

Building and Supporting Effective Boards and Commissions

Municipal leaders are often responsible for appointing members to various boards and commissions, including their jurisdiction's planning board, zoning board of appeals, conservation commission, housing authority board, community preservation committee, and board of assessors.¹ In exercising this key responsibility, municipal leaders delegate significant authority to board members, whose decisions can impact delivery of services and can have financial implications for their community. Municipalities are also impacted when the board or commission is deemed complacent or ineffective. It is therefore imperative that board members understand the many requirements and obligations involved with serving on a public board.

The OIG provides training for board and commission members. But what about the people who appoint the members? That's you. It is a wise investment to make the time to think about appointments, the qualities of good board and commission members, and how you as a municipal leader can build and support effective public boards. That includes providing thoughtful and appropriate training for new board and commission members to help prepare them for their independent role.

In this edition of *OIG In Your Inbox*, we discuss what to keep in mind as you approach appointments, identify members, set expectations, and provide ongoing support, without interference, so that members can carry out the mandate of their board or commission in the best interests of your community.

What are the concerns?

- A board or commission that does not have members with the necessary knowledge, skills, and experience for the board's particular mandate can waste time, frustrate constituent groups, and make poor (and costly) decisions, and ultimately fail to meet the mandate.
- Members who are not able or prepared to exercise independent judgment undermine the deliberative process, leave risks unaddressed, and contribute to poor decision-making.
- Members who do not ask questions, engage in debate, or actively participate in meetings may fail in their fiduciary duty.

¹ In some Massachusetts municipalities, voters elect the members of certain boards and commissions.

- There is a difference between active participation through robust debate and disruptive dissension. Members who do not abide by the rules of procedure for the exchange of ideas pose a problem to the orderly conduct of business.
- Learning on the job is okay, but public board members should understand their role and responsibilities from the get-go so that they can meaningfully contribute from their first meeting.
- Reappointments can retain the unique and valuable experience and expertise of long-serving board members, but you don't necessarily serve the needs of the board by automatically reappointing a member who considers the appointment theirs to keep or simply because it is the easy thing to do.

Recommendations to build and support effective board and commissions

- Know what your boards and commissions need, and solicit members from the community with the requisite knowledge, skills, and experience.
- Before making an appointment, talk to the prospective board or commission member about the importance of exercising independent judgment in their role.
- Set expectations for members' meeting preparation, attendance, and active and inquisitive participation.
- Set expectations for respectful engagement with fellow board or commission members, municipal employees, those appearing before the board or commission, and the public at large.
- Ensure that members receive training on the mandate of their board or commission, as well as on relevant laws and regulations concerning open meetings, records retention (including personal email and computer files), ethics, and conflicts of interest.
- When it is time for reappointment, evaluate members' attendance, preparedness, participation, engagement, and contributions, and consider the value of new voices, new skills, and new experiences.

As a municipal leader, exercise your appointment authority with care and consideration so that you build and support effective public boards. Giving forethought to appointing board and commission members can mitigate the risk of wasting public resources, avoid poor and costly decisions, and maximize the impact of good government.

To support good governance practices, the OIG Academy offers training for members of public boards and commissions. Visit [OIG Academy | Office of the Inspector General \(OIG\)](#) for more information.

*The OIG periodically issues **OIG In Your Inbox: Insights, Advisories and Alerts** as a way to succinctly share timely topics with key stakeholders, most notably the leaders within the Commonwealth's 351 local communities. The OIG hopes that **OIG In Your Inbox: Insights, Advisories and Alerts** will prompt dialogue and needed action on matters important to public entities.*

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