


## Frequently Asked Questions

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## What is the ballot question on March 15 about?

Wellesley voters are being asked to make a radical change to our current government structure by approving a Special Act to enable a Selectmen-Town Manager form of government.

Although Town Meeting approved the Special Act with 120 votes – representing exactly one half the Town Meeting Members (because 41 members were absent or didn't cast a vote) – it will not become law unless a majority of Wellesley residents voting on March 15 approve it.

## Don't we already have a Town Manager?

No.

We have an Executive Director of General Government Services. Although our current Executive Director, Hans Larsen, does not have the title of Town Manager, he is already deputized by the Board of Selectmen to handle many of the same responsibilities of a Town Manager, particularly with respect to organizing and shepherding the annual Town budget through Town Meeting.

## How does Wellesley's town government work today?

Wellesley has a highly democratic, citizen-led, decentralized government.

Similar to the Federal Government, Wellesley has an executive branch (elected boards) and a legislative branch (Town Meeting). This creates the needed system of checks and balances that ensures that our government works.

Anyone can run for office. Town employees work for the elected boards, and in this way, our citizens run the government. Because our citizenry is highly educated, we have enjoyed an expert dedicated legion of volunteers who work in teams, under constant public scrutiny, to serve the town. By Open Meeting law, board members may not meet, deliberate, or make decisions without the public being able to attend. At every board meeting, citizens are allowed to speak.

## How will a Town Manager form of government affect me?

No one knows. There are always unintended consequences from any major change in government structure.

“If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Wellesley’s current form of government is not in crisis. Wellesley is one of the few towns with an AAA bond rating, a hallmark of an exceptionally well-run municipality. It is known for its outstanding schools, a vibrant library, beautiful parks, and cutting edge sustainability initiatives. These features are the direct result of the activism of a large group of civic volunteers who passionately promote and maintain the excellence of its institutions.

We are particularly concerned that an appointed Town Manager structure, reporting to the Selectmen and not subject to Open Meeting laws, will decrease the amount of transparency in Town government and make it harder for the voices of town residents and grass-roots advocacy groups to be heard.

### Who is “Save Wellesley Town Government”?

We are a group of concerned citizens from all walks of life and with diverse political views.

Some of us have been members of elected boards while others of us have been appointed to boards and committees; many of us serve or have served on Town Meeting. Most of us have been deeply involved in citizen-led initiatives or have advocated for town projects.

### Why is “Save Wellesley Town Government” opposing the ballot question?

We feel that it concentrates too much power in the hands of one individual and one board with insufficient checks and balances, and that a move to a more centralized government will deprive Wellesley of the extraordinary volunteer energy of our citizens.

Many of the people who oppose this ballot question are not opposed to the idea of a Town Administrator or Town Manager. We agree that the Town bylaws should be updated to bring the Executive Director’s role into alignment with actual practice. But we are concerned that the powers granted the Town Manager through the Special Act are too great, consolidating power in the Board of Selectmen and the Town Manager and reducing the authority of all other elected boards.

### Wasn’t there a thorough vetting of the Special Act before the Town Meeting vote?

No. The document was subject to many inter-related changes leading up to and during Town Meeting, making it difficult for Town Meeting members to comprehensively review it.

In April 2014, the Town Government Study Committee was formed to study Wellesley’s current government, and bring recommendations for improvement. They returned to

Town Meeting this past November not only with a report of their findings but with a sweeping plan to alter Wellesley's government through adoption of a Special Act. The public phase of the process was largely conducted between Labor Day and Halloween. The Fall Special Town Meeting generated a robust debate but did not feature alternatives for Town Meeting to choose between nor did Town Meeting have sufficient time to reflect on the ways the only presented proposal would impact our community. The eight nights of Town Meeting were contentious and many details of the constantly amended Special Act felt insufficiently vetted. Many members were absent for the final vote, which did not achieve support by a majority of the 240 Town Meeting members.

Most importantly, we feel that citizens were largely left out of the process.

### What are some of the specific concerns of the elected officials?

Many elected officials feel that the proposed form of government will compromise their ability to represent the voters who have elected them.

The Special Act places responsibility for managing Wellesley's employees firmly in the hands of the Town Manager. In most cases, the Town's department heads will report directly to the Town Manager. The Town Manager will be responsible for hiring, firing, and evaluating these department heads, with limited input from the elected boards. Only the schools and Municipal Light Plant will be exempt from direct Town Manager oversight. The Town Manager will control departmental budgets, with reduced opportunity for the boards to advocate for their budgets. Although elected boards will still set policies, they will have limited "tools" to enact them, diminishing their ability to be responsive to their constituencies and achieve the missions of their departments.

### What happens to Wellesley's government if the ballot question fails?

For the time being, we will continue to have an Executive Director.

Wellesley could decide to move forward with changes to our form of government in a different way. One possibility could be to establish a Charter Commission to develop a new form of Town government. Residents would be able to be elected (rather than appointed) to the Charter Commission which would ensure that more stakeholders were included. Alternatively, Town Meeting could amend the Town bylaws to update the Executive Director's authority as needed, and perhaps retitle this position Town Administrator. This would not require a Special Act and could be instituted (and amended in the future if necessary) by Town Meeting.

### How much will it cost to have a Town Manager form of government?

No one knows.

The proposed structure assigns 19 direct reports to the Town Manager, which is not a sustainable management model. The Town Government Study Committee has estimated that it will cost \$20,000 in additional salary for the Town Manager position and between \$16,000 and \$31,000 in additional salaries for each of two Assistant Town Managers. They also “anticipate that a Town Manager will manage within the existing structure and, if needed, will propose additional resources for approval in the future.”<sup>1</sup> We are concerned that the true costs of the Town Manager form of government, which places significantly greater responsibilities on the Town Manager than Executive Director, will be higher than this estimate.

### Will a Town Manager make Wellesley more efficient?

No one knows.

Proponents have hinted that the Town Manager form of government will result in efficiencies. However, the Town Government Study Committee and Selectmen have not quantified potential savings, if any. Good government is responsive to the needs of the community. It seeks to reach the best possible outcome for the citizens, not to reach the finish line in the fastest or cheapest way. Some of our greatest accomplishments such as the new High School, the Fuller Brook Park project, and the purchase of the North 40 – have succeeded *precisely because* leaders of those projects have taken the time to build consensus and develop community buy-in. Projects improve through the myriad skill sets, knowledge and guidance that residents bring to the table.

We can’t advocate for discarding a proven form of government in return for vague promises.

### If we approve the Special Act and then later decide it isn’t working for Wellesley and we want to change it, can we?

Yes, but it is difficult and highly unlikely.

Any changes to the Special Act would have to go through the same process that created this Special Act in the first place, namely a majority vote at Town Meeting, approval by the State legislature and Governor, and finally approval by the Town’s voters in another ballot question. In contrast, changes to the Town’s bylaws can be made solely by Town Meeting.

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<sup>1</sup> Town Government Study Report, page R-7 (see Town website)

