

Cass supervisor leads major lobby

By DEBRA HAIGHT - HP Correspondent | Posted: Monday, February 9, 2015 5:00 am

DOWAGIAC - Linda Preston likely had no idea she would one day lead Michigan's prime advocate for townships when she became Pokagon Township clerk in 1984.

But there she is 30 years later.

Michigan Townships Association members elected her president in January. Preston, elected township supervisor in 2004, said she expects a lively year of traveling the state and meeting with legislators.

"I am grateful to be representing the townships of the state of Michigan with an organization that is so well-respected and that provides so much direction and support for its members," she said in an interview. "I would like townships to be recognized for the value of the services they provide, and to be recognized as the level of government where the voice of the people can be heard."

Preston has been an MTA board member for 10 years and a member of the executive committee for five years. She is the first Cass County official to be MTA president, and just the third from Southwest Michigan in the organization's 60-plus-year history.

She joined the MTA board in 2005, representing Berrien, Cass and Van Buren counties.

"A friend of mine had been on the MTA board, and I thought it would be interesting to do," she said. "I also wanted to be more active and participate in more state events. ...

"I'm really excited about it. I'm eager to get out and meet with township officials in different parts of the state to find out what's going on in their areas."

Preston said township government is an essential part of the democracy.

"It's grassroots government, and the government closest to the people," she said. "Township government is where people can express what they're happy about and what they're not happy about."

The state's 1,240 townships govern more than 96 percent of the state's land area, which represent more than 58 percent of the state's property values.



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More than half the state's population live in townships. She said townships aren't all rural, but include large urban areas - a fact she said the MTA considers as it plans programming each year. For instance, Macomb County's Clinton Township has 97,000 residents, making it Michigan's 10th largest municipality.

Preston said that the MTA is keeping its constituency in mind with its current legislative agenda. "Right now our focus is on transportation and pushing the May ballot proposal" to raise the sales tax and various fees to fix roads, she said.

"We're backing it because we need safe roads for people to travel on and to spur economic and business development. The roads are falling apart."

She said MTA's other priorities include working with new state legislators to get them "up to speed" and continuing to work with veteran lawmakers to advance MTA causes.

She said she would like legislators to be able to serve more than three terms in the House and two terms in the Senate.

"They need to be longer," she said. "It's a huge learning curve when there's a turnover every few years. It would be good to keep some of that experience for a longer time, especially with the budget."

Other issues are still on the organization's radar.

"The idea of doing away with townships is not a hot topic right now but is always in the back of our minds," she said. "Funding is always a concern, but that has settled down right now."

Besides promoting statewide issues, Preston said she wants to use her term as MTA president to re-activate MTA chapters in counties. She said Berrien County was the last Southwest Michigan county to have an active MTA chapter, and she wants to get township officials in Berrien, Cass and Van Buren counties interested again in the MTA.

"The MTA provides so much information to township officials, it's invaluable," she said. "The county chapters give officials a chance to get together, discuss issues and local solutions and to do some networking."

She said Covert Township Supervisor Barbara Rose is taking her spot on the MTA board as the representative for Berrien, Cass and Van Buren counties.

Her new position means a lot of travel, but Preston said she's ready for it. The 29-member MTA board meets every other month. The executive board meets the months when the full board does not.

"I will also be going to district MTA meetings around the state this spring."

Besides her years in township government, Preston has been involved with the Southwest Michigan Regional Planning Commission, Michigan Association of Regions, 4-H, Silver Creek United Methodist Church and Cass County Habitat for Humanity.