

WHAT IS A TOWNSHIP?

In the late 1700s, Congress ordered a survey that divided the territory that became Minnesota into 36 square-mile tracts of land called townships. When Minnesota became a state, its legislature created a process for those living within these “congressional townships” to organize themselves into a form of local government called town government in which a town board governs, but residents have direct input through the annual township meeting.

WHAT IS A TOWN BOARD?

A town board is an elected body chosen to conduct the affairs of the town. In a traditional township, three supervisors comprise the town board and are supported by a clerk and a treasurer. Supervisors serve three-year terms, while clerks and treasurers serve two-year terms (in March elections). If the town has a November election; Supervisors have either a four or six year term while the Clerk & Treasurer hold 4 year terms. The powers and duties of towns and town officers are set out in state statute.

There are optional forms of town government provided for in statute that allow the town voters to change the basic town board structure by: appointing the clerk and/or treasurer, combining the clerk and treasurer positions, adopting a five-member board of supervisors, choosing November elections, or use of mail-in ballots (provided your county approves).

WHAT ARE THE DUTIES OF A TOWN SUPERVISOR?

By law, supervisors “have charge of all town affairs not committed to other officers by law.” Minn. Stat. § 366.01, subd. 1. Town supervisors are charged with the duty to make decisions on behalf of the town and have the responsibility to see that the town fulfills its duties to the state and to town residents. Common duties include awarding contracts, authorizing township expenditures, and adopting ordinances.

WHAT ARE THE DUTIES OF A TOWN CLERK?

A town clerk performs a variety of duties for the township, including: keeping meeting minutes; providing notice of meetings; filing and preserving the town’s records; and serving as the chief election officer for the town. The primary duties of the clerk are listed in Minn. Stat. § 367.11, but there are many other references to clerk’s duties spread throughout the statutes, and the clerk frequently performs other tasks needed for the town to function effectively and efficiently.

WHAT ARE THE DUTIES OF A TOWN TREASURER?

Town treasurers are mostly responsible for properly handling and accounting for the town’s funds. Treasurers keep a register of all demands for payment made to the town and of all checks the town issues. The primary duties of the treasurer are listed in Minn. Stat. § 367.16.

WHEN IS THE TOWN ELECTION?

Most town elections are held annually on the second Tuesday in March, however some townships have exercised an option to hold biennial elections in November, usually in the even numbered years.

For March Elections the town board establishes when the polls open and close, but all town polls must be open at least between 5-8pm. In the eleven-county metro area, towns must keep their polls open at least from 10am – 8 pm.

For November elections the hours are 7 am – 8 pm. Townships under 500 and located outside the eleven county metro area may (at the annual meeting) approve an opening time not later than 10 am.

For combined or shared polling places; best practices would suggest all polls be open at the earliest required hour of a participating township or city.

AM I ELIGIBLE TO RUN FOR TOWN OFFICE?

To be eligible to run for town office you must be: (1) an eligible voter; (2) filed as a candidate for only one position at the same election; (3) be at least 21 years old at the time of assuming the office; and (4) be a resident of the town for at least 30 days before the election.

ARE THE SUPERVISORS THE ONLY DECISION MAKERS IN TOWNSHIP GOVERNMENT?

While supervisors are the only ones with an official vote on most final decisions, the residents play an important role in the decision making process through the annual

meeting. Townships must also comply with state mandates. On a few issues the township can be ordered to do things by the county. Town zoning must also be consistent with or more restrictive than county regulations.

HOW DO TOWNSHIPS SPEND THEIR REVENUE?

The same State Auditor's report shows that road and bridge expenditures are by the far the largest expense for townships, followed by general government expenses, fire protection services, , debt payments, water and wastewater services, public safety, and other public expenditures.

WHAT RIGHTS TO INFORMATION DO THE PUBLIC HAVE TO TOWNSHIP GOVERNMENT PROCEEDINGS?

While all townships except urban townships located in the seven county metropolitan area are exempt from the Minnesota Government Data Practices Act (a decision made by the legislature in recognition of the fact that most townships do not have the type of staffing required by the Act), members of the public can still obtain information in a number of ways. First, townships voluntarily provide access to public data upon reasonable requests.

Second, all townships are subject to the Minnesota Open Meeting Law, which means that almost all meetings of the town board and any official township committees must be accessible to members of the public and be preceded by proper notice. In addition, the Open Meeting Law requires that minutes be kept of the proceedings of the governing body and the minute book must be available for review by members of the public.

Any ordinance adopted by the town board must be published in the designated official newspaper of general circulation within the township, so notice of all such regulations will always be provided.

Finally, the annual meeting affords residents the opportunity to guide many of the activities that will occur within the township.

WHERE CAN I GO FOR MORE INFORMATION?

- The Minnesota Association of Townships web page contains a wide range of information on town government, including a calendar showing the dates and deadlines for town elections (www.mntownships.org). Included on the web page is the *Manual on Town Government* that provides an overview of many town related issues officers and prospective officers may find of interest.

The Minnesota Association of Townships

(MAT) Mission is *"To secure for township officers and office holders full recognition and enjoyment of their rights to administer their responsibilities in a just and professional manner; to secure the tools necessary for them to fulfill their obligations as public servants; and to strengthen and extend our form of township government in such a way as to provide to the citizens the services they are entitled."*

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