

## **A Fundamental, Unnecessary and Damaging Change**

Next Tuesday, Wellesley will decide whether to adopt a town manager form of government by voting to accept or reject the Special Act (the Act) under Question 1. If enacted, most of our elected boards will be effectively dismantled and authority will be concentrated in a town manager, who will not be elected by the voters. The Act raises both substantive and procedural concerns that deserve your attention.

**1. The act will fundamentally change the structure and philosophy of our government.** The operative language in the Act is “THE TOWN MANAGER SHALL MANAGE AND SUPERVISE ALL TOWN DEPARTMENTS except for the school department and the municipal light department.” Other Boards will be diminished. Citizens will be discouraged from participating on Town Boards since the Town Manager will set budgets and appoint and review staff, leaving little room for citizen influence. Don’t let this wholesale transmission of power be obscured by discussions of unspecified communication problems and late employee reviews. There are many ways to address these shortcomings that would keep citizen led government intact.

**2. The new system will lack transparency and accountability.** The town manager will not be subject to the Open Meeting Laws, in contrast to our elected boards. Decisions now made in open session by our boards, which begin every meeting with “Citizen Speak”, will be transferred to the town manager who can make these decisions without citizen input or even awareness. The Act contains insufficient checks and balances to make the town manager’s actions known to the public. The town manager will only be accountable to the Selectmen, so citizens’ only recourse will be to vote Selectmen out of office one at a time over the course of three years if they fail to satisfactorily supervise and guide the decisions of the town manager.

**3. Claims of efficiency and savings are unsubstantiated.** Town Meeting must deliver a balanced budget every year by law. Budgets grow because Wellesley voters support overrides. The argument that the budget is too big to be handled by decentralized boards is not supported by the facts. Indeed, most of the growth in the town’s budget and employee head count over the past 2 decades is related to the school department, which is the one board not subject to the town manager. Any efficiencies (which have yet to be identified) are likely to be more than offset by the costs of increased bureaucracy at Town Hall.

**4. The Special Act will tie the hands of the town.** Amending an Act is a lengthy, difficult process. It requires drafting a new Act, obtaining the approval of both town meeting and the state legislature, and then the approval of the citizens through another town-wide vote. The Town Government Study Committee (TGSC) chose to amend the town government through an Act to reassure town manager candidates that the town could not easily take away town manager powers. This fact alone is a compelling reason to vote against the Act in Question 1.

**5. Do we want to structure our government like a corporation?** We should be recognized for what we are: citizens who pay the taxes and are entitled to receive town services. We are not customers who can buy town products elsewhere if we are unhappy with what Wellesley provides. Further, we are not all looking for the same basket of services. The notion of “an alignment of town goals” should be challenged by everyone who understands that the needs and expectations of our residents are varied and competing, and that a democratic and open process is the fairest way to allocate resources, not the single voice of a manager tasked with achieving efficiencies.

**6. A flawed process.** The deep divisions among town residents reflect the flaws in procedure used to move the issue forward. The TGSC failed to present background information or to give us choices. Most towns take months if not years to reach agreement on significant government changes. There has been insufficient time for people to deliberate and understand alternatives. The TGSC may have engaged in a lengthy study, but it failed to share their knowledge with us. The extensive evaluation it describes involved 9 people.

**Let’s get this right!** A transition of this magnitude will be bumpy under the best of circumstances. The likelihood of success will be far higher if there is a strong consensus among town officials and residents of the merits of the change. Since there is general agreement that the town is currently not in crisis, let’s take the time to thoughtfully and collectively forge a future course. Please join me in voting NO on March 15.

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