What are Townships?

In the State of Ohio, each township is a body politic and corporate, for the purpose of enjoying and exercising the rights and privileges conferred upon it by law. Essentially, townships are statutory local governments exercising only those powers specifically delegated to them by the General Assembly or reasonably inferred by the Ohio Revised Code. The Ohio Revised Code (ORC 503.01) states that each township is a body politic, which has been granted specific kinds of authority: some responsibilities are required, some are permitted, and others are prohibited. The ORC uses “shall” for required items, “may” for permitted items, and “may not” for prohibited items.

Townships were the “first form of local government” in Ohio and were plotted according to a basic policy for the survey and sale of public lands. With the formation of the Ohio Territory under the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, six-mile township squares were used as the primary means of establishing local civil governments in the territory. Since the adoption of the 1851 Ohio Constitution, the basic form of township government has remained relatively unchanged. Governed by three elected Trustees serving four-year terms, this Board of Township Trustees is the legislative authority and also fulfills many executive responsibilities as well. A fourth elected official, Township Fiscal Officer (formerly known as Clerk), is independent of the Trustees yet by law must work closely with the Trustees. The Township Fiscal Officer’s duties include the recording of township proceedings and keeping records of township fiscal accounts.

There are over 1,300 townships in Ohio today. While they all operate under the basic form of township government, they are quite varied in the size of population, annual operating budget, and range of services delivered to township residents. Townships most commonly provide residents with services such as road maintenance, cemetery management, police protection, fire protection, emergency medical services (EMS), solid waste disposal, and zoning. For example, Ohio townships have direct responsibility for maintaining approximately 41,000 miles of roads and streets, and townships manage over 1,800 township cemeteries.

Township Responsibilities

**Township Roads:** The maintenance and repair of township roads is the largest function of most of Ohio’s townships today and includes such activities as snow removal and weed control. Ohio townships receive part of the state’s motor vehicle license fees and gasoline tax, as well as generating additional revenues through local taxation to fund road maintenance.

**Police Protection:** A Board of Township Trustees has the authority to employ police constables, to create police districts, or to contract with neighboring jurisdictions for police protection. Ohio
township police officers or constables are required to receive basic training in the duties of a police officer.

Fire Protection/EMS: Township fire departments are staffed with full-time or volunteer firefighters or a combination of both. Ohio law permits townships and municipalities to contract with each other for mutual fire protection/EMS.

Cemeteries: Townships manage over 1,800 township cemeteries. The Township Trustees have the authority to sell plots, set fees for services, maintain the cemetery, and provide for expansion. Private cemeteries owned by religious or cemetery associations may be transferred to the township.

Parks and Recreation: Townships may establish and operate a park on their own or by joint action with another political subdivision. Townships may purchase land and material and may use township funds to acquire or improve a park. A township park district may also be established in a township. The park district is a separate political subdivision and has its own board with taxing authority.

Zoning: Townships may regulate the use of land and buildings and control the development of their own territory. Ohio law provides for the submission of a zoning plan to the electors of the township and contains provisions for the adoption, administration, enforcement, and amendment of the zoning plan.

Waste Disposal: Townships are authorized to provide waste disposal services to their residents. The township may collect and dispose of garbage and refuse or it may enter into written contracts with other political subdivisions for such services. The cost of refuse collection and waste disposal may be met from tax revenues or from user charges to those who benefit from the service.