

Our town is considering changing from a town administrator to a town manager. What is the difference?

The main difference is that town, city, or village managers are charged by law with the “efficient administration of the affairs of the town.” He or she supervises all appointed staff and departments, manages all town finances, develops and administers the budget, and serves as the general manager of the Town. The manager is also responsible for the hiring and firing of all personnel and overseeing all town buildings, facilities, and infrastructure. In larger municipalities, many of these duties are delegated to other professional staff members that report to the manager.

An administrator, on the other hand, is not a creature of statute. An administrator’s duties are usually enumerated in either a job description or town charter and, generally speaking, do not reflect the broad management authority of the manager. Administrators typically do not have the authority to hire and fire, do not oversee town finances, and are not responsible for the overall efficiency of town government.

An administrator can assume some of the duties of a chief administrative officer if they are expressly delegated via a job description. However, most communities find that the only way to ensure accountability across the organization is to adopt the manager form of government.

According to the International City/County Management Association, a primary strength of the council/manager form of government is “the combination of the political leadership of elected officials with the strong managerial experience of an appointed local government manager.” Under this system, the selectboard or council is the elected representative of the community and, therefore, concentrates on policy issues and is responsive to citizens’ needs and wishes. The manager is appointed to carry out those policy decisions, and to advise the board in the determination of policy.

Adopting (or repealing) the manager form requires voter approval, which is more than just a procedural requirement. The public outreach and education that occurs leading up to the vote puts the public on notice that the community is considering a fundamental choice in how it wishes to be governed.

This governance choice is illuminated by the statutory language that accompanies the shift. Until the manager form is adopted, the selectboard is responsible for the “general supervision of the affairs of the town.” 24 V.S.A. § 872. Once the manager form is adopted, the manager assumes legal responsibility for the “general supervision of the affairs of the town... and is responsible for the efficient administration thereof.” 24 V.S.A. § 1235. This transfer of responsibility allows the selectboard to hold the manager accountable for overall town performance and, in turn, increases the manager’s ability to hold staff accountable for performance. It also frees the selectboard to focus on the larger policy issues facing the community, rather than management of day-to-day operations.

For more information on the council/manager form generally, visit www.icma.org. For more information on the council/manager form in Vermont, contact the VLCT Municipal Assistance Center at 800/649-7915.

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