

Delta Charter Township is a ‘Township of Excellence’



In Ken Fletcher’s mind, Delta Charter Township (Eaton Co.) was already excellent.

The township supervisor was proud of the board’s shrewd fiscal management, the hardworking staff and the quality of life improvements they’d made, such as the East West Pathway trail system. So when he and the board decided to pursue MTA’s “Township of Excellence” distinction, he thought that if the township didn’t qualify yet, it was at least close.

Fletcher was shocked to discover that earning the distinction was a far more rigorous process than he’d imagined. The intense application required information on everything from professional development and policies to emergency services and land use management. The board spent nearly two years scouring every aspect of the township government, identifying areas that needed improvement and finding ways to make those areas better. They made sure that new officials had the knowledge they needed to do their jobs by sending them to MTA training, and they put forth an even more concerted effort to engage the public in township decision-making.

Their work paid off this fall, when Delta Charter Township became only the second township to be named a Township of Excellence. It’s also the first charter township to earn the coveted title.

The township will be recognized for the honor on Wednesday, Jan. 28, at the Opening Session of MTA’s 2015 Annual Educational Conference & Expo in Grand Rapids.

Fletcher knew his community was a strong township before it went through the application process. Now, he’s confident the township has the policies and best practices to maintain the strong status for years to come.

“You as a community can be doing great things to improve the quality of life. You can be spending your money wisely and providing good services,” Fletcher said. “But at the same time, you may not have in place the policies and the procedures to help guarantee that that’s always going to be the case, no matter who is on the board.”

Going above and beyond

MTA started the Township of Excellence program in 2008 as a way to recognize townships for excellence in government. To qualify, townships must go above and beyond simply meeting state statutes. They must demonstrate that they have superior processes and outcomes in government, as well as adherence to best practices involving its statutory duties of financial stewardship, assessing, tax collection and election administration. If the applying township provides services in transportation, utilities, cemeteries, emergency services, land management and economic development, it must also demonstrate excellence in those areas. The program is meant to encourage townships to achieve excellence and create a sense of identity and community pride for residents.

Last year, **Spring Lake Township** (Ottawa Co.) became the first to earn the prestigious distinction. Other townships have been awarded certificates of excellence for meeting program standards in sections such as governance, financial stewardship, tax collection, election administration, emergency services and utilities.



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Applying for the designation is a lengthy, labor-intensive process. It forces townships to scrutinize the way they operate every aspect of their government and look for ways to improve. MTA's goal is for townships to become even better at what they do by striving for a new level of excellence.

"The Township of Excellence award requires a township board and staff to commit to working together toward goals of excellence over a period of time," said Catherine Mullhaupt, MTA director of Member Information Services. "It cannot be achieved if only a few board members or departments participate. Getting that buy-in may be the hardest part of the process, but once it's achieved, it becomes a mark of excellence—and good governance. When a township comes together with that kind of engagement and 'can do' spirit, it is reflected in all the ways the township serves the community."

A focus on excellence

Delta Charter Township board members first heard about the Township of Excellence program while attending the MTA Annual Educational Conference & Expo in 2012. Fletcher and the board decided this distinction would allow them to tell their residents that the township was operating as effectively and efficiently as possible. Earning the honor became one of their top priorities.

Longtime township Manager **Richard Watkins**, who is retiring this year, met with each department head to assess what the township was doing well—and what needed to improve. Every staff member was asked to focus on making sure Delta Charter Township was providing the best service possible.

As they delved into their township operations, they realized the township's elected and appointed officials might not be getting the training they needed to do the best possible job. Members of the planning commission, township board and board review needed more information about their roles and expectations in order to be more successful.

Fletcher sent officials to MTA training events, where they learned from experts about how to do their jobs

more effectively. Everyone returned saying they learned information they wished they'd known when they first took on their roles. Now, the township has a policy that new officials must receive training when they're first appointed.

"We need to make sure they're given all the tools they need to be successful," Fletcher said.

The board began working harder to involve the community when it made decisions. It's not enough to simply post meeting notices and hope people show up—the township also needs to reach out to people who may be affected by a decision and ask for their input, Fletcher said. For example, when the board decided to revisit its sign ordinance, it distributed a survey to business owners and residents asking for their opinions in order to see both sides of the issue.

Board members also took a hard look at their policies and procedures, making sure that their decision-making processes were all in writing.

"At the end of the day, there's always going to be somebody who disagrees with a decision you made," Fletcher said. "But if you can at least show that there was a process, that process was followed and it was done in an open and transparent manner, they can't criticize the process itself. They can disagree with the outcome, but they can't criticize the process."

The entire Delta Charter Township staff was thrilled to learn that their nearly two years of work would finally culminate in earning MTA's distinction. Fletcher knows the township is better because of their efforts to meet Township of Excellence standards.

Well worth the effort

Fletcher encourages other townships to also strive for the distinction—and says the benefits of the process are well worth the effort.

"The process itself requires you to sit down and look and see how you are doing, and think about if you're doing things in the best way possible," Fletcher said. "Even if at the end of the day you decide not to fully complete the process, you will still gain a tremendous amount by going through it."

Learn more about MTA's Township of Excellence program, and download an application form, on www.michigantownships.org (under the "About MTA" tab).

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