

A Guide to Becoming a Member of an Appointed Board or Commission

If you do not wish to run for office but do want to participate in governing our Town, consider serving on a Town Board or Commission. In addition to our elected officials, more than 125 Newtown residents serve on more than 20 appointed Town Commissions, handling matters ranging from the arts to our water supply. The process of joining a Commission is not difficult, although it may involve a number of steps and, because of the number of steps, take a few months. (In the interest of readability, Newtown's appointed Boards and Commissions are referred to simply as Commissions in this guide.)

The first step is to identify a Commission that interests you. The Town's web site is an easy starting point. On it, you can find:

- the list of Commissions
- descriptions of each Commission's task and its authority
- the Commission's meeting schedule
- the list of current members (and vacancies)
- agendas and minutes
- Town Charter & Code, setting forth the rules under which each Commission operates
- forms and other documents that relate to the Commission's work

Next, determine whether you meet the eligibility requirements for a Commission. All Commission members must be resident electors, i.e. registered to vote in the Town and having a principal residence in the Town. The Town Charter requires that Commission membership be balanced according to minority representation standards as set by section 9-167a of Connecticut General Statutes. (See section 2-10 of the Town Charter) That means some vacancies must be filled by either a member of a specific party or an unaffiliated voter. Some Commissions also have specific eligibility requirements. These requirements can be found in the Town Charter, Town Code or in state laws. Although you can find these requirements with a little research, asking the First Selectman's administrative assistant, your party's Town Committee, the Commission's staff or a Commission member may be easier. As an additional consideration, prospective Commission members should not have conflicts of interest that would prevent them from serving effectively¹.

Once you have identified a Commission that interests you, consider attending a meeting or two. Meetings are open to the public and residents are encouraged to attend.

Also consider the type of membership that interests you. There are three general types of Commission members: regular, voting members; alternate members; and associate members. The Town Charter sets the number of regular and alternate members for each Commission. In addition, many Commissions may appoint non-voting associate members to assist with specific projects or otherwise aid in the work of the Commission. Associate members are appointed directly by the Commission. Regular and alternate members are appointed as described below.

¹ For example, a widget seller should not serve on a Board whose sole task is to recommend widgets for the Town to purchase although she could serve on a Board that makes an occasional widget-related decision provided she recuses herself from that decision-making process.

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To become a regular or alternate member of a Commission (that has a vacancy), notify the First Selectman's office by sending a resume or brief description of your background and experience. This can be done via email as well as regular mail.

With few exceptions, positions that have been vacant for 45 days or less are filled by the First Selectman with the approval of the Board of Selectmen. After 45 days, vacancies are filled by the other members of the Commission. Certain vacancies in the Cyrenius H. Booth Library Board of Trustees are filled in accordance with the Library Board of Trustees' by-laws and vacancies in the Board of Fire Commissioners are filled in accordance with Subsection 2-235(b) of the Charter.

If you are registered as a member of a political party, the Selectmen's Office will refer your letter of interest and resume to your party's Town Committee. Your Town Committee will then review your request and may ask to meet with you before it votes on whether to recommend your appointment. If you are an unaffiliated voter, your request and résumé may be referred to a Town Committee for consideration and action. In some other cases, the request and resume of an unaffiliated voter can be acted on directly by the First Selectman and a recommendation brought forth to the Board without going through the Town Committee process.

Ultimately, the First Selectman brings forth to the full Board of Selectmen recommendations for appointment. Persons seeking appointment are welcome to attend the meeting but are not required to do so

If the Commission position you are interested in has been vacant for more than 45 days, the Selectmen may simply recommend your appointment to the Commission. The other members of the Commission will then vote on your appointment. That vote typically occurs at the Commission's next regular meeting. Because all Commissions post the time and place of their meetings together with their agendas on the Town web site at least 24 hours before a meeting, you can easily determine whether your appointment is on the agenda.

Once appointed, there are still two more steps in the process: the Town sends you a letter confirming your appointment; and you stop by the Town Clerk's Office to be sworn in. With that, you are a member of the Commission.

As a final note, whether before or after becoming a member of a Commission, it's wise to attend a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) training program. These programs are typically short – an hour or so – and are held in the Municipal Center or other convenient venue. They cover laws that govern how Commissions are to conduct business, especially with respect to transparency and decision-making. FOIA's general rules are not difficult but they are also not obvious. And, following FOIA's rules avoids procedural errors that may compromise a Commission's work.