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Editor: Dan Bertrand

Editorial Board: Sean Cronin, Anthonia Bakare, Robert Bliss, Linda Bradley, Nate Cramer, Patricia Hunt, Tara Lynch, and Tony Rassias

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A Review of Municipal Government Structures

Tara Lynch - Technical Assistance Bureau Senior Project Manager

(The following is the first of a two-part series examining current local government structures and financial management frameworks in Massachusetts.)

The [Technical Assistance Bureau](#) (TAB) provides guidance to cities and towns on a variety of municipal matters, including those related to structural issues. Communities often contact TAB because they are contemplating merging their treasurer and collector offices, regionalizing a position or function, developing a charter, or transforming to a city form of government, among many other decisions.

As a resource for our analyses, TAB maintains a database of the various structures in effect in the Commonwealth's 351 municipalities. Sources for this include municipal websites, other external agencies, community reviews that TAB conducts, and the Gateway Local Officials Directory, whose data is submitted to the Division of Local Services (DLS) annually by individuals in each community. Although the quality of the accumulated data is imperfect since it is subject to the timeliness and accuracy of local submissions and updates, it nevertheless provides a credible overall picture of municipal governments statewide. The information also reflects and allows TAB to track trends that emerge as the governance landscape grows more complex and as communities mature and evolve.

Based on TAB's current data, Massachusetts today comprises 295 towns and 56 cities. Among the cities are 14 that retain "Town of" in

their names, including the Town of East Longmeadow (pop. 16,022), which adopted a city form of government effective the first of this month. Although the uninitiated may assume that a large population is the crucial influencer of town versus city government structures, this is not the case. In the Commonwealth, city populations range in size from Palmer's modest 12,157 to Boston's 645,966, while towns range from Gosnold's 76 to Framingham's sizeable 70,441.

Generally speaking, towns begin to consider petitioning the state to transform to a city form of government when the traditional, organizationally flatter and less legislatively nimble town model increasingly strains to effectively manage fiscal complexities, economic development, and service demands. Apart from population factors, the point at which this happens can be affected by unique historical aspects, rooted socioeconomic factors, regional changes, and local political momentum toward an ever more vertically aligned, accountable government structure. Population, though, is the easiest of these to quantify.

The tipping-point population range when there is a somewhat even balance of cities and towns appears to be from 25,000 to 45,000. Of the 51 municipalities in that range, 23 (45%) are cities and 28 are towns (55%). The prevalence of cities becomes far more pronounced once populations exceed 35,000. By this point, only seven (16%) of the state's 45 communities over that size remain towns: Natick (35,214), Shrewsbury (36,309), Amherst (38,919), Billerica (41,888), Arlington (44,028), Plymouth (57,826), Brookline (59,128) and Framingham (70,441).

But what exactly is the difference between cities and towns? In Massachusetts, the essential difference is structural: a city is defined by the presence of a city or town council as the alternative legislative body to a town meeting. Having a mayor as the chief executive officer is optional though predominant in the state, this role being present in 43 cities (77%). Chelsea, Cambridge, Lowell and Worcester each have as their chief executive officer a city manager, who is appointed by and reports to the elected city council. While the latter three cities also have mayors, they hold only ceremonial positions. Additionally, there are eight "Town of" cities that have town managers and one with a town administrator.

In a town, executive authority is vested in an elected board of selectmen. The selectmen may choose to appoint a full- or part-time professional to manage town affairs on a day-to-day basis, and the incidence of such an administrator generally correlates to the town's population size. The creation of this type of position can be effected through a charter, bylaw or town vote.

[MGL c. 41, sec. 23A](#) is the general law that authorizes selectmen "to appoint an executive secretary or town administrator." Although the statute makes no distinction between these two titles, in practice, a

greater degree of management and appointing authority tends to be delegated to town administrators, either by formal job description or bylaw. Furthermore, some towns choose to give a different job title to the administrator position, such as town coordinator or executive director. As a well-established best practice, TAB consistently endorses centralized government structures with clear lines of authority because they enable better oversight and accountability. In pursuit of this, many progressive communities refashion the town administrator position and retitle it to town manager, oftentimes doing so through a charter or special act. On a case-by-case basis, though, the difference between a town administrator and town manager can also be purely semantic.

The vast majority of towns statewide now have an appointed, professional, administrator-type position (260 towns, 88%). The ranges of work hours, salaries, oversight authority, and appointing powers among these officeholders vary quite widely, however. In 35 towns (12%), the select boards have appointed no administrator position, although there is usually a person performing at least a clerical function for the selectmen. Statewide, the job titles for the professional administrator in towns break out as follows:

- Town administrator: 172 (58%)
- Town manager: 63 (21%)
- Executive secretary: 8 (3%)
- Town coordinator: 6 (2%)
- Other titles: 7 (2%)

The second part of this series will be presented in a future *City & Town* and further examine local government structure in the context of financial management and the options available for effecting structural change.