Many new residents have asked "what is a town" in the State of Wisconsin. This article may explain this Wisconsin form of government. – Ed Gullickson, Town Chairman

What is A Town?

Towns are created by the Wisconsin Constitution to provide basic municipal government services, such as elections, property tax administration (towns collect taxes for counties, schools and other governments, as well as for their own budgets), road construction and maintenance, recycling, emergency medical services and fire protection. Some towns also offer law enforcement, solid waste collection, zoning and other services. Town governments in Wisconsin provide these general government services to 1,695,776 residents (30.4% of total state population), 95% of the land area in Wisconsin is within towns. Towns maintain 61,780 miles of town highways.

The town form of government was brought into Wisconsin from New England in territorial days. Thus, Wisconsin towns have deep and uniquely American roots.

Legal Framework of Towns: Towns are "general purpose" local governments, which means that they provide basic services used daily by all residents (Wisconsin also has "special purpose" governments that offer more targeted services, such as school districts). The major duties and powers of all towns are spelled out in Article IV, Section 23 of the Wisconsin Constitution, Ch. 60 of the Wisconsin Statutes (which pertains specifically to town governments) and Ch. 66 of the Wisconsin Statutes (which applies to towns, villages and cities).

Two Tiers: Wisconsin actually has two tiers of general purpose local governments: 72 counties and some 1,550 municipalities. This sometimes causes confusion because residents may not always know which level is responsible for a given service. Further opportunities for confusion are spawned by the fact that Wisconsin has three district types of municipalities: towns, villages and cities. Counties cover the entire area of the state and are primarily responsible for providing human services. However, there is also some overlap with municipalities. For example, both counties and municipalities maintain roads.

Municipalities: In some respects, towns operate like cities and villages, but in other ways they are quite different. They are similar in the sense that they provide many of the same services as cities and villages, but they are organized and governed in a different manner. The major distinguishing feature of towns is the fact that they continue to operate as a "direct democracy". State law require towns to hold "town meetings" where all qualified electors who are age 18 or older and have lived in the town for at least ten days can discus and vote on town matters, including the town's property tax levy. This means that the electors of the town have more direct control over their most local government issues than their cousins living in cities and villages (where major decisions are made by elected representatives). Towns also tend to dove-tail their services with counties to a greater extent than cities and villages.

Town Government: The day-to-day administrative issues of each town are handled by an elected town board consisting of three or five members. Town boards are elected for two-year terms in spring elections of add-numbered years. Towns are also served by a clerk and treasurer and can have an appointed town administrator.

Direct Democracy: Wisconsin's 1.259 towns are among the last vestiges of direct democracy in America (or any place else). Did you know that town residents actually get to discuss and then vote on their own municipal property tax levy every year at an annual town budget meeting? Democracy doesn't get much more direct than that. This unique tradition of direct citizen involvement may help explain why towns are so good at keeping spending and property tax levies down. It may also explain why town residents often vigorously fight forced annexations into neighboring cities.

More About Towns: Wisconsin has 1,259 towns, which govern all parts of the state that are not included within the corporate boundaries of cities and villages. The terms "town" and "township" are sometimes used interchangeably. But in Wisconsin, the words are not identical. The word "town" denotes a unit of government while "township" is a surveyor's term describing the basic grid framework for legal descriptions of all land in the state (including land in cities and villages). Originally, most towns (and townships) were six mile by six mile squares (36 square miles), but natural and man-made boundaries (rivers and county lines, for example) caused some variation. Annexation of town lands into cities and villages have eroded some towns to a fraction of their original size. The Town of Germantown (Washington County) is the smallest town in the state at 1.7 square miles.

The 1997-98 Wisconsin Blue Book, published by the Legislative Reference Bureau, includes a feature article about the structure of local government in Wisconsin, including town government.

All Wisconsin towns, regardless of size, remain the most pure form of democracy in this state.

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