

Townships 101

Minnesota Association of Townships



Townships were the original form of local government in Minnesota, established in the late 1700s when Congress ordered a survey that divided the territory into 36 square mile tracts of land. Today, the term “township” generally refers to public corporations governed by a local board of supervisors and created to provide services to residents.

Townships exist in every area of the state, including the metropolitan area. Some, with populations of more than 1,000 function in much the same way as a small city. While many townships remain rural agricultural centers, other host a variety of residential, light commercial, and industrial development.

THERE ARE
1,781

TOWNSHIPS ACROSS
MINNESOTA

REPRESENTING ABOUT
16.4%

OF THE
STATE POPULATION

WITH
914,174

TOTAL
RESIDENTS

Township Government: Efficient, Effective, Accountable, Accessible

Township Elections & Annual Meetings

A township board of supervisors, usually three members, are elected by their residents to staggered three-year terms, and make up the township governing body. The annual elections for 2/3 of all townships are held on the second Tuesday in March each year in conjunction with the township’s annual meeting. The rest of the townships hold their elections in November.

The annual meeting is what really sets townships apart from other forms of local government. At this meeting, the residents of the township have a direct voice in how the township will be run. Residents vote on a variety of matters for which the town board must receive voter approval, and most importantly, the township’s tax levy for the next year.

Services, Revenue & Expenses of Townships

The types of services offered by townships vary greatly from community to community.

- Townships control approximately 39 percent of the roads in Minnesota – more road miles than any other level of government. This means all townships must provide directly or contract for road maintenance services. Many townships provide volunteer fire services and participate in joint powers agreements for a variety of purposes.
- Road and bridge expenditures are by far the largest expense for townships, about 60% of total expenditures. Other categories of expense include general government expenses, fire protection

services, debt payments, water and wastewater services, and public safety.

- Local property taxes are the largest source of township revenue, about 74% of total income. Townships are frugal and efficient! Over the past ten years, revenues have decreased 1.6% and expenses have decreased 1.8% in constant dollars over that same time. In 2018, total township revenues were \$317.3 million; total expenditures were \$312.2 million. Most forms of direct state aid to townships have been eliminated, although the State does provide some funding for township roads and bridges out of the Highway User Tax Distribution Fund - \$51.7 million in FY 2018.