

Is it time to hire a township manager?

With their fast-growing community that includes a vibrant business district, thriving parks system, high-quality emergency services and more, the **Ada Township** (Kent Co.) board and greater community had pondered for several years whether hiring a township manager was right for the township. When long-time supervisor **George Haga** retired in 2020 after more than 30 years in office, the board knew it was time to make the leap.

Working with a professional search firm, the board began seeking qualified candidates to fill the new position, finding their ideal candidate in **Julius Suchy**, who—now three years into his role with the township—believes that the move to hiring a manager came at the right time.

“It’s been wonderful,” Suchy said. “There was a lot of investment going on in the community, and a need for professional management. We’re a full-service township, with a new library, a new riverfront park, robust planning, a downtown development authority—there are a lot of complexities.

“This position impacts the lives of our residents and members of our business community. Having a professional manager allows our board members to operate at a 10,000-foot-view of the township—and still get involved in the weeds when needed.”

Supervisor **Ross Leisman** was elected to his new role on the township board in November 2020, just a few months after Suchy was hired as manager—and the two spent a great deal of time discussing their roles, responsibilities and expectations. “This was setting up something new in Ada,” said Leisman, who also works full time as a municipal attorney. “There was a transition and we discussed how to work together, how to work as partners. For Ada Township, it has worked well.”

While only a small number—roughly 5%—of Michigan’s townships have opted to hire a manager, that number is growing as more and more communities of all sizes are considering hiring an administrator to oversee the day-to-day township operations. What are the benefits of having a township manager? What does working with a manager look like—and how does a township know when it’s time to consider adding this new position to their administration?

The ‘strong administrator’ style

Maybe it’s the title, but some townships operate under the “strong supervisor” model of administration, wherein a significant amount of day-to-day township operations are overseen by the supervisor, as delegated by the township board (since the supervisor does not have any statutory authority over township administration). However, there is another option: the “strong administrator” where a professional township manager is hired to take the reins of township administration, providing consistency and continuity in the face of turnover following elections and a staff person dedicated to serving the community and carrying out the board’s vision.



Both general law and charter townships may choose to bring in a manager. A manager is a township employee with no statutory duties. Their job description is dictated by the township board, and those assignments can be changed or adapted as needed by the board. This is different from a charter township *superintendent*, who has statutory duties specifically denoted in the Charter Township Act (MCL 42.10, see sidebar on page 18). These duties are essentially the superintendent's job description (and if a charter township superintendent is removed by the board, those duties are then performed by the supervisor). Since it's a more familiar term, charter township superintendents are often called a "manager." For the purposes of this article, we'll generally use the term "manager" to refer to both positions.

Cameron Van Wyngarden has served as **Plainfield Charter Township** (Kent Co.) superintendent for more than 10 years, the second individual to hold the position since it was first created in the township in 1996. With a family history of public service—his grandfather was an Iowa state senator—he worked in state government for a number of years before turning to a career in local government "where you can more directly see the results of your work," he said.

Van Wyngarden sees those results daily in his role as superintendent, where he oversees "all day-to-day operations for the township and proposes policy matters for the board

to consider," he explained. "All staff of the township report to me, including those serving in deputy clerk and deputy treasurer roles. I also represent the township when working with other organizations, like our county, road commission, state departments, and neighboring communities."

Township managers typically serve on various township committees, and often on additional community boards as well. In fact, superintendents are required by statute to serve as an ex-officio member of all township committees. They are also a key point of contact for residents.

Among the advantages of hiring a manager is that it can bring to the township a degree of insulation of administrative decisions from political influence—though some critics may charge that administrators can become too insulated from political pressure and are less responsive to public demand.

"This is not a political position," Suchy said. "I deal with the facts, as I work to implement the board's vision."

In addition, a manager can provide a steady hand during times of transition or crisis. They can help to ensure that operations continue unimpeded even when elected officials or department heads change, and they can provide guidance and support during emergencies or other unexpected events.

"My vision extends beyond the four-year township term," Suchy said.

What the law says

Under MCL 41.75a, the township board may choose to employ a township manager or other employees as necessary. A manager serves at the pleasure of the board and performs those duties lawfully delegated to the manager position by the board. Duties that are designated by law to another township official, such as the supervisor, clerk or treasurer, may not be delegated to a manager unless the official has consented in writing to a reduction of duties and to any subsequent reduction in salary of the office. (MCL 41.95)

If a charter township has not appointed a township superintendent under MCL 42.10, the board may employ a township manager—but that position should be distinguished from a charter township superintendent. A superintendent has the following statutory authorities under MCL 42.10(a)-(o) that a manager does not have. (While a charter township superintendent may be referred to as a “manager,” the distinguishing characteristic is whether the board has designated to the position any or all of the duties under MCL 42.10.)

- see that all laws and township ordinances are enforced
- manage and supervise all public improvements, works and undertakings of the township
- have charge of the construction, repair, maintenance, lighting and cleaning of streets, sidewalks, bridges, pavements, sewers, and all public buildings or other property belonging to the township
- manage and supervise the operation of all township utilities
- be responsible for the preservation of property, tools and appliances of the township
- see that all terms and conditions imposed in favor of the township or its inhabitants in any public utility franchise or in any contract are faithfully kept and performed
- attend all township board meetings
- be an ex-officio member of all township board committees
- prepare and administer the annual budget under policies formulated by the township board and keep the board fully advised at all times as to the financial condition and needs of the township
- recommend to the township board for adoption such measures as he or she may deem necessary or expedient
- be responsible to the township board for the efficient administration of all departments of the township government
- act as township purchasing agent or, under his or her responsibility, delegate such duties to another officer or employee
- conduct all sales of personal property that the township board may authorize to be sold
- assume all the duties and responsibilities as personnel director of all township employees or delegate such duties to some other officer or employee
- perform such other duties as may be prescribed by this act or required by ordinance or by direction of the township board or which are not assigned to some other official in conformity with the provisions of this act

When is the right time?

For many townships, the idea to hire a manager may be considered for years before making the leap. A change in long-time leadership could be the catalyst, or perhaps community growth, or the expansion in township services that current officials simply don't have the time, experience or expertise to tackle. If the township's current capacity can't keep up with its vision, perhaps creating a township manager position can help accomplish those goals and initiatives. And if you're already considering hiring a manager, then you might just have your answer. “Are the things that you, as a board, want to get done getting done—and in a timely fashion?” Suchy asked. “If you're asking the question, ‘do we need a manager,’ then it's time.”

Having a township manager to handle the day-to-day administration of the township can also provide greater flexibility and accessibility to allow individuals who may not be able to work full-time township hours to run for elected office. This was the case for Leisman, who as an attorney knew that he would not be able to hold the same full-time township office hours as his predecessor. “Having a manager opened up the opportunity for me to run for supervisor,” Leisman said. “It makes a huge difference.”

Van Wyngarden echoed the sentiment that a “strong administrator” style of governance could open up the possibility for more individuals to run for public office. “Hiring a manager can allow the township to convert the supervisor, clerk and treasurer's roles to part-time (if not already), providing greater opportunity for a resident to serve in these roles while still maintaining other employment or enjoying retirement,” he said. “Elected officials transition to a role of policy-making for their community and away from handling the mundane details of the position, leaving those to the manager and staff.”

One key message for townships considering hiring a manager, according to Leisman: “The elected officials most impacted must be comfortable with the decision” to bring in a manager.

Timing and careful consideration are essential. “Townships most commonly consider this change in the year or two preceding a board election,” said Van Wyngarden. “This is helpful to set clear expectations for anyone considering a run for a township board seat at the next election, and allows everyone time to make an orderly transition before adjusting responsibilities for elected officials.”

Varying skill sets of elected officials—particularly for growing communities or those expanding their services—can also be another tipping point toward hiring a manager. This was the case in **Negaunee Township** (Marquette Co.) when **Gary Wommer** was appointed supervisor after spending two years on the township board as trustee. Although Wommer had also served 15 years as the township's fire chief, running an office just wasn't in his wheelhouse.

“Our community was growing, and just getting busier and busier,” he said. “I am a very open person, and am not going to say, ‘Well, this is the way we’ve always done things.’ The role of supervisor was growing beyond what I could keep my arms around, and I wanted to be fair to the township and the residents.”

Nick Leach first began working for the township of just over 3,000 residents in 2012 as a GIS intern, mapping the township’s water infrastructure and recreation trails. In 2014, he was hired as the township’s planning and zoning administrator. After watching Leach’s abilities and work with the community, Wommer felt the township could be better served if they broadened his role in the township. The board created a manager position, while continuing to incorporate Leach’s duties as zoning administrator into his overall role. “We had the benefit of watching Nick work, and felt we and the community could benefit from putting him in that expanded role,” Wommer said. “Nick brought his knowledge of the community, which made doing this job a little easier. There was a learning curve, and a ‘comfortability’ curve—but it has worked well.”

Leach agrees. “As I built up a knowledge of procedures and processes to help guide residents [when serving as planning and zoning administrator], I realized the value that I was adding to the community. The same thing can be said about the management position; as I have met with interest groups, or written grants to fund major projects, I have learned the value of someone with knowledge of the community and processes around efficiently structuring a project. I hope the community has seen the benefit, too.”

It is important for boards considering adding a manager to their township to take their time, develop a job description to delineate clear roles and responsibilities, and find the right person for the job. “Look for someone with knowledge and experience in local government issues or managing a small organization—a combination of both would be preferable,” Van Wyngarden said.

Inside a manager’s day to day

Ask any township manager what a typical day looks like, and you’re certain to get a knowing chuckle in response. There is no such thing as a “typical” day.

“My days are dictated by the residents,” Suchy said. “Every day is different, and there is such a wide variety of work. That’s what makes serving as a municipal manager so unique.”

In their varied roles—from managing staff and preparing for board meetings, handling resident inquiries to participating on myriad committees, a manager can bring a fresh perspective and new ideas to the table, which can help to drive innovation and improve the quality of services provided to residents. They can also leverage their experience and expertise to identify areas for improvement and develop strategies for addressing those issues.

For Van Wyngarden, his workday changes “drastically” from day to day—but “providing direction and planning for the future” are key parts of his role, he said. “I spend a considerable amount of time outside of the office meeting with various groups, boards and committees, and also handle resident questions and complaints, especially those that couldn’t be satisfied by other staff.”

What does remain consistent is that a manager can provide essential leadership and direction to ensure effective and efficient township operations. Working closely with elected officials, department heads, staff and other stakeholders, managers help deliver on the board’s vision for the community and establish goals and priorities that align with that vision. They provide a valuable, direct line of contact for residents and others seeking assistance, answers or advice, and can help ensure the community is well-informed on township happenings, projects, outreach and information—which can help to prevent miscommunication and foster better community collaboration.

Working for—and with—officials and staff

Having a township manager does not take away from elected officials performing their statutory duties or result in less-involved leaders. In fact, it can enhance officials’ ability to focus on their community’s vision, direction and governance. “Our elected leaders are still actively involved in what’s happening in the community,” Leisman said. “The manager is a staff member who is assisting the board, and reporting to the board, in serving our community. It’s important to communicate—a lot—to make sure we are on the same page.”

Suchy connects with all elected leaders regularly. “There is a lot of interaction between board meetings,” he said, including “pop-ins” at the township offices, discussions at committee meetings, and regular communications to answer questions and make sure that everyone has the same information.

Van Wyngarden communicates with each member of the township’s seven-member board frequently throughout each week—whether providing quick updates on a project or issue or offering a lengthier update on an issue coming down the pike or meeting one on one as needed. “In my position, it is crucial for everyone to understand that I report equally to all seven members of the board and work at their direction,” he said. “If any board member has the perception that I only take direction from the supervisor or a smaller subset of the board, then the trust between us will erode and our ability to work together will fail. To prevent this breakdown in trust, I make every effort to communicate with the entire board, even when the question may be raised by only one member.”

As the liaison between the township board and staff, Van Wyngarden ensures the priorities and directives are clearly communicated so that each person is on the same page for what needs to be accomplished, when and how. “I work closely with our township staff to carry out the direction provided by the board,” he said. “In this role, I serve as a single point of contact between the board and staff, ensuring that the board’s direction is communicated clearly and consistently to avoid confusion and duplication of efforts. This role becomes more important as a township grows in size and complexity as a community and as an organization.”

Suchy also sees himself as an advocate for Ada Township’s 23-person staff, and a connection between staff and the board. “I report to the board, and the staff reports to me,” he said, noting that officials and staff “operate as a team, as smoothly as possible. I can’t be successful by myself—our work is only as good as the staff that we have.”

cover story



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In Negaunee Township, the addition of a manager assisted in providing improved oversight and guidance for the township staff. “Another benefit for us is the consistency and stability for the staff,” Leach said. “We are small—only nine employees—so a very important part of the job is keeping in touch with the staff and knowing what everyone is working through. Before we had a manager, we were at the mercy of the board—who did not hold regular office hours—for daily oversight.”

Townships of all sizes find themselves constantly adjusting to new requirements, initiatives, and community wants and needs—and a manager can help to ensure those activities stay on track. “There is always something in the hopper, in addition to just the day-to-day township administration,” Wommer said. “The elected officials may not always have the answers, and our manager helps serve as a conduit.”

Leach notes that he has a “good rapport” with the township board, including working closely with the trustees who serve on the planning commission and other boards and committees. “The broad scope of what we do keeps me close with the board members,” he said. “I have a great relationship with the board and other committees, I think. We have a board that works very well together; they may not always agree but they can talk things out and understand each other’s point of view.”

Improving township services—and its bottom line

A manager can be invaluable in improving township administration, as well as the delivery of the wide range of essential local public services—helping to meet community needs and building trust with residents.

“An effective township manager can make the township a more efficient and effective organization to serve its residents and businesses,” said Van Wyngarden. “A qualified manager should walk in the door on the first day equipped with the training and experience necessary to lead the organization and push for improving performance.”

A manager can help to improve public service delivery by implementing best practices, policies and procedures, and helping to make decisions and recommendations to ensure that staff are adequately trained and equipped.

A manager also plays a crucial role in the township’s financial management. In fact, under the Uniform Budgeting and Accounting Act, the township manager or superintendent is the “chief administrative officer” for budgeting responsibilities. (The supervisor is the chief administrative officer when there is no manager or superintendent. (MCLs 141.422b and 42.10(i)) As the chief administrative officer, managers are responsible for preparing the budget, presenting it to the board, and controlling township expenditures under the budget and general appropriations act.

A township manager can provide the necessary expertise, ensuring competent financial management and appropriate resource allocation. This can involve recommending and developing financial policies and procedures that align with the township’s goals and priorities. It can also mean overseeing the budgeting process, ensuring that resources are allocated in a manner that is fiscally responsible and in line with the community’s needs.

“Having a manager is very helpful for the township’s budget and finances, and helps bring consistency into our budgeting and spending,” Leisman said.

Additionally, a manager can identify and pursue new revenue streams. This might include developing partnerships with local businesses, seeking grants or other funding opportunities, or exploring new tax incentives to attract investment to the community. By doing so, the township can improve its financial stability, better manage its debt, and maintain a strong credit rating.

Managers can also help to ensure township financial management practices are transparent and accountable, developing reporting mechanisms to ensure that financial information is readily available to the public and that there is clear accountability for how resources are allocated and spent.

Accountability, accessibility and continuity

Employing a township manager can provide many benefits to a township seeking to improve its accountability to citizens, and offer continuity and stability to the township’s administration. By having a dedicated manager in place, the township can avoid disruptions and delays in decision-making, and maintain consistency in operations. This can help to build trust with citizens, assuring them that their local government is functioning smoothly.

“Having a manager allows for greater continuity in the township,” Wommer said. “Nick is accessible to the public—allowing the board to focus on governance.”

The role of the manager offers protections for overall township governance and administration—which in turn benefits staff and the greater community. “The board decided to create the position as manager as a ‘safeguard’ for the township from board members retiring and the potential loss of knowledge and efficiency of bringing new members up to speed,” Leach said.

“We are certainly a poster child for small townships and the benefit of having a manager,” he continued. “If nothing else, I believe it is a good idea to create the manager position as a way to efficiently transition from elected officials leaving office and taking with them all of their learned knowledge to an administrator who is educated in policy and procedure to smooth the transition from one administration to another.”

Hiring a manager can help townships improve their accountability to citizens—helping to foster stronger relationships with stakeholders and build trust in the community. A township manager can help establish clear and open communication channels with residents, making themselves available as a point of contact, sharing and receiving information and feedback to keep residents informed.

“Residents are looking for someone to help them,” Suchy said. “It’s my job to listen, understand and figure out a path forward.”

Helping to ensure long-term success

Making the move to hiring a manager can be a valuable investment for more and more townships as they continue to grow and change to serve their residents. While this form of administration is not a necessity for every township, it is one that many townships may consider in the future. “The decision to move to a manager form of township administration is one that should be made individually by each township based on their own circumstances and needs,” said Van Wyngarden. “The township manager form of administration may not be the right fit for every community. When to consider a manager is a question of the size and complexity of the township as a community and as an organization. When the operations of the township grow to the point where it takes more effort to manage, it is time to bring in a professional for the role.”

The townships that do make this administrative change will likely see the benefits that having such a professional can bring to their community. As Suchy notes, “It’s having someone who is dedicated to whatever the township and the board’s mission is, and seeing that through. My goal is to be the best steward of this position while I have it, and to leave the community better than when I started.”

Authored by MTA Communications Director Jenn Fiedler with contributions by Mark Nicol, Master’s of Public Administration program coordinator at Saginaw Valley State University and Michigan Certified Public Manager Program Capstone advisor. Learn more about SVSU’s program at www.svsu.edu/opd/michiganscertifiedpublicmanagerprogram.

For article references, visit www.michigantownships.org.



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