

ADMINISTRATIVE PROBLEMS OF TOWNSHIP GOVERNMENT IN DU PAGE COUNTY

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Within Du Page County, Illinois, there are nine township governments each of which has an independent existence. They are all similar in organization and area and provide practically identical services. Some of these townships have become almost entirely urban areas, while others remain predominantly rural in their population and attitudes. Basically there is no discernable difference in the services provided by the two types. Both are interested primarily in the building and maintenance of roads, the distribution of poor relief, and the assessing of property for tax purposes. In addition to these basic interests there are other minor functions which vary from township to township.

TABLE I.—POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS^a
York, Naperville and Winfield Townships, DuPage County, Illinois

Township	Total Population	Rural %	Urban %
York	29,161	7.1	92.9
Naperville	3,616	28.9	71.1
Winfield .	6,857	42.8	57.2

(a) Source: U. S. Bureau of Census; 1940 Census, Vol. I, Population, p. 299.

The primary function of the township is to act as an administrative district for the county and state governments. The county depends

upon the township for an accurate assessment of property. This assessment is used as the basis for determining all tax rates within the county. In addition to providing the county with an assessment, the township is used as an election district for all county, state, and national elections.

The relations of the township are not confined to the county but extend as far as the state government and even, in some instances, as far as the national government. This latter extension of relations deals primarily with roads while the former deals with both roads and poor relief.

There are a great many functions provided by statute which the township is supposed to perform. Some of these are: repairing roads and bridges; maintenance of town cemeteries; care of the poor and indigent; preventing growth and spread of noxious weeds; promoting planting and cultivation of trees along highways; making rules and regulations concerning fences; preventing the running at large of cattle, horses, mules, asses, swine, sheep and goats; establishing and maintaining pounds; repairing and regulation of public wells, etc.¹ Today, about the only functions actually carried on by the township are the maintenance of roads, the care of the poor and indigent, and the assessment of property. The other functions, while

¹ *Illinois Revised Statutes, 1945.*

still in the statutes, are either obsolete or simply ignored.

The affairs of the township are administered by elected township officers, each of whom attends to the duties assigned him by law and cooperates with the other officers when it is necessary. The supervisor of the township is the general administrative head and also treasurer. He is, in addition, a member of the county board and ex-officio overseer of the poor. The other elective officers of the township are the township clerk, assessor, highway commissioner, and justices of the peace. A board of auditors composed of certain of these town officers is established to examine the township accounts. Most of the elected officers are paid on a per diem basis. The per diem rate is set by state statute. The supervisor is eligible to receive two separate payments; a per diem as supervisor and a salary as overseer of the poor.

The necessary funds for the operation of the township are appropriated by the voters at the annual town meeting. The township budget is the financial plan for operating the township during the fiscal year. The official budget is drawn up by a budget committee, usually the board of town auditors, sometime prior to the time set by law for the town meeting. At least one public hearing is held on this budget prior to final action by the people at the town meeting. Notice of the hearing is given one week prior to the time set. This public hearing is often called for one hour prior to the town meeting. Because of this practice there is little real opportunity for an interested citizen to bring any effective protest concerning the budget. At the meeting copies of the budget are not available for examination and when it is read by the town clerk, as required by law, it is frequently read so rapidly that it is impossible

to obtain adequate notes. After the budget is read, there is opportunity for the town's people to ask questions, or to propose amendments to the budget. Questions are seldom asked or amendments proposed, for the people present usually do not know enough about the budget to ask questions. If any citizen or group of citizens did wish to make a change, it would be illegal for them to propose an alternate budget. The only recourse that the citizens have is to amend the official budget. This method allows the revision of specific items, but a general revision by this procedure is practically impossible.

After opportunity for discussion and amendment the proposed budget is put to a vote. It takes only a simple majority of the voters present to pass the budget. This vote must either accept or reject the budget as a whole. If the voters present fail to approve a budget there can be no legal expenditure of any funds by the township officers. If the budget is accepted, there must also be voted a levy authorizing the procurement of the funds necessary to execute the budget, unless there is a sufficient balance left on hand from the previous year.

The argument most frequently advanced in support of township government is that it gives the people a chance to exercise direct democracy—that the people have an opportunity to come together once a year and either approve or disapprove of their elected officers' actions. This is certainly in accord with the very best democratic traditions of our country and in the past the town meeting was one of the political highlights of the year. However, today in actual practice, the people either are not interested in their democratic privileges or they do not feel close to their township government. An average of

TABLE II.—ATTENDANCE AT TOWN MEETINGS^a

Du Page County, April 1947

Township	Number of Registered Voters	Attendance	Per Cent Attending Meeting
Addison.....	6,796	17	0.25
Bloomington.....	^b 1,704	(c)	(c)
Downers Grove.....	16,742	23	0.14
Lisle.....	4,841	28	0.58
Milton.....	12,176	50	0.41
Naperville.....	2,222	16	0.72
Wayne.....	775	12	1.55
Winfield.....	4,522	15	0.33
York.....	19,830	194	0.98
Totals.....	^b 67,904	355	0.51

(a) Source: Natale, Joseph, *Local Government in Du Page County, Illinois*, p. 184.

(b) Bloomington not included in total.

(c) Data not available.

less than one-half of one percent of the registered voters in Du Page County attended the meetings in 1947. From the incomplete figures available for 1948 it appears that this percentage will be even lower.

The budget adopted by the town meeting generally provides for two separate funds: the town fund and the poor relief fund. The town fund includes such items as compensation for elected officials, election expenses, and all other general administrative expenses of the township. The poor relief fund includes the funds necessary for the relief of the poor and for its administration, except the compensation for the overseer of the poor which is included in the town fund.

Funds for the maintenance of roads are obtained through a separate budget which is adopted in an entirely different manner. This budget is drawn up by the highway commissioner and then presented to the town clerk who calls a special road and bridge hearing. This hearing is set for some time other than that of the town meeting. A favorite time is 10:15 on a weekday morning,

thus making it inconvenient for persons to attend. Even if interested citizens should attend the hearing there is no way of forcing the commissioner to amend his proposed budget.

Since the road and bridge fund accounts for such a large proportion of the total town expenditure, 44.2 percent, it would seem reasonable

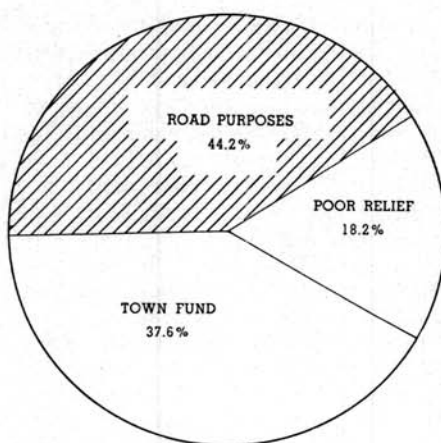


FIG. 1.—Use of funds. Source: J. P. Natale, *Local Government in Du Page County, Illinois*, p. 43.

that it be drafted by a more representative group. In addition it would seem only natural that it should be acted upon at the town meeting when there are apt to be at least a few voters present.

The full authority to contract bills and authorize specific expenditures lies with the township supervisor. The only exception to this is in the case of the road and bridge fund where the highway commissioner has this contractual authority. Thus the supervisor is the possessor of a large amount of financial authority. The electors of the township approve a budget at the annual town meeting, but once the appropriation is made, the actual expenditure of the money is left in the hands of one man.

Theoretically there are checks upon the supervisor's fiscal activity. One check is found in the board of town auditors, which has authority to examine and audit all charges against the township and to examine the accounts of the overseer of the poor. It will be noticed, however, that while authority is given to audit the charges against the town, there is no authority for this board to audit the township or poor relief accounts; they may merely examine them. Consider the composition of this board. It consists of the supervisor, whose accounts are being reviewed, the township clerk and the justices of the peace. All of these are elected officials. There is not one outside impartial member on the board nor one representative of the taxpayers. It can easily be seen that the probability of a good sound review is certainly open to question. The other check is in the town clerk. The town clerk must countersign all warrants issued by the supervisor. By this counter signature the clerk is supposed to attest to the validity of the warrant, but there is some question that he really has the au-

thority to hold up an expenditure authorized by the supervisor.

We have noted earlier a rather lengthy list of duties which have been given by statute to the township. We also saw that of this lengthy list only three or four are actually performed. This discrepancy is the result of a change of emphasis on the part of township government. In the early history of the state, many of these functions were a real necessity and were actively administered. For example, the law provides that the township shall see that all fences bordering township roads are mended. This, in the days when farmers in the area kept large amounts of live stock was very important. Today, with many of the townships predominantly urban, this practice has fallen into disuse.

In another instance the law provides that the township shall repay farmers for any damage to livestock caused by wild dogs. To combat this menace the office of town poundmaster was created. The poundmaster was charged with the duty of apprehending any and all wild dogs found on town property. Today, the danger to livestock from wild dogs is almost non-existent in Du Page County. However, in many of the townships the office of poundmaster is still a thriving institution with an annual appropriation for salary and expenses. Thus here and in many other instances, there is ample opportunity for the elected official to provide himself with extra funds or to provide patronage for his faithful friends.

On the other side of the picture we have instances where these antiquated township statutes have created hardship. For example, take the matter of highways. In 1920 York Township had some 40 miles of roads to maintain. The tax rates were set to produce ample funds for

this operation. Today, this same township has 80 miles of roads to maintain. Thus the number of miles of road has been doubled. In addition to the doubled mileage, the type of road which must be provided for modern transportation is much more expensive. Yet, with all this increase in operating costs, there has been no corresponding increase in the tax revenue to provide the necessary additional funds. The authority for this increase in revenue would have to come from the state legislature.

In contrast, Naperville Township has increased its roads from 40 miles in 1920 to only 44 miles today, so that its problem is not nearly so vexing.

When we come to examine specific budgets and specific expenditures we find many things that make our task difficult. In the first place, there is no uniform system of book-keeping or accounting among the townships. This makes the matter of interpretation difficult unless the supervisor is willing to explain his particular system. Then when comparisons are attempted there is further difficulty in placing expenditures under comparable headings, since expenditures for identical items may be listed under widely different titles.

The first thing noted in an examination of township finances is the varying tax rates. Furthermore, the

township levies have steadily increased in many instances. In Naperville Township for example, the levies per thousand dollars valuation increased from sixty three cents in 1942-43 to one dollar in 1946-47. In Addison Township the levies increased from thirty-eight cents in 1942-43 to ninety cents per thousand in 1946-47. There seems to be no good reason for this difference in rates since the services performed are similar in all the townships and are similar from year to year.

Let us examine now, the expenditures of two typical townships. Two townships were chosen which, from a general overall view, appeared to be representative of the urban and rural townships of the county. Naperville Township was chosen to represent the rural. Its population is in large part rural, there being only half of one incorporated village within the township limits. It also has the reputation of possessing a good, clean township government whose officials are businessmen of high reputation in the community. In contrast, the urban township of York was chosen. York township government is known to be in the hands of professional politicians who obtain their livelihood from their political jobs.

In 1947-48 Naperville Township spent \$4,792.61 on its town fund while York Township spent \$33,-

TABLE III.—TOWNSHIP LEVIES ^a
Per Thousand Dollars Valuation
1942 to 1947

Township	1942-43	1943-44	1944-45	1945-46	1946-47
Addison.....	\$0.38	\$1.05	\$1.07	\$0.66	\$0.90
Lisle.....	1.38	1.29	1.26	1.22	1.40
Naperville.....	0.63	0.57	0.95	0.97	1.00
York.....	0.56	0.57	0.45	0.56	0.50

(a) Source: J. P. Natale, *Local Government in Du Page County, Illinois*, p. 41.

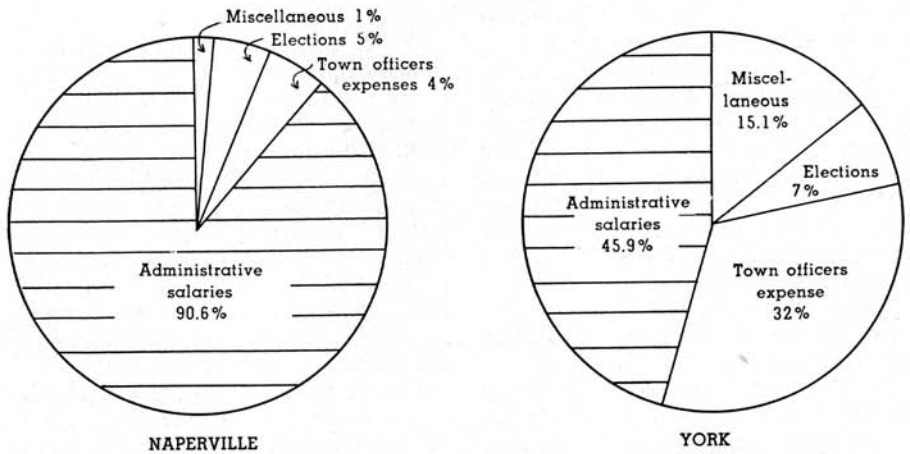


FIG. 2.—How the town fund tax dollar was spent in Naperville and York townships, 1947-1948. Source: Township records.

068.23. Thus it is readily seen that the expenses of the urban township are far greater than those of the rural. Yet the services performed by the two units are identical.

A look at the individual items of expense reveals that in Naperville 90.6 percent of the total town fund expenditure went for compensation of elected town officers. In York Township only 45.9 percent of the total town fund went for such purposes. The elected officials of the townships receive compensation for regular and special services. The

amount of this compensation is set by state statute. The seemingly large expenditure for compensation in Naperville is explained by the fact that the state sets the rate at which officers must be paid. This rate of compensation thus becomes a fixed overhead cost which must be carried by all townships, irrespective of their size, and the smaller the population the larger the percentage of total expenditure this fixed overhead becomes.

But look at the other items of expenditure in the town fund. Exclu-

TABLE IV.—TOWN FUND^a
York and Naperville Townships
1947-48

Purpose	Naperville	York
Total	\$4,792.61	\$33,058.23
Compensation of town officers	4,352.15	15,184.12
Elections	217.00	2,588.90
Town officers expense	193.46	10,654.26
Interest on anticipation warrants		596.49
Miscellaneous services	30.00	4,034.46

(a) Source: Township records, Naperville and York Townships.

TABLE V.—POOR RELIEF FUND^a
Expenditures by Purpose
York and Naperville Townships
1947-48

Purpose	Naperville	York
Total.....	\$2,476.25	\$15,270.08
Home relief.....	1,058.96	7,944.69
Hospitalization.....	540.61	3,008.03
County home.....	876.68	1,330.12
Transient pauper relief.....		170.42
Burial of poor.....		110.00
Administrative costs.....		2,706.82

(a) Source: Township records, Naperville and York Townships.

sive of the officers compensation, it costs the citizens of Naperville practically nothing to run their township government. Take for example, the "town officers' expense." This account includes such things as stationery and office supplies, printing and publishing, office help, rent, office equipment, travel and transportation. All of these things cost the citizens of Naperville slightly under two hundred dollars or 4 percent of the total expenditure for the year. In York township the bill was nearly eleven thousand dollars or 32 percent of the total expenditure for the year. Even allowing for the larger population in York, this seems to be greatly out of proportion. A brief glance at the poor relief fund (Table V) will reveal the same situation. Here, where we are able to get an exact administrative cost exclusive of compensation to the overseer of the poor, we find that it cost the citizens of Naperville exactly nothing to administer their poor fund while the people of York had to pay twenty-seven hundred dollars.

Now that we have seen some of the expenditures for our two townships let us look at the per capita costs of these two units. As we do this, keep

in mind the fact that Naperville is run by businessmen who are not politicians in the usual sense of the word, but are men of high business standing who have the good of the community at heart. On the other hand, York is run by professional political machines. The first thing we note is that the total per capita cost of township government, exclusive of roads, is two dollars per person in Naperville while only one dollar and sixty-five cents in York. (See figure 3 on page 98.) Considering conditions as they are known to exist, this does not seem logical. However, when we break these total figures down we once again see that it is the compensation of town officials which forces the figures out of line. If we look at the town fund expenditures, exclusive of compensation, we find the per capita cost in Naperville to be twelve cents as against sixty-one cents for York. This gives us a much truer picture of the conditions as they actually are.

If we wish to check our figures we may use as a basis of comparison \$1000 valuation of assessed property. When we do this, we find that our results are similar. They once more point to the high per capita

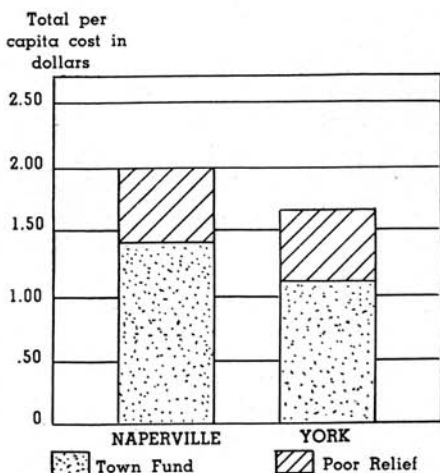


FIG. 3.—Per capita cost of government, Naperville and York townships, 1947-1948. Source: Township records.

costs of officers compensation in Naperville and the exceedingly high running expense in York.

Briefly, let us consider the administrative costs as compared to the

value received for the expenditure of the poor relief fund. In York Township the total expenditures for poor relief were \$15,270.08. To administer this money it cost the tax payers \$5,587.52. Thus, in order to get one dollar into the hands of the poor it cost thirty six and one-half cents. Slightly more than one third of the entire poor relief fund went for purposes of administration.

In contrast look at Naperville. Here \$2,476.25 was spent for relief and there were no administrative costs. Thus the tax payers received 100 percent value for their tax dollars.

This is quite a contrast. You may well wonder how Naperville reached this state of perfection. You will remember that the town supervisor also serves ex-officio as overseer of the poor. In Naperville the supervisor drew his state allowed compensation. However, he refused to draw any compensation as overseer of the poor since he felt that the remunera-

TABLE VI.—PER CAPITA AND PER \$1000 VALUATION COSTS
TOWN FUND^a
Naperville and York Townships
1947-48

Purpose	Per Capita ^c		Per \$1000 Valuation ^b	
	Naperville	York	Naperville	York
Total.....	\$1.32	\$1.13	\$32.20	\$23.40
Compensation of town officers...	1.20	.52	30.00	10.00
Elections.....	.03	.09	\$1.00	\$2.00
Town officers expense.....	.05	.36	1.00	8.00
Interest on anticipation warrants.....0240
Miscellaneous services.....	.01	.14	.20	3.00
	.12	.61	2.20	13.40

(a) Source: Township records, Naperville and York Townships.

(b) NOTE: Population of Naperville.....3,616
Valuation of Naperville.....\$11,351,753
Population of York.....29,161
Valuation of York.....\$132,893,234

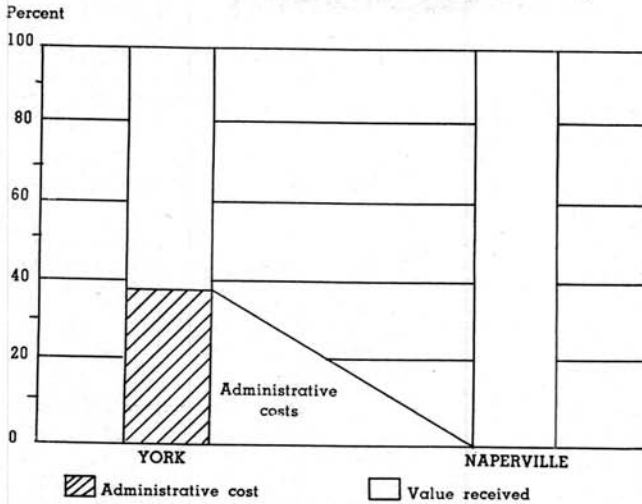


FIG. 4.—Percentage of administrative costs compared to value received, Naperville and York townships poor relief fund, 1947-1948. Source: Township records.

tion received as supervisor was more than ample pay for both offices. At the same time this man carried on his duties as overseer in his own store thus saving the township any overhead expense for office costs.

Nevertheless the fact remains that the per capita cost of township government in Naperville is exceedingly high. From these facts there is but one conclusion to be drawn. This is that the township unit of government cannot perform economically in such a small area and with such a small population. Township expenses are disproportionately high for overhead and low for services received. Compensation accounts for from one-half to nine-tenths of the townships' general expenditures. It has been shown in other studies of Illinois that, at a comparable service level, per capita costs of government were more than twice as great in counties with townships than in counties without townships,² and that "township organization adds to the cost of government without the addition of a commensurate service."³ There is no government function performed by townships that

other units of government could not perform more effectively.

There is almost universal agreement that abolition of the midwest townships would make for better rural government. The Committee on County Government of the National Municipal League, said:

"The objections to the retention of township government are many. There is evidence that the township places a burden on the taxpayer for which there is no commensurate return in services rendered. The major functions of government essential in the rural areas cannot be maintained economically and efficiently by township units.... In the administration of justice, health and welfare, highways, and finance, the township is no longer a satisfactory unit.... Finally, the township is an artificial area which does not conform necessarily to trade or community areas."⁴

The brief study herein presented merely adds further evidence to the support of this contention.

² Hicks, H. S., *County Organization vs. Township Organization*, 1932, (Mimeographed pamphlet).

³ Hunter, M. H., *Costs of Township and County Government in Illinois*, University of Illinois Bulletin No. 45, 1933, Vol. XXX, No. 18, p. 31.

⁴ Bromage, A. W., *Recommendations on Township Government* (Report No. 3 of the Committee on County Government of the National Municipal League), Supplement to National Municipal Review, Vol. XXIII, No. 2, February, 1934, p. 139.