

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 who are 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.

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 streamline 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 November 1996, 123 Michigan townships have opted to become a charter township.

The state of Michigan currently contains 1,242 townships, which vary considerably in geographical size and population. Based on the 1990 U.S. Census, township population in Michigan varies from 15 to in excess of 85,500 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. The number of trustees 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, as police or fire chief, superintendent, and other necessary personnel to properly and efficiently operate the township.

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.