



Kalamazoo Charter Township is a **'Township of Excellence'**

Doing the bare minimum simply isn't an option for the **Kalamazoo Charter Township** (Kalamazoo Co.) Board.

The seven-member board wasn't satisfied with just the basic knowledge of township government. Today, all of them are either enrolled or are graduates of MTA's Township Governance Academy—a program designed to help township officials better serve their communities. When they weren't happy with their deteriorating roads, they took the issue to their voters, who approved a millage. Today, their roads are fixed and redone to within the 90th percentile.

And when they heard MTA had an award for townships that excel beyond their basic statutory requirements, they

knew they had to earn it. They spent more than a year updating old policies, creating new ones and scrutinizing every area of their township government. Each board member understood the award was not just a goal. It was an assignment that they expected to accomplish.

In April, the board's work paid off. MTA presented Kalamazoo Charter Township with the "Township of Excellence" award at the General Session of MTA's 2017 Annual Conference & Expo at the Lansing Center.



The culmination of countless hours of hard work

Retired Treasurer **George Cochran** couldn't help but hold the giant trophy over his head and cheer during the presentation (see photo at right). To him, the moment was the culmination of countless hours of discussing, writing and editing. He always knew earning the award would be challenging—but he never doubted that his township was capable.

"We felt that if we worked hard and did things like we knew we should do them, then we could at least make a really strong run at the award," Cochran said.

MTA started the Township of Excellence program in 2008 as a way to recognize townships that demonstrate superior processes and outcomes in governance, while also adhering to best practices in the statutory duties of financial stewardship, assessing, tax collection and election administration. Every service the township offers must demonstrate excellence, including transportation, utilities, cemeteries, emergency services, land management and economic development.

Earning this distinction isn't easy. Townships can expect to spend 18 months scrutinizing every aspect of their operations and filling out the application—which is the size of a large binder—while demonstrating excellence over an extended time period. The program is meant to encourage townships to achieve excellence while also bringing the board, as well as the community, together.

Kalamazoo Charter Township is the third township to receive the award, after **Spring Lake Township** (Ottawa Co.) and **Delta Charter Township** (Eaton Co.).

"The award doesn't recognize one specific event or project—it honors a township board and staff who work together over time to achieve a shared goal beyond what the law requires," MTA Staff Attorney Catherine Mullhaupt said. "When a board is able to take that approach and meet the award's rigorous requirements, the board is capable of great things. For townships that have received it, the journey was its own reward, inspiring the board, staff and residents to continue working together on future efforts."

Tradition of strong leadership

Supervisor **Ronald Reid** was already confident that his community was excellent. The board had a long tradition of strong leadership, with many officials serving for multiple decades. Township employees followed suit, with many of them spending their entire careers in the township. And even though Kalamazoo Charter Township is geographically small, with just 12 square miles and no downtown, the township still manages to be a vibrant community, Reid said.

He was confident as the township began the application process. His board has a strong record of auditing and record-keeping in finance, elections and assessments.

But as he sifted through the lengthy list of requirements, he realized much of the board's processes weren't formalized. While the board had done things a certain way for years, it was simply because that's how they'd always done them, and they'd just never needed to write them down. For example, the board had operated smoothly for decades, with little to no conflict, but the board didn't follow a manual, or even



Robert's Rules of Order. "We used to operate under 'Reid's Rules,'" Reid joked.

The Township of Excellence criteria became a checklist used to make Kalamazoo Charter Township the best it could be. Reid was amazed at the detail and insight of the criteria. Everything in his application binder was a good idea, he said.

"They're all just the way things should be done," Reid said. "I think many townships do most of these things routinely. But the fact that we had to formalize them ensured that we took steps we weren't taking before."

So the board created a policy manual with the guidance of the Township of Excellence criteria. Members also formed a personnel policy committee to examine policies from each department, Trustee **Don Martin** said. Their goal was to ensure that whether employees worked for the fire department or the clerk's office, their policies were consistent.

The application also gave new life to the township's strategic plan, which for the most part was relegated to the shelf. The Township of Excellence program prompted the township's officials to take the next step and make room in the budget for turning the plan into a reality.

Trustees pitched in, devoting countless hours to writing the application. One trustee, now Clerk **Mark Miller**, put the finishing touches on the document, wordsmithing and adjusting the flow until everyone was completely satisfied.

A new goal

Even then, the first time they submitted it, their application was returned to them with a few notes to work on. "It's meant to be difficult," Reid said. "That's why it's called 'Township of Excellence.' It's not meant to be the average township."

Kalamazoo Charter Township earned the coveted award for the 2012-2016 term. By the time Reid learned they'd won, Cochran and other longtime board members had already retired. And last month, Reid retired as well.

Reid is confident the new board will continue its tradition of excellence. Already, they've set a goal to earn the Township of Excellence award again for this term.

Reid credits MTA's Township of Excellence criteria—and its vast training opportunities—for pushing the township board to even greater heights. "If not for MTA, our township wouldn't be where we are today," Reid said. "Now, I challenge other townships to take the same step and work toward earning the Township of Excellence designation."