

Civic Engagement - Citizens' Responsibility?

By Nancy Tienvieri, Trustee

BEDFORD TOWNSHIP is a community of 30,000 residents and governed by a Township Board of seven (7) elected officials. That is a ratio of a little over 4,000 to 1; 4000 residents to each 1 Board Member. But then the State and Federal government representation is far more out of balance when it comes to the ratio of representative to the population. It is not surprising that in our township, county, state, and country the population is not always happy with the people they elect since contact with those we elect is so remote. Is it possible for only seven (7) people in 30,000 to make "*the right decision*" on every topic that confronts this Township without additional input from the public? A reasonable person would most likely say, "Probably not". So how do we help to bring the will of the people into balance with the few who are elected to make decisions of behalf of the many? Civic engagement can go a long way toward helping the elected know the desires and meet the needs of the people. Citizens who live in a community should make their voice heard, embrace the activities and undertakings, and participate in the decisions that face the community as a whole. Elected officials **NEED** to be held accountable for the declarations and speeches that are made during campaigning. In order to accomplish the accountability of those elected, the public must be informed and engaged after the election.



The citizens of Bedford make up this community - not simply the Township Board, or the school system, or the churches, or the organizations or any one factor. We are Bedford Township collectively; and community means bringing all facets of this exceptional place we call "home" together. In order to do that we all must become involved with making our choices heard, and actively participating beyond our doorstep. Our government officials, school representatives, churches, businesses, senior citizens, and organizations must unite to effectively "brand" this community.

Civic engagement is getting the people of a community involved in the workings of the governing body in order to make known the needs of the community. Sometimes that means volunteering to be on a committee or attending the meetings of the governing body to make your ideas known. Other times it simply means meeting personally with the elected officials or a phone call to share your concerns or views. It might mean sending an email or note to the Township Hall or an elected official. The elected officials should then bring those ideas to the rest of the governing body so it can be considered. Whatever the avenue the citizenry must actively engage with their government to have input, and design the kind of community in which they want to live. There are many opportunities - it just takes doing!

However, before the public senses the receptiveness of their governing body to listen or accept their input, the governing body **MUST** provide their citizens with a sense of ownership, as stated

in the October 2015 edition of the **Michigan Township Focus** (a publication by the **Michigan Township Association [MTA]** which your tax dollars pay for. I think we, as elected representatives of Bedford Township, can and should do a better job of being more welcoming of ideas from the public. It is our responsibility to flood every form of communication with times, dates, locations, and contact names for all meetings associated with government activities. We must make our **Township Board, Planning Commission, Board of Zoning Appeals, Library Board, and ALL** meetings that are associated with governing be more "*public friendly*" to encourage attendance **AND** participation. We should create an atmosphere of "*the Board cannot operate without you*". Local government is the most accessible form of government we have in America and those elected **MUST NOT** operate without being inundated with the thoughts and needs of those who elect them.

How do we do that without expecting unnecessary time commitments from the public? Here are some ideas:

- Post on our website current information regarding Township Board decisions and future agenda items to get input **BEFORE** the business comes before the Board .
- Post on our website **Planning Commission, Board of Zoning Appeals, Downtown Development Authority, Road Improvement** decisions.
- Open our **Buckeye Cable Channel** to programming of other organizations in the township, community events, and human interest programs such as knitting, cooking, fishing, or any enthusiast (*we have many talented citizens who might be interested in airing a program*).
- Fill this Update with upcoming community events and showing appreciation of other things happening in our community.
- Add online engagement such as a Facebook page, etc., to offer opportunities for the public to post comments, and engage in discussions.
- Schedule more (*or regular*) Town Hall Meetings to listen to public.
- Educate the public on how our form of government works through brochures, classroom visits, open forums, and even the public access channel. Many of the questions I hear have to do with the public's misinformation about General Law Township government and how it is different from city government.

These are just some of the ideas I have on improving civic engagement. I am sure there are many more ideas beyond these that would go a long way toward bringing more thoughts, opinions and citizens into the decision-making process. We have a vast **UPTAPPED** source of talented residents in Bedford Township. The more we work together, the more our community will be what we all want it to be. ■