

'ALWAYS SOMETHING NEW TO LEARN'

# Education Is Essential for Becoming **SUCCESSFUL,** **EFFECTIVE** Township Officials

Running a township can be a daunting prospect. Keeping all the moving parts in working order requires township officials and staff to be knowledgeable about a whole range of issues. Rather than stumbling through the local government maze, they can turn to PSATS for timely, relevant education on the issues and challenges they face as local leaders.

BY **BRENDA WILT** / ASSISTANT EDITOR



**By staying educated, township officials keep all the moving parts of local government working smoothly.**



If you're new to township government, whether in the role of a supervisor, secretary, manager, or some other position, you've probably realized that there is a whole lot more to local governance than just keeping the roads plowed and paved. From agricultural security areas to stormwater management and zoning, the number of subjects that township officials and staff must have at least a working knowledge of can be mind-boggling.

What's more, local government is not static. There are always new laws, new rules and regulations, and new requirements coming down from the federal and state governments, usually without any extra money to fund them.

In short, being a township official is going to keep you on your toes, PSATS Executive Director David Sanko says.

"Buckle up, put on your helmet, and keep your arms and legs inside the ride," he says. "It's going to be quite an adventure."

In addition to staying up to date on the constantly increasing laws and regulations, township officials must be sure to not only do the *right thing* but also do things the *right way*, Sanko says.

"Unfortunately, there isn't a rule book on how to serve in public office," he says.

That's why PSATS stands ready to help you understand and navigate the ins and outs of township governance. The Association offers convenient education throughout the year, from classroom courses and webinars to the Annual Conference and the PSATS Municipal Government Academy.

If you're a newly minted supervisor, you may be taking advantage of the PSATS Boot Camp for Township Officials, the only training in the commonwealth that is specifically geared toward officials from townships of the second class.

"We believe so strongly in the benefit of the Boot Camp for new officials that we scheduled classes in 15 loca-

tions across the state to give everyone the opportunity to attend this important training," Sanko says.

While the Boot Camp will give you a good overview of township government, your education shouldn't stop there, experienced supervisors and staff say. To be an effective township official requires continuing education, no matter how long you've been doing the job.

### **'Always something new to learn'**

John Groh, who became a supervisor for Millcreek Township in Erie County four years ago, is a staunch proponent of continuing education even though he has 30 years of experience in local government as a building and zoning code administrator.

"At my age, I'm smart enough to know that I'm not smart enough to know everything," he says. "I attended the Boot Camp four years ago when I was elected, and I attended the Human Resources and Labor Management Institute this past October, which was

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a very good class. Even though I'm an instructor for the Pennsylvania Municipal Planning Education Institute, I'm still learning from the classes I teach and the classes I take.

"My advice to new township officials is to open your mind and don't think that you know everything," he adds. "Never stop learning. I know it sounds cliché, but it's true. Even if you don't get all the answers in a training course, you'll find out where to go to get the answers."

Shirley Moyer, the long-time secretary-treasurer for Oley Township in Berks County, says that no matter how long you've been in township government, there are always new challenges.

"Every day at the office, something new comes up," she says. "We had to adopt an ordinance for drones, for example, and adopted zoning for medical marijuana dispensaries. You have to constantly keep yourself up to date."

New supervisors, especially, should take advantage of as many educational opportunities that they can, she says.

"If you're coming into this brand new, you need to learn how local gov-

## Five tips to help you make the most of township training

- 1 Budget funds for training** every year and be sure to include the PSATS Annual Educational Conference, townships' biggest training opportunity of the year.
- 2 Know the township's goals and issues** and then determine how training can help everyone tackle those topics.
- 3 Consider having township supervisors and employees set training goals for each year.** The end-of-year performance review is a good time to do this.
- 4 Don't limit yourself to classroom training.** Watch out for webinars, learn from peers, read books and magazines — especially the *Township News* — search the Internet, and participate in online forums on topics of interest.
- 5 Step outside your job description.** Learning about topics you might not normally handle can make you an even more valuable employee.

ernment works," she says. "New supervisors sometimes come on board and think they're going to change the world. They quickly find out that they can't do everything they want to do; there are rules and laws and restrictions. It's important to learn the ins and outs of everything and what you can and cannot do."

Being able to network with the other people attending a class can be an education in itself, Moyer says. It's helpful to talk to other officials who are dealing with similar problems and hear how they are handling them.

"I really think it's important to attend training classes regularly," she says. "I've been working in local government since 1979, and I still attend classes because there is always something new to learn."

The networking aspect has also been a fringe benefit of training for Kelly Peck, the secretary-treasurer for Bethel Township in Fulton County.

"I am a one-person office, and the opportunity to discuss how other small offices are organized has been especially helpful," she says. "I was also able to get ideas of how to better computerize our



Township supervisors and employees attend the 2016 PSATS Boot Camp for Township Officials, which is held every two years in multiple locations across the commonwealth.

small township's files and make them more user-friendly for everyone."

Peck also says courses in QuickBooks accounting software enabled her to convert the township's books from a ledger system to an easy-to-use computer system that makes reports available at her fingertips. She even attended the PSATS Boot Camp for township officials, which opened her eyes to the fact that townships really are responsible for much more than keeping roads fixed and snow plowed.

After 17 years as a secretary-treasurer and now administrator for Heidelberg Township in Lehigh County, Janice Meyers is still seeking out educational opportunities.

"I've taken a lot of training courses over the years," she says. "It's important to learn the right way of doing things. I have to advise the board of supervisors, and I want to make sure they also do things the right way.

"Training will help you do your job better and more efficiently and avoid headaches down the road," she adds. "Continuing education is important, too, because things are always changing. Even if you think you know everything about a topic, you can always learn something new."

Meyers credits PSATS with providing training that is relevant to townships.

"It's specialized to cover things that you are actually going to deal with in your job," she says.

A case in point is a webinar PSATS offered last August on First Amendment rights. The Association decided to address the topic for townships in the wake of various marches and protests across the country, some of which turned violent.

For Penn Township in Chester County, this webinar proved to be the right topic at the right time.

"Our entire staff participated in the webinar because we have a very active park and community room and a hefty event schedule," Director of Operations and Public Information Officer Karen Versuk says. "In municipal government, strange requests are the norm, rather than the exception, and we wanted everyone to learn the same lesson in the same way.

"To our surprise," she says, "we were faced with some requests at an upcoming event that allowed us to use the lessons learned in the webinar almost immediately. Had we not participated, we would have had to spend taxpayer dollars to consult with our solicitor.

"Instead, our team was prepared with the correct — and constitutional — response on phone calls and in person at two large township events when confronted with First Amendment rights issues. We also were able to strengthen some township policies on

public events. We owe a big thanks to PSATS for making such an informative and timely webinar available."

### Enhancing knowledge and skills

One of the best ways to get a well-rounded education in local government is to enroll in the PSATS Municipal Government Academy (PMGA).

Through the academy, elected and appointed township officials and staff earn credits for completing specific training courses and other activities. They choose between two programs,



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certificate or graduate, and have three years to finish the required course work to receive certification.

“It’s a focused, streamlined way to help you build on your existing skills and knowledge and develop leadership skills,” Sanko says. “When you reach your goal, you’ll have proof that shows how much effort you put into becoming an even better public servant.”

For the certificate program, applicants must earn 30 credits over three years and focus on one of four course tracks: administration, planning, public safety, or public works. For the graduate program, applicants must earn 60 credits from courses across all four tracks. Anyone in the certificate program may switch to the graduate program during their course of study.

Students in both programs must



**The PSATS Municipal Government Academy gives township officials a well-rounded education in leadership and local government responsibilities and issues.**

attend the full-day, four-credit PMGA introductory course that covers a wide range of local government topics.

The introductory course is an interactive session that presents real-life scenarios. Students improve their problem-solving skills and ability to lead during challenging situations. This class whets their appetite for the learning ahead

and instills in them the importance of being a leader for their community.

Certificate students must attend the primary introduction course for their chosen track, and graduate students must attend the primary course for all four tracks. These overview courses cover the following topics:

- **Administration track:** The Township Code, human resources, insurance coverage and risk management, the Right-to-Know Law, budgeting and accounting, audits, investment, and pension management.

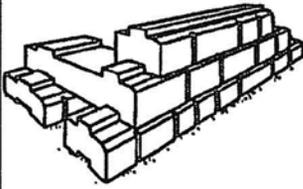
- **Planning track:** The Municipalities Planning Code, subdivision and land development, zoning, planning commission and zoning hearing board duties, planning for parks and recreation, and code enforcement.

- **Public safety track:** Fire service, emergency management plans and operations, police, ambulance service, mutual aid, homeland security, and municipal liability for volunteers.

- **Public works track:** A broad range of public works responsibilities, including road and bridge maintenance, capital improvement plans, road safety, employee and vehicle safety training, stormwater management, traffic signs and signals, and parks and recreation operations and maintenance.

Participants in both the certificate and graduate programs must also earn credits by attending secondary courses — 16 credits for the certificate program and 25 credits for the graduate program.

Some of the secondary courses are



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webinars, which save enrollees time and money while passing on valuable information.

Both PMGA programs require students to earn elective credits — six for the certificate program and 15 for the graduate program. These credits are awarded for attending other relevant PSATS learning experiences, such as the Annual Educational Conference, Human Resources and Labor Management Institute, Boot Camp for Township Officials, and grassroots advocacy days.

“I ran for supervisor because I believed I had a lot to offer after working in local government for 30 years,” Millcreek Township’s John Groh says. “Still, there were a lot of topics I didn’t know much about, such as human resources and budgeting. That’s why I enrolled in PMGA, to fill in those gaps.”

Oley Township’s Shirley Moyer enrolled in the PMGA graduate program in 2016 and has earned most of the required credits except for the public works primary course and a few elective credits, including the upcoming PSATS Annual Conference.

“I was attending training all the time anyway so I figured I might as well get credit for it,” she says. “Just being in the classes with other township officials and staff has been an eye-opener.”

Several of the primary courses, for example, prompted discussions among the participants about municipal separate storm sewer systems, or MS4s. While Oley Township has traditionally received waivers to exempt it from MS4 requirements, that is likely to change in the next five years or so, Moyer says. Those discussions during PMGA classes, plus the MS4 courses she has sat in on, will prepare her for the challenges her township will face down the road.

The fact that completing the PMGA curriculum results in certification may give the board of supervisors more incentive and justification to pay for the training, Heidelberg Township’s Janice

## LEARN MORE

For more information about the PSATS Municipal Government Academy, go to [pmga.psats.org](http://pmga.psats.org) or call (717) 763-0930, ext. 151.

### PMGA requirements at a glance

#### Certificate program

- Complete 30 credits in three years in one of four tracks: administration, planning, public safety, or public works.
- Attend the full-day PMGA introduction course.
- Attend the primary overview course for the selected track.
- Earn secondary credits in the selected track by participating in track-specific webinars, classroom courses, and other interactive training opportunities.
- Earn elective credits by attending PSATS events, such as the Annual Educational Conference, Boot Camp for Township Officials, grassroots advocacy day, or the Human Resources and Labor Management Institute.

#### Graduate program

- Complete 60 credits in three years from across all four tracks.
- Attend the full-day PMGA introduction course (*or Boot Camp*).
- Attend the primary overview course for each of the four tracks.
- Earn secondary credits by participating in specified webinars, classroom courses, and other interactive training opportunities from across all four tracks.
- Earn elective credits by attending PSATS events, such as the Annual Educational Conference, Boot Camp for Township Officials, grassroots advocacy day, or the Human Resources and Labor Management Institute.



Meyers says. Plus, the contacts you make during the classes can be invaluable.

“When you run into a problem in your township, you won’t have to reinvent the wheel if you can reach out to people who have dealt with the same issue in their township,” she says.

### Upcoming training opportunity

Another excellent opportunity for education is the upcoming PSATS Annual Conference and Exhibit Show. This event offers more than 80 workshops, informative speakers, and abundant networking opportunities over 3½ days in Hershey.

“The conference provides the fundamentals for those just starting out and fine tuning for more experienced township officials,” Sanko says. “It’s where you’ll learn best practices from experts and each other. There is no better expenditure of time and dollars than to attend the Annual Conference.”

To learn more about the conference, turn to page 40. You can also visit [conference.psats.org](http://conference.psats.org) and watch the videos

there to hear about how others have benefited from attending the Annual Conference.

Conference informational packets were mailed to all member townships in December, and the online conference registration and hotel reservation system opens at 9 a.m. January 16.

\* \* \*

Becoming a successful public servant takes dedication and work, and PSATS, as your Association, is here to help, Sanko says.

“We want you to be successful and your community to prosper as a great place to live, work, and raise a family,” he says. “To help you do that, we are committed to providing year-round educational opportunities.

“From our classroom courses and webinars to the Municipal Government Academy and Annual Conference — and more — PSATS is *the* one-stop source for fast and reliable information and training specifically geared to townships of the second class. We hope to see you at a training class soon and, of course, in Hershey in April.” ♦



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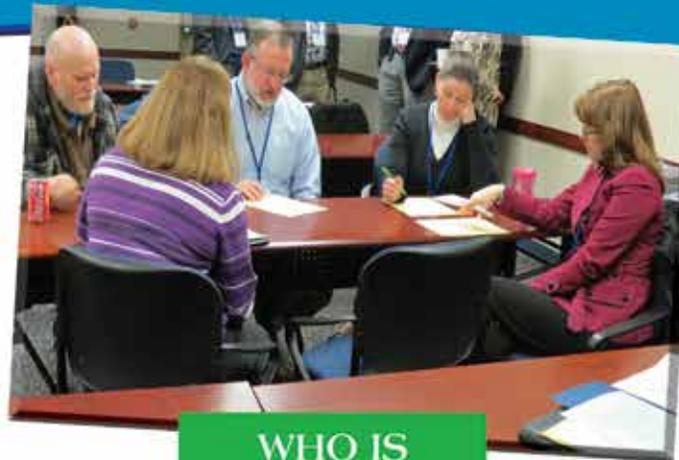
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**FOR A LIST OF PMGA CLASSES** to be held during the Annual PSATS Conference in April or to enroll in the academy, visit [pmga.psats.org](http://pmga.psats.org) or call PSATS at (717) 763-0930, ext 151.



## WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO ENROLL

Elected Township Officials

Township Managers and Secretaries

Other Township Staff

Appointed Township Officials (including Board and Commission members)

"The courses have expanded my knowledge through the great instructors, as well as the experiences of the other participants."

*- Brad Graham, Administrator, Antrim Twp., Franklin Co.*

