

(Post-webinar follow-up for “Selectboard Onboarding & Board Development Tips” training)

Selectboard Onboarding and Board Development: Simple Steps That Make a Big Difference

Every March, Vermont towns welcome new Selectboard members into roles that carry real responsibility for budgets, roads, facilities, staff, and long-term obligations. Yet in many small towns, new members are handed a meeting packet and told to “jump in.” The recent VLCT webinar “Selectboard Onboarding & Board Development Tips” focused on small towns and offered a different approach: build a simple, repeatable onboarding process that helps new members be effective quickly – without creating a lot of extra work for staff.

The core of that process is straightforward. Within the first few weeks, give each new member a concise packet and hold an orientation meeting that covers six basics: roles and responsibilities; legal and ethical foundations (especially Open Meeting Law, public records, and conflict of interest); how the board operates; an overview of the town’s finances and budget; the “people and structure” (who does what, and how the organization fits together); and a snapshot of local priorities and major projects. Add a one-page “how to” tip sheet – how to get on the agenda, how to request information from staff, and how to handle calls from residents – and you’ve given new board members the tools to avoid common missteps and ask better questions sooner.

The webinar also highlighted the importance of the organizational meeting as the full board’s “reset” moment each year. With just a bit of planning, that first meeting can set a positive tone and reinforce good governance. Ideas included formally administering the oath of office for newly elected members, taking a quick photo of the full board for the town website or annual report, and using a simple organizational meeting checklist to ensure that all key items are addressed. Reviewing or adopting rules of procedure early keeps everyone on the same page about how meetings will run. Even small touches – like temporary nameplates printed on card stock – help residents and staff connect names to faces and make the board more approachable.

Beyond onboarding, the session emphasized ongoing board development. A selectboard “retreat” doesn’t need to be fancy or expensive; it just needs to be intentional. Towns shared ideas such as a casual welcome gathering where existing members can get to know new colleagues, a tour of town facilities or the site of an upcoming road project, and a working session to review and update board priorities and the list of upcoming projects. Some boards host a watch party for “Selectboard Essentials”, VLCT’s annual boot camp for selectboards, or invite a local expert to lead a short workshop on a timely issue, such as flood recovery, housing, or infrastructure grants. And one consistent pro tip: include food

whenever you can. Sharing a meal, or even just snacks, lowers the temperature, builds trust, and makes it easier to have honest, productive conversations.

A key message throughout the webinar was that perfection is not the goal. The most important step is simply to start: assemble a basic packet from documents you already have, identify an orientation team (often the board chair and the town manager or town administrator), create a couple of one-page handouts, and commit to using the same simple process every time a new member is elected or appointed. Over time, you can refine your materials, add templates and checklists, and tailor the process to your town's needs.

VLCT offers resources that can support this work, but local leadership is what makes it real. When towns invest a little time in onboarding and board development, they see fewer legal and procedural missteps, more informed decisions, stronger relationships with staff, clearer communication with residents, and more confident and engaged board members. That's good for your selectboard *and* your community.

VLCT resources include:

- [Selectboard Handbook](#)
- Information on [Vermont's Open Meeting Law](#), [Public Records](#), and [Ethics and Conflicts of Interest](#)
- [Selectboard Onboarding Packet Table of Contents Template](#)
- [Organizational Meeting Checklist](#)
- [A Guide to Planning Simple, Effective Selectboard Retreats](#)
- VLCT Municipal Assistance Center and Municipal Operations Support staff