

It's YOUR Turn: A Call to Local Office

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

They are residents, voters, 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 the 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

continued on page 2

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 this 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 advertise for candidates in the newspaper, 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 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 at 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 no 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 the offices helps guide you to the one best suited for you. Let's review a few of the basic offices:

There are over 5,000 local offices to be filled by election or appointment in the 237 towns, nine cities, 45 villages, more than a hundred fire districts, and the varieties of regional government from regional planning commissions to solid waste districts in Vermont.

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 expenditures 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 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 zoning board or planning commission 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.

The Listers 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 they've done there is a local appeal to the board of civil authority. That board consists of the town clerk, selectboard,

and the justices of the peace.

You could run for justice of the peace. It is an office 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. The powers of the office include the authority to perform marriages, work in elections, and tax appeals.

Determining the value of something is a tough business. For a lister, the process involves learning a reasonable and rational method of apprai-

continued from page 1

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.

The Listers and the Board of Civil Authority.

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sal 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 and establish basic policies, and work to improve the library.

School Board.

Three or five members of the school board 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 records of birth, marriage, and death, the

land records, 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 of the other offices, but let's name a few more. The 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 opportunities for seminars and workshops available at regular seasons throughout the year from a host of organizations. Usually there is a modest charge; often the town will pay for it.

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.

You don't have to seek out these programs. Fliers 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, The Vermont Institute for Government, and a host of other organizations dedicated to serving the needs of specific public offices. You can read books and pamphlets about the office and borrow video tapes of presentations from seminars you couldn't attend.

There is no substitute for a good lecture with a live audi-

That's the beauty of democracy everybody has an equal chance at being a ruler, in a limited sphere of influence, with an established body of law to guide you, dedicated to one universal proposition that every person has a right to be treated fairly by a body of fellow citizens.

Training. *(continued)*

ence of fellow officers. Hearing someone from another town ask about a problem you've encountered and couldn't solve is so important. The most important discovery we make and re-make 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 so 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 a 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 the roads clear in winter.

We may not feel like members of the federal or state governments, but local government is a different manner. It is us, and if we don't do, who will?

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.

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.

A Word about The Vermont Institute for Government

The Vermont Institute for Government (VIG) is a nonprofit corporation dedicated to improving educational opportunities for local officials and the public on how government works. It consists of representatives from each of the major groups in Vermont that offer such training.

The VIG has published other pamphlets that may be of use or interest to you. They include:

- ***The Meeting Will Come to Order***, covering town meeting procedures.
- ***Changing the World***, about how to increase your effectiveness in meetings of local and state boards and commissions.
- ***Are You Appealing?***, which covers the tax grievance and appeal processes at the local level.
- ***Isn't This My Land?***, relating to local planning and zoning.
- ***The Vermont Citizenship Comprehensive Examination***, a fun test of basic information a citizen ought to know about Vermont government.
- ***The Public Right of Way and You***, covering town highways.
- ***How and Why to Read a Town Report***, it can tell you a great deal about your town.
- ***Reforming Local Government by Charter***, how to change your local government.

Contact the VIG office for free copies of any of these pamphlets or to learn more about VIG.

Vermont Institute for Government

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