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Chester Town Meeting Offers Appointments in Place of Elections

Staff report

Chester, like most area towns, leans heavily on volunteers to govern through service on town boards and commissions, and like most towns, sometimes has a hard time filling all those spots. What sets Chester apart from its neighbors is that it also asks most of those volunteers to run for office every two years, leading to one of the longest ballots in the state. The 2017 municipal ballot contained 23 races, 8 of which were uncontested.

A Special Town Meeting vote set for 7:30 p.m. on Thursday, Feb. 7 at the Chester Meeting House may change that.

According to the meeting call, voters will be asked whether service on the Water Pollution Control Authority, Zoning Board of Appeals, and Inland Wetlands Commission should be by appointment rather than election.

If the change is adopted, the policies for party representation would remain in effect and members would be appointed by the Board of Selectmen, as with the town's non-elected position.

The meeting will also weigh in on adoption of a Stormwater Ordinance "to regulate discharges to the town storm drainage system. The ordinance establishes methods for controlling the introduction of pollutants into the storm drainage system in order to comply with requirements of the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permit process and is required to be enacted in order to comply with state law." It would also amend the town's Ordinance Regarding Hearing Procedure for Citations and Other Fines "to provide detailed and clear information to the public regarding the citation and hearing process rather than just a reference to the State Statute provisions."

Copies of all ordinances are available for public review on the town's website at www.chesterct.org and in the Town Clerk's office.

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Chester Considering Moving Some Boards from Elected to Appointed

Press release from Chester First Selectman Lauren Gister

As you may be aware, over the years various conversations have taken place to discuss the length of Chester's municipal ballot. Some positions have gone from appointed to elected, some the other way, and several terms have been changed (i.e. town clerk from two-year to four-year). It is my understanding that our little town has either the longest or second longest ballot in the state. Over the past few election cycles, several general themes have emerged:

- Political parties seem to have a difficult time finding candidates to run for all positions. Many slots remain open and the positions are appointed after the election is over. Some parties end up having one person run for multiple positions in order to maintain the party's eligibility for the commission due to various election rules (for instance, the Common Ground party). Some people have expressed that they do not run because they know there will be available slots to be appointed after the election as well.
- Many residents express the desire to be involved in the town, but don't want to "run for office." They are not interested in either campaigning or in being pitted against a friend or neighbor.
- In order to be on the ballot, a candidate must be nominated by either the Democratic, Republican, or other registered party. A vast majority of Chester's registered voters are unaffiliated and do not want to be associated with a specific party. Although the seats on the board are allocated to specific parties, any registered voter can fill a slot on a board or commission in town. Having to run for office as a candidate for one of the parties seems to unnecessarily politicize the process and exclude involvement of many Chesterites. We want to include as many people as possible!
- Having a very long ballot can lead to voters not filling out the whole ballot (voter fatigue).

On the 2013 ballot, there were 14 open Democratic slots that did not have candidates to fill them and 18 open Republican slots. Two seats were cross-endorsed and the same candidate ran for both parties.

On the 2015 ballot, there were 14 open Democratic slots that did not have candidates to fill them and 23 open Republican slots.

On the 2017 ballot, there were 9 open Democratic slots that did not have candidates to fill them and 24 open Republican slots. Four seats were cross-endorsed and the same candidate ran for both parties.

The Board of Selectmen has met and discussed this issue several times, and has reviewed the ballots, election results, and appointment of commission members over the past few years. We feel strongly that the current makeup of the ballot does not contribute to our goal that participation in town government should be both inclusive and accessible to all interested residents. The process of appointing residents to be members of boards and commissions is voted on by the entire Board of Selectmen and done in a public and transparent forum open to all residents, taxpayers, and otherwise interested parties. It is our recommendation that the following positions be changed from elected to appointed as of the 2019 election cycle.

Board of Assessment Appeals (3 members)

Inland Wetlands Commission (7 members)

Water Pollution Control Authority (5 members)

Zoning Board of Appeals (8 members—5 full, 3 alternate)

If these 23 slots were to become appointed positions, the transition would occur over the next two election cycles, with 13 changing in 2019 and 10 changing in 2021. All boards would still require minority representation (rules regarding how many people from one party serve on a board) and prospective members could be put forward by their parties or by petition to the selectmen.

This is not a matter that will be decided by the Board of Selectmen. Any change to the municipal ballot will be voted on at a Town Meeting called for that purpose. I do support the changes, but the most important issue in my mind is , however I feel that increased community involvement and inclusivity in the process is very important. We are planning a Town Meeting for late November/early December, but would like to allow the boards and commissions to discuss this issue at their next meeting and provide a written opinion by Friday, Nov. 2. If committees are not meeting prior to that date, I would appreciate written opinions from board members who would like to comment either in their capacity as a member of the board or in their personal capacity as a Chester resident. I ask they please submit written comments to my office at Chester Town Hall, 203 Middlesex Avenue, at their earliest convenience. Regardless of the result, I feel it is important to bring attention and awareness of the opportunity and need for residents willing to serve.