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Township Supervisors Work to Make Communities Better

An Op-Ed

by David M. Sanko

Executive Director, Pa. State Association of Township Supervisors

You may read about them in the newspaper, run into them in the supermarket, or even see them patching potholes, mowing along local roads, or plowing snow in the winter.

They’re your township supervisors and staff, and while you might not know all of them personally, these public servants show up every day with one goal in mind: to make a better community for you, your family, and your neighbors.

As Pennsylvania celebrates Local Government Week April 10-14, take some time to discover the critical role your township and its officials play in the commonwealth’s governing system.

Established to be a direct reflection and representation of the people who live there, townships are places where residents — when they choose to — have a voice in what happens, where every expenditure is scrutinized, and where services provided don’t exceed what the community needs or can afford.

In other words, townships are full-service, grassroots-driven communities overseen by your neighbors, who are dedicated to meeting your needs cost-effectively and affordably.

Townships have been impacted by the same societal challenges as everyone else. Despite rising costs for just about everything, municipal officials and staff continue to work within limited budgets to provide services to residents. Take a moment to thank them the next time you see them.

A system that makes sense

Since its inception, Pennsylvania has had three levels of government: state, county, and local. This structure, which the Founding Fathers based on a division of labor, made sense then and makes even more sense now.

In fact, the commonwealth's governing system is a lot like a telescope. Open it wide and you'll see the state's big-picture view. Narrow the focus a bit and you've got the county's regional perspective. Narrow the focus even more and you'll see what townships see: the local side of things.

Each of these levels of government has distinct duties and priorities. In the early days, for instance, township supervisors primarily oversaw the maintenance of local roads. And while this continues to be one of their top priorities, today's township supervisors have many more responsibilities.

Jacks of all trades, township supervisors in the 21st century are hands-on local leaders who must be well-schooled in a wide range of complex issues, such as land use management, budgeting, transportation planning, stormwater management, and public safety concerns.

And because they live and may even work in the communities they represent, township supervisors are on call around the clock. In fact, it's not unusual for supervisors to field phone

calls from residents during dinner and to plow roads at night and into the wee hours of the morning.

Just imagine, though, what it would be like if your township didn't exist and your community was managed by a larger, centralized government.

Under this scenario, which has been proposed in the past, you would not be able to turn to a neighbor for help. Instead, you would have to approach a more distant group of elected leaders — some of whom may be familiar with your community, but most of whom may not — and compete against a much larger pool of people to get your voice heard and needs met.

Local democracy, as you know it, would be lost and replaced with a larger, more expensive, and more sluggish way of governing.

So as we celebrate Local Government Week, here's something to keep in mind: Township government isn't just another layer of government; it's the *critical* layer, the foundation. It's the one that represents you and your family, works within its budget, and provides the services you've asked for — nothing more and nothing less.

And the next time you're out and about, take a good look around your township and realize that all the good things you see — the parks, the well-maintained local roads, low taxes, and the safe environment to raise a family — are possible because your local leaders, your neighbors, had a vision about providing a high quality of life and turned it into a reality for you.

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About the author: David M. Sanko is the executive director of the Pennsylvania State Association of Township Supervisors. With a broad background in local and state government, Sanko oversees an organization that is the primary advocate for the commonwealth's 1,454

townships of the second class, which are home to close to 5.7 million Pennsylvanians and cover 95% of the commonwealth's land mass.

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