

Michigan Township Focus

JULY 2016

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE MICHIGAN TOWNSHIPS ASSOCIATION

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What's your story? Developing a 'sense of place' for your township

Every township has a story, and knowing—and honoring—that story can help inspire pride among residents and businesses, bring visitors to your area, and create a sense of place and community connection.

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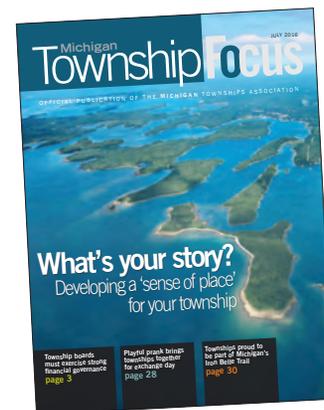
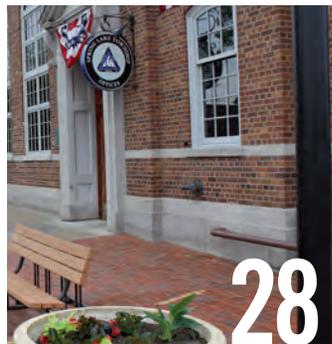
Capture the flag: Playful prank brings townships together

It all started with a stolen flag at MTA's Annual Conference. It resulted in a township exchange day, with Spring Lake Township (Ottawa Co.) inviting the Pokagon Township (Cass Co.) board to visit and learn about their community.

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Take a hike: Townships proud to be part of Iron Belle trail

Michigan's newest—and longest—multi-use trail, the Iron Belle, extends from Belle Isle to Ironwood. Numerous township trails are part of the Iron Belle, connecting residents and visitors with communities along the way.



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The Michigan Townships Association advances local democracy by fostering township leadership and public policy essential for a strong and vibrant Michigan.

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In good times or bad, township boards must exercise strong financial governance

Michigan townships have a well-deserved reputation for maintaining prudent financial positions. Leading up to Michigan's recent recession, townships

generally avoided long-term financial commitments that relied on uncertain revenue sources. And when revenues fell, township officials showed political courage and acumen to cut expenses, trim services and carefully manage the extent to which they dipped into financial reserves.



Some may argue that financial strength results from townships being less dependent

on economically vulnerable manufacturing factories for tax revenues, but nonetheless most urban townships experiencing population declines and closed factories successfully adapted to changing financial circumstances to maintain basic services. Township financial success is a product of several factors—oversight of smaller budgets and fewer revenue streams is more easily accomplished, and higher levels of community engagement continually remind township leaders that the public watches and judges how they handle taxpayer money.

Now that state government has stabilized its revenues and expenditures, a public policy debate is re-emerging as to the extent to which the state should share its financial resources with local governments. Even though there are local governments that, in spite of their best efforts, are struggling from economic forces outside their control, the likelihood that state policymakers will restore revenue sharing any time soon appears less than slim. It isn't even clear that state leaders are willing to give local governments more authority to diversify and raise locally produced revenues. Although the state economy continues to grow, there are strong political forces that want to financially constrain state and local governments.

While property values are currently rebounding, legal restraints on township tax rates, assessment caps and limits on revenue sources continue to require township boards to be especially careful how scarce financial resources are spent. Even with a stable fund balance, township officials need to be ever diligent in exercising fiduciary duties to their taxpayers and pay close attention to changes in their fund balances.

Sometimes a lack of understanding how cash flows differ among counties, cities, villages and townships leads some to criticize township year end-fund balances, and township officials should be prepared to respond to that allegation if other local governments opt to “beggar thy neighbor” in their arguments for more state aid for themselves.

A stable fund balance doesn't mean that a local government has sufficient resources to meet all community needs. Even as township budgets stabilize or slowly grow, boards need to constantly engage in financial planning and monitoring, as well as articulating fiscal policies and ensuring organization compliance, or risk exposing their townships to potential financial hardship or misuse and waste of township resources.

To maintain good fiscal stewardship, boards must regularly review and discuss clear, accurate and timely financial reports. But even quality financial reports are of minimal value to township officials who cannot interpret or understand the context of the information. Financial reports that aggregate a great deal of financial transactions over a period of time are weak in disclosing improper financial transactions and are no substitute for effective internal controls. Smaller townships may be more at risk due to manual accounting systems or off-the-shelf financial software that are vulnerable to manipulation.

Beyond the traditional “watchdog” role of township boards are many more important elements of fiduciary oversight, such as articulating goals that are linked to the annual budget and careful thought to the opportunity costs associated with expenditure decisions. Boards that never establish a strategic direction invariably become fixated on low-level operational matters and react to issues piecemeal.

This September, MTA's “On the Road” regional meetings (see page 27) will present financial topics to help township officials be great stewards of taxpayers' money. I can't think of a better investment of any public official's time or a township's money.

THE NUMBERS SAY IT ALL

Michigan residents continue to prefer townships, new Census figures show

Michigan townships continue to be the fastest-growing communities in the state, according to 2015 municipal-level estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau.

In terms of numbers, **Macomb Township** (Macomb Co.) was once again the biggest gainer in the state, adding an estimated 1,366 residents during the past year—an increase of 1.6 percent, to 86,973 residents. The

township has seen the biggest growth in the state in terms of population for the past several years.

Allendale Charter Township (Ottawa Co.) ranked No. 2 in terms of population growth, adding 1,262 residents—an increase of 5.8 percent—over the past year, to 22,937 total residents. **Lyon Charter Township** (Oakland Co.) once again boasted among the state's biggest gains, with 889 new residents—a 5.2 percent increase—bringing its total population to 18,114.

Overall, one out of three communities in Michigan experienced population growth between 2014 and 2015, according to the census estimates. Michigan saw a marginal increase in total population—0.06 percent or 6,270 people—during the same time period.

For population growth by percentage, **Springdale Township** (Manistee Co.) topped the list, with a 6.2 percent increase, by 48 residents, to 825. Allendale Charter Township tied with **Algoma Township** (Kent Co.) for the No. 2 slot. Both townships increased by 5.8 percent, with Algoma Township adding 617 residents, to 11,293 total population.

Among the Top 10 population gainers in the state, eight were townships. In addition to Macomb, Allendale Charter, Lyon Charter and Algoma Townships, the townships gaining the most new residents were:

- **Pittsfield Charter Township** (Washtenaw Co.), with a gain of 811 residents, the fifth biggest gain in the state.
- **Shelby Charter Township** (Macomb Co.) had the sixth highest gain, with 643 new residents.
- **Georgetown Charter Township** (Ottawa Co.) welcomed 640 new residents, seventh highest in the state.
- **Clinton Charter Township** (Macomb Co.) gained 624 residents, meaning it gained the eighth most residents of any municipality in Michigan.

TO SERVE AND PROTECT

Most locals satisfied with law enforcement

Most townships are very satisfied with law enforcement in their communities, according to recent findings from a statewide survey of local officials.

The survey, part of the University of Michigan's Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS), examined Michigan local government leaders' opinions on law enforcement services in their community, including the perception of problems with crime in the community, satisfaction with law enforcement performance, and funding of law enforcement at the local level. MTA is a partner on the MPPS.

Among the key findings of the survey:

- Over half (54 percent) of local leaders statewide say drug crimes are somewhat of a problem or a significant problem in their community. Property crimes such as burglary, vandalism, identity theft or embezzlement are rated as a community problem by 48 percent of local officials statewide. Violent crimes and public-order offenses like drunk driving and disorderly conduct are less common. Township responses, specifically, mirror the full municipal responses.
- Approximately a quarter of Michigan's local officials say that crime overall is somewhat of a problem (22 percent) or a significant problem (2 percent) in their community. Township responses are identical to the overall responses.
- When it comes to local law enforcement services, 28 percent of the state's cities, townships and villages—and 11 percent of townships specifically—provide police services directly by running their own police departments. Some 24 percent of all municipalities—and 27 percent of townships—contract for law enforcement services with another provider such as a neighboring jurisdiction or the county sheriff. More than 60 percent of townships (and 48 percent of all municipalities) simply rely on the county sheriff and/or state police to respond when called.
- Satisfaction with law enforcement services is high among local officials, who say they are either somewhat or very satisfied with the performance of state police (74 percent overall; 78 percent among townships), county sheriffs (79 percent; 84 percent for townships), and local police (94 percent) in those jurisdictions that have them.
- When it comes to funding, 22 percent overall—and 18 percent of townships—say that they do not have sufficient funds to meet their law enforcement needs. This increases to 47 percent among the state's largest jurisdictions.

INTO THE LIGHT

Court ruling validates arguments to end 'Dark Stores' property tax loophole

A recent Michigan Court of Appeals ruling against a “big box” retailer in the Upper Peninsula validates the case against the “Dark Stores” property valuation method, and the need for an immediate legislative fix to the problem.



In *Menard, Inc. v. City of Escanaba*—which is an MTA Legal Defense Fund case—a three-judge panel said the Michigan Tax Tribunal (MTT) made an error of law in accepting a “Dark Stores”-style appeal by Menards and cutting the retailer’s value by

more than half from the original assessment. The Court held that when a market contains anti-competitive deed restricted property, use of the sales comparison approach undervalues the property and the cost-less-depreciation approach must be considered.

The decision is a significant victory for townships and other local governments that have argued against the Dark Stores technique’s artificial lowering of property values around the state. It also validates the reforms embodied in MTA-supported House Bill 5578, sponsored by Rep. Dave Maturen (R-Brady Twp.), which overwhelmingly passed the Michigan House of Representatives on the day before the Legislature adjourned for the summer. The bill heads to the Senate for consideration this fall.

“The decision validates local governments’ long-standing concerns with past Michigan Tax Tribunal ‘Dark Store’ rulings,” said Judy Allen, MTA director of government relations. “As the court confirmed in its ruling, deed-restricted properties unfairly drag down the true cash value when they’re used as comparables in the assessing process. In the end, small businesses and homeowners are the ones left to pick up the tax burden if the loophole isn’t closed.”

MTA filed *amicus* briefs in support of the City of Escanaba’s position in the case. The case is remanded back to the tax tribunal with very clear and comprehensive directions regarding the use of correct legal principles to determine the appropriate true cash value of the store.

MTA is hopeful this ruling will be helpful in gaining full passage of HB 5578. HB 5578 would restore fair and equitable determinations for property tax appeal cases before the full MTT. The bipartisan bill would level the playing field for all property valuations and put an end to the “dark store” valuation loophole that has been utilized in recent years.

For more on this issue, visit MTA’s “Dark Stores” web page at www.michigantownships.org/darkstores.asp.

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TOWNSHIP DEDICATION

Township renames buildings to honor two long-serving public servants

This spring, one southeast Michigan township recognized the dedication and commitment of two long-serving public servants by renaming municipal buildings in their honor.



In May, a ceremony was held in **Ypsilanti Charter Township** (Washtenaw Co.) to dedicate and rename the Ypsilanti Township Civic Center after former township clerk **Tilden R. Stumbo** (pictured at left), and the adjoining 14B District Court after the court's first judge, **John B. Collins**.

The township board passed a unanimous resolution to rename the civic center building, built in 1973, after Stumbo, a three-term township clerk who later served one term as a county commissioner. Stumbo's legacy was his passion to improve the life of his township residents. During his time on the board, the township acquired numerous parks, and he was instrumental in establishing a township-wide solid waste program. He was the driving force behind an I-94 overpass to connect the north and south ends of the township, a fire substation and a pedestrian overpass for local school children.

Stumbo helped supervise the demolition of Willow Run Village, which was built to house defense workers who were building B-24 bombers at the Willow Run Plant during World War II. His efforts led to a federal grant that funded the transition of the land to a municipal golf course.

John B. Collins, a longtime township resident, became an attorney in the '60s, and served the township in a variety of ways. He was elected justice of the peace, served as township attorney, and was elected the first judge of the newly formed 14B District Court which opened its doors in 1985. Collins' interest in the community and caring for those appearing before him are instilled in the culture of 14B Court.

In 1987, Collins became one of the first judges in the state to oversee the creation of a specialized domestic violence docket. With the assistance of a federal grant, and the collaboration of partners including law enforcement, prosecuting officials, defense attorneys, victim advocates, service providers and others, 14B Court created the framework for domestic violence case processing that continues today.

The Tilden R. Stumbo Civic Center and John B. Collins 14B District Court memorialize the contributions of these two individuals to township government and their residents.

LOCAL UPDATES FROM ACROSS MICHIGAN

Township happenings

The **Aurelius Township** (Ingham Co.) branch of the Capital Area District Library—housed in the township hall—was remodeled, with support from the township and Friends of the Library group. The township funded new carpet and paint in the spruced-up library. Additional renovations included a new circulation desk and additional shelving, and rearranging and organizing items to make the library more user-friendly.

Hastings Charter Township (Barry Co.) was honored by Gov. Rick Snyder and the state Department of Environmental Quality with an Excellence in Recycling Award for New Recycling Program at the 2nd annual Governor's Recycling Summit. The township received the honors for implementing a new recycling drop-off center.

Meridian Charter Township (Ingham Co.) celebrated Earth Week by organizing a community-wide clean-up event at local parks. Litter was picked up and branches removed to clear trails.

Email YOUR Township Happenings to jenn@michigantownships.org. Add MTA to your newsletter mailing list! Mail to MTA, Attn. Jenn Fiedler, PO Box 80078, Lansing, MI 48908-0078, or email to jenn@michigantownships.org.

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UPDATED INFORMATION

New Assessor's Manual in the works

A new state *Assessor's Manual* will be available next April, for use in preparing the 2018 assessment roll. The State Tax Commission announced the timeline in an update released earlier this spring.



The STC approved a contract in April 2014 with Marshall & Swift for the development of a new *Assessor's Manual*. According to the STC, software providers are currently preparing for implementation of the new manual, which will be fully implemented for the 2018 tax year.

Are you retiring from government? We're looking for your MTA, township memories

With the November election approaching, MTA knows that many long-serving township officials will be retiring from public office. If you are one of those individuals, we'd like to honor you in *Township Focus* and other MTA publications. Email your name, township (and county), along with position and years of service to jenn@michigantownships.org. Please also share some of your township or MTA memories, or advice to new officials. Thank you!



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Seeking member input for 2017 MTA legislative platform



MTA member officials play an important role in shaping the Association's legislative policy—both by voting on the MTA Legislative Policy Platform at the MTA Annual Meeting each year, and also by offering suggestions and input for consideration by MTA legislative policy committees.

For many years, the deadline for member township officials, township boards and MTA County

Chapters to submit input has been in the late summer, due to our January Annual Conference. However, as MTA transitions to a spring conference, beginning in 2017, the deadline for submissions has also shifted.

The deadline for submissions for consideration for MTA's 2017 Legislative Policy Platform by the MTA Legislative Policy and Resolutions Committee is Nov. 14. The policy platform will be presented for approval by the membership at the 2017 MTA Annual Meeting, which will be held Thursday, April 13, in conjunction with the 64th Annual MTA Educational Conference & Expo in Lansing.

You can view MTA's 2016 Policy Platform on MTA's website, www.michigantownships.org, under the "Advocacy" tab.

Under the rules adopted by MTA's Board of Directors, **proposed policies must be submitted to MTA 150 days prior to the Annual Meeting—by Monday, Nov. 14, 2016.** Proposed policies are reviewed by the committee for word selection and legality, and to ensure they conform with the Association's overall goals and objectives. The resolutions will be printed in the March/April 2017 issue of *Township Focus* and will also be available at Conference.

Amendments at the Annual Meeting are permitted, provided the purpose and substance of the original resolution remain unaltered.

Resolutions may also be submitted from the floor at the Conference if they are first submitted to MTA Conference Headquarters by noon on Wednesday, April 12, 2016, the day before the Annual Meeting.

For additional information, contact the MTA Government Relations Department at (517) 321-6467 or email legislation@michigantownships.org.

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Elections Administration

Access information on election dates and forms, guides to township election precincts, polling places, post-election audits, campaign finance, and links to related resources.

Access this—and hundreds of additional pages of online township resources—on the members-only section of MTA's website. To log in, click on "Member Login" in the upper right-hand corner of the www.michigantownships.org home page, and enter your username and password. After logging in, access the page via the "Index of Topics" under the "Answer Center" tab. Questions? Email website@michigantownships.org.

mta events | July

13 Cemeteries: Challenges & Solutions workshop, Howell

20 Cemeteries: Challenges & Solutions workshop, Lewiston

27 Cemeteries: Challenges & Solutions workshop, White Cloud

Are you part of the conversation?



MTA's social networking site, *Community Connection*, is an MTA-members only space where you can ask questions and share insights with your township colleagues from across the state. Access *Community Connection* from the log-in portal or members-only side of www.michigantownships.org. **Join the conversation today**, and connect with your fellow officials!

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JULY

1 Taxes due and payable in those jurisdictions authorized to levy a summer tax. (MCL 211.44a(3))

5 Last day to register for Aug. 2 primary. (MCL 168.497)

Deadline for government agencies to exercise the right of refusal for 2016 tax foreclosure parcels. (MCL 211.78m(1))

19 *Tuesday after the third Monday in July.* The July board of review (BOR) may be convened to correct a qualified error. (MCL 211.53b) The township board may authorize, by adoption of an ordinance or resolution, an alternative meeting date during the week of the third Monday in July. (MCL 211.53b(9)(b))

An owner who owned and occupied a principal residence on May 1 for taxes levied before Jan. 1, 2013, for which the exemption was not on the tax roll may file an appeal with the July BOR in the year for which the exemption was claimed or the immediately succeeding three years. For taxes levied after Dec. 31, 2012, an owner who owned and occupied a

principal residence on June 1 or Nov. 1 for which the exemption was not on the tax roll may file an appeal with the July BOR in the year for which the exemption was claimed or the immediately succeeding three years. (MCL 211.7cc(19))

An owner of property that is qualified agricultural property on May 1 may appeal to the July BOR for the current year and the immediately preceding year if the exemption was not on the tax roll. (MCL 211.7ee(6))

July BOR may hear appeals for current year only for poverty exemptions, but not poverty exemptions denied by the March BOR. (MCL 211.7u, STC Bulletin No. 5 of 2012)

21 Candidates without political party affiliation file qualifying petitions and affidavit of identity for the Nov. 8 general election by 4 p.m. Withdrawal deadline elapses at 4 p.m. on July 25. (MCL 168.590c)

22 Write-in candidates other than those who seek precinct delegate position file declaration of intent forms by 4 p.m. for Aug. 2 primary. (MCL 168.737a)

By 22 Pre-primary campaign statements for Aug. 2 primary due. Books closed July 17.

By 23 County clerks deliver remainder of ballots and election supplies for Aug. 2 primary to local clerks. (MCL 168.714)

26 Village candidates who wish to seek office at the Nov. 8 general election file an affidavit of identity and a nonpartisan nominating petition with the township clerk by 4 p.m. Withdrawal deadline elapses at 4 p.m. on July 29. (MCL 168.381)

By 26 Notice of Aug. 2 primary published. (MCL 168.653a)

By 28 Challenges against qualifying petitions filed by candidates without political party affiliation submitted to filing official. (MCL 168.552) Township clerks forward names and addresses of candidates without political party affiliation to county clerk. (MCL 168.321, 349)

Public accuracy test for Aug. 2 primary must be conducted. (R 168.778) Notice of test must be published at least 48 hours before test. (MCL 168.798)

29 Write-in candidates who seek precinct delegate positions file declaration of intent forms for Aug. 2 primary by 4 p.m. Candidates may file form with appropriate precinct board on Election Day before the close of polls. (MCL 168.737a)

Industrial Facilities Exemption Treasurer's Report (Form 170) must be filed with the Property Services Division of Department of Treasury on or before July 31 of the tax year involved. (*July 30 is a Saturday, July 31 is a Sunday.*)

Appeals of property classified as residential real, agricultural real, timber-cutover real or agricultural personal must be made by filing a written petition with the Michigan Tax Tribunal (MTT) on or before July 31 of the tax year involved. (MCL 205.735a(6)) (*July 30 is a Saturday, July 31 is a Sunday.*)

A protest of assessed valuation or taxable valuation or the percentage of qualified agricultural property exemption subsequent to BOR action, must be filed with the MTT, in writing on or before July 31. (*July 30 is a Saturday, July 31 is a Sunday.*)

30 Electors who wish to receive an absentee voter ballot for Aug. 2 primary by mail submit absentee voter ballot applications by 2 p.m. (MCL 168.759)

AUGUST

1 Electors qualified to obtain an absentee voter ballot for the Aug. 2 primary may vote in person in the clerk's office until 4 p.m. (MCL 168.761)

By 2 Petitions to place county and local questions on the Nov. 8 general election ballot filed with county and local clerks. If governing law sets an earlier petition filing deadline, earlier deadline must be observed. (MCL 168.646a)

2 Primary election.

Emergency absentee voting for Aug. 2 primary until 4 p.m. (MCL 168.759b)

3 Boards of county canvassers meet to canvass Aug. 2 primary by 1 p.m. (MCL 168.821)

15 Township reports to Department of Treasury the millage rate levied or to be levied that year for a millage described in section 5(g) or (w) that is used to calculate an appropriation under section 17 (1)(a) or a distribution under section 17 (3)(a)(i). See MCL 123.1353(4) for the calculation for the 2016 report.

By 16 Ballot wording of county and local proposals to be presented at the Nov. 8 general election certified to county and local clerks; local clerks receiving ballot wording forward to county clerk within two days. (MCL 168.646a)

Boards of county canvassers complete canvass of Aug. 2 primary election; county clerks forward results to Secretary of State within 24 hours. (MCLs 168.581, 168.822 and 168.828)

By 22 Board of State Canvassers meet to canvass Aug. 2 primary. (MCL 168.581)



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Welcomes Attorney **Jack L. Van Coevering**

Jack focuses in the areas of state and local tax where he assists municipalities with complex property tax cases and taxpayers in state business tax matters. He provides litigation counsel as well as lobbying and consulting services.

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Can campaign stickers be posted in the hallway of a polling place on Election Day?

No. The Michigan Election Law prohibits any person from doing the following on Election Day in the polling room or a room/compartments connected to the polling room OR within 100 feet from any entrance to the building in which the polling place is located:

- Persuading or attempting to persuade a person to vote for or against any particular candidate, party ticket or ballot question being voted on at that election.
- Placing or distributing stickers (other than stickers provided by election officials pursuant to law).
- Soliciting donations, gifts, contributions, purchase of tickets or similar demands.
- Requesting or obtaining signatures on petitions.
- Posting, displaying or distributing any material that directly or indirectly makes reference to an election, a candidate or a ballot question (other than official material required by law to be posted, displayed or distributed in a polling place on Election Day). (MCLs 168.744 and 168.744a)
- Under Public Act 156 of 2012, the name of any elected or appointed official of the state, township or any political subdivision cannot appear on any material that is temporarily posted, displayed or distributed in a polling place or polling room on Election Day, including name plates, name tags or honorary plaques. (MCL 168.744a)

A person who violates MCL 168.744 is guilty of a misdemeanor.

The prohibition on campaign materials also applies to election officials and workers themselves. It also includes prohibiting vehicles with campaign signs or bumper stickers from parking within 100 feet of any entrance to the building (except those parked only while a person is voting).

Exit pollsters can be 20 feet away from the entrance to the polling place, but then may speak only to people who exit, not those who are entering.

Also note that Section 57 of the Michigan Campaign Finance Act, MCL 169.257, prohibits the use of township property to expressly advocate voting for or against a candidate or ballot question on any day other than Election Day.



The township hall is one of our polling places, and a board member and an employee are candidates. Do they have to stay away from the hall on Election Day?

No, as long as they do not violate MCL 168.744 (including not wearing campaign buttons).

However, there may be other things to look out for. For example, a township newsletter article posted on a hallway bulletin board on what a proposed fire millage would allow the fire department to purchase if it passes should be removed before Election Day. All materials displaying “pro and con” information on any proposals appearing on the ballot are prohibited.



Can a township enforce the Election Law prohibitions or remove campaign materials inside the 100-foot limit on private property on Election Day?

Yes. The Election Law 100-foot rule does not distinguish between private and public property. According to MTA Legal Counsel, the township has a responsibility to see that campaign materials are not present within the 100-foot limit, regardless of whether the property is township property or private property.



May a township remove campaign materials outside of the 100-foot limit on township property on Election Day?

Yes. As long as the policy is equally and consistently applied, a township board may adopt a policy that it will remove unattended campaign signs or other materials from township property outside of the 100-foot limit on Election Day.

Note that people may display or hand out campaign materials on township property outside of the 100-foot limit,

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but only on Election Day, and only if the materials are not left unattended. When the materials are being displayed or handed out by a person, the activity qualifies as protected political free speech.

A township may also regulate vehicle or other use of the township's parking lot on Election Day. A person may park a vehicle with campaign materials on the property only for as long as it takes for them to vote.



May a township lawfully provide food and beverages to election workers on Election Day?

It is possible under certain circumstances, but there may be better options.

According to the Michigan Department of Treasury's *Bulletin for Audits of Local Units of Government*, Appendix H:

"The purchase of coffee, donuts and sandwiches must be for a public, not an individual or private group or purpose. These expenditures for use at a regular or special meeting, for fire fighters, volunteer or full-time employees, when working an extended period of time or when dedicating public buildings are normally considered expenditures for a public purpose.

"Coffee and donuts for employees use during normal working hours is considered personal, not for a public purpose, and improper unless specifically provided for in a collective bargaining agreement or duly adopted employment policy of the governmental unit (fringe benefit)."

Under normal conditions, it is probably best if the township does not provide meals. Just as with other township employees, election workers may bring their own lunches or go out for lunch. In some townships, election staffers volunteer to bring dishes to pass—which gets my vote because few things beat a Michigan potluck!

There is a belief in some communities that once election workers arrive for work on Election Day, they cannot leave the building, even for meals. This has prompted some townships to provide meals on-site. We are not aware of any requirement in the Michigan Election Law or Bureau of Elections procedures that election workers must remain on-site throughout the day. Just as with other hourly employees, break times must be available. If a township requires election workers to remain on-site even through lunch, it must pay them for that time.

In a particularly busy election or where the election workers are short-staffed due to illness or emergency, however, it may be necessary for the proper administration of the election for election workers to work through breaks or for extended hours. In those circumstances, a township may choose to provide food or beverages for election workers.

Hello, MTA ... ? provides general information on typical questions asked by township officials. Readers are encouraged to contact an attorney when specific legal guidance is needed. Member township officials and personnel may contact MTA Member Information Services with questions or requests from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., weekdays, at (517) 321-6467 or fax (517) 321-8908.

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State budget finalized

The 2016-17 state budget received the Legislature's stamp of approval and has been signed by Gov. Rick Snyder.

The final version includes an estimated 1.6 percent increase in constitutional revenue sharing over current year funding, as well as preservation of City, Village and Township (CVT) revenue sharing for 134 townships at 2015-16 levels. The budget also includes full funding of payments in lieu of taxes, with an increase due to scheduled statutory increases.

Other items that impact townships are \$5 million for election equipment replacement, a \$1 million increase for firefighter training grants, a \$3.4 million increase for fire protection grants, and \$3 million to fund the firefighter cancer presumption fund.

Budget stabilization funds can grow under new law

Townships can keep more money in savings under Public Act 169 of 2016.

The newly signed law, sponsored by Sen. Mike Nofs (R-Battle Creek), was enacted with MTA's support. Previously, municipalities were limited to keeping 15 percent of their most recent general fund budget in a budget stabilization fund. Starting Sept. 7, 2016, PA 169 increases the limit to 20 percent. Any money in excess of that percentage must be appropriated to the next general fund budget, as is currently required.

Grant money could help cover cost of sewer infrastructure projects

Eligible communities could receive grant funding to help pay for certain sewer and water projects under a new law that took effect June 9.

Public Act 164 of 2016, sponsored by Rep. Joel Johnson (R-Clare), expands the possible uses for Strategic Water Quality Initiatives Fund grants in addition to various sewage and stormwater treatment projects. Under the new law, grants could cover up to half the cost of projects to address a public health risk from sewer system failure. In order to be eligible, municipalities must apply, meet criteria developed by the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and demonstrate a financial need.

While PA 164 was introduced to address one specific community, the DEQ indicated they are aware of other local units eligible for grant funding.

Deadline extended for multi-line phone system upgrade

More time is allowed for compliance with a rule aimed at better pinpointing the location of a 911 call. SB 878, sponsored by Sen. Mike Shirkey (R-Clark Lake), was enrolled and sent to Gov. Rick Snyder for signature.

This new law extends the deadline by three years to Dec. 31, 2019, for multi-line phone systems to be upgraded in addressed buildings with more than 7,000 feet of occupied space. The rule is intended to help 911 operators better direct first responders to a specific area within the building where the caller is located.



Written notification required for certain drain projects

Property owners must soon receive a seven-day notice before certain drain projects can be done on their property, beginning Sept. 12, 2016.

Public Act 171 of 2016, sponsored by Rep. Joel Johnson (R-Clare), requires a drain commissioner or drainage board to provide notice to the property owner by first-class mail before entering the property for any excavation or tree removal. This requirement does not apply in cases of an emergency that endangers public health, crops or property, or where debris caused or could cause flooding.



Township, school districts could jointly participate in recreational authorities

More swimming pools, parks and auditoriums could potentially be built under two bills expected to be signed into law.

Public Acts 173 and 174 of 2016, sponsored by Sen. Darwin Booher (R-Osceola Twp.) and Rep. Phil Potvin (R-Cadillac), allow school districts to participate in recreational authorities with townships, counties, cities and villages. The laws, effective Sept. 12, 2016, specify that a tax levied by an authority could not be used for any general fund or school operating purposes. They also permit recreational authorities to offer discounts for residents who use the program or facility.

This change allows townships to collaborate with school districts to provide recreational facilities and services to residents, while also increasing efficiency, reducing costs and generating revenue.

False reporting of public threat to be reimbursable offense

Townships will soon be eligible for reimbursement for the cost of responding to a falsely reported public threat.

Three recently enrolled bills—House Bill 5442, House Bill 5567 and Senate Bill 976—were introduced in response to the Kalamazoo shooting rampage earlier this year. HB 5567, sponsored by Rep. David Maturen (R-Brady Twp.), adds false reporting of a public threat to the list of offenses in which the convicted may be ordered to reimburse the state or local government for expenses incurred responding to the offense.

HB 5442, sponsored by Rep. Brandt Iden (R-Oshtemo Chtr. Twp.), creates a notification system to be used during emergencies, including active shooter situations, and would make it a felony to falsely report such an event. SB 976, sponsored by Sen. Mike Nofs (R-Battle Creek), makes the false reporting of a public threat a Class F felony with a maximum sentence of four years in prison. The bills will go into effect 90 days after being signed by the governor.

Law ensures deployed military can receive PRE

Deployed troops can continue receiving a principal residence exemption (PRE) under Public Act 144 of 2016.

Most members of the U.S. Armed Forces don't have a problem receiving and retaining a PRE when serving abroad, but some were concerned that the previous language could create confusion. The new law, sponsored by Sen. Mike Shirkey (R-Clark Lake), took effect June 9, 2016, and codifies the current practice of granting a PRE to deployed service men and women. The change in law also allows an individual to file an appeal for a PRE while living in an assisted living facility or nursing home.

Push for more commercial forests to become qualified forests will soon be law

More forests could potentially return to township property tax rolls under a package of newly enrolled bills.

Senate Bills 651-653, sponsored by Sen. Darwin Booher (R-Osceola Twp.) and Sen. Tom Casperson (R-Wells Twp.), await Gov. Rick Snyder's signature. Once enacted, they will allow forestland to transfer from the commercial forest program to the qualified forest program, while gradually paying the associated tax increase over a five-year phase-in period. The specific tax created under the phase-in could not be less than that under the commercial forest program.

The bills were introduced to encourage more commercial forests, which aren't subject to property taxes, to become qualified forests, which pay property taxes except for the 18-mill school tax. For a commercial forest to qualify, the owner must have owned the property since no later than Sept. 1, 2016, and the deadline for transfer would be Sept. 1, 2021.



Deadline extended for obsolete property rehab districts

Townships have another 10 years to create obsolete property rehabilitation districts under a bill that will soon become law.

Senate Bill 673, sponsored by Sen. Ken Horn (R-Frankenmuth) and supported by MTA, gives local units of government until Dec. 31, 2026, rather than the previous deadline of Dec. 31, 2016, to set up such a district in commercial areas. This allows property owners to apply to pay an obsolete properties tax instead of property tax. Townships use the designation to help revitalize blighted areas and attract economic development.



Bill impacts municipal emergency loans

A newly enacted bill will change aspects of emergency loans for townships. Public Act 197 of 2016, sponsored by Sen. Goeff Hansen (R-Hart Twp.), is part of the legislative package to address the Detroit Public Schools financial deficit.

Previously, revenue for emergency loans is provided from state surplus funds. PA 197 expands this to include revenue from the repayment proceeds of other loans. The new law also will allow the state Department of Treasury to withhold a municipality's portion of revenue generated by the local community stabilization share tax if they are delinquent on emergency loan payments—this is in addition to the current authority to withhold revenue sharing payments when payments are delinquent. PA 197 also expands the list of conditions municipalities must meet to qualify for an emergency loan.

Infrastructure fund to be created

The new "Michigan Infrastructure Fund" will be created under Senate Bill 883.

Sponsored by Sen. Dave Hildenbrand (R-Lowell Chtr. Twp.), the enacted bill would not allocate any money to the fund, but would allow money or other assets from any source to be deposited into it. Money in the fund could only be spent as provided in an appropriation act to offset future infrastructure expenses.

Bill amends specific tax for tax-reverted property

Local and state revenue would increase by extending the fee, interest and lien provisions levied under the General Property Tax Act to the Tax Reverted Clean Title Act under Public Act 151 of 2016.

The new law, sponsored by Rep. Tom Barrett (R-Benton Twp.), amends the Tax Reverted Clean Title Act, which

exempts eligible tax-reverted property from ad valorem property taxes and instead charges them a specific tax. This tax is collected and paid the same as regular property taxes, but half of it is distributed to the land bank fast track authority that sold the property, and the other half goes to the taxing units under the General Property Tax Act.

PA 151 subjects the specific tax to the same fees and interest as general property taxes. Additionally, the specific tax would become a lien at the same time that real property taxes would. If the county treasurer consents, any unpaid specific tax and applicable fees and interest would have to be returned as delinquent at the same time as they would under the General Property Tax Act. The new law took effect on June 9, 2016.

Green lights allowed on snow plows

State, county and municipal vehicles used to remove snow and ice will soon have the option to use a green light, rather than amber, to improve visibility in white-out conditions. This change is the result of Public Act 161 of 2016, sponsored by Rep. Robert VerHeulen (R-Walker), which will take effect on Sept. 7, 2016. The new law is permissive and does not require local units to take action.

Additionally, PA 161 does not prohibit fire services from using a flashing, rotating or oscillating green light.

State emergency fund to increase

Michigan's emergency fund will soon more than double when Senate Bill 914 is signed into law.

Sponsored by Sen. Mike Nofs (R-Battle Creek), the bill will allow funds to be appropriated to the state's Disaster and Emergency Contingency Fund up to a \$10 million cap—an increase from the current cap of \$4.5 million. The fund is used to pay state and local costs in the event of a state or federal disaster.

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Q Our auditors asked about our township’s “risk assessment procedures.” What are these?

The township—not its auditors—is responsible for design, maintenance and monitoring of the effectiveness of the township’s system of internal controls. As part of this charge, township management and “those charged with governance” (ie, the township board) must review the township’s operating environment and utilize “risk assessment” in designing and establishing internal controls. This will help to ensure these controls are effective in mitigating risk of errors or fraud in financial reporting, and safeguard township assets.

For example, townships could consider the following areas for risk assessment:

- Fund balance policy
- Insurance coverage and provider
- Cash management
- Vendor selection
- Grant management
- Property tax settlement
- Financial statement preparation

Risks facing every township could be described in three broad categories: external environment, business processes and information technology.

External environment

- Compliance with significant laws and regulations. Examples include Social Security taxes (who should and shouldn’t be covered), compliance with provisions of grants, and other restricted revenue sources.
- Compliance with state and federal labor laws and regulations.

Business processes

- Protection of the township’s assets against fraud or error. For example, internal control over cash to ensure that all township revenues are deposited into appropriate bank accounts.
- Appropriate risk management of township bank accounts and investments to ensure liquidity and protection of principal. Things to consider: Does the board review the financial strength of institutions holding township funds? Does the township consider collateralizing investments or deposits? Is FDIC insurance coverage maximized?
- Controls over adding new vendors to the accounts payable system.
- Insurance coverage is appropriate for the size and diverse nature of township operations, and placed with providers with strong financial ratings.
- Procedures and checklist to ensure that monthly, quarterly and annual financial closings and internally generated financial statements are reliable and free of material errors and irregularities.

Information technology

- Policies to ensure that information is properly backed up and secure.
- Password policies.
- Use of non-bandwidth devices to help secure online transactions and banking.
- Security over employees’ and residents’ information, such as bank account and banking routing numbers.
- Proper anti-virus and other protections against spam and malware, and procedures to ensure that all protection programs are updated appropriately.

The Government Finance Officers Association has sample risk assessment procedures and policies that small governments should consider on its website, www.gfoa.org.

Q As a very small township, how can we comply with these requirements?

Start with a review of your activities:

Financial

- Does the township accept and make payments through electronic means?
- Are all township bank deposits concentrated in the single financial institution?
- Are there areas of deposit or disbursement accomplished solely by a single employee or official, without any review of another?
- Does your township hold funds as an agent for third parties, such as performance bonds, delinquent personal property taxes, and current taxes?

Information technology

- Do you use off-the-shelf software, such as QuickBooks, that operates on a single computer?
- Does your township use a local area network for your accounting and financial applications?
- Are computers that perform key township tasks connected to the Internet?

Township activities

- Does the township have its own police department? Fire department? Code enforcement?
- Are township recreation activities conducted by township contractors or employees? Does the township maintain public parks?

This simple self-review could help you get started with your risk assessment review to address these and other concerns and challenges. The township board, employees auditor and attorney can work together to arrive at practical policies and other methods to address these potential risks.

Information provided in *Financial Forum* should not be considered legal advice, and readers are encouraged to contact their township auditor and/or attorney for advice specific to their situation.

What's your story?

Developing a 'sense of place' for your township

Clark Township (Mackinac Co.) will probably never have a chain grocery superstore, a mixed-use downtown or an urban vibe. And that's exactly how the community wants it.

For decades, the township has embraced its roots as a haven for nature lovers. Five generations of families have spent their summers fishing, boating and bicycling in the community that boasts lush forests, Lake Huron shorelines and the 36-island archipelago known as the Les Cheneaux Islands. The 2,000 year-round residents—and the 6,000 more who visit for the summer—are proud of their township's heritage. They know their township's story by heart, and they have no desire to change it.

"Everybody who lives here, their favorite colors are green and blue," Supervisor **Gary Reid** said. "Our residents dictate the story. They want their green spaces protected. If you talked about bringing in a big box store, everyone would be up in arms. We like the small town charm."

Long before placemaking became a hot trend, Clark Township has always had a strong sense of place—that unmistakable, positive feeling you get when you visit a community. It's more than the township's lakeshore and trees. Reid believes a large part of what makes the township special is the community's shared philosophy and vision. That's what keeps them unified, even though three-quarters of their residents only live there for a few months a year.

Both rural and urban townships can offer an authentic experience to everyone who lives in and visits their community. Your cultural or historical sites, scenic spots, geological features, waterfalls, wetlands, recreational experiences and much more can all help to give your township that much-desired "sense of place."



“Everybody who lives here, their favorite colors are green and blue. Our residents dictate the story. They want their green spaces protected. We like the small town charm.”

**—Gary Reid, Supervisor,
Clark Township
(Mackinac Co.).**

At the heart of every placemaking project is the desire to make your township stand out as a distinct place where residents and visitors want to be. For many communities, it isn't feasible to take on a major project with mixed-use buildings featuring restaurants and condos. But that doesn't mean they can't improve their "sense of place." Every township has its own unique features and a history that's different from any other community. You just have to identify it—and communicate that story to everyone who will listen.

Townships like Clark Township that have a strong sense of place are not only distinct, attractive and can draw in visitors and retain residents. They also enjoy a closer-knit community of people who are proud of where they live. That community pride can foster more involved citizens who are more likely to support township initiatives.

What is 'sense of place'?

For years, buzzwords like placemaking and smart growth have been used frequently among municipalities. Though the idea of placemaking has become popular more recently, the term was used in the 1970s by architects and planners to describe the process of creating a unique, attractive place. This process focuses on using a community's assets to result in quality public spaces that contribute to people's health, happiness and wellbeing.



The 2,000 year-round residents of Clark Township (Mackinac Co.)—and the 6,000 more who visit for the summer—are proud of their township’s heritage. They know their township’s story by heart, and they have no desire to change it.

According to the Project for Public Spaces, “A real place has memorable physical characteristics. With a pleasant, safe atmosphere, it beckons people to linger. Such a place is meaningful to both local inhabitants as well as transient visitors.”

Typically, conversations about placemaking center on buildings, structures and design. However, that’s only part of the issue. Communities that implement every tenet of placemaking and smart growth principles don’t always have a true sense of place. The most perfectly built streetscape might not invoke the positive emotions and feelings of connectedness you want people to experience.

The emotional aspect of place can be lost in the conversation because it’s so difficult to describe. Articles and workshops might focus more on attractive buildings, sidewalks and the relationship of structures to one another. These are concrete subjects that are easier to understand and implement. The emotional aspect is much more abstract, but it’s also crucial.

When a township has a true sense of place, its residents and visitors will describe it in similar terms. They know what’s unique about that community. Sense of place is what distinguishes a charming small township from a community that feels worn-out and forgotten. It’s a place where people want to be, whether it’s their home or a place to visit. The people who live there have a genuine pride and love for the community where they live and work, even in the face of adversity. It’s about embracing your township’s identity and sharing it with the world.

Why it matters

Developing—and keeping—a sense of place is vital to your township’s future. When your township knows and tells its story, residents are proud of their home, and they feel connected to one another. They’re more likely to be involved in their local government, schools and community organizations, and less likely to move away from the area.

This community pride is good for your residents’ quality of life, but it’s also helpful for your township government. **Ken Schwartz** has learned that residents are more likely to get behind township initiatives when they identify as one community. As supervisor of **Superior Charter Township** (Washtenaw Co.), he and the board are dedicated to preserving greenspaces and the township’s rural character. Sometimes, that means asking voters to support millages. He says voters have supported these initiatives because they’re proud of their community, and they believe it’s worth protecting.

“It’s important that everyone realizes they’re paying into this community, and this community is going to provide services for all of these areas in the township,” Schwartz said. “It’s hard to maintain our rural character if people don’t buy in.”

Your township’s story and brand are also what will attract visitors, businesses and new residents to your township. Visitors can mean a major economic benefit that directly affects the pockets of the people who live there. A family that spends the day in your township could easily spend a few hundred dollars paying for gas, meals and entertainment. While tourism, new employers and new residents may not be a priority for your township right now, they really should matter to every community, said Dr. Scott G. Witter, director of the Michigan State University School of Planning, Design and Construction and interim director of the MSU Land Policy Institute.

“A community is a living organism. It changes and evolves all the time,” he said. “You need new blood, you need people to come and start new businesses, you need workers, and schools and everything else that comes with them. There has to be the reality that if nobody comes, and nobody stays, it is only a matter of time before nothing is left.”

Wondering what’s unique? Look around you!

A Travel Industry Association of America report found that most American travelers had a better experience when their destination preserved its natural, historic and cultural sites. In other words, your township is naturally unique. Your job is then to identify those special features and emphasize them.

Your township’s location will naturally shape its sense of place. This is especially true in Michigan, where life revolves around the water, and the weather has a major impact.

Townships located on the shores of Lake Michigan might have a beachy, relaxed feel, where Northern Michigan or Upper Peninsula townships might invoke thoughts of pine trees and beautiful rocky lakeshores.

In places like Clark Township, the impact of location is obvious. For decades, township officials didn't think about placemaking because they didn't have to—the Les Cheneaux islands did the work for them. The beautiful setting is naturally a place where people want to be.

Superior Charter Township has used its southeast Michigan location as a way to market itself. The self-described bedroom community is conveniently located near several urban areas and large employers, with quick access to Interstates 94 and 96. As one of the few remaining truly rural communities in the area, Schwartz likes to think of the township as the “last remaining green speck on the map between Detroit and Ann Arbor.”

The local culture

Your location helps to shape your township's culture, another major player in developing sense of place. This could include anything from festivals and religious celebrations to crafts and historical sites. Today, food is also becoming important in defining a community and creating a sense of place. Many communities in Michigan are known for their cherries, blueberries, apples and a wealth of other produce. The wine and craft beer industry has exploded in Michigan, helping

more and more communities to stand out and showcase their unique offerings.

“These are the things that make a community really unique, and all of these things together are things that the residents should take a lot of pride in,” Witter said. “These make up that foundational block of placemaking, and allow you to move from the place we are now to the place we can be.”

Oronoko Charter Township (Berrien Co.) Supervisor **Mike Hildebrand** believes the people who live there make the township a truly special place to live. Because of the college in the region—Andrews University—the township has an international flair with people from all over the world. There are also populations from the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the local schools, and the farming and agriculture community. At first glance, there might not be a common thread binding those segments together.

“We kind of figured out that the township is actually what stitches everyone together,” Hildebrand said. “This is us, and it works, and it's awesome.”

Superior Charter Township is also proud of its diverse constituency—two years ago, it was recognized by USA Today as being one of the most diverse communities in Michigan. The wide variety of ethnicities residing there aren't segmented from one another but live side by side. In a given neighborhood, you'll find white, black, Latino, Middle Eastern and Asian families living next door to one another in harmony, Schwartz said.

BUILDING COMMUNITIES.









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Superior Charter Township (Washtenaw Co.) is dedicated to preserving greenspaces and the township's rural character. Township residents took it upon themselves to create a Committee to Promote Superior Township to foster pride, unity and a sense of place among residents.

In Clark Township, nature and its wooded setting have permeated nearly every aspect of its culture. The community has a long history of making wooden boats, and it's the home of one of the original Chris Craft boat dealerships, one of the largest wooden boat shows and a wooden boat school. The natural beauty inspires the arts, with a local art school and culinary school. The township also has a long history of conservation, tracing back to the days when Rand Aldo Leopold, a famous naturalist and conservationist, spent his summers in the Les Cheneaux islands with his family.

Finding your story

The best way to find your township's story is to start asking questions. Witter recommends gathering elected officials, business owners, religious clergy and other community leaders for a meeting to talk about it. Don't think strictly within your township's municipal boundaries. Many well-known places span across multiple local units. Partner with nearby townships, villages, cities and counties, and work together toward a common goal.

Be intentional about reaching out—even sending fliers home with children at your local schools. Your township could also gather information through an online survey in order to get feedback from people who otherwise wouldn't attend a meeting. Listen to your residents and find out what they value in your township. Chances are, they know your township's story, even if they don't realize it. Be intentional in making sure as many perspectives are heard as possible, not just a small but vocal minority.

Once you've gathered a group, start by asking: Why does your family live in the township? Consider the following:

- Where does your community start and end, without considering municipal boundaries?
- Are there any other names for this area?
- What stories are associated with those names?

For example, the people who spend their summers in Clark Township might refer to the place they're visiting as the Les Cheneaux area. Though the actual area includes Clark Township and the communities of Cedarville and Hessel, visitors aren't coming for those municipalities. They're coming for the islands.

Ask yourselves:

- What smells and sounds do you associate with this area?
- What places in your area hold special significance? Why?
- What sort of local traditions and values are connected to this place?
- What has happened in the past?
- What is happening now?

In Michigan, people might name Mackinac Island, Holland and Frankenmuth as having a strong brand and sense of place. Some communities feel that, by comparison, there's nothing special about their township.

But the reality is, your township doesn't need a world-famous festival or a giant tourist attraction to be unique. It could be that your township is a good place to retire or raise children, or that it's known for its farming. Don't try to be like another community—embrace who you are. And once you know your story, preserve it.

"The fun thing about Michigan is every weekend you could go somewhere else and experience something new," Witter said. "Everybody can't be Grand Rapids. Everybody can't be Traverse City. But everybody, because of their environment, their culture and the things they do, is indeed unique."

Telling your story

Your township's story is essentially its brand. Once you've discovered your brand, your job is to market it, both to people outside the community and to residents.

An easy and cheap place to start is with a website, said Witter. If your township has a great farmers market or brewery, you want potential visitors to find it when searching the Internet for spots to visit. Find a place on your township website to describe what's special about the township, and make that description easy to find. Your township could even start a social media campaign to help spread the brand.

Make the township's story a regular part of the conversation in your township. Talk about it at board

meetings, and incorporate it into newsletters and other communications with residents. Remind residents of why their home community is special and that they should be proud to live there.

When residents have community pride, they become ambassadors for your township. Make sure people who interact with visitors regularly know about township attractions and how to direct them to find more information, such as at the local chamber of commerce or visitors bureau. Think beyond those employed in hotels and restaurants and also include those who work at grocery stores, gas stations and even banks.

In Superior Charter Township, residents took it upon themselves to create the Committee to Promote Superior Township. They wanted to promote the township and made it their mission to foster pride, unity and a sense of place among residents—both current and future. Once a month, they gather and share ideas and suggestions with one another. When Schwartz hears what people want, such as the idea for more nonmotorized paths and trails, he funnels it to the committee. And in turn, the committee spreads the word about the township’s botanical gardens, artisan farmers market and massive Humane Society headquarters.

“A lot of people in the township don’t know what the community really consists of,” Schwartz said. “We just want everyone to be aware of what the township has to offer.”



Live, work, play: Free placemaking guidebook available

For the past several years, the Michigan Townships Association has been involved in the Michigan Sense of Place Council (SOPC), a network of organizations advancing prosperity in Michigan through placemaking. Placemaking is the process of creating quality places where people want to live, work, play, shop, learn and visit. While it may sound like a bunch of jargon, placemaking can play a critical role as the state transitions to a more diversified economy that embraces entrepreneurship and innovation.

One of the tangible products from the SOPC partnership is a new guidebook on placemaking, *Placemaking as an Economic Development Tool*. The resource includes everything township officials should know about placemaking, including elements and processes of placemaking, regulatory tools, the four types of placemaking, and more. Because of MTA’s involvement with the SOPC, the MSU Land Policy Institute (LPI), the authoring organization, is offering the guidebook to MTA members first and free (for one year).

Placemaking as an Economic Development Tool can be an excellent resource for township elected officials, downtown development authorities, planning commissions, and more. The techniques and tools discussed in this guidebook can help to improve local quality of life and economic competitiveness by assisting in creating vibrant places where people are drawn. Each chapter includes a case example of a placemaking project in action in Michigan.

The guidebook is available as an eBook in electronic format (PDF) only. To receive access to your free download, complete the Limited Use Agreement form (download at <http://landpolicy.msu.edu/resources/pmedtguidebook>) and send it directly to LPI. Further instructions are included on the form.

MTA members can also download the use agreement from MTA’s “Economic Development” and “Placemaking” Web pages, on the members-only section of www.michigan-townships.org. After logging in, access the pages via the “Index of Topics” under the “Answer Center.”

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cover story

Oronoko Charter Township's story was recently captured in a 55-minute movie. The idea stemmed from a picture slideshow 20 years ago, when 1,500 people packed the high school gym to watch the finished product. Hildebrand and other community leaders decided it was time to celebrate the region once again and instill pride in its people. And it just so happened that one of the original graduates of Andrews University's film program was raised in the township and still called it home.

So they got to work finding sponsors and raised \$20,000 to make a movie highlighting the county youth fair, school events, township activities and interviews with residents about what their community means to them. The result was a film that "would give Tim Allen and the Pure Michigan ads a run for their money," Hildebrand said.

The community was invited to the Andrews University performing arts center for three showings. Hundreds, including U.S. Rep. Fred Upton, showed up to see the finished product. When the house lights rose after the movie was over, people were visibly emotional.

"People literally stood around talked for an hour and a half afterward," Hildebrand said. "There aren't many occasions where all the different parts of the community get together under one roof. That's what we wanted to do."

Hildebrand hopes to sell copies of the movie later this year so that residents can give them as holiday gifts. All proceeds would help fund a community park that's being developed.

Only a starting point

No other township's story will be exactly like yours, and there's no shortage of ways you can spread that story to others. By reaching out—and reaching in—your township can both draw your community closer together and attract more people to visit or even move there.

Your story might not be obvious. But there's always a reason that people came to your township in the first place. Maybe your township is a great place to run a small business. Maybe the leaves are stunning in the fall. Whatever your story is, embrace it and find a way to spread the word.



Bethany Mauger, MTA Staff Writer

With contributions from Michelle Walk, Extension Educator, Community Food Systems & Tourism, Michigan State University Extension

Tell us your story

The Michigan Townships Association knows that every township has a story—and we want to help tell yours.

We want to know what's happening in your township—no project, service, collaboration or experience is too small. Your insights, suggestions and ideas could be featured in *Township Focus* magazine, as part of our "Township Happenings" column (see page 6). Or they could inspire a longer article or a feature on your township, or be included in cover stories. Or we may share with our followers on social media. You could even be asked to share your insights and experiences as part of an MTA workshop or Conference session.

You're proud of your township, and we are, too. Let us help you tell your story. Email your story ideas, happenings in your township, pictures, etc. to *Township Focus* editor Jenn Fiedler at jenn@michigantownships.org.

We're waiting to hear from you!

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MTA's July workshop digs into cemetery management

Township cemeteries provide a positive personal service to residents during a difficult time. Gain a better understanding of the rules and regulations, along with other important aspects of cemetery management and administration during MTA's half-day workshop, *Cemeteries: Challenges & Solutions*.

Led by MTA Member Information Services Specialist Cindy Davis, a featured Michigan Association of Municipal Cemeteries conference speaker, this informative workshop will also dig into elements of green or natural burials and genealogy options many conventional cemeteries are incorporating. Participants will also:

- Review the **legal obligations** for cemeteries, including content and procedures for adopting a cemetery ordinance.
- Explore fees and other **budgeting and financial aspects**, including tips on dealing with special cemetery management issues.
- Examine the role of advisory committees, cemetery sextons and other caretakers, as well as the **duties and responsibilities** of the clerk and township board.

Registration, along with lunch, begins at noon; the class is held from 1 to 5 p.m. Dates and locations are:

July 13: Crystal Gardens, Howell

July 20: Garland Resort, Lewiston

July 27: The Shack Country Inn, White Cloud

Registration forms were mailed in May and appeared in the June *Township Focus*. Visit www.michigantownships.org to download a registration form or register online.

Continue the learning

Workshop participants can purchase MTA's *Township Cemetery Management* book for the discounted price of \$31.50. This book offers a review of statutes that govern township authority over cemeteries along with the financial aspects of this valuable service. A CD of samples that can be customized for your township's use is also included.

Pre-purchased books will be distributed at check-in. A limited number of books will also be available to purchase on-site.

Share your ideas with MTA

Is there a particular topic you'd like MTA to cover in an educational session or *Township Focus* magazine article? MTA wants to hear your ideas, including any "trouble spots" your township is facing, successes your community is experiencing,



or topics or trends you are seeing impact township government. Suggestions could be incorporated into upcoming MTA workshops, Annual Conference educational sessions or *Focus* articles.

Contact MTA Knowledge Center Education Director Shelley Cardenas at (517) 321-6467 or shelley@michigantownships.org to share your ideas.

Interested in serving as a speaker or author? Consider sharing your experiences, best practices or practical solutions by presenting at a workshop or contributing to articles in the magazine. Download a speaker/author information form at www.michigantownships.org/submitproposal.asp.

upcoming MTA workshop

REGISTRATION INFORMATION

MTA On The Road regional meetings bring knowledge, networking

As an MTA member, you belong to the largest community of local government officials in the state. Don't miss this opportunity to connect with that community, and MTA staff, to discuss the latest issues affecting townships at our upcoming *MTA On The Road* regional meetings.

In the morning, gather as a group for an insightful general session, where we'll arm you with information and strategies to make your board more effective and help you to serve your residents in the manner they deserve. Discover what legislative changes are on the horizon for townships and how they could impact your community.

Afternoon breakout topics include:

What Every Board Member Should Know About Financial Oversight

Both statute and township taxpayers deem financial oversight to be township boards' most important function. However, few boards are either trained to do the job well or spend sufficient time on the task. This interactive workshop will take your board beyond merely approving bills and reviewing audits into the generative questions that every township board needs to answer to perform its fiduciary duties and truly govern the township's finances.

Improving Your Township's Internal Controls

Fraud can happen in any township, regardless of size or location. Identify potential internal control weaknesses in your township and learn procedures you can implement immediately to reduce your risk. Discover steps to prevent financial disasters, reduce the likelihood of errors, and provide for efficient and effective operations that comply with laws and regulations.

Hello, MTA ... ? On the Road

Join MTA Member Information Services staff in a game of "MIS Squares," exploring important township functions such as compensation, meetings, ordinances, fire departments, lawful expenditures and more! This fun-filled session will put your skills and knowledge to the test as you learn from some of our most frequently asked questions and misconceptions.

Financial Literacy: Understanding Financial Reports

What exactly are you supposed to glean from your monthly and annual (audited) financial reports? How do you know what to look for or what to analyze? Finally, a plain language session to help you streamline (and understand!) your financial reports. Learn what should be provided and why!

Cancellations & Substitutions: Written cancellation requests received by MTA two weeks prior to event date will receive a full refund. No refunds will be issued thereafter. You may substitute another individual from your township for your registration at any time without incurring a charge; please notify MTA of the change.



AGENDA

8:30 a.m.	Check-in and continental breakfast
9 a.m.	Meeting begins
10:30 to 11 a.m.	Vendor Showcase
Noon	Networking Lunch
1 p.m.	Breakouts
2:30 p.m.	Breakouts
3:45 p.m.	Meeting adjourns

MTA On The Road Registration Form

Which location will you attend?

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sept. 27: Bavarian Lodge, Frankenmuth | <input type="checkbox"/> Oct. 5: Magnusson Franklin Inn, Houghton | <input type="checkbox"/> Oct. 18: Sanctuary Inn, Alpena |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sept. 28: Comfort Inn, Chelsea | <input type="checkbox"/> Oct. 6: Holiday Inn, Marquette | <input type="checkbox"/> Oct. 19: Forward Conf. Center, West Branch |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sept. 29: Fetzer Center at WMU, Kalamazoo | <input type="checkbox"/> Oct. 7: Little Bear East Arena, St. Ignace | <input type="checkbox"/> Oct. 25: Holiday Inn, Big Rapids |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sept. 30: Eagle Eye Conference Center, Lansing | <input type="checkbox"/> Oct. 17: Otsego Club & Resort, Gaylord | <input type="checkbox"/> Oct. 26: Crystal Mountain, Thompsonville |

Township _____ County _____

Name & Title _____

Name & Title _____

Name & Title _____

Name & Title _____

Telephone _____ Email Address _____

- REGULAR rate***: \$121/attendee if registered **after** Sept. 13.
- DISCOUNTED rate***: \$101/attendee if registered **by** Sept. 13.

# of Persons		Registration Fee		Total
_____	X	_____	=	_____

*Rates apply to MTA members. Non-members, call for rates.

NOTE: Payment must accompany form in order to be processed.

- Check enclosed (payable to MTA)
- Charge to: (circle one) MasterCard VISA

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Send your completed registration form with payment to MTA, P.O. Box 80078, Lansing, MI 48908-0078; fax: (517) 321-8908. Or register online at www.michigantownships.org. Questions? Call (517) 321-6467.



Capture the flag

Playful prank brings townships together

When 2015 MTA President **Linda Preston** went to retrieve the **Pokagon Township** (Cass Co.) flag at the MTA Annual Educational Conference in January, she found a note instead.

Preston, who is the township supervisor, learned their flag was being held captive by none other than an MTA Township of Excellence, **Spring Lake Township** (Ottawa Co.). If she wanted the flag back, the letter said, she and her board would have to visit Spring Lake Township to get it.

Almost five months later, the good-natured prank led to a township exchange day. Pokagon Township board members trekked two hours north to share insights as local leaders, and get a look at how Spring Lake Township runs its community.

A chance to learn from one another

Remembering the flag heist still makes Spring Lake Township Trustee **Rick Homan** laugh, but he's always seen it as more than just a joke. He saw the township exchange as an invaluable networking opportunity, a chance for both townships to learn from one another. With hectic schedules and countless time commitments, networking with other officials can often be difficult at best, but Homan believes it's also crucial.

He envisions future exchanges as “capturing a flag” becomes an annual tradition. “This could become a movement, bringing different townships to one another,” Homan said. “This will start to bring us even closer together.”

Each year, townships from across the state bring their flags to the MTA Annual Educational Conference to take part in the iconic Parade of Flags, during the Conference’s Opening Session. Pokagon Township had just commissioned a new flag featuring an updated design, and Preston couldn’t wait to show it off on the MTA stage.

It was after the parade that the idea first came to Spring Lake Township Manager **Gordon Gallagher**.

“Gordon came to me and said, you know what, we ought to steal a flag,” Homan said with a laugh. After the initial shock wore off, Homan knew he wanted in. And he knew exactly whose flag they should hold captive. “I said if there’s one person in all of these flags who I know well, it just happens to be the MTA president.”

Homan and Preston had become friends as they took Township Governance Academy (TGA) courses. He knew she had a good sense humor and would know the prank was meant in a completely positive way.

So they got to work. Homan and Gallagher don’t do anything halfway—they crafted a letter telling Pokagon Township that they’d taken their flag, and if they wanted to get it back, they’d have to come visit Spring Lake Township. Then, they raced to their hotel’s guest services to print the letter and stuffed it in the base where the township flag would have been.

At first, Preston was surprised when she found the note where the flag should have been. But when she realized who it was from, she had to laugh. After all, Homan had slipped her a silly note during their first TGA class together. She and her board members agreed that visiting Spring Lake Township would be a great experience.

So on June 1, Preston and her board members hit the road, armed with a gift of Pokagon pamphlets and a calendar



Spring Lake Township (Ottawa Co.) hosted Pokagon Township officials during a township exchange day, allowing the local leaders to learn from one another, share stories about their communities, and discuss how their boards operate.



Pokagon Township (Cass Co.) Supervisor Linda Preston (left) retrieved her township’s flag from Spring Lake Township (Ottawa Co.) Supervisor John Nash, after it was “stolen” at MTA’s Annual Conference. The ransom? A township exchange day—and the start of a new tradition.

featuring the township church where the hymn “The Old Rugged Cross” was first performed. They shared stories over coffee and muffins with the Spring Lake Township board about how their boards operate and reach a consensus. Gallagher showed them around the office building, which they share with the Village of Spring Lake, before they hopped on a trolley to tour the township’s industrial sites.

Spring Lake Township Supervisor **John Nash** also went through the township’s annual report and discussed upcoming projects before presenting Preston with a ceremonial key to the township. Pokagon Township board members also heard presentations from economic development officials, the area chamber of commerce and the Village of Spring Lake.

For Homan, the experience was the perfect way to help promote Spring Lake Township—something he never misses a chance to do. He also hopes to turn the exchange into his final TGA project.

Preston and her board came away from the event with new ideas and resources to try out at home. She appreciated learning about how another township gets money for parks, runs its department of public works station and keeps board meetings running smoothly. She even got the local economic development official’s phone number in case she needs help with a future grant.

Her board members are already excited to host a township exchange of their own after the next MTA Conference—and they already have ideas for their township tour. They’ve drawn a circle around Pokagon Township and are considering any township within a two-hour’s drive. So if your township is located in that area, consider yourself officially put on notice!

“We’re planning to keep the tradition alive,” Preston said.



Take a hike

Townships proud to be part of
Michigan's Iron Belle Trail

The state's most completely restored iron trestle bridge spans the Cass River in **Bridgeport Charter Township's** (Saginaw Co.) 35-acre Lyle Park.

Local officials hope that more people will be able to enjoy the 110-year-old State Street Bridge—one of only six remaining multi-span truss bridges in the state—now that it will be part of Michigan's newest (and longest!) trail, the Iron Belle Trail.

Bridgeport Charter Township was among the five township recipients that recently received Michigan Department of Natural Resources grants to continue development of the statewide trail.

The township's walking trail, which crosses over the State Street Bridge, runs through the entire township from east

to west. The township will use the grant funding for signage along the trail, and is also in the process of developing a Cass River Trailhead, complete with a pavilion in a park-like setting, along with ADA-accessible restrooms.

"We are really excited to have a trail route of this magnitude come through our township," said township Parks & Recreation Director **Bill Wheeler**. "Our historic bridge is the No. 1 restored truss bridge in the state, and has more than 80 percent of its original parts. The bridge is a focal point of the trail, and we're very excited that more visitors will be able to see it."

From Belle Isle to Ironwood

Hiking and bicycling are a great way to experience the state's vast array of scenic views, cultural resources, vibrant communities and wildlife resources. Michigan's Iron Belle Trail links the wealth of existing trails, helps fill gaps where needed, and creates opportunities for rural economic development, healthy recreation and awareness of Michigan's natural resources.

The Iron Belle Trail stretches from Belle Isle in Detroit to Ironwood in the western Upper Peninsula. In its current proposed state, the hiking route is 72 percent complete, and will include 1,259 miles. The bicycling route will offer 774 miles, and is 58 percent completed. Federal, state and local units of government are working to complete the statewide trail by building upon Michigan's extensive existing trail network.

The bicycle route uses existing multi-use trails that have been developed by local units of government, counties and the state. In the Upper Peninsula, the route follows US-2, a designated national bicycling route.

The hiking route follows the North Country National Scenic Trail between Calhoun and Gogebic Counties. It traverses the west side of the Lower Peninsula, and borders Lake Superior in the Upper Peninsula.

Additional projects in **Alabaster Township** (Iosco Co.), **Grand Blanc Charter Township** (Genesee Co.), **Orion Charter Township** (Oakland Co.) and **Oscoda Township** (Iosco Co.) were among those selected by the DNR to develop the Iron Belle Trail and further Michigan's reputation as "the Trails State."

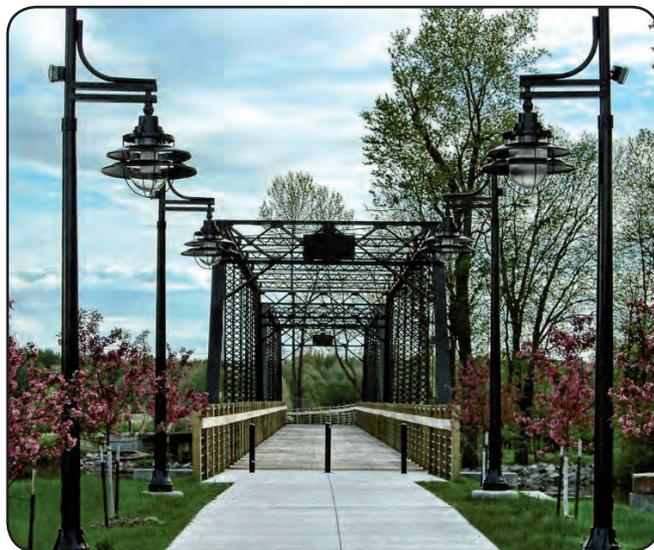
Township trails make the difference

In Alabaster Township, the grant will be used for signage on the recently completed 3.3-mile Sunrise Side non-motorized trail in the southern portion of the township as well as for the first 3.2-mile phase to the north, which will complete the Iron Belle Trail route in the township. Trail welcome information signs, a trail dedication sign, mile markers, and a separate sign about the Iron Belle Trail were parts of the grant.

In addition, Alabaster Township has created an arboretum focusing mostly on native trees along the trail. The various trees have been identified and labeled with QR codes and appropriate signs. The grant provided funding for arboretum information signs at three locations.

The township, which has worked with neighboring municipalities for the past decade on a regional trail system, is thrilled to be part of the Iron Belle Trail.

"Having worked on the regional concept for years, it is very exciting to have a portion of this statewide trail running through Alabaster Township," said Supervisor **Stephanie Wentworth**, noting a cooperative partnership with neighboring townships, cities and villages. "Many, many visitors explore and enjoy our trail system. From our trailhead at the Iosco/Arenac county line, the trail takes you through Tawas City, East Tawas and out to the lighthouse at Tawas Point State Park.



The State Street Bridge in Bridgeport Charter Township (Saginaw Co.)—the state's most completely restored truss bridge—will be part of Michigan's Iron Belle Trail, which traverses the state, from Belle Isle to Ironwood.

"We are so excited—and relieved—that we have completed the entire length of our path plan. As the community increases its awareness of health consciousness, and bicycling and walking become more a favored form of exercise, it is important for the township to provide a safe area where this can be done. The pathway increases connectivity, and is used by residents and visitors alike."

Grand Blanc Charter Township Supervisor **Micki Hoffman** echoes the excitement over efforts to connect three portions of township trails to the Iron Belle. The township has two trails—a one-mile stretch that winds through the township's Bicentennial Park, and another that passes by the township's historical Perry Homestead.

As part of the Iron Belle, the township is working with the DNR to extend its trail to connect into neighboring **Atlas Township**. The Iron Belle will also connect with already constructed paths and trails in the southern portion of the township.

As planning for Michigan's Iron Belle Trail marches forward, there will be opportunities for other communities to plan trail connections to the initial trail routes.

Ultimately, the trail will become an interconnected facility, celebrating a "Pure Michigan" experience with connections to many communities throughout Michigan. A community toolkit will eventually be made available for communities along the trail (and other communities that wish to be involved) to take advantage of this statewide economic driver.

Hoffman says Grand Blanc Charter Township officials are conscious of the impact the trail can have on the community—both health-wise and economically.

"Our health park is a major part of our community," Hoffman said. "We are very conscious of fitness programs. The trail also provides an opportunity for small business growth along the trails and pathways."

aroundthestate

townships in the spotlight



Essex Township

Essex Township (Clinton Co.) is a beautiful and rural area, with grazing cattle and crops covering the countryside, and the Maple River flowing past homes and farmland. The residents enjoy the wildlife, scenery, and community-mindedness of the area.



In 1832, George Campau purchased land in Essex Township in what is now the village of Maple Rapids. He established a trading station along the Maple River, which the *Past and Present of Clinton County Michigan*, an archive of local history, called “the center of community life in



northwest Clinton for quite some time.” The townships of Wandagon and Lebanon even held their first township meetings at this post in 1839.



In many cases, the township’s current residents are descendants of the first settlers in the area, such as Lyman Webster, Chauncey Stebbins, Sylvester Stevens, Daniel Kellogg, Lucene Eldridge, Joshua Frink, Solomon Moss, James Sowle and Chauncey Ferguson. Many residents will recognize the names from their own current neighbors. The current supervisor’s great-great grandfather also held the same office.

Today, Essex Township is home to about 1,900 people. The township maintains four cemeteries—Lowe, Sowle, Beech and Prairie. The township, with the help of Clinton County, recently rebuilt two bridges, on Anderson and Findlay Roads. There are four churches in the community—Lowe United Methodist Church, which just celebrated 125 years, and Hope Bible Baptist, Maple Rapids United Methodist, and the Congregational Christian Church. In addition to the Maple River, there are two creeks that cross the township, and residents also have access to the Maple River State Game Area.

Township residents enjoy a quiet, bucolic life. They look forward to continuing to live on and care for the land their ancestors settled so long ago.



Information

when you need it.

Four ways to connect with MTA

1 Log on to www.michigantownships.org

MTA's website provides access to a wealth of members-only information, including hundreds of pages of township information, sample documents and resources, covering topics from assessing to zoning, and so much more. If you're not logging in to the members-only section of www.michigantownships.org, you are missing out! Click on "Member Login" in the right-hand corner of MTA's home page, and log in with your username (your email address on file with MTA) and password.

2 Join the *Community*

Community Connection, our social networking site *only* for MTA members, is a great way for township officials to come together to discuss best practices, share ideas and ask questions of your peers. Registered event attendees can network with fellow attendees and find handouts at the conclusion of the workshop series. Access on the member login page of www.michigantownships.org, or by clicking on the  logo on the member home page.

3 Follow MiTownships on Twitter

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