

Each March, our town elects five people to a budget committee. Prior to the next town meeting, the committee reviews the selectboard's proposed budget and all social service agency appropriation requests. The committee's recommendations on the budget and the appropriations are included in the annual town report. What legal authority does this committee have?

The role of citizens in the budget preparation process varies from town to town. Though Vermont law does not recognize, as does the law of other states, a formal budget hearing in which the selectboard takes comment and testimony from citizens, each meeting of the selectboard is an open meeting, and the selectboard's proposed budget is subject to review and comment by the general public. The reality is that in many towns, early public participation in the budget preparation process may be sparse. Unless motivated by a particular concern, few citizens have the interest or patience to attempt to understand the town budget or to participate in its preparation.

To increase citizen participation in the budget preparation process, some towns have formed budget committees. There is no statute authorizing their creation. While the influence of the budget committee may be significant, lacking statutory recognition or authority, the role of such a committee is only advisory. The most important role for the committee is to make budget recommendations to the selectboard. The committee's work will, like all board-appointed committees, depend on the interests and skills of its members.

- Jim Barlow, Attorney, VLCT Municipal Assistance Center

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