

What is a Township Trustee?

Written by John Bayles - November 2021

As Township Officials, we are all too often approached by new residents of the Township asking the same question, "What is a Township Trustee and what do they do?" Township Government is a unit of local Government brought to this land from the Old Country in the early 1600's. Townships predate our State Government, the size and shape determined by Congressional Acts, which established the various land grants. As the Ohio population grew, it was only natural that the surveyed townships became the basic unit of local government. In 1804, the elected officials of a Township consisted of three trustees, a clerk, two overseers of the poor, and a sufficient number of highway supervisors- in addition to justices of the peace and constables. Today, just as in 1804, the township is a political subdivision of the state. This is usually an area six square miles divided into thirty-two sections of the unincorporated part of the township.

The functions, duties and obligations of the township have changed over the years. Today we elect 3 Trustees and a Fiscal Officer every 4 years. Township Trustees fill their roles on a part-time basis. Knowledge of their community and its needs enables them to offer more personal service than any other unit of government. One of the most important functions of the trustees is the maintenance of Township Roads within the Township. Not State, or County roads, but Township roadways. If the Township budget allows the township to purchase their own roadway equipment, many times the trustees will perform the duties of road maintenance, destruction of weeds in right-of-way's, and removal of snow and ice themselves.

Another major responsibility of the trustees is operation and maintenance of cemeteries. Trustees sell lots, set up service fees, work directly with Funeral Homes opening and closing graves and yearly maintenance of cemeteries.

Ohio law permits townships to provide fire protection directly, if budget allows, or contract with other townships, municipalities or jurisdictions. In 1974, the northwestern part of Canaan Township petitioned to be included into the newly formed fire district of Marion County, in Caledonia, Ohio. State legislature at that time did not allow for fire service outside of the County jurisdiction. After much work by the township trustees, the State of Ohio allowed for joint district fire departments to serve multi-county areas. The Caledonia Fire Department, was the first to push for this new legislation, hence, it's new name, "1st Consolidated Fire District ". The remainder of Canaan township is contracted with other municipalities for fire protection since Canaan is too small to have its own fire department.

Zoning is another function of townships; however, Canaan is operating under Morrow County wide zoning since voter approval in 2003.

Townships receive revenue from local property tax and from the gasoline and motor vehicle license taxes, as well as the local government fund from the state. Townships collect less than 6 percent of the local property taxes in Ohio.

These are just a few of the responsibilities of Ohio Township Trustees. Townships uniquely balance small community living and the preservation of farmland and Ohio's agricultural industry with infrastructure advancements and economic development. Once viewed as a "temporary government," townships today are key players in Ohio's governmental system.