



## Speakers

BRYAN SMITH, PRESIDENT  
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF TOWNS AND TOWNSHIPS

# NATaT Works to Preserve Local Government and Give Townships a Voice in Washington

Townships in Pennsylvania and Illinois share many challenges, from the threat of local government consolidation to a dearth of volunteer first responder recruits. The National Association of Towns and Townships serves as a unified voice for smaller governments in Washington, as NATaT President Bryan Smith told township officials at PSATS' Annual Conference.

BY BRENDA WILT / ASSISTANT EDITOR

**P**ennsylvania townships are not alone in the challenges they face, whether fighting against forced consolidation, unfunded mandates, fire and emergency services shortages, and more, Bryan Smith, president of the National Association of Towns and Townships (NATaT), told local officials at PSATS' 97th Annual Educational Conference in April.

Smith, who is also executive director of the Townships of Illinois, PSATS' counterpart in the land of Lincoln, said that he hears a lot of the same concerns at his association's annual conference every November. Like the local governments in his state, Pennsylvania's townships are affected by what happens in

the state capital and the nation's capital.

The bigger-is-better movement, which pushes for local government consolidation, is a threat coming from both the state and federal levels, he said. The Founding Fathers created our representative form of government based on the full participation of the electorate.

"Nowhere else has this been more evident and more fully accomplished than at the local government level," he said. "What keeps us on the path is the active participation of the constituents that we serve, which is local democracy in action."

### Fighting forced consolidation

There is a threat to this form of representation, however, Smith said.

Forced consolidation threatens not only local government but also the well-being of our states and nation.

"All across the nation," he said, "people are being told by the media, by ivory-tower dwellers, and even by some of our former elected officials that our financial woes in our communities and our country would be solved if we would only do away with these unnecessary local governments."

The trouble is, there is no real evidence to support this idea, he said.

"Money is only half the issue, in my opinion," Smith said. "More important is that we stand to lose the ability to govern ourselves."

Nothing gets less expensive if local governments are consolidated into larger governments, and it simply distances



**Bryan Smith, president of the National Association of Towns and Townships, tells township officials that Pennsylvania local governments aren't the only ones being threatened by proponents of forced consolidation. Townships in his home state of Illinois face a similar bigger-is-better mentality.**

cruiting and retaining volunteer first responders, NATaT worked to get the Volunteer Responder Incentive Protection Act introduced in Congress on February 14. The bill would exempt nominal volunteer incentives from federal taxes up to \$600.

This measure was law from 2008 until it expired in 2010, Smith said. If the current bill passes, the exemption will become permanent and take effect in 2020. Currently, the bill has 27 co-sponsors, including Reps. Brian Fitzpatrick, Mike Kelly, Mary Gay Scanlon, and Glenn Thompson of Pennsylvania's congressional delegation.

NATaT also submitted comments to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Army Corps of Engineers about the proposed changes to the jurisdictions of the Clean Water Act, which would have made roadside

the electorate from active participation in their government, he said.

"We are not going to see this consolidation talk go away, but the future rests with us," he said. "We need to stand up for local government and what it means."

Those who stand by and allow local governments to lose their authority and ability to provide essential services to their citizens, he told the township officials, are going to be complicit in the demise of local democracy. This will lead to even more uninformed citizens.

"It rests with us, how local government is going to survive in this country," he said.

### **Strength in unity**

Like sticks in a bundle, there is strength in communities working together, which is where NATaT comes in, Smith explained.

The association is townships' voice in Washington, D.C. The NATaT board adopted its federal platform for 2019 and communicated its legislative priorities to congressional staff and membership. These include:

- tax benefits for volunteer first responders;
- broadband expansion while preserving local authority; and

- reauthorization of federal transportation funding.

NATaT has also been on the front lines of legislation that would impact local governments.

To help address the crisis in re-



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ditches, ponding water, and other transient bodies of water subject to pollution regulations.

The national association has been asked to provide comments on last year’s Streamline Bill, which created shot clocks for local governments’ review of small-cell permit applications. The bill also limited the fees a municipality could charge a wireless provider for reviewing applications and collocating on public property.

“We worked last year to include a separate shot clock for smaller local governments that may not have the staff, leadership, or time to complete the application process as quickly as a larger

one,” Smith said. “That was included in the bill but not in the order published by the Federal Communications Commission in December, which would hold all local governments to the same timeline.”

Consequently, NATaT is supporting House Resolution 530, which would nullify the FCC’s order and ensure that the federal government does not preempt local decision-making authority, he said.

To address broadband expansion, NATaT is supporting many of the current bills in Congress that focus on broadband deployment and improved broadband mapping, which indicates service availability in geographic areas.

Township officials can read about these and other legislative issues in NATaT’s weekly legislative update at [natat.org](http://natat.org).

For more personal engagement,

PSATS members can participate in NATaT’s legislative fly-in in early June in Washington, which gives them the opportunity to meet face-to-face with senators and congressional members on the Hill.

Smith concluded his remarks with a nod to Charles Schulz, creator of the Peanuts comics, whose homespun philosophy reminds us that we seldom remember yesterday’s headliners and award winners. Instead, we remember influential teachers, friends who have helped us through rough times, and those who have taught us something worthwhile or inspire us.

The lesson is that we remember the people who care, rather than those with the most money, awards, or credentials.

“Thank you for caring,” Smith said. “Thank you for serving and for your support of the National Association of Towns and Townships.” ♦



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