

A township does what?

by *Kenneth E. (Ken) Lindsay, Harris Township Trustee*

Why won't Indiana townships die? They've survived multiple attempts to kill or maim them, as recently as last year, and as long ago as 1932. Yet those 1,000+ small units of government keep operating.

Gone are the days of issuing dog licenses. Nobody cares about that, right? Who cares about anything a township provides? Good question. For a start, you might care if your house catches fire.

Township representatives are elected every four years and consist of one trustee and three advisory board members. The board's primary responsibility is finances, including approving a budget and tax levy. The trustee looks after township assets and administers day-to-day operations.

The most visible and expensive role of a township is providing fire protection, but only where a city does not exist. The only city that concerns Harris Township is Mishawaka. So when they annex a part of the township, they become responsible for providing it with fire protection. About ten years ago Harris Township joined two other townships in the Clay Fire Territory. Emergency Medical Services (EMS), with trained personnel arriving by ambulance or fire truck, are part of that mix.

By law, townships provide a level of welfare called Assistance or Poor Relief. In certain, narrow circumstances, those who qualify based on income might receive temporary help with rent, utilities, food or medicine. Many nonprofits require their clients first visit a township, which typically uses a detailed process to determine true need.

Harris Township maintains two cemeteries. The State of Indiana mandated it for historic ones (existing prior to 1939) which were abandoned and had fallen into disrepair. Typically, few accurate burial records exist, while old headstones fade and crumble, sometimes to rubble. "Maintaining," by statute, includes straightening headstones, leveling ground, having a fence, and getting rid of weeds. Harris Township does not currently sell grave plots. This entire arrangement can be a source of confusion and frustration, especially to those with family members buried in a particular cemetery and who would like to continue the tradition.

Ninety years ago townships had more responsibilities concern-

ing roads, schools, assessing property values, justices of the peace, and constables. And while there currently is flexibility to provide "optional" services, it's important to note that funding is limited, with \$20 per year being what a Harris Township homeowner might pay in direct township taxes not related to fire protection.

Where Harris Township lacks hydrants, city water, sidewalks or a sewer system, it can probably be traced back to a lack of city government, which also means no city taxes. Sometimes, it's that simple: you get what you pay for.

What if there were no township government? One proposal would transfer responsibilities to elected county officials. To speculate how that might work, we have a local model. Today Harris Township residents pay a lot of county taxes, and the county has a big parks department. But, despite owning over 100 acres in Harris Township, they have no interest in turning it into a county park. (You don't get what you pay for?) Compounding the problem, the City of Mishawaka has been annexing into Harris Township for years, with the city limits reaching north of State Road 23 on Gumwood, but their plan remains to not have a park north of Day Road, which is miles, and perhaps thousands of residents, away.

Harris Township is attempting to meet the huge demand for green spaces by operating two parks, one on Brummitt Road partially in public/private partnership with a soccer club, and one constructed in the past few years on Elm Road. Your township: a small unit of government, with a small operating budget, and no full-time operations staff, hopefully making a positive contribution to quality of life.

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Kerry Byler, Editor • 574-277-2679
grgazette@comcast.net

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