

town-ship (town'ship) *n.* **Abbr.** **town, tp., t., T.** 1. A subdivision of a county in most Northeastern and Midwestern states, having the status of a unit of local government with varying governmental powers. 2. A public-land surveying unit of 36 sections or 36 square miles. 3. An ancient administrative division of a large parish in England.

The Smallest Government

TOWNSHIP GOVERNMENT . . . A phrase that evokes thoughts of New England town meetings. Democracy in its smallest form. Grass roots government. Kansas forms the southwestern corner of a rectangle of states which have such units of local government. From Maine to New York and westward to Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, and North Dakota, there are thousands of these smallest of governments.

As the United States expanded westward, the national government took an interest in the establishment of local governments. The Organic Act, which established the Kansas Territory, allowed for the election of township officials. By 1890 the geographical boundaries of Kansas townships were set. While patterned after the deliberative New England town meeting, township government lost much of its original meaning as it moved from New England into the unbroken expanse of the Midwest.

The township was originally planned as the basic unit of rural local government. While they still exist today throughout the state, some of the township offices have fallen by the wayside and in nearly every instance they perform only a few of their former functions. Although Kansas townships were never given broad governmental powers like the New England towns, they were assigned certain responsibilities in the fields of law enforcement, tax assessment, welfare, and election administration. These responsibilities have gradually been removed and now townships have no formal power for these functions.

The construction and maintenance of roads has always been the most important function of the township.

There are many reasons why the importance of townships has been on a decline. In 1890, eighty-eight percent of the population of Kansas was rural. Today only thirty-one percent is rural. With the development of the railroad, the modern highway, rural electricity, and state-wide responsibility for health, welfare, and mental health programs, much of the original reason for township government has disappeared.

Nevertheless, many townships in Kansas play an important role in at least one aspect of our modern lives. The farm-to-market roads, vital links in Kansas, were built by townships and in many counties of the state are still maintained by townships. The construction and maintenance of roads has always been the most important function of the township and remains so in many counties of the state. Nearly 400,000 people in Kansas benefit from the vital local road service provided by townships.

But even this most important function of townships has been eroding away. Since 1917 two major changes have occurred in Kansas that have had the effect of lessening the importance of the township in regards to road construction and maintenance. The first change began with the establishment of the State Highway Commission in 1917 which re-

lieved the townships of responsibility for some roads. Also in 1917 the legislature enacted another law which resulted in a substantial reduction of the township's role. Since 1917 Kansas counties have been permitted to adopt the county-unit plan for maintaining their roads. Under this plan townships are relieved of responsibility for road construction or maintenance, and all township roads became county roads. By 1945, twenty-seven Kansas counties had adopted the county-unit system. Today sixty-nine of the 105 Kansas counties are using the county-unit plan.

Opinions differ widely on the desirability of the county-unit system. Adoption of the system is a controversial issue among county and township officials in many parts of the state. Favored and encouraged by many county and state officials, the county-unit system is often opposed by township officials and others.

Aside from the Township-County Unit controversy, the fact remains that there are still thirty-six counties in the state of Kansas where the townships are responsible for the important task of maintaining roads. Without their maintenance work, life in the country would be much different. It doesn't take mother nature long to reclaim an unattended country road.



Shaded counties represent those in Kansas where townships still have responsibility for maintaining roads. In 1917 townships in ALL counties had this responsibility, but through the years their numbers have been dwindling. 100 in 1929 . . . 78 in 1945 . . . 45 in 1969 . . . Today only 36 counties remain that have townships performing a road-maintenance function.

Since 1917, Kansas Counties have had the option of adopting the County-Unit plan for maintaining their roads.

Largely due to township roads, Kansas is third in the nation in the number of maintained roads and highways. Only Alaska and Texas have more.



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