

Article would give more power to Brookline's town administrator

By Neal Simpson/staff writer

Wicked Local Brookline

Posted Feb 04, 2010 @ 08:29 AM

Brookline — An article before Town Meeting this spring could strip the Board of Selectmen of the power to hire and fire most department heads, giving that authority instead to the town administrator.

If approved by Town Meeting and state lawmakers, the legislation would give the unelected town administrator hiring authority for 13 key town employees, covering everything from the chief of the police to the director of finance. The Board of Selectmen would retain the power to hire police and fire personnel, legal counsel and the town administrator himself.

The article was drafted by members of the Committee on Town Organization and Structure, a slow-moving committee that has been discussing the possibility of beefing up the town administrator job for several years. A final draft of the article was approved at a meeting last month.

The article, which would go before Town Meeting in May and must be approved by the state Legislature before becoming law, would amend the Town Administrator Act of 1985, which replaced Brookline's "executive secretary to the Board of Selectmen" with a more powerful town administrator.

Dick Leary, a longtime Brookline resident who was serving as executive secretary at the time of the change, said the amendment is intended to give the town administrator more authority over his staff, and to clarify the Board of Selectmen's role as a policy-making body.

"What we're trying to do here is make it clear and crisp just who has the responsibility for the town administration, and to remove what we think has been sort of a grey area where the town administrator recruits and recommends, but does not have the final say in the appointment process," he said.

As the town's executive secretary, Leary said he would recruit and interview a pool of candidates for each department head job, then recommend a choice to the Selectmen, who would sometimes disregard his recommendation. As town administrator, he would bring a single candidate to the board for an up-or-down vote, rather than offering them a pool to choose from.

The proposal would go one step further, cutting the Selectmen out of hiring decisions entirely, though the members of the board would likely continue to participate in a so-called "screening committee" typically used to review candidates from outside Brookline government.

The Selectmen would also retain the authority to hire the town administrator, town counsel, and personnel of the Fire and Police departments, as well as to appoint the members of most of the town's many boards, commissions and committees. The Selectmen themselves are elected by voters, as are the members of the School Committee, the library trustees and the town clerk.

The Committee on Town Organization and Structure reviewed similarly sized towns around Massachusetts and found that most had granted stronger hiring powers to the town administrator. The model would also mirror Brookline's own School Department, where the unelected superintendent has the power to make most hiring decisions, though the School Committee plays a strong role in selecting potential candidates.

Not everyone is behind the change. Marty Rosenthal, a former Selectman and co-chairman of Brookline PAX, said the change would further remove the hiring of key town personnel from the voters.

"I just don't feel the case has been made to diminish the authority, essentially, of the voters and the Selectmen," he said.

It's not clear whether the Board of Selectmen, which reviews and comments on most articles before they head to Town Meeting, would support the measure. Selectman Richard Benka and Selectwoman Betsy DeWitt declined to comment on the article, because they have not read it yet, while Selectwoman Nancy Daly said she generally supports it, though she's still considering some components of it.

Daly, who serves as the chairwoman of the Board of Selectmen, said she didn't think the role of citizens in town government would be diminished by the move.

"I think the town administrator should get input from the board on decision like that, but it's sometimes best if they don't get politicized," she said.

Richard Kelliher, the sitting town administrator, supports the change, but said this week that his own standing in the town shouldn't be a factor in the discussion.

"This is the kind of thing that should be looked at as an organizational matter, and really shouldn't be considered in regard to specific individuals, myself included," he said

Neal Simpson can be reached at nsimpson@cnc.com.