

Current Controversy: Reducing the Size of the Board

by Leslie Burg, Alderman at Large, Ward 3

Op-ed, Newton Tab, July 11, 2007

I believe the board's size can be reduced. I also believe there are consequences for doing so that must be addressed prior to determining the number of positions to be retired and the type and distribution of the remaining seats. I know many consider a smaller board desirable, but I differ significantly from some regarding how any reduction of the board should be approached.

There is nothing to suggest that a significant increase in the board's efficiency and /or general level of functioning would automatically result from reducing the number of aldermen.

In fact, several of the inefficiencies I have observed in my admittedly short time on the board, seem to have little to do with the number of Aldermen. They are inefficiencies that have grown up over years and taken root largely, I suspect, because timely changes have not been made. Some are principally administrative. Others are weightier, such as the need for improved communication by the board with the public, the Mayor, and possibly with the school committee. While I believe we have made progress in that direction, it should be obvious that simply reducing the number of aldermen would do nothing to alleviate either of these two very different kinds of challenges.

Many aldermen believe the board should have greater decision-making power over the budget, now controlled wholly by the Mayor. Legally, the board can do no more than reduce the size of an allocation, and vote the entire budget up or down. Such a change however, can only be addressed through charter reform. Downsizing the board would do nothing to alter the balance of power in our current system.

There are claims that other cities and towns do as well as Newton with far fewer legislators. Some undoubtedly do, others may not. We would have to control all variables with the exception of board size to design a valid comparative study, a task that is all but impossible given the enormous diversity of our cities and towns. Not surprisingly then, I am aware of no empirical evidence supporting either of these contentions, unless we consider Moody's annual report on the financial health of municipalities across the country. If we do, Newton rates extremely high on all factors examined in spite of an unwieldy 24-member board!

We should be careful when we state that a particular city or town has only 7, or 9, or 12 selectmen, or councilmen, or aldermen, because other cities and towns assign municipal responsibilities differently. In Brookline, a town of 55, 000 people, there are only five selectmen, but there is an Advisory Committee that looks much like our Board of Aldermen. It comprises between 20 and 30 members, 1 for each of Brookline's 16 precincts and other "at large" members. The seven subcommittees that do most of the town's business are run and staffed by members of the Advisory Committee. The duties and responsibilities of Brookline's selectmen are actually quite different from those of Newton's aldermen.

Some colleagues envision a sixteen, or seventeen member board. To carry the current workload, a board of sixteen aldermen would require that each serve on three major and two minor committees. Knowing the amount of time active aldermen devote to board responsibilities, three major and two minor committees, even when the latter do not meet regularly, is simply too many. We can however, reconfigure our committee structure, composition, and duties so that fewer aldermen are required. The board can also relinquish control of certain tasks and responsibilities assigning them elsewhere, to standing commissions or committees, or to ones the board may create for that purpose.

I believe it is more reasonable to determine first what work the board needs to do for the city, and then how best to do it. This should entail discussions of whether and how to restructure committees, develop new ones, how to charge them, what responsibilities the board might turn over to other bodies, etc. It should also include discussions with the Mayor's office and other organizations in the city that will be impacted by the change. At the end of this process, depending on what the board decides with regard to restructuring itself, we should be able to state with some confidence the number and type of aldermen —Ward or at-Large-- required to competently carry out the city's business.

I am well aware that what I am suggesting involves a lot of thought and hard work. However, arbitrarily lopping off seven or eight or whatever number of positions is simply a numbers game. It does not consider the ramifications of doing so. A recent docket item, voted No Action Necessary, requested the state legislature grant a home rule initiative to reduce the size of our board by a certain number, but it is not clear how that number will be arrived at. Personally, I have to take issue with a process that asks us to take action first, and then decide how to handle the consequences after the fact. The current effort, although well intentioned, does not offer a salient approach to board reduction.