

Michigan Township Focus

OCTOBER 2015

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE MICHIGAN TOWNSHIPS ASSOCIATION

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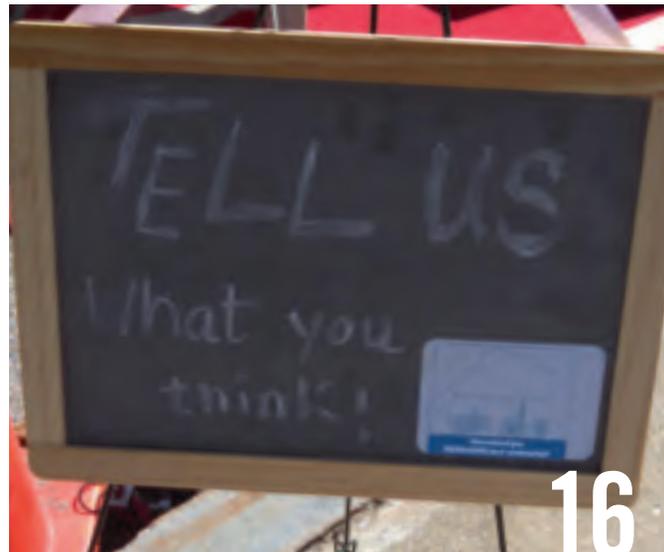
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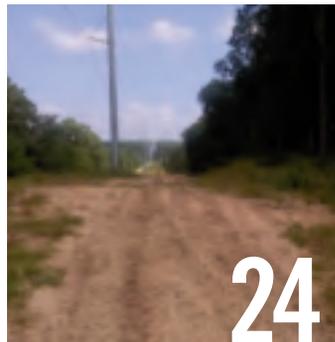
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Say it ain't so!

Jim Beelen—friend and trusted advisor to legions of Michigan township officials—is retiring from the Michigan Townships Association this month. MTA legal counsel tells me that our schemes to keep him here are illegal variations of kidnapping and involuntary servitude, so I guess we have to accept the inevitable.



Jim wanted to keep his retirement on the down-low, preferring a quiet, inauspicious departure. Well, we're going to honor his wishes, but not let him walk off into the sunset without acknowledging what a great team player he has been and what a treasure of insights and knowledge he has been to MTA.

Long before he joined us, Jim was a standout township official well known to the MTA staff and many township officials. He had chaired the Michigan Township Participating Plan and Michigan Association of Township Supervisors boards of directors, where he was fully committed to building collegial relationships and effective communications. We saw first-hand that Jim put principles first in how he dealt with others, and with extraordinary calm and patience he would contribute to resolving issues guided by a strong sense of fair play.

When Evelyn David prepared to retire in 2009 from our Member Information Services Department and with his township elected official career coming to an end, Jim Beelen was at the top of our list to fill the impending MTA staff void. In fact, when we learned of Jim's availability, the list pretty much disappeared, and Jim began his second township career as MTA Member Information Services liaison.

Because Jim and his wife Pat lived beyond a comfortable commuting distance, Jim settled into an apartment about a mile away from the MTA office and proceeded to live in Lansing during the week and return home to his family on weekends. Not an ideal situation, but we all are grateful that to Jim and Pat, the rewards from serving township officials statewide balanced to some degree the personal sacrifices resulting from their time apart.

As a member of the MTA team, Jim had to first "unlearn" much of his understandings of township government to ensure that the information he provided to MTA members was consistent with interpretations of MTA legal counsel.

While Jim had an impressive knowledge of basic township laws, he truly excelled at the "hands-on" skills. **Allendale Charter Township** (Ottawa Co.), where Jim had been a township official, is a full-service township that had given Jim first-hand knowledge of downtown development authorities, utilities, personnel administration, public safety, recreation services and the art of governance.

MTA members also found in Jim a compassionate and nonjudgmental listener who could patiently unravel the intricacies of relationships among township officials and share his wisdom and insights on how to repair hurt feelings and right wrongs. Jim enabled those who sought out his advice to recognize their own fallibilities, and identify and correct their mistakes. Instead of righteous condemnation, Jim appreciated that miscues merely validate one's connection with the greater humanity. Yes, he could chuckle at the predicaments in which people find themselves, finding humor in the situation but not in those involved. He could laugh when his experience told him that everything would turn out okay—and when he saw a proverbial train wreck coming, he was visibly saddened at others' misfortunes, and following his advice undoubtedly kept many members out of trouble.

Jim's township knowledge and experience has set a very high bar for the MTA Member Information Services Department. Jim can never be replaced, but we are going to extraordinary lengths to fill the void with a person who will continue Jim's legacy of extraordinary service.

Jim's email address is jim@michigantownships.org. I know he would love to hear from you one more time. For more information on Jim's career, see the article on page 26-27 of this issue of *Township Focus*.

AN IVY LEAGUE OPPORTUNITY

Harvard program energizes, affirms township manager's aim to maximize public value

Fresh from Harvard University, **James Wickman** has an entire notebook of ideas to help him maximize the public value of **Hartland Township** (Livingston Co.).

The township manager was selected for the university's prestigious program for Senior Executives in State and Local Government. He spent three weeks in July attending intensive courses and diving into best practices as one of two recipients of the Taubman Company's Fellowship for Executive Excellence. Administered through the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, the fellowship provides local public officials who have demonstrated leadership with the opportunity to improve their management skills.

Wickman came away from the program energized with new ideas but also confident that his township is already doing a great job. "Having that reinforced based on learning from others is a great thing," he said. "We don't have to make wholesale changes. The biggest takeaway is in affirmation."

Throughout the three weeks, Wickman was surrounded by state and local government leaders from around the world. Together, they spent quite a bit of time studying the U.S.'s founding fathers. Wickman was gratified to learn that the style of government advocated by Thomas Jefferson is very similar to today's township government in Michigan.

Program leaders from the John F. Kennedy School of Government taught attendees leadership principles that they might have heard before, but they were explained in a different framework. They emphasized the importance of relationships, of seeking to understand before being understood, of being positive. Wickman also noticed a theme of emphasizing public value. Leaders were told to ask themselves if they were offering value to the public in return for the tax and trust they give their local government. "If we're scrutinizing that in everything we do and asking ourselves those tough questions, it helps us make ourselves better," he said.

Since returning from the program at the end of July, Wickman has been careful to look for windows of opportunity, something that was emphasized by the instructors. "The best ideas we ever have can be wasted or lost if we're not prepared when the opportunity comes along," he said.



Wickman

SEEKING AN UPGRADE

First steps taken to replace Michigan's aging election equipment

New election equipment could be up and running in township precincts as soon as the August 2016 primary election. The state is in the process of seeking bids to replace the more than 10-year-old election equipment used in Michigan's 4,800 voting precincts.

Michigan will continue to use a voting system featuring a paper ballot marked by a voter. The upgraded equipment will include replacing tabulators that count voted paper ballots, election-management software, voting devices that assist voters with disabilities and other items.

Some counties may be able to receive the new equipment and training in time for the August 2016 primary election. The state hopes to complete the statewide rollout no later than August 2018.

Township clerks were among those on a steering committee that worked with state Bureau of Elections (BOE) staff to view demonstrations of available equipment and draft the requirements to ensure the new systems will meet their needs.

Certain specifications must be met under the request for proposals for election equipment vendors to ultimately be certified by the Board of State Canvassers. The certification process includes detailed testing of new equipment followed by a mock election to gauge voter reaction to the new systems. A detailed report and recommendation whether to certify will then be prepared by the BOE. Selection of various certified systems will take place at the county level following consultation with township and city clerks.

The equipment that voters now use was rolled out in 2004 and 2005 when Michigan began using optical-scan voting systems statewide. The aim is to begin the process to replace the equipment before any wide-scale issues occur with the aging equipment. While the state can use available federal Help America Vote Act funds to purchase new equipment, the amount is not sufficient to cover the full cost of the new election systems, which could be as high as \$60 million.



AFFORDABLE CARE ACT PENALTIES

Penalties double for not filing ACA information returns

Large employers (those with 50 or more full-time equivalent employees), including townships, that don't file Affordable Care Act (ACA) information



returns with the IRS will face double the penalties under the newly enacted Trade Preferences Extension Act. The basic penalty for failure to file or furnish a correct information return or payee statement will more than double from \$100 to \$250.

The act, which became law on June 29, also applies to employers that fail to furnish employees with payee statements required by the ACA regarding their health care coverage. Some of the reporting requirements apply to all employers that provide self-insured health coverage, regardless of their size.

Watch future issues of *Township Focus* for more on the ACA or visit MTA's Affordable Care Act Web page on the members-only section of www.michigantownships.org. MTA's Web page includes a link to IRS Publication 5196, which includes information to help explain the employer reporting requirements of the health care law.

LOCAL UPDATES FROM ACROSS MICHIGAN

Township happenings

After arson destroyed the historic landmark Whites Bridge in **Keene Township** (Kent Co.) in 2013, residents formed a nonprofit to raise money through private events and benefit concerts to rebuild a replica bridge. Through the work of volunteers, funds raised, along with a Michigan Department of Transportation local bridge program grant, will make construction possible in 2016.

After several years of planning, grant-writing, design and construction, **Presque Isle Township** (Presque Isle Co.) celebrated the opening of its improved Range Light Park this summer. The waterfront park, which is part of the Blueways Water Trail, now includes a handicap-accessible walkway and pavilion on the beach.

The newly opened Heritage Park in **Whitehall Township** (Muskegon Co.) allows visitors to explore 10,000 years of state history through historical exhibits along a half-mile handicap accessible looped trail. Sites include a replica mastodon skeleton, Indian wigwams, an English fur-trader's cabin, and a 1900s farmhouse, among others. At each site, costumed presenters explain the history and invite visitors to help with activities such as spinning wool, churning butter or cooking over an open hearth.

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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Letter to the editor

Sharing 'small steps' that make a difference

As an example of "Small steps make a difference" as noted in your recycling cover story in the July *Township Focus*, **Sturgis Township** (St. Joseph Co.) has had a battery recycling program in place for three years. The program was recently expanded to include **Burr Oak, Sherman, Fawn River** and **White Pigeon Townships**, and the City of Sturgis.

Sturgis Township serves as a drop-off point for batteries collected at the participating unit offices. The batteries are picked up for processing by Battery Solutions Inc. of Howell, Mich. The pick-up and processing fees are shared based on the units' percentage of total weight of accumulated batteries.

As of Aug. 1, more than 1,472 pounds of batteries have been recycled. With the next pick-up, the total will be more than one ton.

Local residents are pleased to have a way to dispose of batteries without having them end up in a landfill.

—**Michael A. Bobalik**
Clerk, Sturgis Township

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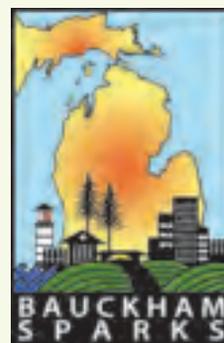
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For as long as the Michigan Townships Association has been around, the law firm of Bauckham Sparks has successfully guided Michigan townships through the complex and often challenging legal issues they face. In fact, back in 1953, the firm's founders also helped found MTA—and the Association itself has relied on Bauckham Sparks' expertise ever since.



The legal challenges Michigan townships face have certainly changed over the past six decades, and Bauckham Sparks' attorneys continue to change with the times. The firm's guiding principles, however, remain as steadfast today as they were over 60 years ago. The firm continues to provide careful and thoughtful analysis, detailed problem-solving, and individual attention to its clients' needs with the highest degree of integrity in all circumstances.

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Advertorial

mta events | october

14 *Emerging Issues in Emergency Services,*
Frankenmuth

27 Registration and housing open at 9 a.m. for MTA's
63rd Annual Educational Conference & Expo, being
held Jan. 19-22, 2016, at the Detroit Marriott
Renaissance Center
*Registration brochure is included in this issue of
Township Focus!*

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Township Focus

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OCTOBER

5 Last day to register for Nov. 3 election. (MCL 168.497)

15 Assessor reports status of real and personal Industrial Facilities Tax property to the State Tax Commission (STC). (MCL 207.567(2))

Governmental units report to STC on the status of each exemption granted under the Commercial Redevelopment Act. (MCL 207.666)

Qualified local governmental units report to STC on the status of each exemption granted under the Commercial Rehabilitation Act. (MCL 207.854)

The assessor sends annual report of the determination made under MCL 207.783(1) to each taxing unit that levies taxes upon property in the local governmental unit in which a new facility or rehabilitated facility is located and to each holder of the Neighborhood Enterprise Zone certificate. (MCL 207.783(2))

Qualified local governmental units report to STC on the status of each exemption granted under the Obsolete Property Rehabilitation Act. (MCL 125.2794)

By 23 Pre-election campaign statements filed. Books closed Oct. 18.

23 Write-in candidates for Nov. 3 election file Declaration of Intent forms by 4 p.m. (MCL 168.737a)

By 27 Notice of Nov. 3 election published. (MCL 168.653a)

By 29 Public accuracy test must be conducted. (R 168.778) Notice of test must be published at least 48 hours before test. (MCL 168.737a)

30 Deadline for submission of New Personal Property (PA 328 of 1998), Obsolete Property (PA 146 of 2000), Commercial Rehabilitation (PA 210 of 2005), Neighborhood Enterprise Zone (PA 147 of 1992) and Industrial Facilities Tax (PA 198 of 1974) tax exemption applications to STC.

Deadline for filing Principal Residence Exemption (PRE) Affidavits (Form 2368) for exemption from the 18-mill school operating tax to qualify for a PRE for the winter tax levy. (MCL 211.7cc(2))

Deadline for filing the initial request of a Conditional Rescission of Principal Residence Exemption (Form 4640) for the winter tax levy. (MCL 211.7cc(5))

Deadline for filing for Foreclosure Entity Conditional Rescission of a PRE to qualify for the winter tax levy. (MCL 211.7cc(5))

31 Electors who wish to receive an absentee voter ballot for Nov. 3 election by mail submit applications by 2 p.m. (MCL 168.759)

NOVEMBER

2 Electors qualified to obtain an absentee voter ballot for Nov. 3 election may vote in person in clerk's office until 4 p.m. (MCL 168.761)

3 Emergency absentee voting for election until 4 p.m. (MCL 168.759b)

Election.

4 Local clerk delivers result of Nov. 3 election to county clerk by 11 a.m. (MCL 168.809)

By 5 Township supervisor shall notify township treasurer of the amount of county, state and

school taxes apportioned in township to enable treasurer to obtain necessary bond* for collection of taxes. (MCL 211.43(1))

By 9 Boards of county canvassers meet to canvass election. (MCL 168.821)

25 Township treasurer gives county treasurer a bond* running to the county in the actual amount of county, state and school taxes. (MCL 211.43(2))

*May be handled by the county treasurer. See MCL 211.43(2) for additional information, or call MTA at (517) 321-6467 for further guidance.

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What can our township do to better protect our investments and cash positions?

Although the economy is rebounding, the protection of principal balances in township accounts is always an important concern for treasurers and township boards. Consider the following:

1. **Federal depository insurance.** The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) and National Credit Union Share Insurance Fund (NCUSIF) insure township deposits in member banks up to \$250,000 per institution for checking (demand deposit accounts) and \$250,000 for time savings accounts, including certificates of deposit (CDs).
2. **Consider “collateralization” of deposits and investments, on amounts over FDIC insurance limits.** Collateralization of deposits requires the depository bank to place in escrow—usually with a third-party trustee—agreed-upon securities, such as commercial paper, or U.S. treasuries or agencies, whose market value is equal to the uninsured bank deposits divided by an agreed-upon “margin” percentage. This arrangement essentially grants the township with a security interest in the bank’s investments in case of a failure. Although many states require collateralization of public deposits, Michigan does not.
3. **Minimize deposit levels.** Invest surplus cash in safer investments than unsecured deposits over FDIC limits (for example, CDs in other institutions under the FDIC limits, U.S. treasuries, and other secure investments authorized by your township’s investment policy).
4. **Consider CD deposits through the Certificate of Deposit Account Registry Service (CADARS), which can provide additional FDIC insurance.** Townships should review the program with the

township attorney for compliance with Public Act 20 of 1943, as amended.

5. **Review the township’s current investment policy and consider modifications to make it more conservative.** Many townships adopted “boiler-plate” sample documents that were produced in response to Public Act 196 of 1997, which first required township boards to approve investment policies. Many of these standard documents permit the local treasurer to invest in any financial institution—without consideration of the institution’s financial strength—eligible under state law (PA 20 of 1943), and all permissible investments under state law.

Other thoughts to consider in safeguarding the township’s finances include:

1. **More frequent reporting of the status of township cash balances and investments.** Often, the board and the public only get an annual report of FDIC insurance coverage and other information about credit risk, interest rate risk, and concentration of credit risk in the annual audit. The township is required by GASB Statement 40 to provide this information in its annual reports, which is usually reported in the notes to the financial statements marked “deposit and investments.” The township board could ask the treasurer to provide this information more frequently.
2. **Check on your financial institution’s health.** The FDIC has a tool on its website, www.fdic.gov, to gather financial information. You must know the bank’s FDIC number or headquarters location, which are fairly easy to find on the FDIC site’s search engine. With these reports, you can review the bank’s balance sheet and operating results, and run a ratio analysis to determine trends. The FDIC even has a tool to compare your bank’s results with all member banks or banks of similar sizes.

Fee-based services, such as Highline (found online at www.highlinefin.com) and Thomson Publishing (www.thomsonreuters.com), provide services that will perform much of the analysis work necessary to review a bank’s historical performance and trends. Also, you may wish to consult with your county treasurer’s office or county treasurers’ association.

Townships may consider using free commercial websites for a “quick” overview of the institution’s health, such as www.bankrate.com, which use a proprietary process to rank banks on a quarterly basis.

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.

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Our audit report stated that we had “material weaknesses” in some internal controls. What does that mean, and what should a township board do about it?

A material weakness is defined by auditors as “a significant deficiency, or combination of significant deficiencies, that results in more than a remote likelihood that a material misstatement of the financial statements will not be prevented or detected by the township’s internal control.”

What does that mean for a township board? It generally means that the board needs to take a look at its procedures involving money, including procedures such as check writing and approval, receipts and deposits, and bank statement reconciliation, for example.

An internal control is like a lock on a door; in the case of townships, internal controls help prevent unauthorized use of public money. And some internal controls involve “segregation (separation) of duties”; the analogy would be two or more locks on the door, where different people each hold only one of the keys.

An important resource for all township board members is the Michigan Department of Treasury’s *Uniform Accounting Procedures Manual*, which is available on the state’s website, www.michigan.gov/treasury. Click on “Local Government” on the left-hand side, then select “Accounting Information,” and “Bulletins, Manuals and Forms.”

The following are edited excerpts from the manual list of minimum internal controls that must be in place in every unit of government in Michigan. The manual discusses these procedures in greater detail:

Receipts

- Numerically controlled (printer pre-numbered) three-part official receipts with the name of the township printed on the receipt must be issued for all revenues.
- Receipt books issued to other departments must be accounted for numerically.
- The use of “dime store” receipts is strictly prohibited.
- “Cash” or “check” as the method of payment must be indicated on the receipt.
- The receipt must identify the individual receiving payment.
- The receipt must allow for immediate revenue account classification in conformance with the Uniform Chart of Accounts.
- Checks must be restrictively endorsed at the point and time of collection.
- When possible, someone other than the person who writes receipts or posts the accounting records must be

responsible to verify that collections received in the mail are properly receipted.

- When possible, collections must be reconciled by an individual not involved in the receipt process.
- Tax collections must be received by the treasurer or a person designated by the treasurer.

Bank accounts and deposits

- All deposits are to be made intact. Intact means that the deposit must include the checks and cash received for a specific numerical sequenced receipt group.
- Deposits must be made timely and reconciled to official receipts.
- Deposit tickets must list checks, by name or number and amount.
- All bank accounts must be in the name of the township and the township treasurer. Use of the township’s tax ID number should be strictly controlled by the treasurer.
- Tax collections must be deposited in a separate bank account in the name of the treasurer.
- All bank accounts should have an ending date of the end of each month.
- Bank signature cards should be kept current and the authorized signers limited.

Disbursements

- Dual signatures are required for all checking accounts (except the separate tax collection checking account). The dual signatures **MUST** be the clerk (or deputy clerk) and the treasurer (or deputy treasurer).
- The separate tax collection bank account statutorily only requires the signature of the treasurer. However, the treasurer must provide the clerk with summaries of tax receipts and copies of all checks written so the clerk can enter the information into the township’s accounting system.
- Appropriate documentation (supporting invoices) must be attached for all disbursements.
- Original bills, not copies, must be used for documentation.
- All disbursements must be approved by the township board prior to disbursement. The township board may establish a formal policy to authorize payments prior to approval to avoid finance or late charges and to pay appropriated amounts and payroll (including related payroll taxes and withholdings). This policy must be very limited and a list of payments made prior to approval must be presented to the township board for approval.
- Checks should not be returned to the originating office for distribution.
- Bank accounts must be promptly (within the month following the bank statement date) reconciled by an

individual not involved in the receipt/bank deposit process. In small units of government when segregation of duties is not possible, a second official must review the reconciliation.

- Adequate security must be provided over unused checks.
- Checks must NOT be signed prior to being completely filled out.
- All functions (i.e. deposit, write checks, issue checks, reconcile account) regarding a checking account should NOT be performed by the same individual.
- Numerically controlled, pre-numbered checks must be used.
- Actual checks must be returned to the township (record retention requirement). Under the Records Media Act, electronically stored checks should meet this requirement.

(The following questions are excerpted from the Michigan Department of Treasury's online publication, What to Look for In Audit Reports: Citizen's Guide to Understanding Financial Statements.)

Q. What is an audit?

A local unit contracts with an independent certified public accounting (CPA) firm to opine on whether the financial statements prepared by the local unit and presented by its management are fairly presented. In part, the CPA (auditor) tests a sampling of financial transactions to ascertain the reliability of the financial statements. An audit provides reasonable assurances, not absolute, that the financial statements are free of material misstatements. Examples of financial transactions can include verifying bank account balances, tracing invoices, tracing cash receipts, and reviewing contracts to determine compliance. The CPA also obtains an understanding of internal controls to assess the risk of a material misstatement.

Q. What is in an actual audit report?

To have an overview of how a local unit of government is performing financially, you should focus on the financial statements of the general fund. In particular, you should look closely at the statement of revenues, expenditures and changes in fund balance that contains the following:

1. **Revenues:** This tells you how much money the local unit has received from its own operations during a fiscal year, such as:
 - a. Property taxes
 - b. License fees
 - c. Fees for permits
 - d. Grants
2. **Expenditures:** This tells you the bills paid by the local unit during a fiscal year, such as:
 - a. General government expenses
 - b. Utility charges
 - c. Public safety
 - d. Transportation

3. **Other financing sources/uses:** You may see other sources or uses of money not generated by the day-to-day operations. Those monies are received or used on a one-time basis and are not expected to be repeated.

Examples of one-time sources of income include:

- a. Money resulting from issuing bonds (public borrowing of money)
- b. Borrowing from other funds of the local unit (interfund transfers)
- c. Sale of capital assets such as buildings or land

Examples of one-time uses of income include:

- a. Loans to other funds (interfund transfers)
- b. Payments related to refunding a bond

4. **Fund balance:** This item shows you the changes in the fund balance, such as:

- a. If the local unit is receiving more revenue than it needs to pay its bills, its fund balance (net worth) will increase.
- b. If the local unit is paying out more money on its bills than it is receiving, then its fund balance will go down.
- c. If the fund balance goes down far enough, it creates a negative fund balance called a deficit. In Michigan, any local unit with a deficit in any of its funds at the end of its fiscal year must prepare and send to the Michigan Department of Treasury, for approval, a deficit elimination plan. This plan provides detail of how the local unit will eliminate the deficit within a stated period of time.

To figure out the net worth of a local unit, the calculation is usually revenues minus expenditures, plus or minus other financing sources/uses that will either increase or decrease the fund balance (net worth).

The ending general fund balance shows the "net worth" or equity of the local unit. The ending general fund balance should be the same number as is shown for the fund balances reported on the balance sheet.

Notes to the financial statements are usually found in the middle of the audit report. When you read the notes, they give you insight into the details of the financial statements and are very important for you to understand the financial statements.

Budgetary comparison information is another useful part of the audit report to review. This typically presents the original budget, the final appropriated amounts, and the actual inflows, outflows and balances. This is useful to determine if resources were obtained and used in accordance with the legally adopted budget.

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.

Legislative lowdown

Here's a quick look at important bills that MTA is following as they move through the legislative process:

Transportation: House-passed package would direct \$700 million in projected General Fund growth to roads. Senate proposal would phase in a gas tax increase by 15 cents per gallon over three years and shift \$700 million in existing income tax revenue from the General Fund to transportation. *MTA's Policy Platform supports a gas tax increase, and other reforms. MTA is concerned about potential cuts and their impact on local government.*

Unfunded mandates (HBs 4753-4755, SBs 388-390): Would not require local units to provide new services required by state law unless state provides the funding. *MTA supports.*

HB 4004: Would require charter township board approval before an annexation question can be placed on the ballot. *MTA supports.*

HB 4182: Would prohibit members of public bodies from casting a vote on a decision of the public body without being physically present at the meeting. *MTA opposes.*

HB 4183: Would allow townships to post legal notices on their own websites instead of printing them in newspapers by 2025. *MTA supports.*

HBs 4423-4426: Would modify speed limits on certain roads, revise certain requirements for speed limits in school zones, modify assessment of points for certain speeding violations, and remove townships from current role in setting speed limits. *MTA opposes.*

HBs 4499, 4500, 4503, 4504, 4506, 4507: Would change forfeiture reporting requirements for local units and create a clear and convincing standard of proof to abate a nuisance by forfeiture or sale of a vehicle, boat, or other personal property. *MTA monitoring.*

HB 4516: Would allow disabled veterans who missed the filing period to retroactively

receive a property tax exemption for 2013 and 2014. *MTA opposes.*

HB 4522: Would allow certain state legislative committees to subpoena any records or files of local units with a majority committee vote. *MTA opposes.*

HB 4563: Would permit township funds to be used to pay for domestic and sexual violence victim services. *MTA supports.*

HBs 4570-4573: Would keep wind turbines and electricity-generating property on the tax rolls. *MTA supports.*

HB 4747: Would protect township land from adverse possession claims. *MTA supports.*

SB 6: Would expand disabled veterans property tax exemption to include residential and agricultural real property. *MTA opposes.*

SB 191: Would allow local units to recover certain costs for retail fraud or criminal contempt prosecution. *MTA supports.*

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Two MTA e-newsletters help today's township officials be "in the know" on state and federal legislation impacting local government



Township Insights, MTA's quick-read weekly electronic newsletter, offers timely information and updates about legislative happenings, as well as news, programs and resources that can help you better serve your community and your residents. Get the latest on what's happening in Lansing, updates on court opinions, grant opportunities—and so much more!

Each month, *Township Voice* provides comprehensive insights and background on the "what, when, where and why" of emerging issues at the Capitol. This monthly e-newsletter goes in-depth on pending legislation—and how it will affect townships.

Let MTA help you stay on top of legislative issues impacting your township!

Both of these Association legislative publications are distributed via email, and are sent to every individual from an MTA member township with an email address in our Association database.

Not receiving *Township Insights* or *Township Voice*? Check your spam or junk mail filter in your email system. If it is in one of those folders, add the email address to your "safe sender list." You may also contact michelle@michigantownships.org to be added to the subscription list.

Sen. Jim Stamas (R-Midland Chtr. Twp.)

Jim Stamas believes the best way to do his job is to listen. He learned this valuable lesson during his days as a **Midland Charter Township** (Midland Co.) trustee. He continued putting the principle into practice as a Midland County commissioner, and later, during his three terms as a state representative, where he served as majority floor leader. Now, as a state senator, he continues to listen to his constituents, local officials and state associations such as MTA anytime he makes a decision.

“Every perspective that I hear helps me do a better job representing Michigan,” Stamas said.

Serving his first term in the Senate, the Midland Republican is dedicated to keeping an open dialogue with the local government officials back home, as well as with MTA. Before he votes on a piece of legislation, it’s crucial that he hears from those who will be responsible for administering it. Bills that come before each of his committee assignments—Senate Appropriations, Health Policy, Natural Resources and Economic Development—often affect local governments in some way. “It is very important that our local officials stay involved and share their thoughts and concerns with us,” Stamas said.

Stamas has an even more direct impact on local budgets through his role as chair of the Senate Appropriations General Government Subcommittee. Finalizing the budget is a huge challenge—lawmakers must consider many promising programs and ideas but have limited resources to implement them.

When faced with those tough decisions, Stamas sticks to his original goals, which haven’t changed since he was first elected a state representative. He’s proud of how far Michigan has come since his first term began in 2009—with balanced budgets, increased personal income, private sector job growth and the lowest unemployment rate in 14 years. However, he knows there is still work to be done.

“I came to Lansing to help get Michigan back to work, improve education and increase accountability to Michigan’s taxpayers,” he said. “While those goals have not changed, the challenge now is how to build on our positive accomplishments and expand new opportunities to every Michigan resident.”

Moving forward, Stamas wants to review Michigan’s tax policies and remove any unnecessary and restrictive red tape. He wants to see all levels of government become more effective and efficient with taxpayer dollars. This would help local governments address their funding challenges—one of the biggest issues he believes they face.



Sen. Jim Stamas (R-Midland Chtr. Twp.) is dedicated to keeping an open dialogue with local officials back home—before he votes on a piece of legislation, he wants to hear from those responsible for administering it.

Local governments also need more participation from their residents. “As I have traveled around talking to people, I encourage them to get involved in their communities and local government,” Stamas said. “There are plenty of areas, from planning commissions to parks and recreation boards, to get people involved.”

Townships have a crucial role in Michigan’s future as the form of government that’s closest to the people. Though consolidation could make sense in some cases, Stamas believes townships should be the ones to make that decision. What works for one township might not work for another, he said.

Stamas hopes his work results in making Michigan a better place for future generations. “I want to leave a legacy that all of our children and grandchildren can choose Michigan as the place to raise their families and have their careers,” he said.



Rep. Laura Cox (R-Livonia)

After 10 years in Wayne County government, Laura Cox knows her way around a budget. The freshman state representative spent a decade serving the community as a Wayne County commissioner and handling what she described as very complicated finances. The experience helped to prepare her for an even bigger challenge—the State of Michigan’s General Government budget. The \$4.9 billion budget reaches nine different subject areas and a wide variety of state departments. As chair of the House Appropriations General Government Subcommittee, she was responsible for completing that budget on time—an accomplishment she is proud to include on her resumé.

The Livonia Republican hasn’t backed down from a challenge since she was elected to the state office last fall. She doesn’t like to betray even weaknesses she can’t help—like a nut allergy—to those who might fight against her.

“I’ve always prided myself on not being afraid of a fight—of fighting the good fight for my constituency and the people of Michigan,” Cox said.

Cox comes to the Legislature with an extensive background in public service. Before becoming a county commissioner, she spent 13 years preventing smuggling and currency trafficking as a U.S. Customs special agent. Then, in 2004, she was elected to the Wayne County Commission, where she chaired the Ways and Means Committee. Since coming to Lansing, she’s focused on absorbing all the knowledge she can while trying to be transparent and a “fiscal hawk.”

Her experience helped her to feel prepared in her roles on the House Appropriations Committee as well as the General Government Subcommittee. She’s tasked with managing revenue sharing, and though it allows her to touch many municipalities in the state, it also provides her with her biggest challenge. She has the difficult job of determining the best way to distribute revenue sharing, considering factors such as which services have the most value and warrant reimbursement for locals. She also looks at ways to provide incentives for consolidation and efficiency.

“Consolidation is ideal—but can only be done so much before it is no longer efficient,” Cox said.

Cox is a big believer in the role of local government in residents’ lives, especially at the township level. As a county commissioner, she says she represented two strong townships—**Northville** and **Plymouth Charter Townships** (Wayne Co.)—and saw firsthand the important services they provided to their residents.



During her 10 years in Wayne County government, Rep. Laura Cox (R-Livonia) saw first-hand the exceptional services that townships provide their residents.

“I believe the future role of townships will be to continue to encourage strong growth and foster those that have achieved an exceptional level of services to their communities,” she said.

But even strong local governments are plagued by unfunded mandates. That’s why Cox sponsored legislation—House Bill 4755—that’s part of a three-bill, MTA-supported package aimed at ending unfunded mandates and providing local units with a legal avenue to challenge the state.

Though she is no longer a local official, she believes strongly in staying in touch with the officials in her district. She has a reputation for reaching out and listening to the concerns of the townships and local units she represents. Communication is the key to building a good working relationship, she said.

With more than a year left in her first term, she’s determined to keep fostering those relationships and fighting the good fight for her constituents.

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Reaching out:

Strategies to increase civic engagement at the local level

It's a familiar refrain. Everyone from colleagues at the office to neighbors waiting in line at the grocery store, or acquaintances picking their kids or grandkids up from school echo the same sentiments. Life is hectic. So, how can townships actively engage their already-busy residents and business owners to vote in local elections, engage in public participation events, and discuss and plan for the community's future?

Local government is perhaps the most important form of government for Americans. Think about the issues that are most important to us and our residents: our homes, our neighborhoods, the parks and schools in our communities, where we work and where we shop. A majority of the policies that affect each of these issues are made at the local level. Unfortunately, most residents do not participate in local elections or the policy development process that affects these aspects of their community.

In 2012, voter turnout for the national election was 57.1 percent: one of the highest voter turnouts for a presidential election since 1968. The high turnout rate extended to the state of Michigan. In Shiawassee County, for example, almost 70 percent of registered voters cast a ballot, shattering the national average. One year later, several communities in Shiawassee County held off-year elections for local positions. Were they able to ride the coat-tails of

excitement from the 2012 election and duplicate high voter turnout for their local elections? Quite the opposite, actually. The county-wide turnout for the 2013 election in Shiawassee County was 17 percent. Only 6,630 out of nearly 40,000 eligible voters showed up to cast a ballot.

Low voter turnout for off-year local elections is not a new trend and is certainly not unique to Shiawassee County. While voter turnout for presidential elections typically ranges between 49 and 64 percent, turnout for local elections hovers around 21 percent. Low turnout rates extend to other areas of local government as well. What is the typical attendance like at your average local planning commission meeting? Master plan workshop? For most Michigan communities, the common answer is: low.

Low turnout—whether it is for a local election or a township board meeting—indicates that most residents do not have a clear understanding of the planning process, policy



Effective civic engagement must provide the public with a sense of ownership—a sense that, “my township wants and needs my opinion to make an effective decision and has gone to considerable efforts to receive my input.”

development and implementation as they relate to decisions that affect our quality of life. Further, there is a perception that this process is unimportant and difficult to change, and, most unfortunate, boring! But the truth is, as local officials well know, local government is critically important. To a great extent, local government has more of an impact on everyday life than the federal government.

Given this, how can Michigan’s townships increase civic engagement at the local level? This article will explore three strategies:

- Make local government engaging.
- Make local government easy to access.
- Make local government easy to understand.

Think local: Why local government matters

Elected officials are accountable to the residents of their community, and are directly responsible for overseeing the quantity and quality of local programs and services available. The decisions that elected and appointed local officials make have serious, community-wide implications.

Local government is the most accessible form of government. Citizens have a much greater opportunity to learn about, meet and even influence their local representatives. Township residents, board members, planning commissioners and zoning board of appeals members all live in the community. Local government meetings are open to the public and anyone can speak directly to the governing body. Given these facts, civic engagement should come as a natural and informal process, and be expected of all residents. On the contrary, however, the seats in the audience at township board and planning commission meetings



Citizen engagement can be increased if local officials and staff provide alternative platforms and methods for engaging their citizens. Local government ownership can be instilled by creating a government that is transparent, exciting, easy to understand and easy to access.

often remain empty, and local ballots remain uncast. Local civic engagement remains an uncommon activity for typical residents and is viewed as a stressful inconvenience.

Often citizens are introduced to the process of local government when they are faced with a decision that affects their neighborhood. Concerned individuals may show up at meetings or circulate petitions when a controversial development is on the agenda, but rarely do they show up when important policy decisions are being made in the first place. Poor turnout may stem from the fact that the average residents do not have a clear understanding of the local policy development process as it relates to land use, transportation planning, economic development and other community components that affect quality of life.

Other factors may affect low turnout:

- A feeling that individual opinions don't matter or won't have an effect on a board's decision or a vote.
- A lack of familiarity regarding how public meetings work or how voting works.
- Failure to understand the issues.
- Social anxiety/fear of public speaking.

While the onus of participating in local government activities ultimately lies with each resident, citizen engagement can be increased if local officials and staff

provide alternative platforms and methods for engaging their citizens. Civic engagement and public participation must be viewed as more than a simple checkbox required by state enabling legislation. Effective civic engagement must provide the public with a sense of ownership—a sense that, “my township government wants and needs my opinion to make an effective decision and has gone to a considerable effort to receive my input.” Local government ownership can be instilled by creating a government that is transparent, exciting, easy to understand, and easy to access.

Strategy #1: Make government more engaging

Local meetings and public workshops often seem to drag on into late hours of the night. Similarly, elections are often viewed synonymously with long, un-moving lines. Maybe it should come as no surprise, then, that many residents aren't interested in participating in local politics or view it as an inconvenience.

One northern Michigan township has found a way to increase citizen participation in its meetings. For the past four years, **Victory Township** (Mason Co.) has hosted its August board meeting

parkside—on Upper Hamlin Lake in Victory Park. This year, on Aug. 3, volunteers served up hot dogs and nearly two dozen residents—many bringing dishes to share—enjoyed dinner, and stuck around for the meeting following the summertime meal with their local officials. In addition, the township was able to show off some recent township efforts. “We've been doing work at the park, and decided this was the best way for people to see the end results,” said township clerk **Barbara Egeler**.

Egeler noted that the annual meeting in the park typically doubles the attendance of the usual township board meeting. This year, at the township's July board meeting, just three residents attended. A change in venue and a fun idea increased attendance by more than 70 percent.

Ideas for master plan workshops

Township master plans—whether they are comprehensive township-wide plans, parks and recreation plans, or neighborhood plans—typically require public participation. More often than not, this takes the form of long (and boring!) surveys. As an alternative, consider the following hands-on activities at master plan meetings to make them more exciting:

- Mapping exercise: Utilize large, colorful maps for exercises and encourage participants to sketch out their vision using markers and colored pencils
- Highly interactive, small group discussions
- Use building blocks for 3-D modeling/visioning
- Active brainstorming: Use stickers, get up and walk around

Instead of treating civic engagement events as ultra-serious, somber processes that are only held because the state requires them, these events should be treated as a celebration for the community. Instead of calling your master plan workshop the, “2015 Township Stakeholder Visioning Workshop,” try something more exciting, like, “A Celebration of the Township’s Future.” Including fun activities, games and discussions as a part of these workshops can instill a sense of excitement into the participatory planning process and help eliminate the dull stigma typically associated with local government.

Yale political scientist Donald P. Green once compared the election process to a “morgue-like experience.” Public participation should never, in any circumstance, be compared to a lifeless morgue (unless, of course, a morgue site plan is on a planning commission agenda). Rather, a simple re-imagination of the participatory process can spark excitement and promote engagement within a community.

Strategy #2:

Make local government easy to access

For residents in many townships, the only way to provide input on a new project, proposal or issue is to attend a township board or planning commission meeting and speak during the public comment period. Unfortunately, these meetings are often held at inconvenient times. Young parents, elderly residents, and those that work night shifts may not be able to attend a meeting on Tuesday night at 7 p.m. In the first instance, you may want to investigate if you are holding your meetings at the most convenient time. Even those who do attend meetings might be too afraid to get up and speak their mind, or may not know when they are allowed to do so. For these reasons, government may seem out of reach for some.

There are several strategies that can be used to break from the cycle of relying on conventional public hearings to obtain input. And, while public hearings are still necessary, there are strategies to de-mystify the process to help residents understand how—and when—to give their input.

Online engagement

New tools for online public participation seem to be popping up every week. Adding an online engagement platform to the mix is an excellent way to receive input from groups of residents who may not be able to attend public hearings or planning workshops, or those who may be too anxious to express their opinions out loud. It also appeals to hard-to-reach, tech-savvy young people who are often under-represented.

Online participation tools can complement traditional face-to-face civic engagement techniques, and can help townships further empower and encourage their residents to become engaged in community decision-making. There are a wide variety of tools available that can assist with garnering insights for a host of township projects, plans and processes.

They offer mechanisms for residents to post comments, upload pictures, and even engage in discussions. Some map-based programs are especially useful for garnering public input regarding community-wide land use or transportation plans, or other location-specific projects.

Online survey tools can also augment the traditional hard-copy survey. Such surveys allow responses to be submitted online at any time, eliminate the need to mail in or drop off physical surveys at the township hall, and provide flexibility to the public input process. Results can be analyzed in quick, convenient reports—all at the click of a mouse.

The bevy of available online tools can provide improved, more productive public participation, allowing your township to expand the insights it garners from its residents.

Informational pieces

Many residents choose not to attend meetings or vote because they are unfamiliar with how the process works or are anxious about doing something they’re not supposed to. Simply providing a guide or pamphlet explaining important terms and procedures can go a long way in de-mystifying the process. Consider providing hard copies of a “how-to” guide at the meeting or polling place, as well as on the township’s website.

The following information may be useful to include in these guides:

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Continuing education recommendations

- Reach people where they are already engaging, such as a traditional downtown or village center, chamber of commerce, farmers' market, public schools, parks and recreation programs, etc.
- Offer procedures handouts at board and commission meetings (as discussed within strategy #2)
- Utilize online platforms to update and educate

The Michigan Townships Association offers a thorough, high-quality package of learning materials at www.michigantownships.org/curricula.asp. The American Planning Association offers curricula geared toward planning that embrace many of the facets of municipal governance, available at www.planning.org/education/youth/.

Poor access to

local government is more than an issue of busy schedules and inconvenient meeting times, it's also about access to information. Planning, zoning and public policy are full of technical terms, acronyms, nuances and cumbersome procedures. Residents should feel comfortable with the process and should have ample opportunities to learn about local government so that they can present their ideas and suggestions with confidence.

Civic engagement must be engaging

To overcome obstacles to local civic engagement, townships must throw out the conventional methods and re-invent the system. We can't ask residents to provide their input or vote if these processes are inconvenient, difficult to understand or uninviting. We cannot expect residents to participate if they do not truly understand the importance of decisions and policies at the local level. This must begin at an early age so that understanding of local government is as common place as that of the federal government.

Truly effective civic engagement must be engaging! Townships should synchronize fun public events, online platforms and educational opportunities to encourage residents to speak their minds and participate in the local government process. To build better communities, townships must help residents understand the importance of their voice, and give residents multiple ways to express that voice.

And remember ... free food never hurts.



Paul Montagno, AICP,
and **Matt Lonnerstater,**
Carlisle/Wortman
Associates, Inc., Ann Arbor

Contact the authors at
(734) 662-2200 or visit
www.cwaplan.com.

MiCommunity Remarks is an online, Google-map-based community engagement tool that allows residents to post comments and pictures to a specific geographic location within a community. This tool is ideal for seeking input for community-wide projects, such as land use and parks and recreation plans, and can also be used to provide information regarding a specific development. Learn more at <http://MiCommunityRemarks.com>.

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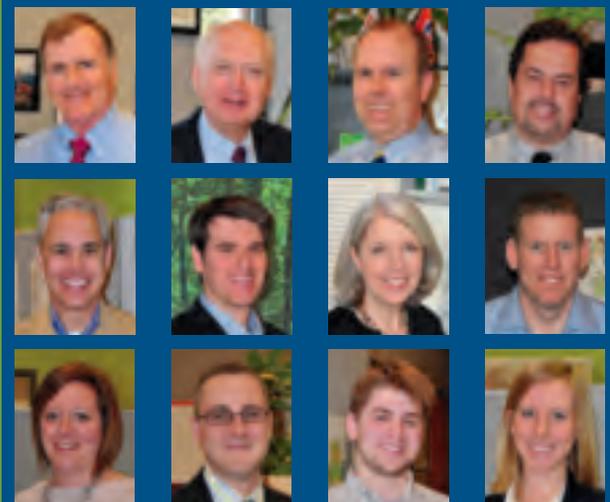
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upcoming MTA workshop

REGISTRATION INFORMATION

Emerging Issues in Emergency Services

Providing emergency and fire protection services may be one of the more complicated—and most important—services your township provides. MTA can help you gain a better understanding of the myriad of hot issues facing your fire department and emergency services personnel.

Township board members and fire officials alike should join us **Oct. 14** at the **Bavarian Inn Lodge** in **Frankenmuth** for *Emerging Issues in Emergency Services*. This full-day event examines emerging legislative issues and hot new trends.

- Get the inside scoop on the Bureau of Fire Services, including an update on future fire safety and public assembly as well as how fireworks revenue is being used for training across the state.
- Delve into the newest danger facing today's fire department ... social media. From responders posting photos of emergency scenes to the public posting photos of vehicles parked illegally, the negative impact on the department's image may be damaging—but potentially avoidable! Discover policies you can put in place to reduce negative (and litigious!) social media coverage.



- Learn more about the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet), a national public safety broadband initiative making headway in Michigan.
- Gain insights into establishing expectations between the township board and the fire chief to ensure a successful department and supportive environment.
- Get an overview of the Mutual Aid Box Alarm System (MABAS), including how it can help you ensure an adequate response and whether it will necessitate a change in your mutual aid agreement.

Registration, along with continental breakfast, begins at 8:30 a.m. Class is held from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and includes lunch served at noon.

Cancellations & Substitutions

No refund requests will be issued after Sept. 30. You may substitute another individual from your township for your registration at any time without incurring a charge; please notify MTA of the change.

Registration Form

Emerging Issues in Emergency Services Oct. 14, Frankenmuth

Township _____ County _____

Daytime Telephone _____ Email Address _____

Name & Title _____

Name & Title _____

Name & Title _____

Name & Title _____

REGISTRATION RATE*: \$121/person

of Persons **Registration Fee** **Total**
_____ x _____ = _____

*Rate 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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Card # _____	Expires _____
Print Card Holder's Name _____	Signature _____



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.

upcoming MTA workshops

REGISTRATION INFORMATION

Take your board governance to the next level

Join MTA in **Mt. Pleasant** at the **Comfort Suites Conference Center** on **Nov. 17-18** and learn to:

- Use policies to provide financial leadership to your township
- Define your future by measuring what's most important to your residents
- Improve transparency and credibility

Township Finances (F-103 - 6 credits; *includes continental breakfast & lunch*)
Nov. 17, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Township boards are responsible for protecting their township's financial resources and ensuring that there are adequate resources to serve the community in a manner consistent with constituent expectations. Explore the types of revenue sources available to townships and their appropriateness for various programs and services. Gain insight into fiduciary duties, the allocation of resources and evaluation of results through the budget process. Learn how township boards can use policies to provide financial leadership. *Presented by Larry Merrill, MTA Executive Director*

Creating a Vision for Your Township

(B-103 - 4 credits; *includes continental breakfast*)
Nov. 18, 9 a.m. to 12:15 p.m.

Identifying your community values (and expectations!) is a critical component in serving your township. Learn strategies for evaluating township programs and services, and explore the need for innovation and change. By examining both adversity and opportunities, you can identify how to balance short-term issues with a long-term vision. Rekindle your township's mission by examining your community's past, present and future. *Presented by Susan Radwan, Owner, Leading Edge Mentoring*

These courses are part of MTA's Township Governance Academy, an innovative credentialing program for township officials and local leaders in Michigan. You do NOT have to be enrolled in the Academy to attend.



Linking with the Community

(B-106 - 4 credits; *includes lunch*)
Nov. 18, 1 to 4:15 p.m.

Enhancing credibility in the public eye begins with your township board. Examine ways of being more open and transparent to the community—a valuable exercise to increase trust at the local level. Explore strategies for determining what your constituents want and how to keep them informed about your township's activities. Join the discussion on cultivating emerging leaders in your community. *Presented by Susan Radwan, Owner, Leading Edge Mentoring*

Cancellations & Substitutions: Written cancellation requests received at the MTA office by Nov. 3 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. Scholarship funds are not subject to substitution.

Registration Form

Township _____ County _____

Daytime Telephone _____ Email Address _____

Name & Title _____ All 3 Finances Vision Community

Name & Title _____ All 3 Finances Vision Community

Name & Title _____ All 3 Finances Vision Community

Name & Title _____ All 3 Finances Vision Community

Registration Rate **Discounted Rate**
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Township Finances (F-103)	\$145/attendee	\$125/attendee
Creating a Vision (B-103)	\$109/attendee	\$ 89/attendee
Linking with Community (B-106)	\$109/attendee	\$ 89/attendee

of Sessions **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

- - - - - /	
Card #	Expires
Print Card Holder's Name	Signature



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.

Discovering a piece of history

Trustee finds lost cemetery

Far off the beaten path, a remote **Pinora Township** (Lake Co.) hilltop is covered in sandy soil and untamed grass. Its only visitors are electrical workers servicing the power lines and the occasional outdoor recreational vehicle rider.

No one guessed that below the surface, a piece of history remained hidden for more than a century.

Four years ago, township Trustee **Sid Woods** discovered a long-forgotten cemetery beneath what is now an electrical maintenance road. A local historian has compiled a list of 17 names of township residents and Native Americans who are believed to have been buried there in the late 1800s.

Today, the township is working to ensure these men, women and children receive the respect they deserve. The state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is busy building a guardrail around the hill, preventing any further vehicle damage. Township Supervisor **Vicki Dennett** is also eagerly anticipating the completion of a large headstone with all 17 names carved on it.

When the monument is finished, Dennett plans to have a small dedication service with relatives of the deceased in attendance.

“We just felt the people who are buried there deserve to be recognized,” Dennett said. “We’re doing it out of respect. We don’t know much about any of the people, but we want to give them the dignity of a proper burial place.”

A mystery leads to discovery

Woods first learned of the cemetery by accident as he sifted through microfilm at the library, one of his favorite hobbies. He stumbled upon an article that mentioned a cemetery donated to the township. As an amateur historian and lifelong

township resident, he knew there was no such cemetery—at least not one that currently existed. The mystery piqued his interest enough to inspire a trip to the courthouse. There, he found a warranty deed from 1877 setting aside three acres in Pinora Township to be used as a cemetery.

It was by far Woods’ most exciting discovery he’d made from looking at microfilm.

“It was just kind of an accident,” he said. “I stumbled on it and followed up. If I see something like that, I follow up on it.”

Further research uncovered that the cemetery originally belonged to township resident William Gould. The family plot was chosen as the final resting place of his daughter, Priscilla. A few years later, Gould donated the

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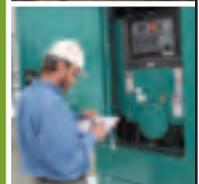


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three-acre cemetery to the township when he sold his 80-acre homesteaded property to a logger, but the person executing the deal forgot to set aside the three acres. Eventually, back taxes forced the state to seize the 80 acres from the logging company, and no one remembered the hilltop cemetery.

But without proof, the township couldn't have the plot recognized as a cemetery following Woods' discovery. Shanna Avery of the Lake County Historical Society poured through old newspapers, looking for any and all mentions of the cemetery. An original list of about 100 names was eventually whittled down to 17.

"It's been a big event for our little township," Dennett said.

Protecting the land

With the presence of graves confirmed, the next step was to protect the land. Today, the ground itself is damaged from years of vehicle use. The sandy soil has eroded to the point that the shallowest grave sits just a foot and a half below the surface.

The DNR is working to make sure the cemetery rests in peace, without any further damage. Trees will be removed, a soil preservationist will visit the site, and the hilltop will be planted with native grasses. A guardrail will also be placed around the hill to allow only electrical maintenance vehicles to use the maintenance road.

Dennett plans to leave the property in the state's hands. The upgrades and maintenance could be too costly for the township's budget. Dennett's primary aim is to make sure the dead are honored. Pinora Township has commissioned a \$2,000 headstone with plans to carve all 17 names on it. The



For more than a century, a long-forgotten cemetery sat on this sandy hilltop in Pinora Township (Lake Co.) before being discovered by a township trustee.

stone will be worded carefully, as the actual identities cannot be confirmed.

When the monument is complete, descendants of William Gould will be invited to a dedication service. Dennett doesn't have any further plans for the property, but she's happy to see that it will finally be a peaceful resting place again.



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Saying goodbye— and thanks

MTA's Jim Beelen retires

At 60 years old, Jim Beelen was faced with an unexpected career change.

After 12 years as **Allendale Charter Township** (Ottawa Co.) supervisor and more than 20 years in full-time township government, he'd lost the 2008 primary election. Township government was what he knew. It was what he loved. And in a few short months, he wouldn't get to be a part of it anymore.

As he walked into his office the morning after the election, he thought, "What am I going to do now?"

But as it turned out, he didn't have long to ponder that question. MTA Member Information Services (MIS) Director Catherine Mullhaupt called that very afternoon, asking if he'd be interested in a job opening at MTA.

Beelen accepted the position as MTA Member Information Services liaison and quickly learned that the job melded perfectly with the skills he'd molded from his years in township government. Since then, he's answered countless questions from township officials and taught numerous MTA workshops and Conference sessions on everything from budgeting to tax collection to meetings management.

Now, almost exactly seven years later, Beelen has decided it's time to say goodbye. He'll retire from MTA this month, taking with him his vast knowledge that township officials have depended upon for years.

"Jim's experience, insight and positive people skills made him a perfect fit for Member Information Services," Mullhaupt said. "His personal skill at building bridges and fostering positive interactions made him a perfect fit for our members, who have really appreciated his talent for listening and finding

solutions. Plus, he's just a really nice person, and we're going to miss having him around the office."

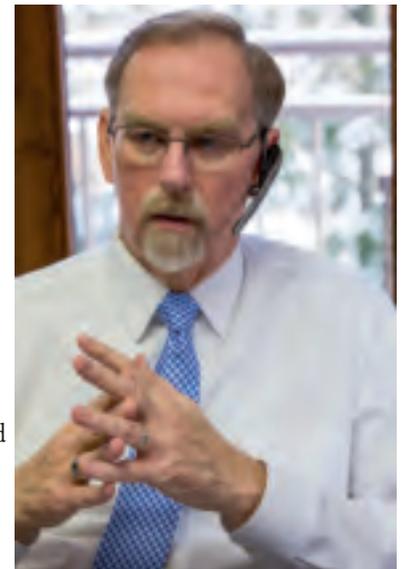
'Extremely rewarding'

Beelen knows the time is right, and he's looking forward to spending more time with grandchildren and catching up on household projects. But he knows he'll miss MTA. Working at the Association gave him the opportunity to help others,

and to make a difference in townships around the state.

"It's been extremely rewarding knowing that you're helping people," he said. "When you're at an event and people come up and shake your hand, and say 'Thank you for all the help you've given us,' that's extremely rewarding."

Beelen never imagined a career in township government back in his early years. Fresh from high school, he was determined to pursue a career in the medical field. After spending a year at Calvin College, he was accepted into a two-year X-ray technology program in Grand Rapids. He spent the next 10 years working as a special procedures X-ray technologist. It was during this time that he ran for treasurer



Beelen

of Allendale Charter Township. The position was part-time, and he continued serving as treasurer in the midst of a career change, including opening a hardware store in 1979, and going to work in a Holland lumberyard.

Then, in 1987, the course of Beelen's career forever changed. Allendale Charter Township was growing, and Beelen had the opportunity to become a full-time treasurer. It was his chance to not only work close to home, but also to be involved in the township's day-to-day operations.

"Just collecting the money, you feel somewhat detached," Beelen said. "But being in the office created a situation where I got to know the residents better. We're from a township where people still like to come to the office and talk to their elected officials. So there was a lot of interaction."

Beelen continued serving as treasurer until 1996, when he learned the township supervisor was retiring. It was a major change that he worried could change the board, which at that point was stable and functioning as a cohesive unit. He decided to run for supervisor to keep the board moving in the same direction, and that year, he was elected.

The learning curve for his new job was steeper than he expected. As treasurer, his role was clearly defined and somewhat predictable. That wasn't always the case as supervisor.

"When I became supervisor, all that predictability was gone," Beelen said. "I never knew what I would run into during the course of the day. You could come in the morning and think, this is what I'm going to do today, and a person walks in and the direction of your day totally changes."

In addition to attending meetings, community events and business grand openings, Beelen made it a point to cultivate relationships with the president, staff and students at Grand Valley State University, which is located in the township. He spent hours at student senate meetings and met with the university president on at least a quarterly basis.

Beelen enjoyed his job and believed it was where he was supposed to be. But the 2008 election would bring that career to an end.

'Star-struck'

Just days after the election, he found himself in Lansing sitting in the MTA office and, soon afterward, getting the official offer to join the MIS department. Beelen describes his state of mind in those early days at MTA as "star-struck."



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"MTA, from my perspective, was on a pedestal. I couldn't believe that I was here," Beelen said. "I can remember driving into work in the morning for quite a while and seeing the MTA sign and thinking, 'How are you here?'"

For his first six months at MTA, Beelen worked alongside Evelyn David, who at that time was retiring from the MIS Department. He listened to David take calls, and he read everything he could from state statutes, MTA books and the Association website. He learned how to navigate the resources available and spent time learning from MTA staff.

But for all his preparation, taking that first member call was nerve-racking. With every call he answered, however, Beelen became more confident. Multiple township officials would call with similar questions, and soon the answers became stuck in his head. He learned to draw from his own experience in township government in addition to the MTA resources.

Beelen knows from his experience as a township official how much it means to have help in resolving an issue or to just receive some encouragement. "There's as much counseling that goes on as there is answering a specific question," Beelen said. "Sometimes people just need an independent, unbiased person to listen."

As his time at MTA winds to a close, Beelen knows he'll miss interacting with the staff and township officials on a daily basis. But he's ready to have more time to spend with his family. Leaving is bittersweet, but what lies ahead will be worth it.

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townships in the spotlight



Elk Township

In **Elk Township** (Lake Co.), a conversation about a township hall building project has been going on for about 15 years. The last renovation of the original hall, which was built in 1914, took place in 1974. The old building was in dire need of a few important items, such as adequate handicap access, updated electrical wiring and insulation, and space.



In fall 2013, the township board decided upon a building project that would add a new 1,076-square-foot office and utility addition to the back of the original hall. Those renovations were based on a structural engineer's report that the hall was sound and could be useful for many years to come.

Both the township board and residents wanted to preserve some of the old hall's original attributes. Using old pictures and other historic references, the design captured some of the historic essence of the hall's interior, especially in the wood trim and the refinishing of the original rock maple wood floor.

Along with a contractor who worked directly with the township, a host of volunteers and donations, the many jobs that go into a building project were completed to give a new face and the much-needed space to the township facility—without increasing taxes.

In 2014, the rural township celebrated the completion of the building project and the 100th birthday of the original hall with a ribbon-cutting ceremony and centennial

celebration picnic attended by nearly 200 residents. State Rep. Jon Bumstead attended and awarded Elk Township with a State of Michigan Special Tribute signed by Sen. Darwin Booher and Rep. Bumstead citing the township's accomplishments.

One of the township's first actions after completing the project was to make the facility available for residents' use. The township now provides space for a number of activities—all at no cost to residents. Numerous community organizations host meetings, and a weekly exercise class for seniors is held. The hall has also hosted an Eagle Scout award ceremony and an annual fire department holiday dinner, as well as several family gatherings. The community is coming together in the township in a way that has not happened for a long time.

Elk Township is proud of this building project and what it means to the community, all of this is in keeping with its vision and motto: "Elk Township—Making Life Better."



Submitted by Elk Township Supervisor Lou Fitz.

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