

What is the division of responsibility between the selectboard and town manager?

When we hear the term “town manager,” we tend to think of the individuals who occupy those offices and lose sight of the fact that the term “town manager” describes a form of government that is codified in 24 V.S.A. Chapter 37. In selecting this form of government, voters have decided to vest the “general supervision of the affairs of the town” with one individual who, as the “administrative head of all departments ... shall be responsible for the efficient administration” of the town. Thus the role of the manager can be succinctly summarized as “to run the town.”

Managers are hired for their judgment, training, and experience; they are typically generalists with a knack for managing both people and projects. State law reserves both general and specific powers for the manager in 24 V.S.A. § 1236. Among them are to perform and execute all duties not committed to another officer in the town and school district; serve as the general purchasing agent of the town; supervise and manage all town buildings; serve as the road commissioner; do all the accounting for the town (and school if requested by the school board); and to have charge and control of the police and fire departments. In short, the manager is in charge of the day-to-day operations and is charged with *executing* the policy choices of the selectboard or voters, and requirements of state law.

In a town with a manager form of government, the selectboard fills more of a legislative and deliberative function, leaving the management to the manager. With the hiring of a town manager, the selectboard can focus on the policy issues in town. Chief among its responsibilities is identifying unmet needs, adopting ordinances and policies, charting the future of the town, ensuring that the town will have sufficient revenues to offset its expenses, and evaluating the town manager. Most town managers provide their selectboards with the information and analysis needed to make decisions. The selectboard by majority vote can remove the town manager at any time for cause. 24 V.S.A. § 1233.

In sum, the relationship between the selectboard and the manager is best compared to that of a corporate board of directors and the chief executive officer. The directors establish policy, but entrust everyday operations to the executive.

- *Dominic Cloud, Manager, VLCT Municipal Assistance Center*

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