

A Solution to the Supervisor “Learning Curve” Issue

By Susan Siegel

The recent debate in Somers about changing the length of the supervisor’s term focused on the steep learning curve for a new supervisor, especially when a new supervisor doesn’t bring to the job any prior experience in local government and/or a track record as an administrator.

The supervisor learning curve “issue” is not new; it was studied and debated by citizens committees in Somers more than 30 years ago and twice in Yorktown, first in 1976 and again in 2008. All three committees came up with the same recommendation: Have the elected supervisor serve as the part time elected leader of the town focusing on policy and long range planning while a professional town administrator (a.k.a town manager) was appointed by the town board to implement the board’s policies and oversee the day-to-day operations of the town.

1976 — Yorktown Citizens Committee on Manager Government:

“Professional management brings to the town an accumulation of experience and a set of skills which better enables the town to cope with rapidly changing technological conditions. Because of his professional background, a manger is better equipped to deal with the increased complexities of modern day municipal services and interdepartmental and intergovernmental relations....The Supervisor, freed from administrative responsibilities, would become a part time official, devoting his time to policy matters as well as short term (and) long range planning. He would remain the elected political leader of the community.”

1979 — Somers Citizens Advisory Committee on Town Manager Government:

“The increasingly complex task of administering local government has put much more emphasis on the need to find qualified public servants with administrative as well as political experience ... (Under the current system) we run the risk of electing officials who do not possess the leadership, government/business training, experience as well as legislative or administrative know-how necessary to effectively manage town government. The town manager form will provide Somers with the continuity of professional administrators necessary for the effective operation of local government, leaving the responsibility of political leadership with the Town Supervisor.”

2008 — Yorktown Town Administrator Committee:

“The complexity of local government had increased dramatically in the past 5-10 years, with new and changing mandates, responsibilities, laws, and technology. The only requirement to run for the office of supervisor – unchanged for over 200 years – is to be a resident of the town. No prior experience or skills are necessary. First-time supervisors often experience a steep learning curve, while immediately becoming responsible for running the town.”

Town government is getting more, not less complex. While lengthening the supervisor’s term to four years from two years theoretically gives a new supervisor more time to “learn” the job, the longer term doesn’t necessarily guarantee that the person will have the managerial, organizational and communications skills needed to be an effective administrator.

The need for professional administration in town government is greater today than it has ever been; the findings of the three citizens committee reports are as valid today as they were when they were written, two more than 30 years ago.

Concerned residents in both towns may want to shake the dust off these earlier reports and take a fresh look at how a 200-year old system of town government can be modernized so that it can be made more responsive to its residents and, at the same time, deliver municipal services in the most cost efficient manner.

Copies of the three reports are available by emailing bookhunterpresss@verizon.net.