

SUPPORT SYSTEM



Townships Rely on Support Staff, Volunteers to Serve Constituents

Townships do more work in their local communities than most residents realize. From planning for future land use to communicating crucial information, appointed township staff and volunteers are fundamental to providing services. However, while townships rely on these roles to function, many municipalities must get creative to attract and retain essential volunteers.

BY HANNA MARTIN / ASSOCIATE EDITOR

BONUS VIDEO
Head to the digital edition to learn about modern threats from an experienced emergency management coordinator.



Imagine an organization that provides essential services to its customers. The group is key to raising and maintaining quality of life in the community and protects the interests, health, and happiness of those it serves. In fact, one could argue that without the organization, the entire foundation of the community would crumble.

Now, imagine this organization relies on mostly volunteers. Without these service-oriented, community-minded individuals, it would struggle and the community would suffer the consequences of a lack of critical services.

If you haven't guessed by now, townships are organizations that often rely on volunteers to provide essential public services like planning and zoning, fire and EMS, and emergency management. While appointed staff positions and boards, authorities, and commissions are instrumental to operating a township — and sometimes required — finding qualified, willing residents for the job can sometimes be a challenge.

Doylestown Township in Bucks County boasts about 125 resident volunteers serving on 21 different boards and committees. The township actively recruits residents to serve and has been blessed with engaged, active citizens.

"Excepting for the zoning hearing board, which is quasi-judicial, our boards and commissions all play an advisory role to the board of supervisors," manager Stephanie Mason says. "They are invaluable to providing advice, information, and research they do for the township."

Delegating tasks to volunteer groups

As Mason explains, township authorities, boards, commissions, and committees act as advisers to the board of supervisors. While some groups and particular positions, such as a zoning hearing board (*if the township has zoning*) and emergency management coordinator, are required, others are optional and meant to help supervisors with decisions and aid in administrative tasks, such as finding grants.

"Our boards and commissions are

a way for the supervisors to get direct feedback from residents," says Don Herbert, director of public information and communication for Upper Merion Township in Montgomery County, "because they're interacting with their neighbors, so the supervisors can get residents' perspectives on things."

It's the board of supervisors' responsibility to create boards, authorities, and commissions through ordinances (*for sample ordinance language for the creation of multiple boards and commissions, visit psats.org/resource-center-ordinances*). Although advisory boards play a critical role in townships, the Second Class Township Code doesn't have much to say about the creation and regulation of these boards.

Article XXII, Section 2204 of the Code authorizes the creation of a five- to nine-member recreation board, while Article XXIX outlines the requirements for a shade tree commission. Meanwhile, Article XXX allows for the establishment of a five-member board of health to enforce health and sanitation laws, while the Municipali-

Doylestown Township in Bucks County has more than two dozen boards and commissions. The township's Environmental Advisory Council advises the board of supervisors and is very active in community events.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF DOYLESTOWN TOWNSHIP

Right: Planning Commission members in College Township, Centre County, attend a planning and land use training sponsored by PSATS.



Left: The College Township Industrial Development Authority addresses problems regarding unemployment, blight, and air and water pollution and encourages business development by backing financing for manufacturing construction and research and development enterprises.



“Our boards and commissions are a way for the supervisors to get direct feedback from residents because they’re interacting with their neighbors, so the supervisors can get residents’ perspectives on things.”

ties Planning Code explains the requirements for zoning hearing boards and other planning agencies.

Despite the limited options presented to townships in the Code, many townships choose to appoint a range of boards, committees, and commissions, including but not limited to:

- Bike and hike committee;
- Environmental advisory council (turn to page 28 to learn more about EACs);
- Historical preservation commission;
- Industrial development authority;
- Library board;
- Local traffic advisory committee;
- Municipal and/or water authority;
- Parks and recreation committee;
- Planning commission;
- Telecommunications advisory board; and
- Zoning hearing board.

Many townships have residents fill out an application and submit their resume if they’re interested in serving on a board. Then the township will contact residents when a vacancy arises

that is a good fit for that person’s expertise and interests. Some boards of supervisors also choose to talk to applicants to ensure they’re the right person to fill a vacancy.

“A lot of times, you get people who get involved in an issue and then serve on a board,” says Jennifer Snyder, manager of College Township in Centre County. “For instance, if they have a problem with a park or something, we can say, ‘The best way to get involved with this park directly is the committee. Are you interested in that?’ If they are, they turn in an application, and if a vacancy comes open, that’s who we would appoint.”

In some townships like Doylestown, the board of supervisors is very involved in the volunteer committees and commissions, with a board liaison attending each meeting. However, it’s typically the manager’s job to regulate the boards and committees and create a system to report back to the board of supervisors. Snyder says that she’s constantly including items from the authorities, boards, and commissions

on the supervisors’ meeting agenda. Additionally, the township has a report form that commission members can complete to bring an item to the board’s attention.

In addition to creating a system for regular reporting back to the board of supervisors, some townships also choose to hold a special presentation session once or twice a year to keep the supervisors — and the public — abreast with current projects.

“All of our boards and commissions do an annual presentation to the board of supervisors on what they’re working on and their various projects,” Doylestown’s Mason says. “And then our telecommunications advisory board works with all of them to put together a video of those presentations so residents can see what all of our boards and committees are up to.”

Keeping an eye on land use

While all township authorities, boards, committees, and commissions are important, planning commissions

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and zoning hearing boards are arguably two of the most vital municipal entities, as they shape the future of the community through land use decisions.

The Municipalities Planning Code outlines the duties of the planning commission and zoning hearing board. A planning commission has three to nine members and helps develop the township's comprehensive plan, makes recommendations for an official map, prepares zoning and subdivision and land development ordinances, and reviews proposed subdivision and land



Planning commissions help develop the township comprehensive plan, prepare zoning and subdivision and land development ordinances, review plans, and make recommendations for the official map.



development plans before making recommendations to the board of supervisors.

Although planning commission members are permitted to receive compensation, this position is often volunteer. Still, the planning commission is of utmost importance, as it is tasked with protecting the community's interests while leading positive change that could impact the surrounding region.

Clint Morris's grandfather was part of the original planning commission in Kelly Township, Union County, about 60 years ago, and Morris is following in his footsteps to serve on the current planning commission. He learned about a vacancy through word of mouth; one of the supervisors at the time thought he would be a good fit so he decided to apply.

"We meet once a month," he says. ➤



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“It’s a not a huge commitment, but it’s something that I enjoy, and it’s a good way to give back to the community. You can either complain about progress, or you can be involved in positive progress.”

Also involved in land use, a zoning hearing board (ZHB) is a three- to five-member board required of townships that have a zoning ordinance. The ZHB enforces and hears appeals to the validity of the zoning ordinance, official map, or decisions of the zoning of-

ficer. Additionally, the board can grant special exceptions, called variances, to the zoning ordinance.

The zoning hearing board has its own solicitor separate from the general township solicitor, and townships with a zoning ordinance must select a zoning officer that is not already an elected official of the township. Members of the zoning hearing board may also receive compensation.

Preparing for emergencies

While a zoning hearing board is only required of townships that have zoning, all townships must have an emergency management coordinator, or EMC, under Pennsylvania’s Emergency Management Services Code. Although the EMC is typically a volunteer position, the requirement exists for good reason: Townships never know when an emergency may strike, and the EMC is tasked with preparing and maintaining a disaster emergency plan, establishing an emergency operations center to communicate and provide essential equipment and facilities, and managing the response after a disaster.

EMCs are recommended by the board of supervisors and reviewed by the county and then the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency, or PEMA, before being sent to the governor for final appointment of the nominee. PEMA publishes guidelines for the Emergency Management Certification and Recertification Programs to ensure EMCs are properly trained. EMCs must complete two phases of a career development program. The first, associate level, must be completed within a year of appointment, while the second, professional level, must be completed within three years of appointment. The latest directives, updated in 2022, can be found at pema.pa.gov/directives/pages/2022-directives.aspx.

An important job of the EMC is to understand common hazards in Pennsylvania and the region, including natural hazards, such as flooding, sinkholes, and invasive species, and human-caused hazards, including cyberterrorism, food contamination, and addiction. Preparation for a potential disaster is ongoing, and EMCs must



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be able to plan for an emergency and coordinate a targeted response to disasters.

“Emergency managers undergo an ongoing training process,” says Lori Sherk, EMC for Rapho Township in Lancaster County. “We want to look

at what we can prepare for based on a hazard assessment. The hazards we have in Pennsylvania may not be the same ones that happen in any other part of the country. We can’t stop disasters from happening so what resources can we bring to the table when something bad happens?”

Rapho Township was fortunate to have Sherk as its EMC after an explosion caused by a propane leak destroyed the public works building in the early morning of July 5, 2023. Sherk says that the explosion was an “all-hands-on-deck” moment that required her to rely on the network of contacts and resources she had built over the years.

“It’s easier to do your job if you have contacts and a good understanding of the resources that are out there,” she says. “You’re not in this alone. There’s a lot of peer support from the emergency management world locally, as well as at the county and state level.”

The first step after the explosion was to check for any casualties. After Sherk and the first responders confirmed that there were no fatalities or injuries, she notified the board of supervisors and township manager of the incident. While it was her job to coordinate the disaster response, Sherk stepped back and allowed the first responders to complete the required tasks while conducting an initial assessment.

Next, Sherk needed to determine how to communicate the event with the public. Because the news media arrived early at the scene, Sherk and the supervisors decided to stage a media briefing several hours after the explosion at 9 a.m., allowing her to share information that was pertinent to the public.

“If I’m working an incident like the township’s explosion, everybody in the community has question,” she says. “They want to know what’s going on and should know what’s going on. We wanted to make sure that the community knew that the road was closed and that we didn’t have any fatalities. We wanted to let them know how to report any damages.”

Finally, Sherk asked key response leaders for reports of what happened, their roles, and the next steps to complete a damage assessment and follow

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The seminar will be held from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday April 14, 2024, at the Hershey Lodge in conjunction with PSATS’ Annual Educational Conference and Exhibit Show. For more information about the Township Emergency Management Association and Spring Seminar, visit psats.org/township-emergency-management-assn/.



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up after the incident. She credits the successful response to her strong working relationships with local volunteer organizations, first responders, and the township staff and supervisors.

“Everybody needs to have a professional relationship with their first response partners, and that goes for the managers, supervisors, and local fire, EMS, and police,” Shenk advises. “If you don’t have respectful relationships, open lines of communication, and some experience working with them, it can make your job very hard.”

Keeping residents informed

Beyond communicating in an

emergency situation, local governments must regularly share information with the public. Having strong forms of communication, such as a newsletter, website, and regular social media posts increases government transparency

and builds public trust. Plus, regularly communicating with residents can help townships build relationships with residents, aiding in the search for volunteers to serve on various boards and commissions. ➤



After an explosion at the public works building in Rapho Township, Lancaster County, EMC Lori Shenk had to assess the damage, coordinate with local first response agencies, and communicate with supervisors, staff, and the public.



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- AI in Townships: ChatGPT and Beyond
- Avoid Costly Mistakes: Do Your Homework for Capital Projects
- Best Practices for Budget Preparation
- Building a Successful Retirement Plan for Your Municipality
- Case Studies in Code Enforcement
- Codification: An Important Building Block of Good Governance
- **Communicating and Navigating Through Conflict**
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- **Creating a 1-Page Budget Status Report Folks Can Understand**
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- The Decider Guide: When to Use Cooperative Purchasing
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- Evolving Best Practices in Bid Management
- Fraud in the Workplace & Internal Controls to Prevent Fraud
- Freedom of Speech & Public Officials: What Crosses the Line?
- Fundraising & Event Planning – It's Not as Hard as It Seems
- Grant Policy for Municipal Funding
- A Guide to Outsourcing Delinquent Collections
- How to Impose Effective Disciplinary Action
- How To Strategically Approach Funding Procurement
- How to Survive – and Thrive – as a Municipal Administrator
- Insurance 101: Choosing the Right Coverage
- Let's Make a Deal: Collective Bargaining for Municipalities
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- Municipal Law Update
- New Age Necessities (*and Nightmares*) for Municipalities
- New Developments in Municipal Employment Law
- PLGIT – A Focus on Investment Safety and Service
- PSATS Legislative Update
- QuickBooks Roundtable
- Right-to-Know Law and Sunshine Act Update
- Secretaries-Managers Q&A
- Supervisors Have Rights, Too!
- Sustainability and Procurement
- **Taking Township Events to the Next Level**
- **Write This Down: Employment Documents and What Goes In Them**
- The Year in Review: Labor & Employment Potpourri

Planning/Zoning

- 2023 Year In Review for Zoning
- ACRE 101
- Conservation Collaboration
- **Crazy but True – Zoning and Enforcement from the Trenches**
- Customized Recreation: Designing Facilities for Diverse Community Goals
- EV Charging – Is Your Municipality Ready?
- **Grid-Scale Solar – Planning for the Coming Solar Wave**
- Land Use & Zoning Law Update 2024
- Leveraging GIS for Effective Stormwater Management
- Livability – Blending Practical Needs and Community Wants
- Living with Logistics
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- A Township Resource: PennDOT Municipal Services
- Understanding Fair Market Value for Water/Wastewater Assets
- **Using Technology for Smarter Pavement Management**

Public Safety

- **An Introduction to the Safe System Approach for Speed Management**
- **Best Practices in Police Department Management**
- Best Practices in Volunteer Fire Department Management
- FEMA/PEMA Hazard Mitigation Planning Update
- Fire & EMS Issues in Your Township
- Making Your Roads Safer Through a Positive Guidance Approach
- **A New Normal for Recovery and the Municipal Leader's Role**
- **OK, I Am TIM-Trained – Am I Safe Now?**
- PennDOT Multimodal Transportation Fund (MTF)
- PennSTART – Pa. Safety Transportation & Research Track
- PENNVEST: Water Project Financing Overview and Updates
- Safety and Security in the Natural Gas Industry
- Speeding on Rural Township Roads
- **Sustaining the Volunteer Fire Service Through Partnerships**
- What You Need to Know About Drones, AVs, and Other Tech
- When the 'Big One' Hits Home

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Because of the importance of sharing township news with residents, many townships have a director of communications or public information officer. Herbert, the director of public information and communication for Upper Merion Township in Montgomery County, oversees the township's website, electronic newsletter, social media accounts, television production

studio and channel, print newsletters, broadcast of the supervisors' monthly meeting, and coverage of local events. Additionally, Herbert shares everyday news, such as road construction, line painting, and snow plowing, with residents.

Herbert has found that regularly communicating with the public has increased transparency, especially during times of change, such as when the board of supervisors recently enacted an ordinance banning single-use plastics.

"We spent months in advance getting the word out that the ordinance was going to be in effect," he says. "We notified businesses, residents, and everybody we could with press releases and articles in our publications."

As a public communications professional for more than two decades, Herbert cites social media as one of the biggest changes to how townships share public information. The way people consume information has changed, with many now choosing to get in touch with their local government online. Even small, rural townships can benefit from having an online presence, as technology streamlines government processes for citizens and staff alike.

"Social media is a huge part of communicating with the public, and a lot of people get their information through Facebook, Instagram, and X (*formerly Twitter*)," Herbert says. "There is less and less print material and more and more of the materials online."

For townships that want to develop an online presence but don't know where to start, PSATS offers a website hosting service. Visit psats.org/website-hosting-service/ for more information.

Finding public servants

Because many essential — and sometimes legally required — township positions rely on volunteers, municipalities may struggle to attract and retain the help they need to fill staff positions or board vacancies.

"It's hard to recruit people because it feels like fewer and fewer people are interested in volunteering," says College Township's Snyder. "We do our best to try and keep it in the front of

SPECIALIZED AID

Supervisors fill certain pivotal roles through appointment

The board of supervisors can appoint individuals who provide special expertise to the township or enforce ordinances. Below are several commonly appointed township positions.

- **Township solicitor:** One of the most important appointments, the solicitor controls legal matters in the township, including bonds, real estate transactions, ordinance review, and court actions. In addition to the solicitor with experience in municipal law, townships may also appoint land use and labor law attorneys as special counsel.

- **Township engineer:** The township engineer, which can be an individual or engineering firm, provides valuable advice during road and bridge construction, site plan and subdivision reviews, and environmental issues. Additionally, the engineer prepares contract plans, specifications, and estimates and reviews bids. See the cover story in the March issue of the *Township News* for more information about township engineers.

- **Certified public accountant (CPA):** The board of supervisors may appoint a CPA to perform the annual audit in place of the elected auditors. This requires the placement of a legal advertisement, and then the board must wait 30 days before making an appointment. If a CPA performs the annual audit, the board of elected auditors sets wages for any supervisors who work for the township.

- **Emergency management coordinator (EMC):** Pennsylvania law requires that each municipality appoint an EMC and develop an emergency plan. The EMC is appointed by the governor after recommendation by the board of supervisors. Townships must also have a plan detailing how and when an emergency is declared and what powers the EMC holds.

- **Sewage enforcement officer (SEO):** Because townships are responsible for sewage management, each township must have an SEO and alternate to issue on-lot septic system permits and inspect systems. These individuals must be licensed by the state Department of Environmental Protection and comply with continuing education requirements.

- **Zoning officer:** Zoning officers are required for townships that have a zoning ordinance to administer and enforce the ordinance. While the zoning officer is usually a township employee, they cannot be an elected official.

- **UCC official:** Townships that have opted to administer and enforce the Uniform Construction Code, or UCC, must have a certified building code official who can oversee the program, plus certified plan reviewers and inspectors to review permits and check that construction is up to code. The board of supervisors must also participate in or appoint a UCC Board of Appeals.

peoples' minds through a push on social media, our alert system, and our website, and then we hope to have a good pool of people we can choose from."

Regularly advertising vacancies on various authorities, boards, and commissions on social media, the township website and newsletter, and local newspaper can help find the volunteers townships need to keep everything running.

"We're always advertising if there's a vacancy," says Herbert. "Explain to people that their insights are important and they can help guide the supervisors' decisions that are going to affect the future of the township."

While finding service-minded individuals who want to give back to their community is an important consideration, townships may want to look for residents with particular backgrounds to fill vacancies. For example, someone with a land use law or engineering background may be particularly helpful on a planning commission or zoning hearing board, while a dedicated

local first responder could make a great emergency management coordinator.

Other local service organizations can also be a good source for volunteers. For example, College Township sometimes recruits volunteers from the roster of individuals who have taken a leadership development course offered by the county, since they are typically already service-oriented.


Additionally, considering the time of day that different volunteer groups meet can help attract a wider pool of residents. For example, if a committee only meets during traditional work hours, many residents may not be able to serve based on their work schedule. On the other hand, groups that meet in the evening may attract more applicants.

"We've had vacancies in our industrial development authority for probably six months," Snyder says. "It makes a difference because that committee meets during the day, so we're limiting ourselves to people who don't work or those who have a very flexible career and could come to the meeting."

Often, creating a relationship with residents can help townships find eager volunteers who are ready to serve. Many townships fill vacancies through networking and word of mouth. Inviting residents to observe a meeting prior to making a commitment can demonstrate that service to their community doesn't have to take a ton of time each month.

Supervisor Lorenzo Bonura says East Cocalico Township in Lancaster County actually had to place several commission and committee applicants on a waiting list last year because of a lack of vacancies.

"When you explain to people how much time it takes, they say, 'Oh, well I can spare an hour or two out of my month,'" Bonura says. "It's so easy for people to say, 'No, I don't have time for that,' but if you truly want to help your community, an hour is not going to hurt. Your input could change how someone else looks at things. Once you pump people up with a little pep talk and show them what service entails, they usually come help." ♦




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