

MTA President Doug Merchant: Committed to MTA, committed to townships

Doug Merchant, supervisor and assessor of **Arcada Township** (Gratiot Co.), is committed to taking extra steps to achieve his personal best. Now, as 2014 MTA president, Merchant wants to spread the importance of that commitment and help other MTA members to become the best township officials they can be.

Merchant was elected president at the MTA Annual Meeting, held Jan. 31 during the MTA Annual Educational Conference & Expo in Acme Township (Grand Traverse Co.). His goal for his term is not to build a legacy for himself, but to use his experience to carry on and even improve the continued success of the Association.

Commitment is an expectation Merchant has had for himself throughout his life. It was his commitment to precision and time management that allowed him to farm cash crops of corn, soybeans, sugar beets and cucumbers while still spending time with his wife and four sons. Later, his dedication to township government led him to accept two additional assessing jobs at Bethany and Pine River Townships (Gratiot Co.), in addition to his positions at Arcada Township.

Merchant sat down with Township Focus to reflect on the experiences that have brought him to the helm of one of the largest municipal associations in the state, as well as what he envisions for the future of township government and MTA.

What are your goals as MTA president, and for townships, this year?

I would like to travel throughout the state and visit all the different MTA districts. I want to spread the message to members that their job is more than attending meetings. They need to make the commitment to seek out more training and become better elected officials to help their communities as a whole. We made the commitment when we ran for these jobs. We should make the commitment to be the best we can be.

How can township officials engage residents in the local government process?

We can engage residents by making more information available to them. We can post it to our websites if we have them and make them aware of what's happening in their township. We need to do our part and get the message out there.



2014 MTA President Doug Merchant addresses the membership at the MTA Annual Meeting

What role do townships play in Michigan's prosperity?

We are the grassroots of government. We need to meet with our residents, hear their concerns, and take that message to the next level, our state and federal government. Townships hold 96 percent of the land mass and provide services to 51 percent of Michigan citizens. We can improve the economy by attracting more commercial and industrial businesses to locate within townships, and more residents to live in townships, because of our lower tax rates.

What do you see in the future for township government?

I still see township government being here. I think we'll have to change the way we do business and do more collaboration with other townships and municipalities in order to reduce our overall costs. Here in Gratiot County, we're already collaborating. All 16 townships and four cities joined together to do a county-wide master plan. We have spots designated for commercial and industrial business as well as residential growth. We also have a county-wide wind turbine ordinance, which was very helpful when wind turbine developers came into the county. They could move from one township to the next and knew what they could and couldn't do. I see more of this happening in our future.

What advice do you have for township officials in how to achieve quality leadership and service in their communities?

It falls back to the issue that some officials can take their positions too much for granted, and they may not get the education and training they need to make themselves better leaders. We need to make the commitment to be the best officials we can be.

What experiences have prepared you to serve as MTA's leadership?

Being in agriculture until I retired in 2006, I'm used to deadlines in planting and harvesting, and I've never been afraid of the hard work that comes on a farm. I've been on other local boards, including the Farm Bureau board for six years in our county and the Farm Service Agency board for a few years.

Upon completion of your term, what would you like your legacy to be?

My goal right now is to carry on where we're at and proceed to make everything maybe a little bit better. You handle everything as it comes up. I think that's where a lot of legacies come from. I didn't take this job to build a legacy for myself. It's not about that. It's not about me.

Who are your heroes?

I would start out by saying my dad, who taught me how to work hard. Being on the farm, it was always work before play. Then, for the last 40 years, someone came into my life who kind of changed that—my wife, Mary. Our youngest son being diagnosed with leukemia at four years old and my dad passing away taught me you can work hard and play hard through time management. My wife helped me realize that it's not all about the work. My wife is a big hero to me.



2013 MTA President Denny Olson affixed the MTA President pin on Merchant



Merchant was joined by his wife, mother and three of his four sons at the MTA Annual Banquet

2014 MTA Executive Committee

Doug Merchant,
President

Supervisor,
Arcada Township
(Gratiot Co.)



Linda Preston,
First Vice President

Supervisor,
Pokagon Township
(Cass Co.)



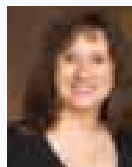
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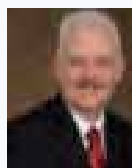
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Denny Olson,
Immediate Past President

Supervisor,
Breitung Charter Township
(Dickinson Co.)



cover story

HARVEST THE KNOWLEDGE



2013 MTA President Denny Olson welcomed attendees at the Opening Session



Conference Keynote Andy Core shared his expertise on work-life balance

MTA's Executive Director Larry Merrill offered insights during his State of the Association address



Tuscarora Township (Cheboygan Co.) Supervisor Mike Ridley wowed Opening Session attendees with his original song, "Michigan Man"



Team building and a little competition at Par Plan's Beach Party Fun Night



The MTA Expo connected attendees with more than 100 vendors offering township solutions and services. They also learned about the region and entered to win numerous giveaways provided by Grand Traverse and Antrim Counties' Host County Chapter booth.

Photos by Trumpie Photography. To view or order online, visit www.trumpiephotography.com.

2014 Conference Sponsors

Platinum



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Networking time between sessions and events



The annual MTA Banquet allowed Conferencegoers the chance to mingle while dining



Attendees debated MTA legislative policy at the Annual Meeting



The Parade of Flags offered an inspirational start to the Conference



More than 60 educational sessions to choose from and dozens of speakers to share their expertise



Spring Lake Township named MTA's first Township of Excellence

Spring Lake Township (Ottawa Co.) has been honored as the first Michigan township to achieve MTA's comprehensive Township of Excellence designation.

The Township of Excellence program awards townships that meet a series of demanding, high-level criteria. Spring Lake Township board members and staff (*pictured above, with MTA Executive Director Larry Merrill and 2013 MTA President Denny Olson*) were presented with the award at the Opening Session of the MTA Annual Conference.

"Spring Lake Township is made up of elected officials and staff members who sincerely want to provide the best service possible for our residents," Supervisor **John Nash** said. "When MTA established the Township of Excellence standards, it was a natural for us to see how we measured up to this very complete and tough standard."

A "Township of Excellence" is a strong, vibrant community governed by a township board that adheres to best practices to deliver quality programs and services to accomplish community-driven goals. Spring Lake Township board members and staff distinguished the township through policy-driven governance; a commitment to making knowledge-based decisions; practicing accountable delegation of responsibilities and evaluation of results; responsive constituent service; adherence to strong fiscal management; and delivering high-quality township services.

"Many local governments embrace some or many of these hallmarks of excellence, and it is laudable that a local government succeeds on so many levels and in respect to such a broad scope of governance, management and operations," MTA Executive Director Larry Merrill said.

Spring Lake Township's recognition is for its achievement in the 2012-2016 term. Nash is thrilled to meet this goal after coming close during two previous board terms.

"I know there are many other good townships in the state of Michigan," Nash said. "I hope the fact that we have achieved this standard encourages other townships to work toward becoming a Township of Excellence. Obviously, there are always higher goals to work toward, but completing the MTA Township of Excellence standard certainly makes it clear that in every aspect of township government, Spring Lake Township has met very high standards."

Beeson elected District 16 Director

Pine River Township (Gratiot Co.) Supervisor **Kevin Beeson** has joined the MTA Board of Directors, after being elected to serve as District 16 director at a caucus election held during the MTA Annual Conference. Beeson will represent township officials from Montcalm, Gratiot and Ionia Counties on the MTA Board.

Beeson has been township supervisor since 2004. He served as chair of the township planning commission from 1994 to 2003 before he was appointed as a township trustee in 2003 to fill a vacancy. He also served as the chair of the Gratiot County MTA Chapter from 2006 to 2012.



Beeson

Among Beeson's most rewarding experiences in township government is developing a long-range interlocal and conditional transfer agreement among Pine River Township and the cities of Alma and St. Louis. As an MTA director, he hopes to highlight and promote the value that townships bring to Michigan.

"I'm excited to face the challenge of meeting and working with new friends from adjoining counties," Beeson said. "Together, we can improve our prospects in Lansing for added job opportunities and economic development."

Jansen receives MTA Meritorious Award

Sen. Mark Jansen (R-Gaines Chtr. Twp.) was presented with MTA's Meritorious Award during the Annual Banquet at the MTA Conference (*pictured at right*). The award recognizes Jansen's support and active involvement on behalf of Michigan township government.



"Sen. Jansen has distinguished himself in his career by demonstrating a great understanding of the complexities of local government, and townships in particular," MTA Executive Director Larry Merrill said. "He has shown great creativity in crafting policy that's appropriate to different local circumstances."

Jansen was first elected to serve the 28th Senate District in 2006, four years after serving six terms in the Michigan House of Representatives. Before entering the Legislature, Jansen was elected as the **Gaines Charter Township** (Kent Co.) clerk from 1992 to 1996.

"I am proud to be honored by MTA," Jansen said. "Strong local governments provide solid infrastructure for their citizens, and I'm happy to have played a part in helping them become successful."