

## 2. ROLE OF BOARD OF SELECTMEN & SCHOOL COMMITTEE IN TOWN MEETING

As explained in the first segment of this three-part overview, town meeting has been alive and well in the Commonwealth for hundreds of years. In the late 1770s Massachusetts was still under the control of the Crown so the Great and General Court was a mishmash of executive, judicial, and legislative officials. All that changed in 1780 with the Constitution requiring the separation of powers into what we now think of as the three branches of government. Here's a look at the role of the two principal executive bodies on the local level, the Board of Selectmen and School Committee, in the town's legislature: town meeting.

Selectmen have been serving for us for a long, long time. Their name was originally the *Sevenmen*, apparently from the Biblical reference: "Wisdom has hewn out her seven pillars." They first appeared in the Ipswich records in 1636. By 1798 our *Sevenmen* were only paid \$19 per year and that year fifteen were selected but all of them refused to serve; their salary was later increased to \$38 and five were selected. Fast-forward to today, after Ipswich adopted its current form of government in the 1960s the Selectmen became responsible for "formulating a general policy for administering the affairs of the town." While they form the policy our Town Manager actually executes that policy.

As for the Board of Selectmen (BOS) in town meeting, their only responsibility – other than setting the time and place of the meeting – is to set the agenda; they prepare, arrange, and publish the warrant. It's their job to collect the articles, arrange them in the order they chose, and word them as they see fit. Until the warrant is posted it is in their exclusive control. Once posted the BOS are required to send it to the Finance Committee (FinCom) as well as town counsel. Because Selectmen are up on the facts and are often familiar with the issues discussed during town meeting, their input as members of the meeting is very instructive; but they are not there as officials per se, they are only members of the meeting. Nor is the School Committee there in any official capacity, but they come at the process from a different direction. Technically a department of the town government, School Committee is a stand-alone executive body.

As early as 1647 there was to be a free school in every town in the Colony. Today the School Committee's responsibilities start with edict from John Adams, the principal author of our 1780 Constitution (which served as the template for the U.S. Constitution nine years later). Adams instructed that "wisdom and knowledge, as well as virtue...being necessary...it shall be the duty of...future periods of this Commonwealth, to cherish the interests of literature and the sciences, and...public schools and grammar schools in the towns..." At a minimum, cherish means to pay for it; state law now requires every town annually to provide "an amount of money sufficient for the support of public schools." In Ipswich as in most towns, that can be a pretty big piece of the pie – something like two-thirds. If for no other reason then, the School Committee's input at town meeting is important. But keep in mind: their piece of the pie is an all-or-nothing vote on the floor of the meeting.

That is, since Prop. 2 ½ passed in 1980 a town meeting can only vote on the total amount of the school appropriation. It cannot "cherry pick" – or place restrictions – on the schools' appropriations as it can with the other town departments. Before 1980, however, if the meeting didn't appropriate the money a School Committee had requested it could sue the town for the difference. On the other hand, today a town meeting could vote to add money to a school's appropriation, but in that case the meeting would not be authorized to direct the School Committee what to do with the money. Whoever requested the

increase would have to go to the School Committee to ask (not tell) them to spend the money as requested. This fiscal autonomy is one reason that the town meeting's advisor, FinCom, must be particularly vigilant and closely scrutinize the School Committee's budget article. FinCom is the town meeting's only real "check" in order to "balance" the School Committee's request for its annual budget.

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