



# TOWNSHIPS TODAY

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## Township Supervisors Make a Tough, Complex Job Look Easy

Those unfamiliar with the role of a township supervisor may wonder: What exactly do they do?

It's a good question, and one worth exploring as Pennsylvania prepares to celebrate Local Government Week, April 16-20, which is set aside to honor the commonwealth's public servants.

If you ask David M. Sanko, executive director of the Pennsylvania State Association of Township Supervisors, which represents the commonwealth's 1,455 townships of the second class, he is pretty clear about the role of these local officials.

"Well, for one, supervisors make a tough, complex, often thankless job look incredibly easy," he says. "It's safe to say there is no other job like it in the public sector, and the people who do it are very committed to their communities."

"I mean, how many state or federal lawmakers would answer their own phone? And how many of them do you see at the grocery store, the ballfield, or the post office? That's unheard of, and it just goes to show that township supervisors are a rare and special breed."

### Keeping the wheels on the bus

The official duties of the board of supervisors can be found in the Second Class Town-



**Township supervisors live and often work in the communities they represent. This accessibility — at the local diner, the grocery store, and baseball games — is one of the things that sets them apart from their state and federal counterparts.**

ship Code, the rulebook for Pennsylvania's townships. There, Section 607 spells out the responsibilities, which take up about a page and require local leaders to do what you might expect: Hire staff, carry out state and federal laws, rules, and regulations, and maintain township equipment and facilities.

Most important, though, the code charges the board with "the general governance of the town-

ship and the execution of legislative, executive, and administrative powers to ensure sound fiscal management and to secure the health, safety, and welfare of the citizens of the township.”

Unclogging sewer drains, plowing snow at 2 in the morning, fielding complaints from residents, spending evening after evening at meetings, and eating a cold dinner because a resident wanted to have a two-hour discussion about a pothole aren’t even mentioned. But guess what? Township supervisors do those things, too, and much more.

Balancing budgets and stretching tax dollars, providing quality services at an affordable cost, managing people and places, understanding state and federal laws, writing and passing ordinances, responding to residents and their complaints, working with developers, overseeing volunteer boards and committees, purchasing equipment and supplies, negotiating contracts, and making unpopular decisions also come with the territory.

“Being a township supervisor is a far more difficult job than most people realize,” says Walt Whitmer, who trains municipal officials through the Penn State Cooperative Extension. “It’s a volunteer position with professional expectations.

“However, every day, township supervisors are out there doing the things that keep the wheels on the bus.”

Bev Cigler, Ph.D., professor of public policy and administration at Penn State University, agrees: “Local government is the workhorse of the governing system.”

And while the public may be unaware of everything that’s required of a township supervisor, Cigler doesn’t think that constituents are any less appreciative.

“People, including those who run for office, may not know the specifics of the job, but quite often they’re happy because they’re getting good service,” she says, “and that’s all they care about.”

### **Trust, confidence remain high**

In fact, a recent Gallup poll backs up Cigler’s contention that local government is popular with voters.

Last fall, the group quizzed a random sampling of 1,017 adults across the United States as part of its annual governance poll. The study revealed that two-thirds of Americans have a great deal of confidence in their local governments to handle problems. This trust has remained steady for several years, Gallup reports.

“Americans’ persistent high confidence in local government contrasts with their generally diminishing confidence in the legislative and executive branches over the past five or so years,” the organization says in a news release. “Confidence in the executive branch fell annually during George W. Bush’s presidency from 2002 through 2008; it then surged in 2009 after President Barack Obama took office but has since declined.”

Local government, the release notes, “has fared particularly well over time, being the only governmental entity not to have lost any of Americans’ trust since 1997. Trust in state government is now 11 percentage points lower than in 1997, while trust in the executive and legislative branches is down by 15 points or more.”

Similar surveys conducted here in Pennsylvania, including one by Pittsburgh’s Allegheny Forum, a group that gathers feedback on municipal government and services, and another by Harrisburg’s Susquehanna Polling & Research, have given municipalities equally high marks.

Penn State’s Walt Whitmer isn’t surprised.

“If the general public could hear the stories that I hear [from local leaders],” he says, “they would have an even deeper appreciation for their local officials.”

### **‘The township truly is my life’**

Although township supervisors campaign for office and hold an elected position, that’s where the similarities with their counterparts in Harrisburg and Washington, D.C., end.

They don’t have expense accounts, canned speeches or teleprompters, drivers or taxpayer-funded transportation, large staffs of advisers, or even comfy, wood-paneled offices.

Instead, township supervisors are regular folks — your neighbors and friends — who aren’t in office for the glory, the glamour, the power, or the money, for that matter. Many earn just \$1,800 a year before taxes, which translates to about \$150 a month. Some are paid much less.

Still, a majority of supervisors have been in office 20, 30, and even 40 or 50 years. Why? Often, it’s out of a desire to improve their community and help their neighbors — nothing more, nothing less.

As one long-time township official put it: “My day is supposed to end at 3, but I can’t tell you the last time I left then. I’m not complaining, though. I enjoy what I do. The township truly is my life.”

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