police coverage.
- Roughly 10 percent of townships operate some form of their own police department.
- Nearly 55 percent of townships are covered by police protection solely through the county.
- Nearly 49 percent of southeast Michigan townships contract with the county for additional services.

Emergency Medical Services

- More than 42 percent of townships operate some form of emergency response service.
- Some 65 percent of southeast Michigan townships operate their own services, while 29 percent of townships in the other counties operate their own services.
- More than 16 percent provide some form of emergency services jointly—nearly 12 percent of southeast Michigan townships and 24 percent in the other areas of the state.
- Emergency medical services are provided by private companies in 20 percent of townships.

WATER AND SEWER SERVICES

Water Service

- Nearly 53 percent of southeast Michigan townships provide water service to residents, while roughly 36 percent of townships in the other areas of the state provide water service.

- Some 62 percent of townships that deliver water service to residents do so cooperatively.
- A full 36 percent provide water with another local unit—42 percent in southeast Michigan townships and 29 percent in other areas.
- Roughly 22 percent are members of a water authority—16 percent in southeast Michigan townships and 26 percent in other areas.
- Approximately 4 percent contract for water service from another local unit or authority.

Sewer Service

- Almost 46 percent of townships surveyed provide sewer service to their residents—63 percent of southeast Michigan townships and nearly 35 percent of townships in other areas.
- Nearly 79 percent of southeast Michigan townships provide sewer service cooperatively, versus 57 percent in outstate townships.
- Only 12 percent of townships that provide sewer service do so on their own, without cooperating in some way.



RECYCLING

- More than 51 percent of townships offer a formal recycling program.
- Roughly 8 percent of townships offer recycling through a program with the county and almost 14 percent have their own program.
- Amongst southeast Michigan townships, no townships offer a program with the county while more than 25 percent offer their own program. Comparatively, 13 percent of townships in outstate Michigan offer a program with the county, while only 8 percent offer a program on their own.
- More than 10 percent offer recycling programs with other local units or townships—12 percent of southeast Michigan townships and 9 percent of townships in the other areas. ▶

State Laws Govern Cooperation

At least 11 state laws grant general authority to local governments to enter into contracts and agreements for joint services, to purchase and sell services, or cooperate in other ways. Many statutes address specific authority to enter into interlocal agreements related to public works, transportation, libraries, mental health, public health, substance abuse programs, fire protection, police protection, youth centers, assessing, senior services and construction code enforcement.

The following are four enabling statutes that are most commonly used for intergovernmental agreements:

- Urban Cooperation Act (Public Act 7 of 1967, MCL 124.501, *et seq.*)
- Intergovernmental Transfers of Functions and Responsibilities (PA 8 of 1967, MCL 124.531, *et seq.*)
- Intergovernmental Contracts Between Municipal Corporations (PA 35 of 1951, MCL 124.1, *et seq.*)
- Intermunicipality Committees (PA 200 of 1957, MCL 123.631, *et seq.*)

Other statutes authorize municipal districts, metropolitan councils, regional planning and intercounty committees. The Charter Township Act also contains provisions for intergovernmental cooperation.

'A Great Success'

For officials in **Beaugrand Township** (Cheboygan Co.), inter-governmental cooperation is just a way of life. And they are always looking for more ways to cooperate and expand services to their 1,200 township residents.

According to Supervisor **Marcia Rocheleau**, one of the township's cooperative agreements dates back more than three decades. Four townships—Beaugrand, **Munro**, **Inverness** and **Hebron Townships**—receive fire service through a cooperative department. Governed by a joint administrative fire board, the department operates out of two fire halls. Currently, two of the townships have entered into a cooperative agreement to construct a new fire hall to replace the older one used by the department.

"The fire agreement has been a great success," Rocheleau stated. "I really can't say enough about the fire department and how proud we are of it."

The township's intergovernmental cooperation isn't just limited to fire services. Three years ago, the city of Cheboygan approached the township, along with Inverness and **Benton Townships**, to "sit down and discuss common problems and situations, and to keep each other informed of what is going on in our own area," Rocheleau said. A group of officials from the four communities continues to meet quarterly, and those meetings have proven quite informative.

"The city sees what the townships are dealing with, and we see what issues they are handling," said Rocheleau. "Everybody has their own ideas and perspectives. In fact, the ideas that have come out of those meetings have proven to be very beneficial."

Among the new concepts that emerged from the quarterly meetings was a desire to look at the area's land use and zoning. "We thought that if we sat down at the same table, we could discuss things and avoid any future conflicts at the borders of each community," Rocheleau said.

The group developed a future land use map and will be turning the map over to the county in hopes that it will be integrated into the county's overall land use plan. Rocheleau says the group will continue to meet, to discuss future issues, such as water quality, protecting farmland and natural resources.

Most recently, Beaugrand Township—among others in the area—has joined into an agreement with the county to offer recycling services to residents. The county is even partnering with neighboring Emmet County, by bringing the collected recyclables to the Emmet County's recycling station. The services began in January of this year, and "residents have indicated they are very happy with it," Rocheleau said.

The township is always on the lookout for new cooperative endeavors, Rocheleau continued. "We're a smaller township," she said. "To offer some of these services on our own would be cost-prohibitive. By doing things jointly, we're able to offer residents more than we'd be able to on our own."



LAND USE

Building Inspectors

- More than 76 percent of townships enforce the state construction code, while 21 percent allow the county to do so, and nearly 2.5 percent have a local authority handle code enforcement.
- More than 50 percent of townships surveyed have their own building inspectors, with nearly half of those inspectors contracting with other local units or considering a cooperative service with another local unit.
- More than 12 percent of townships hire inspectors jointly with another local unit, while nearly 33 percent allow the county to handle building code inspections.

Zoning

- More than 83 percent of townships perform their own zoning, while roughly 17 percent allow the county to handle this function.
- More than 76 percent of townships—86 percent of southeast Michigan townships and 52 percent in other areas—engage in joint planning efforts.

Assessing

- Nearly 43 percent of townships have contracts with assessors who also contract with other local units—30 percent of southeast Michigan townships and 54 percent of townships in the other counties.
- Nearly 5 percent of townships have a contract on their own with assessors, and almost 6 percent of townships have contracts for assessing with the county.
- Almost 12 percent of township supervisors in outstate townships act as assessor, with 60 percent of those being unshared and 40 percent sharing their supervisor as assessor to other communities.
- No southeast Michigan township supervisor serves as assessor.
- Of the approximately 25 percent of townships that employ a full-time assessor, only 12 percent share this employee with another local unit.

- More than 8 percent of townships have a part-time assessor, with nearly 78 percent of those employees being shared with other units.



SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS

- Nearly 75 percent of townships surveyed conduct school board elections—84 percent of southeast Michigan townships and 70 percent of outstate townships.
- More than 18 percent of townships allow the county to handle school board elections, particularly in the outstate counties—25 percent compared to 11 percent of southeast Michigan townships, while 4 percent allow another township or local unit to conduct their school board elections.
- Almost 58 percent issue joint public election notices.

TAX COLLECTIONS

- Some 48 percent of townships print tax bills themselves.
- Almost 44 percent of townships allow the county to print tax bills.
- More than 7 percent of those that print or contract to have their tax bills printed do so jointly with other local units.
- More than 52 percent of townships collect their own delinquent personal property taxes, while almost 47 percent have the county perform this task.
- Roughly 35 percent of southeast Michigan townships, and 63 percent of townships elsewhere in the state, collect delinquent personal property taxes.

COOPERATIVE PURCHASING

- A full 40 percent of townships are involved in joint purchasing—58 percent in southeast Michigan and 22 percent in outstate townships.
- Almost 10 percent of townships jointly purchase goods with other townships, including more than 8 percent that jointly purchase for their fire departments.

'We Are Not an Island'

Ask **Lima Township** (Washtenaw Co.) Supervisor **Ken Unterbrink** about his township's cooperation with neighboring municipalities and he can rattle off a laundry list of examples.

The township has been involved in "many types of inter-governmental cooperation for many years," Unterbrink said, including:

- Dexter Area Library and Chelsea Area Library
- Chelsea Area Fire Authority and Dexter Area Fire Department
- Western Washtenaw Recycling Authority
- Western Washtenaw Area Value Express transportation system
- Washtenaw County Consortium for Solid Waste Management
- Chelsea Area Planning Team and Dexter Area Regional Team
- Sylvan Township Water and Sewer Authority
- Chelsea Area Construction Agency

In addition, Unterbrink points out that the township is also part of Washtenaw County's purchase of development rights program, and its elected officials—who work primarily from home offices to serve the township's 3,000-plus residents—sit on numerous countywide committees.

"Our future is attached to our neighbors and their plans," Unterbrink said. "With Lima Township involved in many authorities, boards and committees, we can be a presence in the community and in community government. Other entities do call and ask opinions and perspective. We, as a township, are more aware of the other township activities and concerns, as their concerns are ours also. We are neighbors."

While the cooperation process may sometimes present challenges, "we are not an island," Unterbrink said. "The thoughts and planning of each municipality are not the same, but understanding our neighbors is a necessity. We may not agree, but we should try to understand their position.

"I believe that it is necessary to seek out intergovernmental cooperation opportunities for the benefit of our residents and their quality of life. In order to survive as a home rule government entity, we must seek out our neighbors in intergovernmental cooperation opportunities."



ADDITIONAL SERVICES

Parks and Recreation

- Of the 69 percent of townships that have a parks or recreation program, 33 percent run programs or parks jointly with another unit.
- Almost 38 percent of southeast Michigan township parks run jointly, with the rest of the state showing nearly 32 percent with a joint park system.

Senior Services

- Of the nearly 45 percent of townships that provide senior services, 25 percent provide programs on their own, while more than 70 percent provide them jointly with another local unit.
- More than 83 percent of outstate townships, and 60 per-

cent of southeast Michigan townships, jointly provide senior services.

COUNTY ROAD COMMISSION FUNDING

- More than 90 percent of townships surveyed contribute annually to the county road commission, including 88 percent of southeast Michigan townships and 91 percent of outstate townships.
- Roughly half of townships contribute more than \$100,000 annually to the county road commission.

OTHER EXAMPLES

- Approximately 53 percent of townships surveyed are involved in additional cooperative efforts, including mutual aid, 425 agreements, clean-up days, election training, youth programs, cemeteries and open space preservation.

TRUTH IN NUMBERS

The numbers don't lie—townships *are* acting cooperatively with one another. While the degree of cooperation varies from township to township, county to county, and region to region, there is certainly a trend for townships to cooperatively use and build upon their resources.

The MTA survey data demonstrates that townships know the best way to spend their resources, and provide the services that their residents desire and need. Because of the variety that exists in our state, there are different needs and wants for each community, and township officials are in touch with identifying and addressing these needs.

Whether through contracting, jointly operating or providing those services themselves, townships are active in finding the most appropriate way to serve their residents. By engaging in cooperative measures, completely of their own volition, townships demonstrate their ability to seek out and adopt plans to use their resources to the best of their ability and to the benefit of their community. ■

Lauren Michalak,
MTA Legislative Intern



About the Author

In July 2007, Michigan State University senior Lauren Michalak approached MTA with an interest in doing an internship revolving around House Bill 4780, legislation that would move tax collection, election administration and assessing duties from townships to counties. As the daughter of **Platte Township** (Benzie Co.) Clerk **Alison Michalak**, Michalak recognized the dangers posed to township government, and wanted her internship to impact the debate on HB 4780. "I knew working with MTA on such an important issue would be a fantastic learning experience," she said. The data that Michalak collected will have a broad impact as the debate over the value of local government continues.