

# It's Your Turn

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**Y**our town needs you. In every town, city, village, or other local unit of governance, there are jobs that have to c c ñ Û l\$

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 self sh motive that brings people to local off ce e w "

your turn." That's all it takes with many people—a whisper from someone you respect, who drops a hint about help

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 off ce, 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 off ce 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 off cers. For a traditional f oor 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 f iers.

There are few contests in local elective off ce. 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 off ce 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 ofthe basic off ces:

## 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. Every-



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.

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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](http://vtinstituteforgovt.org).

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