



# From Your Associate Director

## A New Term Begins

**W**ITH WARM TEMPERATURES HERE, we also embrace administrative changes in township government on May 18. That is the date the incumbents and first-time elected township officials begin their new four-year term as an elected official. Whether you are a newbie or a returning township official, keep one thing in mind—you have an association that is ready to assist when needed to help you understand your role and perform your statutory responsibilities. The Township Officials of Illinois utilizes many resources to keep you up to date on your responsibilities. The official publication of the association, *Township Perspective*, is a great resource for date-sensitive requirements. Additionally, you will find educational opportunities scheduled by both TOI and your divisions.

The day after the election, April 8, I started reviewing the many changes that occurred in elected township office. Yes, some of our dedicated township officials were not re-elected. However, they will remain dedicated to the existence of township government. Although they will be greatly missed, we must focus on the job before all of us—ensuring that the government closest to the people—township government—remains effective and efficient in the delivery of both statutory and created government programs.

The election is over, you are about to be sworn in or have already, you have taken the responsibility of your new elected office. (Assessors assume the same post on January 1, 2010.)

As we initiate a new term, it may seem appropriate to visit some of the basic concepts of township government. The term is new and I encourage all of you to initiate conversation on how to better serve your electors.

### **A brief historical review of township government ...**

Township government is sort of a different breed from other forms of government. It's generally not as high profile or as politically oriented. Most township officials are just average folks who want to have a leadership role in their community and make a dif-

ference. And most of the services we provide aren't headline grabbers either—just fundamental services like road maintenance and human service programs that help improve the quality of community life, one person at a time.

We like to think that this is a good thing. But there is a down side, and that is that township government is so low profile, many people just don't know much about who we are and most importantly, what we can do for them. There are two reasons for this.

One is that township government is like any other form of government in that it works best when people get involved. Your opinion and your vote are important so it's critical that people be informed.

The second reason is that townships provide a lot of services that can really help people—but only if they know to take advantage of them.

Historically speaking, township government is the oldest existing form of government on the North American continent. It was established in 1636 by early American settlers. Back then, township government basically meant self-government. The basis for this was the Annual Town Meeting, which brought people together from neighboring areas to discuss important issues and establish their own laws.

Over the years, township government has changed considerably, of course. But one thing that hasn't changed is that townships are still required to hold Town Meetings annually on the second Tuesday in April. This is really a unique feature of townships, and it is the only forum that allows people to have a direct voice and vote in their local government. You can actually come to your local town meeting and offer your opinions, even vote directly on issues affecting your community.

Today, there are 1,432 townships in Illinois, serving more than 8 million people. What confuses many people about this is where townships fall into the big picture in relation to city, county and state government.

As you may know, townships are not subsets of cities or counties, but individual geographical designations. So a large city may contain several townships.

At the same time, one township may include several small towns. Townships also may cover many rural, unincorporated areas. This is important because certain services in these areas may not fall under the direct jurisdiction of any other unit of government. And even if they do, townships are often able to deliver those services more effectively, at a lower cost, and with less red tape.

### So what do townships do?

There are two answers to that question because townships have certain mandated functions, but may provide a number of additional services. Every township in the state of Illinois is mandated to provide three things:

- The first is road and bridge maintenance. Townships maintain about 71,000 miles of Illinois roads—that’s more than half of the total road miles in the state. In large cities, the city typically oversees this function. So if you’ve ever driven in Chicago—that mess is not our fault!
- The second mandatory function of township government is property assessment. To keep assessments local and ensure fair market value, the township assessor oversees the appraisal process for every property within their township.
- The third mandatory function is “general assistance” to the needy. That can mean a lot of different things, but typically, it means providing temporary relief for people in need—perhaps due to a recent crisis or natural disaster—until those individuals can either become self-supporting or qualify for other forms of assistance.

So those are the three things townships MUST provide—road and bridge maintenance, property assessment and general assistance to the needy.

However, townships often do a lot more than that. Again, because townships are close to the community, most have taken steps to pinpoint specific needs within their communities and design creative programs to help fill those needs. These “optional” services, as we’ll call them, really run the gamut, and can include everything from shoveling the sidewalk of a person with a disability to running hospitals and recreation centers.

Townships are also widely known for engineering creative ways to deliver these services very inexpensively. We have limited budgets, so these “optional” services often have to pay for themselves, or be administered with the help of volunteer efforts or grant funds. And this has led to some really great partnerships.

As you may have gathered, one of the nice things about township government is that there is a real

human element. Many of the programs and services we provide are “people programs” that address quality of life issues and really have a direct impact on the folks in our communities.

There are a number of other advantages that townships offer in comparison to county or state government.

One of these is the local aspect. As mentioned before, being localized helps townships better respond to the unique needs of their communities because they are more in touch with what is going on outside their doorstep. More importantly, local government makes for much more efficient government.

### Question of the Month

**Q:** Where can I locate information that addresses the duties and responsibilities of my new township position?

**A:** TOI offers many publications that will assist you in performing your responsibilities as an elected official. Visit our website at [www.toi.org](http://www.toi.org) and review the available publications on the TOI store.

I encourage you to purchase the Laws and Duties Handbook. The 2009 revised edition will be available soon. There are other publications made available by the separate divisions of TOI. Take the time to review the information.

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