

## **Office Annual Report May 6, 2019**

It may not typically be thought of as a “department.” And it does not have a specific cost center in the operating budget. But “The Office” (for lack of a better term) performs key activities for residents and supports many of the Township’s functions.

The Office Annual Report is organized in four sections:

- Front Counter
- Finance
- Personnel
- Communications

Additionally, the Office assists elections, grant writing and administration, compiling Board of Trustees meeting packets, and other clerical support roles.

### **Front Counter**

#### **Overview**

The front counter and phones are handled by two full-time Finance & Clerical Support employees. These two have also been independently named to serve as Deputy Clerk and Deputy Treasurer to serve certain roles in the absence of those respectively elected officials, but this report is intended to focus on department operations rather than the duties of elected officials.

Additionally, the Clerk, Assessor, Assessing Assistant, Communications Coordinator, and other employees may at times cover the front counter and/or phones when additional coverage is needed (lunch, vacation, or training).

For many residents, the front counter is the “face” of the Township, so attention to customer service is paramount. A variety of questions and transactions are handled at the counter and by phone. For example, but certainly not limited to:

- Sewer payments
- Tax payments
- Election questions and absentee ballots
- Parks & Recreation registrations
- Picnic shelter and building reservations
- Burn permit applications and activations
- Questions about Board of Trustees (BOT) and other meeting packets
- Cemetery lot sales, burial arrangements, and questions about grave locations
- Notary public
- Resident faxing and photocopying

Answering resident questions, often acting as the “Yellow Pages” for other agencies

The amount and variety of tasks can vary, and there are busy seasons (eg: taxes, year-end, elections, sewer bills) which employees adjust schedules to accommodate. For example, when Lori is extra busy with taxes, Brenda takes “first on counter, first on phones.” Or when Brenda has extra duties for election training, Lori takes the “first” position. Aside from busy seasons, the two work extremely well together: communicating and backing each other up. This winter, we have placed greater emphasis on cross-training by having the Assessing Assistant provide back-up coverage.

It is important for them to be up to date about Township activities in order to answer resident questions or refer people to the right contact. They often utilize the Township’s website, Facebook, and Friday Report as references.

One notable change over the last few years has been to provide direct phone numbers for the Building Department, Parks & Recreations, Ordinance Compliance, Planning, and Senior Center. This has greatly reduced the volume of calls received on the general Township line.

### Current Challenges

- **Focused Time** – As seen by the amount and variety of questions received in person at the front counter and by phone, it can be difficult to have enough time to attend to other duties (such as accounts payable or accounts receivable) without interruption. It requires attention to detail to not lose one’s place.
- **Cemetery** – The cemetery book is difficult and time consuming to look up lot ownership and burial records. Rose Cemetery records have been entered into the Pontem Cemetery Software, but a large portion of Pleasant Hill Cemetery records have not been digitized.
- **Cross Training** – Some but not all office duties (this goes beyond just the front counter) have “how-to” lists and checklists, and there has been little cross training. Day to day this does not pose much problem or challenge, but it could be a vulnerability if someone were to be out for an extended period. Any cross training of financial duties needs to be attentive to maintain an appropriate segregation of duties.

### 2018 Goals

- Complete the “new resident packet” and website information.
  - **UPDATE:** The packet has been developed and is being distributed to new residents. The website was augmented with additional community information, but the packet as a whole is still not online. The Communications Coordinator will complete the online updates in 2019.
- Obtain budget amendment, purchase, and implement the Active Net recreation registration software.

- **UPDATE:** Staff anticipated the purchase of Active Net in 2017. As Active Net was not compatible with BS&A, staff conducted further research on Vermont RecTrac, which we were told was compatible, but then discovered was cost prohibitive (\$30,000-60,000). Treasurer Wiswasser has identified two possible payment solutions that may be compatible with BS&A and the Township’s website. Communications Coordinator Hildebrant will work with Treasurer Wiswasser to implement a payment solution in 2019.
- Investigate alternative cemetery software. Complete data entry into one of the programs.
  - **UPDATE:** Staff determined it was critical to first digitize the existing cemetery records. If at a later time another solution is determined superior to Pontem, digital records could be transferred to the new system. Rose Cemetery records have been entered into the software, but a large portion of Pleasant Hill Cemetery records have not been digitized. Staff will continue entering records as time allows.

### Long Term Goals

- **Cross Training** – Some but not all office duties (this goes beyond just the front counter) have “how-to” lists and checklists. Instructions should be written down and cross training implemented so we are better prepared to handle any extended absences or turnover in staff.

## Finance

### Overview

- **Transactions** – All of the front counter work described above has to fit in between the daily financial duties.

Accounts payable processes invoices as approved by Department Heads and prepares invoices for review and processing by the Treasurer. Accounts receivable collects payments by mail, drop box, and in person and includes property taxes, utility bills, and other department receipts. Bank reconciliation has been handled by Maner Costerisan accountants, (formerly Abraham & Gaffney/ Stevens, Kirinovic, & Tucker) under direction of the Treasurer.

The Township uses BS&A Software for the majority of financial processes, including property taxes, utility billing, financial reporting, general ledger, and payroll. In recent years, invoices have been scanned into the BS&A system to aid in tracking and reference of approved payments. Staff also scans documents or adds comments to utility billing and other modules to assist in account history.

- **Budget Process** – The Township’s fiscal year is January – December. Formal development of the next budget cycle typically starts around July. Department Heads discuss budget

proposals with their Committees. The Superintendent compiles and adjusts the requests with a recommended budget to the BOT in early September. The BOT holds a public hearing and adopts the budget by the end of the year. Budget amendments are typically considered at the end of the first, second, and third quarters and monthly during the fourth quarter.

### Current Challenges

- **Multi-Year Budget** – We adopted a multi-year budget in 2017, in order to plan ahead and make sure long-term needs are recognized and avoid surprises. But it caused some confusion. In 2018, we simplified the format to focus on major changes – such as added staff, construction projects, or replacement vehicles. Now they are listed in the notes for each department, as well as gathered in a single “Future Planning” page at the end of the budget. Also in 2018, the Planning Commission overhauled the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) to improve the multi-year focus.

### 2018 Goals

- Decide whether to continue with CHBW for independent financial audit service – likely with a two or three year contract – or to hire another company for the service – possibly through a request for proposals (RFP).
  - **UPDATE:** The BOT approved a proposal for financial audit services by Condon, Hecht, Bisher and Wade for fiscal years ending December 31, 2018, and December 31, 2019.
- By fall 2018, review the 2009 Bond Series to see whether or not refunding (refinancing) it would make sense at current interest rates.
  - **UPDATE:** The BOT approved a Resolution Authorizing Issuance and Sale of Limited Tax General Obligation Refunding Bonds, Series 2019 in February 2019. Refinancing the debt in this manner will save the Township nearly \$163,000 over the next 11 years.
- Work with BS&A to update the Chart of Accounts either before or during the 2019 budget process.
  - **UPDATE:** The Michigan Department of Treasury has indefinitely delayed the project.
- Update the recordkeeping and ordinances for the various streetlight districts throughout the Township. This would allow additional lights where appropriate and ensure accurate billing.
  - **UPDATE:** The Deputy Treasurer has updated some of the records. Additional research is needed to continue the update. This has been a lower priority project.

## Personnel

### Overview & Current Challenges

The Township has 26 full-time employees, 15 part-time positions, and 20 on-call firefighters (numbers can fluctuate). Most of the Police Department is represented by one of two collective bargaining agreements. Other Township employees are at-will. Additionally, the Township relies on a number of volunteers for both day-to-day operations and special projects. The Township contracts for some services, including building inspection, information technology, accounting, attorney, and engineering.

- **Organization** – The Superintendent has the duties and responsibilities of the personnel director of all Township employees. Although ultimate decisions are by the Superintendent, many operational matters are shared with committees and the BOT. For example, committees representatives participate in hiring interviews and committees help develop department budget requests. At times, this decentralization can lead to conflicting directions and employees responding to many bosses.

Traditional human resources functions have been allocated (more by circumstance than by design) across three different employees. The Superintendent handles employee performance and contract negotiations. The Clerk handles payroll. The Communications Coordinator handles workers compensation, short and long-term disability claims, and employee questions about benefits.

Several of the Township’s departments are “departments of one.” For example, the Parks & Recreation Director is a single, part-time employee assisted by numerous volunteers. The Ordinance Compliance Officer is one employee, who is contractually shared with DeWitt Township. The Planning Department is a full-time Director with part-time Intern. Such “departments of one” can lead to feelings of overwork, particularly for part-time employees. The lack of bench also means we are limited when there is an extended absence or employee turnover. But it has also promoted collaboration across departments. For example, the Superintendent, Building Department, and neighboring communities have assisted when we’ve had vacancies in the Planning Director position in the past.

- **Personnel Policy** – The Township’s personnel policy is out of date, not having had a comprehensive review in about a decade. It contains various provisions inconsistent with current law and best practices. It also appears to contain sample language cobbled together from various sources resulting in a document lacking cohesion and consistency in itself. There have been several changes which might appear in stand-alone policies, meeting minutes, or memos. Additionally, some aspects of the policy have changed as a matter of practice without formal approval.

- **Compensation** – In 2012, effective January 2013, the Township conducted a compensation study to compare wages of our employees with other townships and the market in general. The study resulted in wage increases for a number of employees, a couple of them quite sizable, to bring them in line with the market.

The compensation study anticipated establishing wage ranges for all positions with the Township; this did not occur. The Township's practice has more typically been to give raises equally to all employees; although, a couple of new employees have been given raises upon earning certain training benchmarks. This approach rewards seniority and may have contributed to many of the positions being below market rate prior to the 2012 study.

In 2016, the Township conducted a similar review for elected officials. The Superintendent position has not been reviewed.

Potential changes in the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) may have some impact on one or two positions. This has been pending at the federal level for a couple of years, but it is anticipated to come sometime in the next year.

- **Benefits** – The Township provides benefits to full-time employees. Major benefits include retirement pension, health insurance, and a health reimbursement account (HRA). For most employees, the retirement is a defined benefit plan (the Fire Chief is instead in a defined contribution plan) with the Township's contribution capped at 10%. The health insurance is a high deductible plan, with the Township paying the entire premium for the employee and immediate family. The high deductible plan is balanced with the HRA covering out of pocket expenses until the deductible is met. Additionally, the Township offers eligible employees who have health insurance through a spouse or parent a benefit equal to half of the premium as an incentive to opt out of the Township's insurance.

Other benefits are pediatric dental coverage, vision insurance, life insurance, and short-term and long-term disability insurance. Additionally, deferred compensation and health care savings programs may provide tax advantages for some eligible employees; these programs are at the employee's option without additional participation by the Township.

Part-time employees with certain qualifications and exceptions might be eligible for sick time, life, short-term disability, or long-term disability insurance. Otherwise, part-time employees are not eligible for benefits.

During the fall of 2017, the Township changed its benefit agent / broker to 44 North for its in-house expertise and excellent customer service.

## 2018 Goals

- Complete update of the personnel policy.
  - **UPDATE:** The Superintendent has compiled comments and changes from meeting with Department Heads and other staff. This compilation will be reviewed by the BOT prior to submission to legal counsel for updates. The policy will eventually be submitted to and approved by the BOT.
- The Superintendent and the Police union stewards have indicated that they should meet in spring 2018 to discuss potential changes to the health insurance benefit in order to keep costs from rising beyond the Township budget.
  - **UPDATE:** The Superintendent and Police union stewards met in 2018. It is recommended that they meet in 2019 to review same as health insurance benefit costs continue to rise.

## Long Term Goals & Challenges

- **Cross Training** – As noted earlier when discussing front counter positions, some but not all positions have “how-to” lists and checklists. And there has been limited cross training. Instructions should be written down and cross training implemented so we are better prepared to handle any extended absences or turnover in staff.
- **Retirement Pensions** – The Township’s contribution on the defined benefit retirement plans is capped at 10%. So when there are actuarial or other adjustments to the total required contribution, it is all falling on employees. A decade ago, the employee contribution was 6.74%, and it is now 15.32%. At some point, this trend will hinder employee retention and recruitment. Additionally there are trends in the market away from defined benefit toward defined contribution plans.
- **Hiring** – There is a tight labor market for some specialized positions, and projections are even tighter in coming years. Some of this can be explained by demographics such as retiring baby boomers and fewer younger workers entering certain fields, but an explanation doesn’t make the reality any easier to cope. Our neighbors have recently had difficulty in hiring licensed sewer operators at SCCMUA and a licensed building inspector in DeWitt.

## Communications

### Overview & Current Challenges

Around 2013, the Township had created a Communications Committee / Workgroup with several Trustees and employees. It discussed several policies and procedures about the Township website, social media, newsletter, and other ways to get the word out. With staffing changes in 2013-2014, it ceased to meet. The 2016-2020 Strategic Plan identified the need to “develop a communication plan which includes gathering public opinions.”

The Township utilizes a number of formats to communicate with residents and other audiences. These include:

- **Newsletter** – Newsletters are mailed to nearly all residents via the Every Door Direct postal program. In recent years we published 3-4 times per year, 12 to 16 pages, full color. In 2017-2018, a single newsletter was produced, supplemented by billing inserts. The Township has tried maintaining an email list to send digital versions of the newsletter. This has proven pretty ineffective because of limited registration, outdated email addresses, and they still get a mailed newsletter through Every Door Direct.
- **Inserts** – Sewer billings (4 times/year) and tax billings (2 times/year) have room for a 1-2 page insert without incurring additional postage. Inserts have been used sporadically in the past, but are now seen as a way to supplement information after reduction in the mailed newsletter. This allows the Township to communicate with residents more frequently at very little additional cost; however, these mailings will be limited to residents on the sewer system and property owners. Although the Township’s prior effort for an email newsletter has been limited, it may be much more effective as a supplement to the inserts. Running it through Documents on Demand or other services might also be more effective than basic email. Apartment offices and homeowners / neighborhood associations could also be targeted with a digital version which they might distribute to their residents.
- **Website** – The website had a major overhaul when the platform switched to WordPress in September 2017. Maintaining it with current information is an ongoing process. It is also the focus of other communications media – we use social media, new resident packets, billing inserts, and press releases to drive people to the website for consistent messages. An employee web portal might also be added for internal information such as policies, training, and benefit forms.
- **Documents on Demand** – Documents on Demand is an automated email notification system. You (or anyone in the world for that matter) can sign up to receive an email notice for any committee, any agenda, any minutes, or any packets (mix and match for what best suits your needs) whenever they are posted on the Township website.
- **Social Media** – The Farmers Market, Police Department, Senior Center, and the Township itself use Facebook to advertise information and respond to resident questions. The Police Facebook page is extremely successful with more than five times the Township’s population in likes and follows. Instagram and Twitter accounts have been tried occasionally but not used consistently.



- **Friday Report** – In 2014 this was originally intended as an “internal” newsletter to keep BOT and employees briefed about operations. In 2015 it was extended to committee members. It could easily be extended to the public via website, social media, or email.
- **Friday Folders** – The Farmers Market and Parks & Recreation make frequent use of the Bath Elementary School to distribute information for age appropriate activities.
- **Marquee** – The Township has marquees in front of the Township Offices and the Bath Community Center (BCC). The Office marquee was repaired in 2016, but it is already in need of additional repair. Although convenient for passing motorists, this is a difficult method of display. It has limited space for a message, is labor intensive, can be vandalized (happens at BCC frequently), and has multiple departments competing for limited space. Electronic message board style systems have been proposed in various discussions, but they have been assumed expensive so have not been seriously investigated.
- **Press Releases** – The Township sends press releases to the DeWitt Bath Review and the Town Courier regularly for activities at the Farmers Market, Parks & Recreation, and Senior Center. Publishing press releases are at the discretion of the publisher. Fortunately, most are printed in the DeWitt Bath Review, but almost nothing is printed in the Towne Courier. Some material is also printed in the Meridian Weekly (Laingsburg) and Argus Press (Owosso).
- **FOIA** – Even if not communicating to a broad population, this is an important transparency function. As required by law, Bath Charter Township makes its public records available and provides guidelines for the disclosure of these records and associated fees, known as the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). The Board of Trustees has designated the Clerk as the FOIA Coordinator. The Township Clerk has designated the Police and Fire Departments as FOIA Coordinators for Public Safety requests.

The Board of Trustees significantly amended the Township's FOIA Policy in 2015 with specific written procedures and guidelines for implementing the FOIA. All records except those specifically cited by the FOIA are available to the public regardless of record format. The FOIA request is subject to fees based on the actual cost of locating, examining, copying, and sending the requested records.

Commonly requested Township records include Board and Committee meeting video recordings and emails.

## 2018 Goals

- **Communications Coordinator** – With the Administrative Services Coordinator no longer supervising Library or Senior Center employees, the position will be proposed to be recast as

a Communications Coordinator. This would formalize the key internal and external communications this position already performs and emphasize the importance of coordinating messages across different departments, audiences, and media.

- **UPDATE:** In December 2018, the Administrative Services Coordinator position was redesignated by the BOT as Communications Coordinator with updated responsibilities for coordinating messages across different departments, audiences and media. This position still supervises the Parks & Recreation employee.
- **Communications Plan / Strategy** – This plan will be completed in 2018.
  - **UPDATE:** An inventory of the communication methods used by the various departments has been compiled. The “regular messages” and events have been plotted on a calendar. An inventory of communication methods and the message/event calendar is regularly conducted to help identify any gaps in communication.
- **Website** – The next phase of updating the website will be completed in 2018. This includes filling some gaps in the current site and adding contact information for non-Township agencies that we are frequently asked about.
  - **UPDATE:** All major updates to the website have been completed, except adding the “new resident packet” information. The site is regularly updated (almost daily) with program and service information.
- **Ordinance Codification** – Codifying the online Municode system was not included in the 2018 budget, but it should occur within the next year to keep the system current. Municode also offers a “real time” service for maintaining ordinances; this option should also be investigated.
  - **UPDATE:** The Township’s ordinances were codified (updated through Supplement 3) in November 2018. Municode’s “real time” service for maintaining ordinances has been reviewed and at this time offers no financial incentive. Staff will continue to monitor ordinance changes and codify annually, rather than periodically (3-4 years).

### 2019-2020 Goals

- Complete the online updates of the “new resident packet” on the Township website.
- Implement an online payment/registration system on the Township website.
- Complete data entry of Pleasant Hill records into Pontem Cemetery Software.
- Investigate alternative cemetery software.
- Fully cross-train Assessing Assistant to assist front office absences.
- Update the Chart of Accounts per the Michigan Department of Treasury guidelines when issued.
- Complete the update the recordkeeping and ordinances for the various streetlight districts throughout the Township.
- Complete update and implement new personnel policy.
- Monitor FOIA for changes in State law and update as necessary.
- Continue conducting ten-year sewer projections during budget process.
- Train staff and implement Guardian Tracking (purchased late 2018).
- Improve information and communication with employees about benefits (retirement, Section 115 health care, deferred compensation, and sick leave).