

It's Your Turn

A Call to Local Office

Your town needs you. In every town, city, village, or other local unit of governance, there are jobs that have to be filled by somebody—listers, auditors, justices of the peace, clerk, treasurer, constable, and members of the zoning board, planning commission, and selectboard, among others. Who do you think the people are who hold these jobs?

They are residents, voters, and taxpayers who felt an urge to serve and gave in to it. They are willing to contribute an evening or two a month to do something good for their town. They are seldom paid and rarely celebrated for this effort. They are the most responsible Vermonters.

Who would want these jobs? Some think it is a selfish motive that brings people to local office. They cannot believe people would give so much time and effort to something unless there was something in it for them, some personal accommodation, some benefit to their business or friends. They are wrong. The same motive brings people into local office as the instinct to join a church choir or help out with the 4-H, teach an adult how to read, or volunteer to bring meals to seniors. It is something deep within each of us, manifesting itself in different ways, that shows a love for a town and a dedication to a better community. Service is the best of motives. Serving the town in one office or another is often a family tradition, a means of paying your citizenship dues.

It often happens by invitation. Someone says to you, "It's your turn." That's all it takes with many people—a whisper from someone you respect, who drops a hint about helping out where you are needed. Human beings have a gene for selflessness. It sparks when people say they need your help. Some people never stop giving. Most of us try to balance our other roles and responsibilities, but see that we have a duty to do something.

Let that something be local office. Let this pamphlet be your invitation to join with your friends and neighbors in getting involved in your town government.

What's Open, and What's Involved?

Some positions have one-year terms, some three or four. You get the job in most instances if you show some interest. No long interview process is involved.

Learn what you can by reading the town report closely. What positions are going to be vacant next year? If you are going to seek elective office, you should get your petitions ready for submission at least forty days before Town Meeting. Most appointments are made in the weeks following Town Meeting, so it won't hurt to talk to a few people at Town Meeting about your interest. Some towns publicly advertise for candidates, but others just look around for people to take a job after the incumbent retires or resigns.

Running for local office is not like running for the legislature. You do need to collect signatures and get the petition to the town clerk on time, if the town votes by Australian ballot for officers. For a traditional floor meeting election, you talk to a few people about your willingness to have your name put up for nomination and to support you. You don't need paid political ads or volunteers handing out fliers.

There are few contests in local elective office. In many towns, incumbents are reelected without challenge, as long as they are doing a decent job of it. People are comfortable with what they know. That's not particularly bad for a community, but still, in a democracy, there ought to be choices in elections. Don't be put off from running for an office against an incumbent. A contest is good for everybody. Running and losing is not disgrace, and often a loss this year translates into a win next time.

Getting elected or appointed to an office isn't hard. Deciding what office to seek and learning what is entailed are the next steps you need to take.

The Basic Offices

There are thirty to forty positions available in each town. Knowing as much as you can about offices helps guide you to the one best suited for you. Let's review a few of the basic offices:

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Selectboard

Selectboards have either three or five members, elected for one-, two- or three-year terms. They are responsible for the basic administration of the town. They take care of the roads, make appointments to other boards and commissions, and authorize expenditure of voted budgets. They act by majority rule, with a chair to run the meeting. They are bound as all local boards are to the open meeting and public records laws. Everything they do is done in the open for all to see.

The sheer variety of questions that come before a selectboard makes it one of the most interesting local offices. One week it's a neighbor who can't sleep because of a barking dog, the next it's a decision on whether to add a new highway to the town or trade in the plow truck. The selectboard is the body you turn to when there's no one else to help. Sometimes it can help. The board's powers are limited to what the legislature allows it to do, but those are considerable in the realm of highways, water and sewer, and fire and police.

Planning and Zoning

In most towns, there are rules about how you can develop your property. They come in a variety of forms—zoning bylaws, subdivision regulations, the town plan—and their purpose is to promote sensible community design, so that commercial and residential development are integrated properly and people don't irritate each other too much by building something that offends their neighbors. These rules need people to administer them. These include the zoning administrator to issue permits or make initial decisions, planning commissions to write the plan and bylaws and conduct site inspections, and development review boards or zoning boards to hear appeals from the zoning administrator and grant variances and conditional use permits. All are appointive offices, serving terms of three or four years; however, some towns elect planning commissioners.

Serving on the development review board or zoning board (or planning commission, where the town has not adopted the development review board system) is akin to being a local land use court. Most meetings are public hearings on proposed development. You hear testimony from those promoting and opposing the permit and then decide, using the law as your guide, whether to allow it or not, and if to allow—which is most often the case—to name the conditions on the development. There are fascinating questions that arise when public and private interests collide. The front line is the public hearing hosted by the board or commission.

Listers, Justices of the Peace, and the Board of Civil Authority

Your dwelling and the land you own are appraised by the town and form the basis for determining how much you must pay in property taxes. The listers establish the Grand List for each property in town.

If a taxpayer is unhappy with what the listers have done, there is a local appeal to the board of civil authority. This board consists of the town clerk, the selectboard, and the justices of the peace.

Justice of the Peace is an office you could run for; it is filled at the general election, with a term of two years. Nomination is by political party or an independent petition, which has to be filed with the town clerk at least eight weeks before the November election. In addition to serving on the board of civil authority, the powers of Justice of the Peace office include the authority to perform marriages, work in elections, and hear tax appeals.

Determining the value of something is a tough business. For a Lister, the process involves learning a reasonable and rational method of appraisal and applying it to various properties. For a member of the board of civil authority, the challenge is deciding whether the listers or the taxpayers are correct in what each thinks is the proper value. The process can be intriguing.

Library Trustees

You have come to cherish the local library. Your children visit it often, and you can see that it could benefit from a little more attention from the community. Consider serving on the library board. Once or twice a month you'll meet with the librarian at the library. You'll review the budget, establish basic policies, and work to improve the library.

School Board

Following the merger laws of 2015, many town school districts were eliminated, but unified or union school districts have taken their place. These municipalities are run by school boards, which serve as a legislative body for the school district. They negotiate teachers' contracts, write the school budget, and set policies on everything from student discipline to class trips. Serving on a school board is hard but rewarding work. You can see the impact of your decisions on the school and the students. Come annual meeting time, you have to defend the budget and the school. Standing up for the schools is the job.

Town Clerk and Treasurer

The town clerk and the treasurer are elective offices. The clerk keeps the land records and the records of birth, marriage, and death, and runs elections. The treasurer keeps the financial records of the town and collects current property taxes. Often both positions are held by the same person.

Having a good town clerk can make all the difference to a town. Good town clerks are the glue that holds the town together, regularly mediating between warring factions and helping everyone, officer and citizen alike, find their way through the maze of local government. Some Vermont clerks have served for more than fifty years. Others stay only a few years before moving on to something else. Clerks and treasurers need good office skills, the patience to handle detail, and the diplomacy to keep everybody comfortable.

Other Officers

There isn't room here to name all the other offices, but let's mention a few more. Auditors are responsible for editing and reviewing the final draft of the Town Report before it goes out. They also are responsible for reviewing the town's financial records. Some towns have conservation commissions, recreation boards, and cemetery commissions. Everyone has a collector of delinquent taxes, town agent, town grand juror, and tree warden. Each position has a little law to go with it, and a special responsibility to the citizens to do the job right.

Training

You need to learn what the job is first before doing it, like anything you do. Most of the training is on the job, watching others do it, but there are seminars and workshops available at regular times throughout the year from a host of organizations. Usually there is a modest charge; often the town will pay for it.

Seven Bad Excuses for Not Serving in Local Office

1. *I can't make a difference.*
2. *It's just a waste of my time to try. Nobody would want me.*
3. *Local government is small potatoes. What it does is not important.*
4. *I wasn't born here.*
5. *It's all so boring.*
6. *I don't have enough experience.*
7. *It really needs younger/older people.*

It is something deep within each of us that shows a love for a town and a dedication to a better community.

At these sessions, you will discover something quite amazing. You will meet other people from other towns who hold your office. You will hear speakers talk about the law, participate in mock hearings, and have an opportunity to ask questions about how the process should work.

It doesn't matter how far you went in school or what you do for work. Keep an eye out for notices that will come to you as soon as you take office, from the Vermont League of Cities and Towns, the Vermont Association of Listers and Assessors, the Vermont Clerks and Treasurers Association, state and regional agencies, and a host of other organizations dedicated to serving the needs of specific public offices. You can read about the office and find recorded presentations from seminars you couldn't attend.

There is no substitute for a good workshop with a live audience of fellow officers. Hearing someone from another town ask about a problem you've encountered and haven't been able to solve is valuable. The most important discovery we make and remake in life is learning we aren't alone. Our fear is not unique. Our lack of confidence and confusion is shared by others in similar circumstances. That's what makes education important for everyone, and it works. It does change you.

Don't worry about what you don't know in deciding to stand for election or appointment to a local office. You will learn what you need to know soon enough. It's not hard. Others will show you how.

Hearing the Call

Nobody can talk you into serving in local office, but there may come a time when somebody asks you if you'll serve. Don't say no without thinking about the idea. Promise yourself you will serve only one term and then decide whether you like it. You don't have to spend your whole life in local public office or in a single office.

Think of it as giving something back to the town. Vermonters get mighty sentimental about their towns, as well they should. These units of government have the hardest job of all: making ends meet with limited resources, keeping you safe in your home, and clearing the roads in winter.

What's In It For You

You may not change the world. You won't become a celebrity. You may see yourself on television or in the newspaper, but that isn't the equivalent of fame. You'll just do your work and feel good about it at the end of the evening. That will be the reward. That will suffice. It will be your duty. It's your town. It's your turn.

The Vermont Institute for Government

The Vermont Institute for Government (VIG) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring that government remains responsive, accessible, and competent, by improving educational opportunities for local officials and the public regarding how government works. Since 1989, VIG has been creating educational materials, offering

workshops, and collaborating on a variety of trainings and educational events for Vermont's town officers and citizens.

This pamphlet is one in a series of VIG publications on Vermont local issues. For more information and additional resources, please visit the Vermont Institute for Government website: vtinstituteforgovt.org.

Please note: This pamphlet was revised and updated in the spring of 2020. Changes in the law subsequent to that date may make some of what is written here no longer valid. Always check the latest versions of the law before proceeding.