

Township Government in Michigan

Townships are a product of Michigan's early history, and Michigan is one of 20 states that currently has some form of township government. Township government powers in Michigan have grown to the point that it is difficult to discern the differences between townships, cities and villages.



There are, however, significant differences that are important to the people charged with administering township affairs and deciding township policies. Townships and counties are statutory units of government, having only those powers expressly provided or fairly implied by state law. Cities and most villages are vested with home rule powers, meaning they can do almost anything not prohibited by law.

Types of Townships

There are two types of townships in Michigan—general law and charter townships. Charter township status is a special township classification created by the Michigan Legislature in 1947 to provide additional powers and streamlined administration for governing a growing community. A primary motivation for townships to adopt the charter form is to provide greater protection against annexation by a city. As of March 2007, 137 Michigan townships have opted to become charter townships.

The State of Michigan contains 1,242 townships, which vary considerably in geographical size and population. Based on 2000 U.S. Census figures, township population in Michigan varies from 10 to 95,648 people.

Township government is conducted by a township board consisting of either five or seven members—a supervisor, clerk, treasurer, and two or four trustees—which is determined by the desires of the township residents, whether the township has a population of over 3,000 or 5,000 registered electors, and if the township has charter status. The township board may also hire a manager, assessor, police or fire chief, superintendent, and other personnel to properly and efficiently operate the township.

Township Duties

State laws authorize townships to perform a wide variety of functions in two important categories: mandated and permissive. Mandated functions are activities that townships are required to perform. The three broadest mandated responsibilities are assessment administration, elections administration and tax collection, which are legally assigned functions of the supervisor, clerk and treasurer, respectively. State laws also specify details for performing these functions.



In addition to these broad mandates, there are other, more narrow state requirements. Procedures for the township's financial administration, such as budgets, accounting, investments and deposits, are closely regulated by the state. Township meetings must comply with Michigan's Open Meetings Act (*MCL 15.261-15.275*), and township records must be stored and made available in conformance with specific laws, such as the Freedom of Information Act (*MCL 15.231-15.246*).

The Michigan Zoning Enabling Act (*MCL 125.3101 - 125.3702*) gives townships broad powers to enact and enforce ordinances. Zoning ordinances give townships the authority to regulate land use, while many other specific ordinances control activities that infringe on the rights of citizens.

The Michigan Constitution and state statutes also limit the amount of property tax millage that townships can levy for general township operations. General law townships are allocated at least 1 mill from the constitutionally limited 15/18 mills allocated among townships, the county, public schools and the intermediate school district. Charter townships, like cities, do not share in this allocated millage, but townships chartered by a referendum may levy up to 5 mills. Townships chartered by board resolution after Nov. 22, 1978, must have a vote of the electors authorizing the levy of 5 mills. In either case, the 5-mill limit may be increased up to 10 mills with a vote of the electors.

Townships also utilize other sources of revenue to support services. User fees, permits, fines and special assessments on real property are the most frequently used sources.

Townships Support Other Governmental Units



Townships serve other governmental units by providing tax collection services. To avoid imposing an unnecessary burden on citizens to pay separate property taxes to the township, schools, special assessment districts and the county, Michigan townships provide uniform assessment of property values and collect all property taxes on behalf of the other units of government. Only a very small portion of the taxes collected are retained by the township for its own operating purposes.

Michigan townships, large and small, provide services tailored to meet the needs of their residents. Township officials represent the level of government closest and most responsive to the wishes of the people.

