

Elected boards vs. Appointed boards: a point-by-point examination of why one or the other.

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Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	An appointed board's advantages	2
3	An appointed board's disadvantages	2
4	An Elected board's advantages	2
5	An Elected board's disadvantages	3
6	Conclusions	3
	References	4

1 Introduction

There are several “boards”¹ in town government. Some have elected members and some have appointed members[2]. There are various reasons for having some boards with elected members and some with appointed members. Generally there

¹Some are called boards, some are committees, and some are commissions. For the purpose of this paper, I am considering these terms as interchangeable.

are statutory requirements (state law or town meeting votes) for some and not for others. Aside from these statutory requirements, there are also underlying reasons. This paper will explore those reasons.

2 An appointed board's advantages

There are some advantages to an appointed board, including avoiding the costs associated with an election, an appointed ad-hoc committee can be created with a simple Selectboard vote, and the Selectboard can simply select citizens (or even non-citizens) to fill out the membership of the board and often can select people with the necessary knowledge or expertise.

3 An appointed board's disadvantages

There are some disadvantages to an appointed board, including the Selectboard not always knowing who might be available, willing, and knowledgeable to serve on a given board. The Selectboard may not have the time or expertise to fully vet candidates to serve on a given board. The board members are only accountable to the Selectboard (and not to the public at large). The electorate is **not** fully informed of the positions and platforms of the board members. The board membership selection process can be influenced by Selectboard politics. It is also possible for the Selectboard to appoint a fresh board in a given year, which can be problematical for long term boards, because there is a lack of continuity.

4 An Elected board's advantages

There are some advantages to an elected board, including the electoral process (from nomination to the election itself) opening up the selection of candidates to the whole town. The candidate(s) are put before the whole electorate to be scrutinized by a large number of people in a wide public forum. The candidate(s) are often required or compelled to present position paper(s) to fully explain their position and/or qualifications for the board positions that they are running for. An Elected board is independent of Selectboard politics. Sometimes this is necessary for a board to function properly. The electorate is fully informed of the positions and platforms of the board members and the electorate can hold the board members accountable. An elected board's members serve for multiple years and their

terms are staggered, which allows for good continuity over time, which can be important for boards with long (indefinite) lifetimes.

5 An Elected board's disadvantages

There are some disadvantages to an elected board, including the cost of an election. It is also possible that an unqualified candidate could run and be elected.

6 Conclusions

Generally, an appointed board bypasses the democratic process. Sometimes this is appropriate, particularly in the case of short term and/or specialized advisory committees (where the democratic process just adds an unnecessary and cumbersome process), but sometimes this is actually not appropriate, particularly for long term policy making or regulatory boards, which are meant to serve the public at large over the long term (for as long as the town exists), rather than advise the Selectboard (or other elected body, such as town meeting) over the short term. An elected board fully engages the town through the democratic process. Elected board candidates both inform the town of their positions and platforms and are in turn informed by the electorate of what the electorate wants of the board. There is a fully open and complete bi-direction communication between the voting public and the board membership. This allows the voting public to have confidence in the board and allows the board to do its job properly and satisfactorily.

It is noteworthy that MGL Chapter 164[1], the law governing Municipal Light Plants, says that cities and towns may create an elected Municipal Light Board to oversee the Municipal Light Plant, and says nothing about an appointed Municipal Light Board. Creating an appointed Municipal Light Board is treading into mostly uncharted legal territory.

References

- [1] General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Commonwealth of Massachusetts, chapter 164. On the web at the URL: <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXXII/Chapter164>. 3
- [2] Chantelle Peters. Elected vs. appointed local government. On the web at the URL: <https://classroom.synonym.com/elected-vs-appointed-local-government-12080845.html>. 1