



## 2014 ANNUAL REPORT

*Your vital community*

**Zion**  
**Township** *...Serving our community since*



Prosperity has not been the word on people's lips around town with our tax rate as high as it is. Zion Township also feels this pain, experiencing a revenue decrease of 34% since 2010. We had already cut all of the fat from the budget – eliminating unnecessary expenses and spending money where it counts. It was time to make hard decisions that would directly impact services to residents. Sleep was lost, discussions ensued, and decisions were made. In the end, jobs were cut, new collaborations were formed and changes were implemented. Now, with one-third of the staff that was in place when I was elected in 2001, we are so laser focused on our role in the community that we are making a greater impact than we did with all the added money and staff of days past. It has become our purpose and passion to serve Zion constituents to the best of our ability to achieve the maximum feasible impact possible. Although painful, the cuts have resulted in intentional programs and services offered to the community, increased partnerships and collaborations and focused efforts on how Zion Township supports residents in crisis and are an asset to Zion residents in general.

As your Township Supervisor, it has been my mission to effectively network with community leaders and build coalitions to effect positive change. In 2014, great progress was made in impacting the leadership in our community by:

- Partnering with the Zion Elementary School District to create the Youth Leadership Team, comprised of youth from each of our grade schools. I also became a facilitator of the 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens Program and taught the 28 youth participants tools to improve self-esteem, build friendships, resist peer pressure, achieve their goals, get along with parents and more as a means to overcoming obstacles to becoming successful.
- Creating the Zion-Benton Leadership Academy through the Coalition for Healthy Communities as a means to engage more adults in leadership in our community and begin to move towards having a representational leadership that better reflects the diversity of our population. 35 community members have graduated so far and some of them have risen to the challenge of leading the group. This is a powerful program for change in our community. More information is available at [www.zbchc.com](http://www.zbchc.com).
- Bringing together board members of the various taxing bodies in our community (schools, city, library, park district and township) to begin working together to systematically address community-wide issues and promote collective fiscal responsibility. It was from this group that the Community of Character ([www.zbchc.com/community-of-character/](http://www.zbchc.com/community-of-character/)) initiative was created.

- Becoming president of WINGS (Lake County Women interested In/ In Government Services) to encourage more women to work together to effect change across our county.
- Becoming president of Lake County Township Officials of Illinois to further the goals that townships begin working together to better assist residents in need and adopt effective marketing strategies to increase awareness of programs, services and impact.
- The expansion of the Boys and Girls Club in the Zion Elementary School District, which was an initiative that I was recognized as "The Founder" at their annual dinner in 2013.

We have more exciting things planned for 2015, including the formation of a steering committee and focus group to address communication strategies in the Zion and Benton communities with the Charmm'd Foundation facilitating discussions. We also look forward to opportunities formed from newly elected leaders throughout the community.

Zion Township prides itself on being the place that Zion residents can come when they don't know where else to go. We believe in providing low cost services to residents by partnering with other agencies to reduce costs and serve constituents more effectively. We believe in integrity, fairness, transparency, accountability and reducing inefficiency in government as well as identifying and advocating effective public policy. Most of all, we believe in you.

My burning desire is to make sure that all Zion residents know: YOU MATTER! I work to send that message by visiting the senior buildings in town to bring information, donated food or donuts; driving the bus for the Red Hat Society to create an environment of fun and purpose; and partnering with different taxing bodies to increase efficiency and effectiveness. My favorite partnerships were working with the library to help offer workshops by agencies that bring significant value to our community, working with the Park District to keep our Summer Work Program in operation and providing the Annual Senior Resource Day, and co-chairing the ZB Run Squad ([www.zbrun.org](http://www.zbrun.org)) to not only make our community healthier and happier, but also to support seven amazing organizations that do all they can to impact our community.

Though many might not recognize it, PROSPERITY is all around us. I am grateful to serve with a team that continues to look for the best practices, honoring the values of teamwork, leadership, communication, mutual respect, and responsible stewardship.

If you have ideas of how we can continue to make our community better, please stop in and see me!

*Chris S. Neal*



Our team is passionate about serving people. We pride ourselves on being compassionate towards each resident's circumstances and tailoring our services to fit the unique needs of each situation.

#### **Highlights of 2014:**

- 4,384 phone call and walk-in resident contacts
- 1,355 resource referrals were made
- 158 General Assistance Flat Grant approvals
- 103 Emergency Assistance recipients
- 70 Emergency Transportation recipients
- 293 LIHEAP applications processed resulting in over \$118,565 in energy assistance to Zion residents
- 66 completed Budget Counseling
- 35 Summer Work program graduates
- 66 Elf Network Recipients
- 71 Senior Half-Fare taxi recipients
- 180 attendees at Senior Resource Day
- 936 Senior Birthday Cards

#### **2014 Subsidies:**

Zion Township subsidizes a portion of other agency programs to ensure continued, expanded or lower cost access to residents, including:

- Catholic Charities Meals on Wheels program operates locally from our facility
- Love INC Clothing and household item pantry - \$1,000
- Abiding Love Food Pantry - \$1,000
- PADS emergency shelter program - \$1,000
- Consumer Credit Counseling Services one-on-one budgeting program - \$2,500
- Zion Park District Senior Luncheon - \$3,000
- Zion Park District Weekly Shopping program- \$3,000
- Nicasa substance abuse counseling program - \$6,000
- PACE Dial-A-Ride program - \$7,536

#### **General Services/Senior & Youth Programs List**

Zion Township coordinates and offers the following additional programs and services:

- Elf Network
- Medical Equipment pantry (by donation)
- Notary

- Prescription discount cards
- Senior Half-Fare Taxi tickets
- Senior Birthday Cards
- Senior Resource Day
- Voter's Registration
- Youth Summer Work Program



## ZION TOWNSHIP ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

### ***Case Management***

Our case manager is trained to oversee the state mandated *General Assistance program*, the *Emergency Assistance program*, the *Emergency Transportation Assistance program*, *other agency application processing*, *resource appointments* and *referrals*.

The most valuable service we provide is directly connecting residents to the resources they need. We have established networks with case managers at various agencies across the county to provide a direct link to the resources available and give our residents options to address their own situations.

## AGENCY PARTNERSHIPS FOR SERVICES

Zion Township recognizes the scarcity of accessible transportation for our residents. Through our agency networking efforts, the following Zion Township partner agencies allow us to process their program applications at our location (by appointment) as a convenience to Zion residents or provide our residents with direct referrals for services.

### ***Community Action Partnership's LIHEAP program (Low Income Home Energy Assistance)***

The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) is designed to assist eligible low-income households to pay for accumulated gas and electric bills. *In 2014, Zion Township processed 293 LIHEAP applications resulting in over \$118,565 in energy assistance funding to Zion residents.*

### ***Consumer Credit Counseling Services (CCCS) of McHenry County***

A certified CCCS bilingual counselor is on site every Thursday to meet with Zion residents by appointment for confidential, comprehensive financial counseling services. *In 2014, 66 Zion Township clients successfully completed a financial counseling session.*

### ***Love INC Intake and Referral***

Love INC of Lake County's clearing house can connect clients with local church ministries to provide clothing, furniture, household items, repair services and even financial counseling. Love INC has helped create miracles in special crisis situations that other partner agencies could not address. *A total of 59 Zion residents received referrals to Love INC in 2014.*

***Illinois Department on Aging Benefit Access Program***

In December 2014, Zion Township began assisting Zion residents to submit online applications to the Benefit Access Program. Approval of this program is a necessary step prior to receiving the Secretary of State license plate discount, the persons with disabilities free transit ride and the seniors free transit ride. *A total of 10 applications were completed in December 2014.*

### ***RTA Free or Discounted Ride Program***

Zion Township is an authorized Key Processing Center of this program offered through Chicago's Regional Transit Authority (RTA). A township team member will accept completed applications, take a picture of the applicant and submit a complete application on the applicant's behalf. Please allow up to six weeks for processing. *In 2014, 57 complete applications were submitted for the RTA program.*

### **North Shore Gas Share the Warmth**

Share the Warmth provides heating grants to limited and fixed-income households towards accrued gas bills. *In 2014, 27 Share the Warmth applications were completed resulting in \$5,400 in gas assistance for Zion residents.*

### **ComEd Cares**

ComEd Cares Energy Assistance Programs offers The Residential Special Hardship Fund for households to address electric bills in special hardship cases. *A total of 18 ComEd Cares applications were submitted in 2014.*

### **Mothers Trust Foundation**

The Mothers Trust service committee provides small grants to families who are experiencing an immediate need. *Zion Township Case Managers referred 12 Zion residents to Mothers Trust in 2014.*

### **Miller Foundation**

The Miller Foundation assists with specific situations where housing is jeopardized. *One resident was assisted in 2014.*

### **Rebuilding Together**

Each spring, Rebuilding Together rehabilitates homes for low-income homeowners, particularly the elderly and those with disabilities free of charge. Applications can be completed and submitted at Zion Township.

### **Reach Out Wireless Phone**

A free wireless cell phone with 125 free rollover minutes or 250 free minutes offered to residents that participate in one of the qualifying low-income programs. Applications can be completed and submitted at Zion Township.

### **Pace Dial-A-Ride (First Transit)**

Zion Township subsidizes the Pace Dial-A-Ride service that provides curb-to-curb transportation to medical facilities and local shopping in the Zion-Benton area Monday – Friday, 8:30am to 5:30pm.

### **Catholic Charities**

Volunteers pick up meals at Zion Township and deliver to Catholic Charities Meals on Wheels program recipients that live in the Zion area. Catholic Charities also participates with Zion Township in collaborative emergency assistance cases as well as referrals for many other services.

## PARTNERSHIPS FOR PROGRAMS & COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Zion Township also recognizes the importance of building relationships with other taxing bodies and non-profit organizations to provide better programs in the community. Through our agency networking efforts, the following partnerships have been formed:

- Each April, Zion Township in cooperation with Zion Park District, The Grove at the Lake, and Benton Township coordinates a **Senior Resource Day** in which seniors who attend can visit booths and obtain important information regarding local resources that are available to them. *In 2014, the event registered around 200 attendees and 42 booth vendors.*



- Zion Township spearheaded the creation of Partners for an Enriched Community (PEC), which merged with Respecting Every Single Person through Outreach, Networking and Diversity (RESPOND) to form **RESPOND Lake County** in 2011. The group is made up of social service agencies across Lake County and serves as a forum for front-line workers to meet monthly with the mission of more comprehensively assisting residents in crisis to improve their quality of life.

- **Elf Network** was created to help coordinate Christmas gift distributions throughout the community to avoid duplication of services and more comprehensively address need. Zion Township coordinates the applications submitted by school Social Workers and gift distributions, while Love INC Lake County coordinates a clothing pantry, Bernie's Books donates book bags and Christ Community Church provides a family holiday dinner and outreach to program participants.



- Recognizing the barrier that substance abuse can form to gaining and maintaining self-sufficiency, Zion Township partners with **NiCasa to drug test** General Assistance program clientele and youth Summer Work Program participants. In both cases, those who test positive are afforded the opportunity to remain in the program as long as they follow through with the treatment plan suggested by NiCasa counselors that is provided at no cost to program participants.
- To ensure Zion seniors remain aware of programs and services available to them and have access to a Zion Township representative to ask questions even when faced with limited mobility, Supervisor Cheri L. Neal **visits the local senior buildings** to bring donuts and donated food items as well as information.

- To address the lack of places for Zion youth to go when school is out, Zion Township founded the **Zion-Benton Boys and Girls Club**, which has now expanded to serve all Zion Elementary District 6 students with multiple locations.

- For six weeks during each summer, Zion Township coordinates a **Summer Work Program (SWP)** in which 14- and 15-year old youth apply to participate in a paid workforce readiness-training program. Lake County Workforce Development subsidizes wages for qualifying youth (typically around 35) and Zion Park District joined the collaboration in 2014 to subsidize wages for one of the program supervisors as well as continuing to provide project opportunities for the youth work crews to complete. *In 2014, 35 youth were hired and 33 successfully completed the 6-week program (1 moved, 1 quit). One youth tested positive for the use of cannabis and was offered support through NiCasa.*



- Monthly completion of 30 hours of **community service** is required for continued eligibility in our General Assistance Community Work Program. Christian Assembly of God provides community services work in their food pantry and throughout their facility and the Lake County Job Center provides work readiness training opportunities to program recipients.

- Zion Township partners with the Zion Park District to host a monthly **Senior Luncheon** and contracts to provide **curb-to-curb service** to Zion senior residents on designated Fridays to and from their local grocery store. The **Queen Bees of Zion Red Hat** group was established in April 2004 at the persistence of long time Zion residents Noma Blanton and Oachi Galiger to create an environment of fun and purpose for senior women. In collaboration with Zion Park District, Supervisor Cheri L. Neal drives the Park District bus for scheduled red hat trips and has logged over 100 trips to date.



- As a member of the Coalition for Healthy Communities, Zion Township had significant contribution to the creation of the **Zion-Benton Leadership Academy** and the **ZB Community of Character** initiative.
- Zion Township has many partnerships with Zion Elementary School District 6 in addition to the Elf Network Program. The **Real Deal** was implemented originally through Zion Township's Summer Work Program and then transitioned to Zion Central Middle School as part of their curriculum. The **Youth Leadership Team** was established, bringing youth together from the various school buildings to develop leadership skills among key student council members. Zion Township is also a supporter of the **Community Schools initiative**.

## Larry Wicketts, Zion Township Assessor



In 2014, Zion Township Assessor's Office had 837 Senior Homestead Exemptions and processed 381 Senior Freeze Applications. We had a total of 639 complaints processed by the Board of Review. Of those complaints 332 were non-owner occupied properties.

2015 is a General Reassessment year (formerly referred to as a Quadrennial). What this means is that every four years, by law, the Assessor must review and reassess all property in their jurisdiction. It's during this time that adjustments are made to reflect the market activity in smaller specific areas and neighborhoods within the Township. We will be looking at all the sales over the past three years and adjusting assessments as needed, per Illinois State Statutes. (35 ILCS 200/9-155)

I would like to remind property owners that the first place to turn with assessment questions is their local Assessor's Office. We can help you understand the assessment process, answer questions on exemptions, and give you the resources you need to evaluate your property and even file an appeal.

Assessment notices (the "Blue Letter") will appear in mail boxes later this summer, and most property owners have a lot of questions, such as:

### **What can I do if I think my assessment is wrong?**

Call my office before the 30-day deadline to file an assessment appeal has passed. This 30-day period is the time we have available to work with you on your assessment. You may have information about your property that I need to consider and I may have information about the market and assessment process that you need to consider.

### **Do I need to hire someone to contest my assessment?**

NO. The entire process is very "user-friendly." The county website, in addition to providing assessment information, provides valuable tools for analyzing your assessment for accuracy and fairness.

I will be hosting an Appeal Workshop whereby we will walk you through the process of selecting comparable properties and filling out the necessary paperwork. Watch for information regarding this session in the Zion Benton News later this summer.

In recent years there has been a tremendous increase in the number of companies offering their services to appeal assessments. Many of these companies do little more than make use of the same tools available to you at the county website. Please be aware that just because a person or

company portrays themselves as a property tax representative or property tax appeal agent there are no professional regulations for them as there is for Assessors and their staff.

Also, if you do choose to contract with a property tax representative beware of what documents you sign. Many people were shocked when they received a large bill from the 'representation' company payable in just a very short period of time. There is absolutely no need to pay for representation for filing a tax appeal, but the choice remains yours.

**I understand that the best evidence of fair cash value is a professional appraisal done for “ad valorem” purposes. What is that and how is it different from my refinance appraisal?**

An “ad valorem” appraisal is an appraisal done for the purpose of establishing fair cash value as of the assessment lien date, January 1st of the current assessment year. A refinance appraisal is done for a lending institution to ensure that your property has sufficient value to secure a loan without undue risk to the lender. It is important to remember that all appraisals are “opinions of value”. Rarely, if ever, is there one absolute value for a property. Rather, there is typically a range of possible values. This is why the reason for an appraisal can influence the appraiser’s final opinion of value. Appraisals done for refinancing are attempting to define the low end of the range of value that exists for every property, thereby protecting the lender from possible loss. As a result, refinance appraisals tend to be lower than appraisals done for ad valorem purposes. It is not necessary to obtain an appraisal to appeal your assessment; however, that choice is yours as well.

**The appeal process is an important safeguard for the taxpayer.**

Its intent is to protect the taxpayer and ensure fair and equitable assessments. However, in the past few years of a declining market, the appeal process has actually created inequities, not curing them.

Why? Because Assessors and the Board of Review are operating with different rules. Assessors are required by law to consider three years of sales when determining assessments, but the Board of Review specifically states that sales closest to the assessment date (January 1st of the assessment year) are preferable. The Property Tax Appeal Board (PTAB) takes both reviews into consideration when making a decision for value on appeals at the State level.

## **HOMESTEAD EXEMPTION INFORMATION**

There are several exemptions available for owner-occupied properties that will help to save money on your property tax bill. The exemptions are listed below. If you have any questions, just give my office a call.

**General Homestead Exemption**

This exemption is for all owner occupied properties. This exempts \$6,000 from your equalized assessed value. Our office automatically applies this exemption if you qualify.



**Homestead Improvement Exemption**

This exempts, for four years, any increase in the assessment of your owner occupied property due to an addition or other improvement to your home for which the township assessor would add value, up to a maximum of \$25,000 equalized assessed value. Our office automatically applies this exemption if you qualify.

**Senior's Homestead Exemption**

This is for properties that are owner-occupied by a senior citizen age 65 or older. This exempts \$5,000 from your equalized assessed value. A form must be filled out in our office to enact this exemption.

**Senior Freeze Exemption**

To qualify you must also receive the Senior Homestead Exemption and have had the property you are applying for be your principal residence for a period of time that would include the past two January 1st. This exemption freezes the assessment on your property if your total household income is \$55,000 or less. First-time applicants can obtain forms from my office or is available online at <http://www.lakecountylil.gov/assessor/taxrelief> this exemption must be renewed annually.

***There are also several more exemptions that may be of interest to you:***

- **Disabled Person's Exemption**
- **Disabled Veteran's Standard Homestead Exemption**
- **Disabled Veteran's Exemption**
- **Returning Veteran's Exemption**

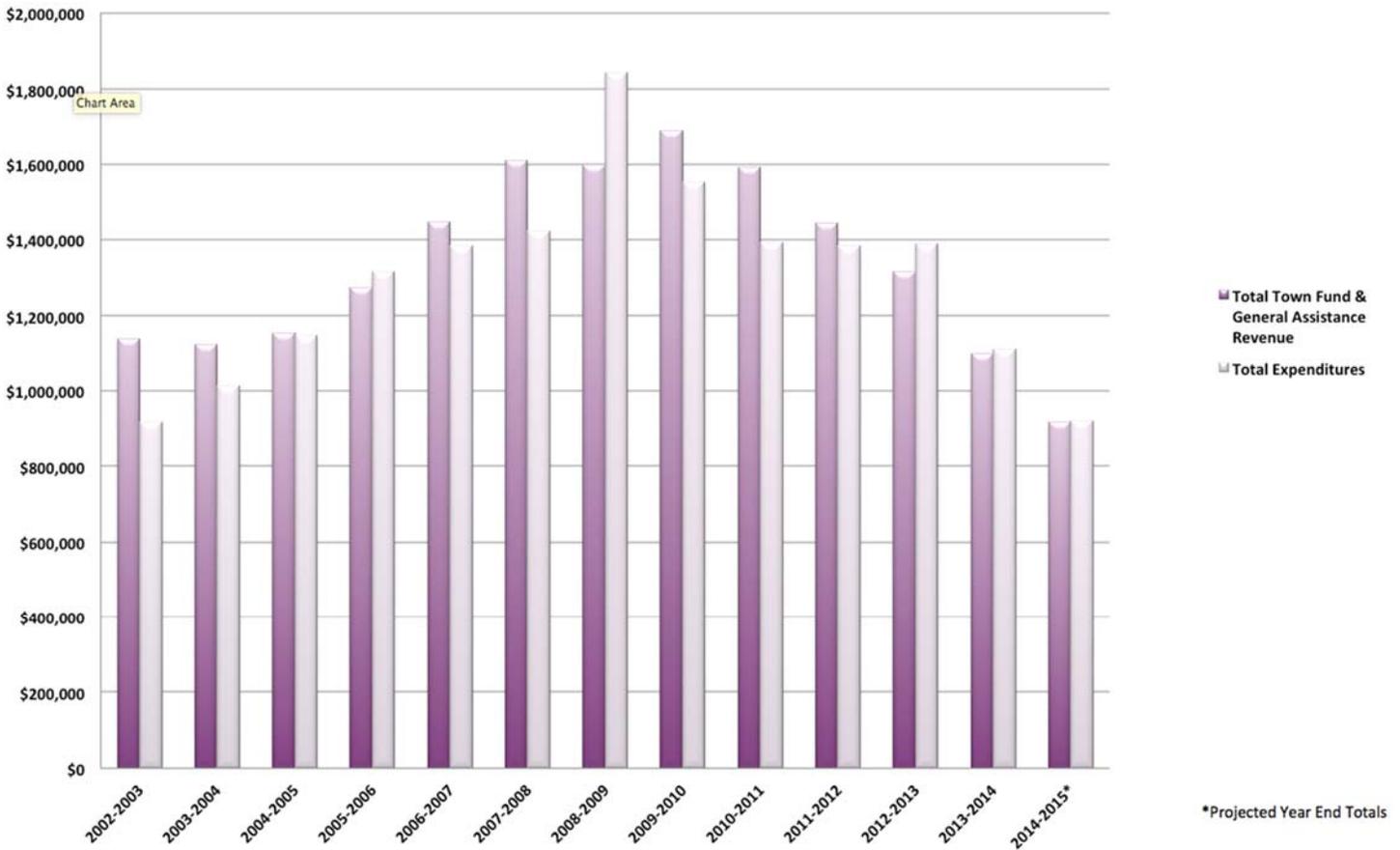
More information on these exemptions can be found by calling our office at (847) 872-5031 or on the county website at <http://www.lakecountylil.gov/assessor>

As always, it is a privilege to serve you! Please feel free to call upon me with any questions you have regarding your assessment, exemptions or the appeal process. I will be happy to assist you in any way I can.

Sincerely,

LARRY WICKETTS, C.I.A.O.

**Town Fund & General Assistance Fund Total Revenues and Expenses by Fiscal Year  
May 1 - April 30**



\*Projected Year End Totals

## Summary

Fund balance carryovers allowed Zion Township to manage in the black when faced with a necessary relocation and economic decline. Increased revenue was necessary to complete construction of Zion Township’s new building, which opened in 2010.