

June 6, 2008 Spring Ritual of Reciprocity

An amazing thing has been happening all across the State of Massachusetts. Town government is being practiced in 351 towns, as it is every spring. At town meetings, held in gymnasiums, all-purpose rooms and great halls, issues are debated and decisions made. At town elections, more decisions are made and people are elected for numerous town positions. All who participate and even those who do not, all benefit from one of the greatest privileges known to mankind: Democracy in its purest form, practiced at the local level.

On the whole, we are fortunate, indeed. Sometimes, though, a sufficient number of people are not present at town meeting for votes to be made. Sometimes we are not happy with the results of elections and/or votes. It is very difficult to resolve to work harder next year, to campaign with more vigor, to gather the strength to strategize yet again, but, you know what? We still have the opportunity to participate, to discuss, to convince, to listen, to raise our hands at our town meeting and to mark our "X" in the square on the ballot. We have a say in our future. Most of the world does not.

While democracy is great for responding to and reflecting the needs of the group, leadership is still needed. Every parent discovers that necessity and not just because their group is comprised of mostly children. Even when the children have grown, leadership is needed. Every committee, commission, club and board discovers the importance of leadership, also.

Boards of Health function amidst an unusual situation where they have the power but probably not the time and, quite often, not the knowledge required by a leader. Statutory authority has been granted to them in order that they may act with speed and strength, when necessary. Yet, they probably are comprised of people with full time jobs and little time to spend on current and emerging public health issues. They depend, to a great degree, on their health agent to stay informed. They also depend on their health agent to carry out their wishes. It is a partnership. It is a relationship of reciprocity.

While the boards of health are usually elected and sometimes appointed, the health agent is hired to carry out their wishes and then appointed to have the authority to do so. The agent is the arm of the board, reaching out into the community, representing the board. If it appears to the board that the agent is not effective, they can deal with that in just the same way that any employer can when dissatisfied with an employee. They review the expectations by reviewing the job description. They give their agent tasks to accomplish and reasonable time to do so. They document unmet goals and review this with their agent. After opportunities and chances and documentation of problems, a health agent can be terminated, just as any other kind of employee can.

What does a health agent do, though, with an under achieving board or, worse yet, a bickering or self-serving board? If talking and demonstrations of needs does not convince a board to be more involved and behave in a civil manner, at least the health agent can pursue another job.

What does a whole town do, though, when a board abuses its power or repeatedly makes decisions that are inconsistent or favor certain people? Just what do the citizens of a town do when they are very dissatisfied with an elected board? There are two key words in the question. Those two words lead to the answer. The two words are "citizens"

and “elected”. Citizens elected them and those very same citizens have the right to un-elect or revoke them.

The process varies from town to town, depending on their individual by-laws and/or town charter. If allowed, it starts with a form from the Town Clerk for collecting signatures so that the “un-election” can be on a ballot. Once the required number of signatures has been gathered (and it may be many, due to the serious nature of this venture), properly documented and turned in to the Clerk, the information becomes public. At that point, a date can be set, allowing citizens the opportunity to vote-out the unwanted person.

Concurrent to those efforts, someone is chosen or convinced or requested or perhaps even begged to run as the replacement. Someone is elected in on the same day that someone is elected out, if that is how the votes tally. This is a democratic process and people must participate or pay the piper.

There are cases of whole boards having been revoked and replaced. Wow!

That democratic method may work but it is very time consuming and lines in the dirt may be drawn as the campaign evolves. Sides form and sometimes enemies, too.

I can’t help but wonder if it could be avoided by more participation at the public meetings in the first place. With the rare exception of executive sessions, meetings of boards of health are open to the public. Attend. Be involved. It is okay to ask questions. The board is there to protect your health. Expect consistency, reasoning based on science, common sense and proactive planning and decisions.

Know whom you vote for. If you don’t know, don’t make an, “X” in the box on election day. Continue to know whom you voted for by talking to the board, by attending meetings, by attending hearings for new regulations. Remember: It is the ritual of reciprocity.