

A Look At ...

OPINION/ANALYSIS – Kathy Swanson
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“The community will continue to crumble because there is a new belief that policies and procedures are more important than the community volunteer base.”
former Supervisor Mike Ridley, 4-18-20 Cheboygan Tribune story

Why are policies necessary for a public institution?

Observable reality in troubled municipalities around the country shows that communities do not crumble because they have strong institutional policies. Communities crumble because public officials lack oversight, accountability, and knowledge of the law and their institution’s policies. Citizens who volunteer to participate in local government and community deserve to understand what their role is, and have protection that is not provided by elected officials who are more comfortable making it up as they go along than they are with following the law.

Public policies that describe how an institution must comply with the law, that provide transparency and continuity for how the institution conducts public business, are the essential skeleton around which accountable government is built. Elected public officials do not have the authority to view the law as “guidelines,” and harm themselves, the institution, and the public when they choose to remain ignorant of the law or find ways to walk the gray line between what is legal and what is illegal.

For an illustration close to home, Inland Lakes Schools, a public institution, pays an outside source to keep their Administrative Guidelines and Policy manuals up-to-date and in compliance with the law. These policies would fill enough three-ring binders to potentially sink a small rowboat. (*May be viewed online.*)

Discussions of needed policies is nothing new for Tuscarora Township. A read-through of township meeting minutes online from Feb. 2012 to present records the board tabling discussions of policies that never resurfaced for action.

Serious action on Tuscarora’s policy framework built up momentum in 2021, when Mike Ridley, Bobbi Balazovic, Dawn Webb, Janet Vance, and Bob Kramer made up the board, as events in the township made it impossible for the board to continue to kick adoption of policies down the road. Lack of financial policies were identified by the auditor in the 2021 township audit. Application for loans and grants from state and federal agencies required the institution applying to have specific policies in place.

From August 2021 through September 2022, the Hiring Policy, an Ethics and Conflict of Interest Policy, an Employees Handbook, Job Descriptions, a Purchasing/Bid Policy, and a Federal Awards Policy were discussed and adopted by Ridley, Balazovic, Webb, Vance, and Kramer.

With the election of Jay Reidsma to the Clerk’s office in November 2022, and use of policy templates from the Michigan Townships Association (MTA) “Township of Excellence” program (previously approved as a potential resource by the board on Aug. 9, 2022), policy work continued in a series of meetings over three months. On January 13, 2023, the board passed a motion to adopt the Tuscarora Township Administrative and Policy Manual, Chapters 1-10.

Overview

Tuscarora Township’s new Administrative and Policy Manual was developed by discussion and adoption by township officials Ridley, Balazovic, Webb, Vance, Kramer, and Reidsma

Policy manual intro

“This document will provide all township policies in one place as a reference for Township Board members, members of Boards, Commissions and Task Forces, township employees, volunteers and the public. The policies in this document explain the responsibilities and roles of elected officials and employees, and offer guidelines to ensure understanding of those responsibilities. This is a living document that is subject to change ...

The majority of these policies were modified from templates from the Michigan Township Association’s “Policy Matters” book, documents from the Association’s “Township of Excellence” program checklist, policies from townships who have won the “Township of Excellence Award” and recent policies enacted by the Tuscarora Township Board of Trustees.

(Complete manual online at Tuscarora Township website)

MTA, Township of Excellence

Michigan Townships Association is a non-profit organization that provides legislative news, educational opportunities, and more to its members. The Township of Excellence program through the MTA may be followed in whole, or in part. It offers criteria for “superior processes and outcomes in government, along with ... best practices involving statutory duties of financial stewardship, assessing, tax collection, and election administration.”

(Find online for more info)