A Guide to Planning Simple, Effective Selectboard Retreats

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***** Selectboard retreats are subject to Vermont's Open Meeting Law. *****

See the Municipal Assistance Center's Open Meeting Law FAQs(opens in a new tab) for additional information.

Board development doesn't have to be formal or complicated. A selectboard retreat is a chance to welcome new members, reconnect as a team, and focus on the work ahead. Consider starting with a casual gathering so existing members can get to know new colleagues in a low-pressure setting. Add a tour of town facilities or the site of an upcoming road project to ground board discussions in real-world context. Use a working session to review and update board priorities and create a clear list of upcoming projects. You might also host a "Selectboard Essentials" watch party or invite a local expert to lead a short workshop or class on a timely topic.

Use this Guide as a menu: pick a few elements that fit your time, budget, and board culture, and build from there. Even a two-hour "mini retreat" with one or two of these ideas can make your board's work together smoother and more satisfying for the year ahead. Remember, low-cost ideas can build connection, clarity, and a shared agenda. And don't forget this pro tip: include food whenever you can—sharing a meal (or even just snacks) helps build relationships, trust, and a stronger sense of community within the board.

Easy Retreat Components (Mix & Match)

- **Welcome gathering for existing and new members**
  - Short, informal meet-and-greet (coffee, cookies, potluck).
  - Simple "round robin": each member shares why they serve and one hope for the year ahead.
- **Tour town facilities**

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- Visit the highway garage, water/wastewater plant, town office, transfer station, or library.
- Invite key staff to give a 5–10 minute "what we do and what we're worried about" overview.

- **Visit the site of an upcoming road or infrastructure project**
  - Walk or drive the site together.
  - Ask: What do we need to understand here before we make decisions?
- **Work session to review and update board priorities**
  - List current projects and commitments on a flip chart or screen.
  - Ask each member to identify 3–5 top priorities.
  - Combine into a short, clear list of upcoming projects with rough timelines and leads.
- **"Selectboard Essentials" watch party**
  - Watch live or, if you watch recorded segments, select one or two short segments to watch together.
  - Pause to discuss: "What do we already do well?" "What might we try differently?"
- **Workshop or class with a local expert**
  - Invite your town attorney, regional planning staff, road foreman, or a local mediator/facilitator.
  - Keep it focused: 30–45 minutes on a single timely topic (e.g., open meeting law basics, road funding, conflict at meetings).

Additional Low-Cost, Low-Tech Ideas

- **Board norms mini session**
  - In small groups or as a whole, draft 5–7 "how we work together" agreements
    (e.g., one person speaks at a time; no surprises on big decisions; we ask

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questions before we assume).
    - Post them at future meetings.
- **Strengths and interests round**
    - Each member shares:
        - One strength they bring to the board.
        - One area where they'd like to learn more this year.
    - Use this to match members with topics, committees, or trainings.
- **Simple reflection exercise**
    - Ask: "What went well for the board this past year?" "What was hard?" "What do we want to be different next year?"
    - Capture answers on paper and refer back when setting priorities.
- **Mini listening session with staff**
    - Invite key staff for a 20–30-minute conversation. Ask:
        - "What's one thing the board does that helps you do your job?"
        - "What's one change that would make your work easier or more effective?"
- **Community "thank you" notes**
    - Take 10 minutes to identify volunteers, committees, or partners who helped the town this year.
    - Draft a few short thank-you notes or plan a simple public recognition at a future meeting.

Don't Forget the Food

- Light snacks, a potluck meal, or pizza and salad can transform the tone of a retreat.
- Eating together slows the pace, encourages informal conversation, and helps new members feel welcome.
- Keep it simple and within budget—homemade cookies and coffee work just as well as anything fancy.

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