Examining Board Relations:
Township Officials’ Views from the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS)

Presented at the
2019 Michigan Townships Association
Annual Educational Conference
April 3, 2019
Presentation Outline

• Overview of MPPS survey program

• Findings on township officials’ views on Board Member relationships (from the Spring 2018 Wave of the MPPS), including...
  ✓ Assessments of the overall relationships among Board members, as well as between Board and employees
  ✓ Various factors that help and hurt Board relationships
  ✓ Assessments of Board effectiveness on a variety of metrics
  ✓ Suggestions for how to improve relationships
The Michigan Public Policy Survey

- **Census survey** – all 1,856 counties, cities, villages, and townships
- **Respondents** – chief elected and appointed officials
- **Administered** – online and via hardcopy
- **Topics** – wide range, such as fiscal health, budget priorities, roads, public safety, economic development, intergovernmental cooperation, service privatization, employee policies, labor unions, environmental sustainability, Great Lakes, citizen engagement, much more.
MPPS is not a typical opinion poll

- **70+% response rates**
- **Transparency**
  - Questionnaires online
  - Pre-run data tables online
  - Sharing of (anonymized) datasets with other researchers
- **Expert advisors on questionnaire content**
- **Research partnership with Michigan local government associations**
  - MAC, MML, & MTA
- **Borrowing from other proven sources such as NLC and ICMA**
What does the MPPS aim to do?

- **Improve understanding** of local government to help improve policymaking and quality of life
- **Inform local leaders** about peers across the state: challenges and responses
- **Inform state policymakers** and other stakeholders with data about local level challenges and responses not available from any other source
- **Build a longitudinal data archive** to allow tracking of fundamental changes (such as the economic transition, aging population, etc.)
- Foster **academic research and teaching** on local government issues
How many townships responded to the Spring 2018 MPPS?

72% of all statewide - 893 townships total

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>By Population Size</th>
<th>By Region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>67% of townships &lt;1500 – 327</td>
<td>70% in the Upper Peninsula – 104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72% townships 1500-5000 – 395</td>
<td>71% in the Northern LP – 174</td>
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<tr>
<td>79% of townships 5001-10,000 – 84</td>
<td>71% in the Central West – 175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85% of townships 10,001-30,000 – 64</td>
<td>67% in the Central East – 162</td>
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<tr>
<td>92% of townships &gt;30,000 – 23</td>
<td>76% in the Southwest – 144</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>78% in the Southeast – 134</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
How do township officials rate Board relations?

Overall, how would you rate the relationships among elected officials in your township?

- Excellent: 41%
- Good: 13%
- Fair: 5%
- Poor: 41%
- Don't Know: 41%
How do township officials rate Board relations?

Overall, how would you rate the relationships among elected officials in your jurisdiction?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Townships</th>
<th>Villages</th>
<th>Cities</th>
<th>Counties</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>22%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>56%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Don't Know</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Township Size</th>
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<th>Poor</th>
<th>Don't Know</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Townships</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>&lt;1,500</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1,500-5,000</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>5,001-10,000</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>11%</td>
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<tr>
<td>10,001-30,000</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>18%</td>
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<td>&gt;30,000</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<td>13%</td>
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<td>17%</td>
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<td>41%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly Rural</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly Urban</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>11%</td>
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<td>11%</td>
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How do township officials rate Board relations?

Overall, how would you rate the relationships among elected officials in your township?

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<th>Fair</th>
<th>Poor</th>
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<td>41%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low fiscal stress</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium fiscal stress</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High fiscal stress</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All data are percentages of respondents.
How do township officials rate Board relations?

Overall, how would you rate the relationships among elected officials in your township?

- Excellent: 41% (All Township Officials), 44% (Supervisors), 39% (Clerks), 24% (Managers/Other Admin)
- Good: 41% (All Township Officials), 42% (Supervisors), 52% (Clerks), 13% (Managers/Other Admin)
- Fair: 11% (All Township Officials), 5% (Supervisors), 14% (Clerks), 13% (Managers/Other Admin)
- Poor: 5% (All Township Officials), 5% (Supervisors), 4% (Clerks), 8% (Managers/Other Admin)
- Don't Know: 13% (All Township Officials), 11% (Supervisors), 4% (Clerks), 13% (Managers/Other Admin)
Overall, how would you rate the relationships among elected officials and other employees in your township?

Among Board Members:
- Excellent: 41%
- Good: 13%
- Fair: 5%
- Poor: 13%
- Don't Know: 5%

Between Board & Staff:
- Excellent: 34%
- Good: 51%
- Fair: 2%
- Poor: 1%
- Don't Know: 1%

(in townships that have employees)
Overall, how would you rate the relationships among elected officials and other employees in your jurisdiction?

(among jurisdictions that have employees)
What helps Boards with positive relationships?

To what extent, if at all, would you say overall the following factors help or hurt relationships among the members of your Board?

- Willingness of individual elected officials to support final decisions of the Board: 47%
- Clarity of roles and responsibilities: 33%
- Behavior of individual elected officials (tone of communication, professionalism, ethics, etc.): 33%
- Turnover among members: 11%
- State and national partisan politics: 8%
- Blocs or factions on the Board: 5%

In townships that say Board relations are “excellent” or “good”
To what extent, if at all, would you say overall the following factors help or hurt relationships among the members of your Board?

- Behavior of individual elected officials (tone of communication, professionalism, ethics, etc.)
  - Help: 46%
  - Hurt: 38%
  - Neutral: 9%
  - Don’t know: 3%

- Blocs or factions on the Board
  - Help: 26%
  - Hurt: 33%
  - Neutral: 14%
  - Don’t know: 1%

- Clarity of roles and responsibilities
  - Help: 27%
  - Hurt: 25%
  - Neutral: 28%
  - Don’t know: 10%

- Willingness of individual elected officials to support final decisions of the Board
  - Help: 23%
  - Hurt: 22%
  - Neutral: 28%
  - Don’t know: 17%

- Turnover among members
  - Help: 12%
  - Hurt: 25%
  - Neutral: 19%
  - Don’t know: 5%

- State and national partisan politics
  - Help: 9%
  - Hurt: 16%
  - Neutral: 12%
  - Don’t know: 3%
Thinking more generally about the **tone of discussion and communication** that takes place around local policy issues, how would you describe the general state of public discourse **among elected officials themselves**?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All Townships</th>
<th>Excellent relationships</th>
<th>Good relationships</th>
<th>Fair relationships</th>
<th>Poor relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very constructive</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat constructive</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>36%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat divisive</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very divisive</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Has Board’s tone of discussion changed recently?

Would you say the tone of discussion and communication among elected officials is more or less civil than it was five years ago?

- Significantly more civil
- Somewhat more civil
- Neither more nor less
- Somewhat less civil
- Significantly less civil
- Don’t know

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>Good relationships</th>
<th>Fair relationships</th>
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<tr>
<td>All Townships</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<td>4%</td>
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</table>

- Don’t know
In your best estimate, how often is there consensus among Board members regarding routine decisions facing the township?
Is it difficult to reach consensus on the Board?

In your best estimate, **how often is there consensus** among Board members regarding votes on **budgeting and fiscal policy**?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All Townships</th>
<th>Excellent relationships</th>
<th>Good relationships</th>
<th>Fair relationships</th>
<th>Poor relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nearly always</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of the time</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some of the time</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seldom</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Almost never</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- The chart shows the frequency of consensus among Board members for budgeting and fiscal policy decisions.
- The data is categorized by the quality of relationships among Board members: All Townships, Excellent relationships, Good relationships, Fair relationships, Poor relationships.
- The chart also indicates the frequency of consensus across the relationships categories:
  - Nearly always: 45% (All Townships), 65% (Excellent), 49% (Good), 49% (Fair), 40% (Poor)
  - Most of the time: 39% (All Townships), 26% (Excellent), 49% (Good), 29% (Fair), 35% (Poor)
  - Some of the time: 8% (All Townships), 2% (Excellent), 6% (Good), 1% (Fair), 10% (Poor)
  - Seldom: 3% (All Townships), 4% (Excellent), 4% (Good), 3% (Fair), 5% (Poor)
  - Almost never: 4% (All Townships), 3% (Excellent), 6% (Good), 29% (Fair), 10% (Poor)
  - Don’t know: 4% (All Townships), 4% (Excellent), 6% (Good), 1% (Fair), 5% (Poor)
In your best estimate, how often is there consensus among Board members regarding votes on development issues?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relational Quality</th>
<th>Nearly Always</th>
<th>Most of the Time</th>
<th>Some of the Time</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Almost Never</th>
<th>Don't Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Townships</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
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<td>Good</td>
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CLOSUP
Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy
Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy
University of Michigan
In the past five years or so, to what extent has there been turnover among members of your township's Board?

- No turnover at all
- Very little turnover
- Some turnover
- Significant turnover
- Don't know

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Excellent relationships</th>
<th>Good relationships</th>
<th>Fair relationships</th>
<th>Poor relationships</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Townships</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>35%</td>
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<td>31%</td>
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<td>14%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>26%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

How does turnover correlate with Board relations?
Thinking about your Township Board, how would you rate its effectiveness in performing the following functions?

- Overseeing the township's finances: 50% Excellent, 37% Good, 10% Fair, 2% Poor, 2% Don't know
- Addressing citizens' expectations: 63% Excellent, 20% Good, 14% Fair, 2% Poor, 2% Don't know
- Overseeing administrative performance: 56% Excellent, 22% Good, 16% Fair, 5% Poor, 8% Don't know
- Establishing long-term goals: 51% Excellent, 17% Good, 22% Fair, 8% Poor, 8% Don't know

CLOSUP Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy
Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy University of Michigan
What do officials think of Board effectiveness?

Thinking about your Township Board, how would you rate its effectiveness in performing the following functions?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Positive relationships</th>
<th>Negative relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overseeing the township's finances</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addressing citizens' expectations</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overseeing administrative performance</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing long-term goals</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

% who say Board effectiveness is excellent or good

% who say Board effectiveness is excellent or good
How do officials rate Board effectiveness?

Thinking about your Township Board, how would you rate its effectiveness overall?

- Excellent: 57%
- Good: 26%
- Fair: 15%
- Poor: 2%
- Don't know: 1%

(C)LOSUP
Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy

GERALD R. FORD SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN
How do officials rate Board effectiveness?

Thinking about your Township Board, how would you rate its effectiveness overall?

- Excellent: 31%
- Good: 60%
- Fair: 9%
- Poor: 1%
- Don't know: 1%

Boards with positive relationships:
- Excellent: 13%
- Good: 47%
- Fair: 38%
- Poor: 1%
- Don't know: 1%

Boards with negative relationships:
Local officials say communication is one key to improved Board member relations

- **No surprises:** “All board members need to make sure to keep the lines of communication open at all times and provide agenda items to the supervisor prior to meetings so other board members are not surprised by any topic of discussion.”

- **Set aside time to talk about relationships:** “We held a special meeting a few weeks ago to go over council conduct. So far it has helped but not enough time has passed to see if these changes will help long term.”
  “More time in social settings to allow relationship building.”
  “Some way to have more time for frank discussion among council members, without necessarily making decisions, that would not violate Open Meetings laws.”

- **Share information:** “As a 72-year-old supervisor my greatest communication tool is the FORWARD button for emails I receive to keep my Board in the loop.”
Local officials say training is another key to improved Board member relations

• **Provide relationship strategies**: “An improvement in people skills learned in a program such as Dale Carnegie. We have some insecure personalities on the board and some very sure of themselves, that being said, the insecure tend to over exert their authority to make up for their deficiencies.”

• **Focus on part-time members to make sure they are fully trained**: “Additional training for Board members that are not as active "full time" in the office. Out Trustees are not full time employees of the Township and that makes it hard to communicate and keep them informed.”

• **Clarify roles**: “We hosted several trainings about council's roles which helped a little bit. We have also had several brainstorming sessions which helped show that the commissioners all want similar things and we can focus on common ground issues.”
Local officials say respect is another key to improved Board member relations

- **Be straightforward**: “Do not talk about others when they are not present.”

- **Be present**: “Better communication face to face instead of comments from other sources.”

- **Demand preparation**: “The Board members have to read their packets and be prepared.”
Local officials say communication is the key to improved Board-employee relations

- **Formalize relationship efforts**: “We have recently created a Employee Relations Committee in the hope to better the relationship between the Township Board and its staff.”

- **Intentional outreach**
  “Attend employee's union meetings. Spend some time with them.”
  “I think it would be eye opening for the Trustees to spend some time with each department to see what happens on a daily basis. I understand that for many it wouldn't be possible because of their other jobs and responsibilities.”
  “I think the relationship between our board members and staff is excellent. We work at this with a monthly meeting with the township's office staff to review the prior monthly board meeting and pertinent comments regarding the agenda items. Then we ask each staff member if they have anything to mention. I value this meeting and I know the staff appreciates it. We have this an hour before we open and the employees are paid for the extra hour each month.”
As far as you know, does your jurisdiction currently have a formal set of rules (e.g., a code of conduct, charter provision, ordinance, or policy) concerning appropriate Board behavior and/or Board interactions with administration or employees in your township?

Policies on Board behavior:
- Yes: 53%
- No: 35%
- Don’t know: 12%

Policies on Board-employee interaction:
- Yes: 53%
- No: 36%
- Don’t know: 11%
As far as you know, does your jurisdiction currently have a **formal set of rules** (e.g., a code of conduct, charter provision, ordinance, or policy) concerning appropriate Board behavior?

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<td>62%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>4%</td>
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</table>

*Data source: [CLOSUP](https://www.closup.org)*
As far as you know, does your jurisdiction currently have a formal set of rules (e.g., a code of conduct, charter provision, ordinance, or policy) concerning appropriate Board behavior and/or Board interactions with administration or employees in your township?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive relationships</th>
<th>Negative relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policies on Board behavior</td>
<td>Policies on Board-employee interaction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Positive relationships: 54% (Board behavior), 55% (Board-employee interaction)
- Negative relationships: 34% (Board behavior), 34% (Board-employee interaction)
Officials’ Views on Township Relationships

Summary

• Township officials’ overall assessments of Board relationships and those between Board and employee are very positive.

• Factors that help in those places with excellent or good relationships:
  -- Willingness to accept decisions of the Board; clarity of roles; positive tone of communication, professionalism, and ethics

• Factors that help in those places with only fair or poor relationships:
  -- Negative tone of communication, lack of professionalism or ethics; factions on the Board; lack of clarity of roles

• Suggestions for action:
  --more formal training and opportunities for informal interaction; making the time for outreach to staff; codify roles and appropriate behavior
The Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS)

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