

Town of Lincoln, Massachusetts

Comprehensive Plan



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Lincoln Planning Board

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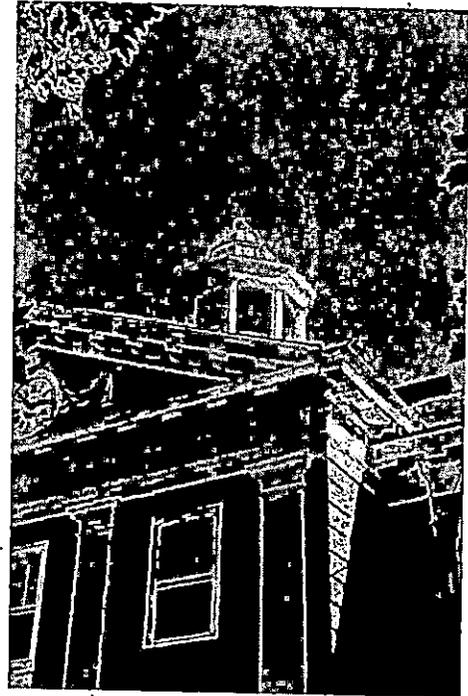
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Governance

OVERVIEW

Like many Massachusetts towns, Lincoln has seen a perceived decline in civic engagement by residents as evidenced by declines in town meeting participation and the number of volunteers and candidates for election. Although this may be attributable to the absence of highly contentious issues or the severe time constraints of dual income families, it is nevertheless a concern of many long-term residents.



Key Findings

- ❖ Lincoln has a fairly traditional small-town government with an open town meeting, a three-member Board of Selectmen, and a town administrator.
- ❖ Lincoln has numerous elected boards and appointed town committees, and some boards with both elected and appointed positions. Overall, its town government is designed to provide many opportunities to participate.
- ❖ Lincoln's regional affiliations are unique due to the presence of Hanscom Air Force Base (HAFB) and Hanscom Field. Some of Lincoln's ties with neighboring towns relate directly to the presence of these military and aviation facilities.
- ❖ Like many towns in Massachusetts, Lincoln has seen a perceived decline in town meeting participation, although this concern has been expressed periodically. There have been relatively few contested town elections over several decades. Recently, however, it seems more difficult to recruit candidates to run for office or volunteer for appointment.

Key Challenges

- ❖ Increasing public participation on town boards and committees as well as attendance at town meeting will be significant challenges for Lincoln. Reversing what appears to be a trend toward declining participation will take sustained leadership from town officials, a commitment of volunteer and staff resources, and more effective collaboration with established local organizations and networks.
- ❖ Lincoln may need to seek more effective avenues for providing public information and communication within town government and between government and residents. Toward these ends, the town might consider enhancing its use of information technology although this could require a significant investment of public funds.

- ❖ There is consensus that communication among Lincoln's town boards and committees needs improvement. Achieving this goal will require active efforts by both town staff and volunteers. At the outset this will place a significant burden on both staff and volunteers, but in the long term it should create a more efficient government with a parallel and probable reduction in the overall effort.

EXISTING CONDITIONS & TRENDS

A community's approach to governance largely determines how well it can resolve conflicts, develop consensus, set policy, and manage its affairs. On one level, "governance" consists of tangible components: the institutions that a community creates and arranges to conduct the work of local government, such as legislation, taxation, regulation, enforcement, and delivery of public services. On another level, it is a set of intangibles: an expression of a community's political culture, including the beliefs, values and principles that shape policy and guide local decision-making.

One of the traditional ways of characterizing governance involves rating a unit of government's organization and authority on scales of *effectiveness* and *efficiency*. An *effective* government is typically one that citizens regard as responsive to people, and an *efficient* government is one that citizens regard as high-value relative to cost, with little if any waste of resources. Although a government can rank high on both counts – effective and efficient – an effective government is not necessarily efficient and an efficient government is not necessarily effective. Some communities want a *decentralized* government that works slowly and deliberatively by design, with many avenues for citizens to influence or participate directly in decisions large and small. Other communities want a *centralized* government that operates mainly as an administrative unit, with clear lines of authority, a high degree of accountability, and controlled access to the decision-making process. However, most communities seem to want something "in the middle," as evidenced by the number of local government permutations that exist in Massachusetts today. Lincoln is a hybrid of decentralized and streamlined organizations, but the degree of streamlining that exists in Lincoln today is informal because for the most part it is not codified.

Organization of Town Government in Lincoln

Lincoln is one of 213 municipalities in Massachusetts without its own *charter*: a written description of a community's form of government and distribution of powers, approved first by the town and thereafter, by the General Court.¹ Many state laws on municipal government date to the early 1800s, but some have been changed in order to give communities simple ways to streamline and consolidate separate functions under one board or department. However, the general law version of small-town government is decentralized by design, with legislative decisions made by an open town meeting. The degree of citizen participation it requires is evident in Lincoln. Although many Eastern Massachusetts communities have moved toward more centralization and consolidation since the early 1980s, Lincoln has preserved its custom of electing an large number of boards, commissions, and individual officers of the town. Lincoln voters currently elect a combined total of fifty-two local officials. In addition, Lincoln has numerous appointed committees and statutory office holders. Excluding appointed employees of the town there are more than 160 appointed members of standing boards and committees.²

1 Not all charters are developed or take effect in the same way because there are two types of charters in Massachusetts: home rule and special act charters. Though communities can use either method to develop any form of government they choose, the home rule charter process is more prescriptive.

2 See Appendix D, Elected and Appointed Boards, Commissions, and Committees.

Lincoln has many non-profit organizations that provide services or work directly with town government on matters of general public interest. The Rural Land Foundation (RLF) and the Lincoln Land Conservation Trust (LLCT) are good examples of non-profits that work in partnership with the town on land planning and open space preservation. They also rely on volunteers to carry out their work, though the RLF also has a paid executive director and paid assistant. Other examples of privately run groups that work hand-in-hand with the town include The Lincoln Foundation, Codman Community Farms, Lincoln's youth sports organizations, the Lincoln Historical Society, and the Lincoln School Foundation. Lincoln is an active community with many functions that depend on civic-minded people. Since its population is only 5,500, including roughly 4,100 adults, many residents volunteer for more than one task.³

The town has appointed representatives to several regional organizations, such as the Hanscom Field Advisory Commission, the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) and its subregional arm, the Minuteman Advisory Group for Interlocal Coordination (MAGIC), the Route 128 Corridor Advisory Committee, and the Hanscom Area Towns Selectmen (HATS). However, Lincoln's government has few elements of *regionalism*, less because of qualities unique to Lincoln than the structure of Massachusetts government as a whole. In other parts of the country, regional governments handle many responsibilities that New England cities and towns administer on their own. The Massachusetts model of state and local government has always involved a "direct line" between Beacon Hill and municipalities, with counties – when they existed – having jurisdiction over a limited number of functions.

While Lincoln has many elected and appointed officials, it also has a departmental structure similar to that of communities with a centralized organization, such as Lexington. Many years ago, town meeting adopted the provisions of M.G.L. c. 41, s. 23A, which allows communities to establish the position of executive secretary. In 2000, Lincoln changed the position title to town administrator. Much like a town manager, the town administrator is generally responsible for the day-to-day operations of local government. Unlike a town manager, a town administrator has as much or as little direct authority as a board of selectmen chooses to delegate. Lincoln's town administrator has both day-to-day operational responsibilities and considerable influence in key decisions, but no formal (codified) authority over the town budget, personnel matters, or the awarding

Lincoln's Regional Affiliations (Partial Listing)

Town of Concord (Interlocal Agreement:
Health Department Inspections, Sealer of
Weights and Measures)
Hanscom Field Advisory Commission
Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC)
Minuteman Advisory Group for Interlocal
Coordination (MAGIC)
Hanscom Area Towns Selectmen (HATS)
Route 2 Corridor Advisory Committee
Route 128 Central Corridor Coalition
Metropolitan Council for Educational
Opportunity, Inc. (METCO)
Lincoln-Sudbury Regional School District
Minuteman Regional School District
Concord Area Special Education (CASE)
Educational Collaborative for Greater Boston
(EDCO)
Minuteman Library Network
Metropolitan Boston Emergency Medical
Services Council (EMS Region IV)
Massachusetts Emergency Management
Agency (MEMA) Region I
Northwest Suburban Health Alliance
Massachusetts Department of Public Health
Community Health Network Area (CHNA)

³ Current population estimate from Claritas, Inc., Site Reports 2008, Lincoln, Massachusetts.

of contracts. Like so many towns in Massachusetts, Lincoln's form of government qualifies as something "in the middle." It has the basic components of a modern bureaucracy, but not the attendant centralization.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Lincoln's government is primarily a *participatory-deliberative* institution – that is, a governance structure that is largely decentralized, with powers and duties shared by many officials and a legislative body open to all registered voters. A government with many committees and an open town meeting provides important avenues for public participation, which Lincoln residents value. As one resident said at a public meeting for this Comprehensive Plan, "Lincoln is a place where you can truly make a difference."⁴ Still, it can be difficult to balance a desire for public participation with a desire for efficiency because a system that accommodates multiple voices in the decision-making process usually works through deliberation. This quality of the town has often been referred to as "the Lincoln way," and people say they appreciate it. However, decisions made through extensive deliberation take more time and they are vulnerable to being postponed or reversed. A positive feature of a participatory-deliberative mode of governance is that residents have lots of opportunities to shape policy. A negative feature is that if the ground rules for participation are unclear, the experience of government service may leave some volunteers dissatisfied and discourage them from serving in the future.

Many towns are finding it difficult to maintain citizen interest in government, and Lincoln faces a similar challenge. Lincoln has numerous volunteer boards and committees and a politically active population, so it is not surprising to hear residents describe the town as a "model of civic engagement" with "many places to get involved for many interests." However, some residents worry about declining attendance at town meeting, the aging make-up of the population that does attend town meeting, and a decrease in the number of contested elections. Responding to a survey conducted for this Comprehensive Plan, several local officials said town meeting is not working, yet others described town meeting as one of Lincoln's major strengths.⁵ There is concern that newcomers may not recognize the value of citizen participation, but some think participation would improve if the town took creative steps to recruit more volunteers. They also think the perception of an "open-ended time commitment" may discourage people from accepting a committee appointment or running for office.⁶

Towns with participatory-deliberative organizations like Lincoln's need both volunteers to serve on boards and committees and space for their volunteers to meet, conveniently located meeting rooms with access to records, and parking. Today, the public often expects that meetings will be televised, too, which means that some meeting rooms need cable access. In many communities, the limited number of public meeting rooms that Lincoln has to offer would not begin to accommodate the boards and committees that need them. Lincoln seems to have managed with the space it has, at least in the past, but this is partially because Lincoln boards and committees meet both during the day and at night. Still, the meeting spaces that do exist are conspicuously limited and not always accessible to people with disabilities. Moreover, not everyone has the schedule flexibility to participate in daytime meetings. Arrangements that work well for individual committee members may not be conducive to broader public participation.

4 Town of Lincoln, "Large-Group Discussion Notes," 9 February 2008, and "June 19th [2007] Public Forum Group Exercise Results," <http://www.lincolntown.org/depts/planning.htm>, select "CLRP web page."

5 Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee, Cultural and Historic Resources and Governance Subcommittee, "Board Survey; Open-Ended Responses," [undated], to Community Opportunities Group, Inc., 21 May 2008.

6 Town of Lincoln, "February 9 Workshop Notes: Cultural and Historic Resources and Governance Subcommittee," <http://www.lincolntown.org/depts/planning.htm>, select "CLRP web page."

Participatory-deliberative governments also need a process for direct communication between boards and committees. Lincoln does not seem to have a clear or predictable communications structure in place for its volunteers. This concern has surfaced repeatedly in meetings and master plan surveys. Current and former town officials report the need for “better communication among boards,” “more joint meetings to resolve problems” and more coordination between the town’s development review boards in particular.⁷ Department heads supporting the work of volunteers help by communicating with each other, but they do not speak *for* the boards and committees with authority to make a decision. Some towns rely on quarterly meetings or as-needed “all boards” meetings to facilitate communication among volunteers. Lincoln once had periodic board meetings called by the town moderator, but this practice has ceased and some say it should be restored. Like a growing number of communities statewide, Lincoln posts the meeting minutes of several boards and committees on its website. However, minutes reflect actions that have already occurred, and they may not fully convey the essence of a board’s deliberations. Meeting minutes do not substitute for a conversation, and sometimes what decision-makers need most is a chance to consult with their colleagues. Lincoln also has an interesting mechanism to encourage community conversations – the State of the Town Meeting – and many people value it. Others say that while the State of the Town Meeting helps to bring residents together for public information and discussion, it does not solve the problem of inter-board communication.

Finally, communities that expect to attract and retain devoted volunteers need a culture of cooperation and a process for working out disputes. In Lincoln, there is some disagreement about the degree of cooperation inside town government or the effectiveness of existing mechanisms for achieving consensus. Descriptions of Lincoln’s strengths as its “town culture,” “efforts to reach consensus,” and a place “that looks beyond itself” stand in contrast to perceptions of “difficulty in engaging in mature public discussion/debate” and “a spirit of selectivity.”⁸ Many long-time residents praise Lincoln’s approach to weighing, debating, and resolving major public policy questions, and they say local government’s historic efforts to reach out to the community have helped to make Lincoln all that it is today. Their view of Lincoln’s dedication to consensus conflicts with concerns expressed by some more recent arrivals who think insiders resist newcomers and new ideas.

ADMINISTRATION

Lincoln has nineteen town departments with a combined total of approximately 101 full-time equivalent personnel.⁹ A strong suit of Lincoln’s local government is the cooperation and sense of unity that exist among department heads and staff. Lincoln is impressive for the services its local government provides. Through its own municipal and school employees, Lincoln delivers services that many other towns offer only on a limited basis or do not offer at all. The breadth of programs offered by the Recreation Department and Conservation Department, Lincoln’s commitment to community preservation, its outstanding public library, and the climate of public service that characterizes Town Offices all point to a community that holds high expectations of its local government. Town departments have responded in kind, but the cost of government has changed significantly since the late 1990s and revenue growth has not kept pace without frequent overrides of Proposition 2 ½. This is due to a combination of factors: fixed costs beyond Lincoln’s control, choices town meeting has made to keep Lincoln the kind of place that residents say they want, and an almost exclusively residential tax base.¹⁰

7 Comprehensive Long-Range Plan Committee, “Survey of Town Board and Committee Members.”

8 Ibid, “Large-Group Discussion Notes” and “February 9 Workshop Notes.”

9 Colleen Wilkins, Lincoln Finance Director, to Community Opportunities Group, Inc., 18 April 2008.

10 For additional information about Lincoln’s fiscal condition and fiscal policies, see Chapter 10, Community Services & Facilities, and Chapter 12, Lincoln’s Town Finances.

Local Government Traditions

HOME RULE

In Massachusetts, "local government" includes incorporated cities and towns. Since 1966, the Commonwealth has operated as a "home rule" state, which means that municipalities have a constitutional "right" of self-government and authority to design their own form of government – to a point. Even before 1966, the General Court approved local government organizational changes petitioned by cities and towns and over time, Massachusetts has assembled an interesting collection of local governments. They range from the highly decentralized, all-volunteer governments found in very small towns west of the Connecticut River to the City of Everett's unusual bicameral legislature – a Board of Alderman and Common Council – and mayor.

"Home rule" does not mean that municipalities have absolute control over their affairs. In municipal law, "home rule" is thought of as the opposite of "Dillon's Rule," a principle articulated by a nineteenth century judge from Iowa, who argued that local governments possess only those powers explicitly granted to them by the state.¹¹ An important difference between so-called "Dillon's Rule" and home rule states is that municipal powers are narrowly construed in the former and broadly construed in the latter. That is, local governments under home rule in its purest form possess all the powers not explicitly claimed by the state. A second difference involves the ease with which states can preempt locally adopted ordinances or bylaws. In Massachusetts and other states with constitutional provisions that guarantee the right of home rule to all municipalities, home rule is not without limitations.¹² Local governments in Massachusetts are prohibited from establishing charters and adopting bylaws or ordinances that are inconsistent with state law or supersede the General Court's authority over six matters: regulating elections, levying taxes, borrowing money, disposing of park land, enacting laws governing civil relationships, setting punishments for felonies or imposing prison sentences for a violation of law.¹³

11 John F. Dillon, *Treatise on the Law of Municipal Corporations*, (1872), 101-102, citing *Merriam v. Moody's Executors*, 25 Iowa 163, 170 (1868).

12 In practice, the differences between "Dillon's Rule" and "home rule" states are not always clear. The Brookings Institution categorizes 31 states as "Dillon's Rule" states and another eight as "partially" Dillon's Rule states, i.e., with home rule powers granted to some classes of municipalities (in most cases, cities). The ten states with constitutional guarantees of home rule include Alaska, Iowa, Massachusetts, Montana, New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, South Carolina and Utah. Many of the Dillon's Rule states do have some form of home rule, but not the constitutional "self-executing" home rule that applies to all municipalities in states such as Iowa and Massachusetts.

13 Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Article LXXXIX ("Home Rule Amendment"), Section 7.

What constitutes a town?

Neither state law nor the courts provide much guidance about the legal differences between a city and town, except that eligibility to establish a city government requires a total population of at least 12,000. However, the key distinction lies with type of legislative body. Under a town form of government, each town must hold an annual town meeting and may hold special town meetings if called by the board of selectmen (or petitioned by voters).

Towns also have a plural executive – a board of selectmen – and the selectmen control the town meeting warrant. Towns usually have more elected boards and individual office holders than cities, yet the only offices towns are required to fill by ballot vote are the selectmen and school committee (and members of a representative town meeting, where applicable). Although cities have independent authority to adopt local ordinances, town bylaws require approval by the Attorney General.

In Massachusetts, home rule is mainly the right to adopt a plan of government. It does not include all possible forms of local autonomy, notably *fiscal autonomy*. Accordingly, the authors of a report published by the Rappaport Institute argue: "...there is no home rule in Massachusetts in the sense of local independence and autonomy. The state has established a complex mix of grants of and limitations on local power. This mix of powers and disabilities creates the constrained environment within which municipal officials operate..."¹⁴ As a result, home rule consists of blurred rights with respect to the health, safety and welfare interests of a community's population. Nowhere is this more obvious than municipal authority over land use regulation and revenue. Despite home rule, Massachusetts places more limits on local authority to raise revenue than most states. For example, there is considerable debate in Massachusetts about the legality of development impact fees. While impact fees are common in most states, Massachusetts towns have been discouraged from attempting to implement them due to a series of court decisions beginning with *Emerson College v. City of Boston* (1984).

MECHANISMS FOR SELF-GOVERNANCE

The "default" or standard powers and duties of municipal officials appear in the Commonwealth's general laws, and most communities in Massachusetts still operate under them to some degree. Cities and towns seeking to change their form of government have access to three options:

- ❖ Petition the legislature for a "special act" charter, as Lexington, Concord, Sudbury, and Waltham have done;
- ❖ Adopt the provisions of "enabling" or local option statutes – a form of *legislative home rule* – found variously in M.G.L. c.40N, c.41 and c. 43C, as Lincoln and Wayland have done; or
- ❖ Establish a charter commission and adopt a home rule charter under the Home Rule Amendment (Article 89), ratified by voters in 1966, and M.G.L. c.43B, the Home Rule Procedures Act, enacted by the legislature in 1967. Bedford has a home rule charter.

NEEDS, ISSUES & CHALLENGES

Town Meeting Attendance

For many people in Lincoln and beyond, open town meeting embodies popularly held ideas about democracy. Residents clearly value town meeting and want to see it preserved, but many of Lincoln's long-time residents as well as leadership are concerned about the perception that town meeting attendance is declining as evidenced by the limited presence of newcomers and younger attendees. This concern may be recurring as it was equally on the minds of those who participated in the Lincoln Logs the Future forum in 1991. It may be indicative of how difficult it is for many dual-income families to engage in civic participation or maintain an interest in local government, a fact that may have contributed to the dissolution of the Lincoln League of Women Voters in 1995?. It may also be indicative of broader changes in society in which a younger generation may not relate to government as an entity on which they can have an effect. In truth, these are speculations, but ones worth watching as Lincoln works to preserve this classic New England form of self-government.

Although there may be a general trend that fewer people are voting or attending town meeting, the numbers do not necessarily support the notion that there are fewer contested elections in Lincoln. These concerns may be heard in other Massachusetts towns with an open town meeting, but contested elections in Lincoln have occurred

14 Barron, et al., *Dispelling the Myth of Home Rule*, (Rappaport Institute, 2004), 77.

periodically over the last thirty years, usually when there are differing views on pressing issues. Nevertheless, Lincoln may need to think about some innovative ways to encourage both newcomers *and* longer-term-but-inactive residents to participate in town meeting and to take advantage of the opportunity to engage in the full range of civic responsibilities offered by living in a small town.

With respect to town meeting, the town may want to consider some of the factors that could explain varying rates of attendance.

- ❖ Attending town meeting takes time. According to the Comprehensive Plan survey, sixty-four percent of the respondents who did not attend Lincoln's annual town meeting in 2007 cited time conflicts or time constraints as their only reason for non-attendance, with some saying that town meeting "takes too long."¹⁵
- ❖ Lincoln holds its town meeting on a Saturday in March. Although this arrangement may have worked well in the past, perhaps it should be revisited. Ironically, Lincoln used to conduct its annual town meeting at night, but following the "By '80 Conference on Education and Town Affairs," the town responded to recommendations from residents and instituted a Saturday meeting.
- ❖ Lincoln spends considerable time preparing for town meeting and tries to inform the public ahead of time about major decisions that need to be made. While its website could stand some improvements, Lincoln does a commendable job of making important information available on the internet. Still, mailing the annual town meeting warrant to all households and posting information on the town's website may not be enough to engage the public. Cable television announcements, town meeting broadcasts, or pre-town meeting neighborhood parties provide additional ways to make people aware of town meeting and encourage them to participate. However, these initiatives take time and also require volunteers.
- ❖ On balance, residents may be content with how the town is run. In most communities, town meeting attendance seems to increase during periods of unhappiness about taxes or dissatisfaction with town government, or when voters have to act on a controversial matter such as an override. Alternatively, residents may have concerns about how the town is run and how their tax dollars are spent, but if they believe town meeting is ineffective, they will not attend.
- ❖ In the absence of controversy, people are more likely to attend town meeting if they believe their interests are at stake and they can influence the outcome of a decision. Lincoln's population has changed over time, so perhaps the town has fewer residents who believe they have much power to affect local decisions.
- ❖ People who hold public office, whether elected or appointed, may be more inclined to think they have a stake in how the town is run than residents who have never served on a town board or committee.
- ❖ New residents unfamiliar with open town meeting may not realize that they have a right to participate and vote on such basic issues as the town's operating budget. They also may not understand that most of the town's budget is financed with property tax revenue.
- ❖ As Lincoln's population has changed, the demographic make-up of the town has changed as well. Though Lincoln has always been an affluent town, its mix of farms, estates, and modest homes suggests that historically, Lincoln had a somewhat more diverse population. Some local officials wonder if there is generally less interest in participating in civic affairs among newer residents.

15 Comprehensive Long-Range Plan Committee, *Report on Lincoln Citizens' Needs and Interests* (October 2008), 1-2. See Appendix E for survey questionnaire.

Public Participation

Communities throughout the state report greater difficulty recruiting residents to serve on town boards and committees, and uncontested races have become increasingly common. Lincoln wants to preserve its tradition of citizen involvement in town government and encourage new residents to participate. One speaker at a public meeting said that Lincoln's attraction to home buyers is "...what they see and not what they feel. There is less emphasis on shared community values than before." However, others say the town is fortunate to have as many volunteers as it has managed to retain, and that Lincoln traditionally welcomes a "diversity of ideas."

The experience of the Comprehensive Plan process suggests that Lincoln does have diverse ideas – and even if town government disagrees with some of those ideas, local officials listen. Lincoln could take steps to make public service inviting to more residents, but some barriers to participation will remain difficult to overcome.

- ❖ The Comprehensive Plan survey suggests that residents are more likely to be asked to serve on a town board or committee if they are connected in some way to an established network: parents of children in the public schools, people who have lived in Lincoln for more than a decade, or frequent users of the town's recreation facilities. As the authors of the survey report said, "...those who seek to fill empty volunteer positions need to call the people they don't know rather than the people they know."¹⁶
- ❖ More people commute longer distances to work today than ever before. Journey-to-work statistics for Lincoln confirm that local residents spent more time in the car traveling to more distant locations for employment in 2000 than in 1990.¹⁷ Similar conditions occurred throughout the state. Many employed people have less time to devote to public service today, and the effects can be seen not only in most Eastern Massachusetts suburbs but also in small, rural communities in Western Massachusetts: from a decrease in the number of residents running for office to a sharp decline in call firefighters. Still, while residents with a long commute may find it impossible to join a board or committee that meets frequently, they may be willing to serve on a board that meets once a month.
- ❖ Even for those with time to serve, they may place a higher priority on other interests than joining a town board or attending town meeting.
- ❖ Often, residents who would never run for office will agree to serve on an appointed committee. Although some exceptions exist, elected boards tend to be more visible, which means they also tend to attract more public scrutiny. When people have limited time to commit to volunteer activities, they have to decide how much criticism they are willing to endure.
- ❖ A government structure that relies more heavily on appointed volunteers would create some new needs and magnify needs that already exist in Lincoln. Recruiting volunteers takes time, and usually it requires both public outreach and personal contact. A small corps of dynamic volunteers taking responsibility for recruiting and mentoring new volunteers would probably work well in Lincoln. Historically, this was one of the major contributions of the League of Women Voters (LWV). For several decades, the LWV served to recruit, educate, and train residents interested in civic affairs. Unfortunately, a severe decline in active membership caused the LLWV to cease operations around 2004. Filling this vacuum may require significant leadership from the town's primary appointing authorities: the Board of Selectmen and Town Moderator.

¹⁶ Ibid, 3.

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1990 Census of Population and Housing, Summary File 3, Tables P048, P049, and P050; and Census 2000, Summary File 3, Tables P29, P30, and P31, American FactFinder, <http://www.census.gov>.

In addition, seeking participants rarely works without a consistent process in place for managing applications or inquiries from prospective volunteers: prompt responses from the town, periodic checks to verify continued interest, and a database that can be used to store basic "talent bank" information about residents so that skills can be matched easily with openings on town committees.

- ❖ All town boards, elected or appointed, have to comply with the Open Meeting Law, which requires them to deliberate and make all of their decisions in public. While the Open Meeting Law has important functions, it makes it more difficult for boards and committees to have candid discussions and test new, potentially unpopular ideas. Town officials are more likely to think twice about what they say and how they say it. The press and the public can be so focused on assuring "transparency" in government that people sometimes forget how difficult public decision-making can be.
- ❖ Mentoring of new volunteers is important for helping citizens acclimate to public service and develop an understanding of the culture, strengths and limitations of local government.
- ❖ Lincoln may need to consider consolidating or eliminating some of its existing committees, as the town did recently when it assigned the duties of the former Celebrations Committee to the Recreation Committee.
- ❖ Veteran local officials speak reverently of Lincoln's past achievements. They worry about what the future holds if Lincoln fails to attract a new generation citizens dedicated to a volunteer form of town government. One respondent to a survey of present and past town officials described a key weakness of the town as a "gradual deterioration in Lincoln's pervasive, unifying ethos for conservation, open space, and rural character." Whether long-time residents can effectively pass the baton of civic involvement to newcomers remains to be seen. Newer residents may simply have different ideas about what it means to live in Lincoln. As stated in *Lincoln Logs the Future* in words taken from an address given by Dr. Edward Waldo Emerson at the banquet held in celebration of Lincoln's 150th anniversary in 1904:

Naturally, when new names and new ways come into old towns, there is a temporary dislocation felt by both parties. The old residents who value and continue the ways and standards of their ancestors may be anxious and disturbed. The newcomers, brought up under different conditions, may not be quite prepared to live on old-time country principles.

Efficiency

Over the past fifteen to twenty years, many suburbs and small towns in Eastern Massachusetts have looked to departmental mergers as a way to reduce costs and make more efficient use of available resources. Although some report later that they did not save much, virtually all say they achieved operating efficiencies and thereby accomplished more with available funds. Increasing efficiency can reduce some of the stress on local government and improve the community's capacity to plan. In Lincoln, improving communication between town boards could help town government function more efficiently. Structural changes such as inter-board liaisons, a predictable schedule of joint meetings, or breakfast meetings for board chairs seem realistic for Lincoln.

Regionalism

Despite the fact that Lincoln participates in numerous regional organizations, some residents wonder if the town should do more to cultivate regional relationships. At a Comprehensive Plan meeting in February 2008, a resident noted that, "Lincoln tends to think of itself as somewhat isolated, but the town is part of a region and needs to reach out/integrate with the larger environment." Lincoln is not alone in this view, as evidenced

by the actions of some neighboring communities who are represented at these regional meetings. Some town board members also think Lincoln should “put more emphasis on regional approaches to collaboration.” For small towns such as Lincoln, the important questions are whether residents have an appetite for surrendering some control in order to collaborate with other towns, and whether the potential advantages of regionalizing outweigh the risk that the interests of larger communities could supersede the interests of smaller communities.

Regional services exist in Massachusetts, but there is little in the way of *regional government*. Outside of New England, counties function as governing units with executive and legislative powers and financial responsibility for nearly all regional services, including county-level regional schools and regional planning. In Massachusetts, the limited presence and authority of regional institutions long pre-dates the Home Rule Amendment and reflects a historical deference to cities and towns. Massachusetts once had fourteen counties, each with administrative responsibility for county courts, jails, a registry of deeds, and maintenance of county roads. In the late 1990s, the Commonwealth began to abolish county governments and by the end of 1999, eight of its original fourteen counties had been dismantled – including Middlesex County. These areas still have a geographic identity for census purposes, but they have neither a political identity nor any of the governing powers of a county. In some parts of the state, towns have approved charters for regional councils of government to replace their former county governments.¹⁸

Most of the Commonwealth’s thirteen regional planning agencies also have limited authority. Each regional planning agency serves a central city and metropolitan area. Lincoln belongs to the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), which covers 101 Boston-area cities and towns. More than twenty years ago, MAPC established sub-regional organizations in order to provide more locally oriented services and energize its constituents. The sub-region that includes Lincoln, MAGIC, is the administrative unit for the Route 2 Corridor Advisory Committee and other services in its thirteen-town catchment area. Although MAPC is influential in statewide planning issues, it has no power to require communities to adopt plans consistent with a regional plan. The state provides very little financial support for planning, so regional planning agencies depend on other funding sources, notably federal transportation funding. MAPC’s recent regional plan, MetroFuture, represents a noble effort to inspire communities in the Greater Boston area, but it has no legal standing under current state law.

Massachusetts has other types of regional organizations with public or quasi-public powers: regional school districts, economic development agencies and corporations, housing authorities, transit authorities, emergency planning and response districts, regional library consortia, and health care service delivery networks. The boundaries of these regional service areas differ by service type (Figure 11.1). On one hand, defining regional service delivery areas by factors other than county lines means they could be more responsive to conditions “on the ground.” On the other hand, it all but assures that no single unit could serve as the administering agency for all or even most regional programs and services.

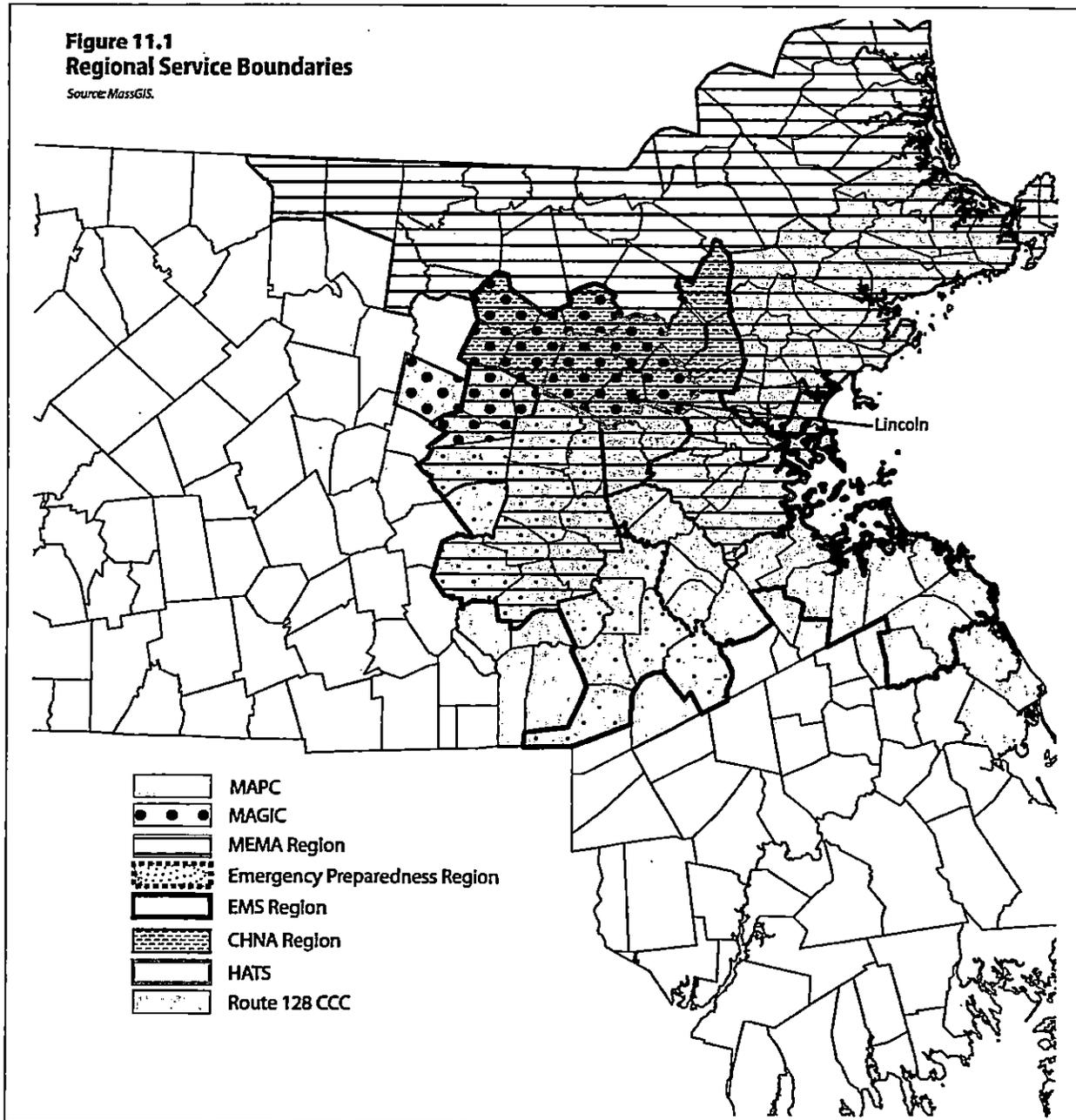
There are a few outstanding examples of inter-local service delivery initiated by individual towns, such as the Hamilton-Wenham Public Library and the Joint Hamilton-Wenham Recreation Department.¹⁹ Lincoln also provides some services through inter-local agreements, contracts with larger regional organizations and private

¹⁸ Massachusetts counties have no constitutionally guaranteed right of home rule. The legislature has created an optional process for establishing county charters and adopting alternative forms of county government in M.G.L. c.34A.

¹⁹ The Department of Revenue, Division of Local Services, recently completed a feasibility study of merging Hamilton and Wenham into a single community. See *Enhanced Regionalization and Merger Analysis: Towns of Hamilton and Wenham*, June 2009.

**Figure 11.1
Regional Service Boundaries**

Source: MassGIS.



service providers, and informal arrangements with neighboring towns. Communities always have informal, cooperative arrangements with neighboring towns, too, such as mutual aid (public safety) and occasional equipment sharing. Most of these programs and services reflect decisions made by municipalities to seek resources beyond their own corporate boundaries.

Communication

One of the most oft-cited concerns in Lincoln is that town government needs better ways to communicate, both internally and with the public. Lincoln's communication challenges relate partially to the size of the town and partially to the form of government that residents want to preserve. It is a small town with a large government: large not because Lincoln has a complex hierarchy of well-staffed departments, but rather because Lincoln has

many boards and committees. With so many people involved in town government – full-time and part-time staff and volunteers – it is not surprising that Lincoln has problems managing communication.

- ❖ **Municipal Website.** Lincoln's official website contains valuable information – for those with the time and motivation to search for it. Town government's entire communications technology system is managed by a one-person department. The issue is not lack of talent. Rather, it is lack of resources. Improving the website's design would go far to make it more usable to a wider range of people, but designing a website is one task and maintaining it is another. Making substantive changes to the town's website will require voters to make a significant investment in up-front services and may require an ongoing investment in website maintenance. Moreover, Lincoln has to recognize that if an improved website succeeds as a vehicle for providing public information, the public will expect information to be readily available and this, in turn, will place some additional demands on town staff.

Ideally, all important public documents should be available on the website in an easy-to-find, indexed repository, and some documents are already available. If departmental web pages contain links to the same repository, users will have multiple ways to navigate to public records as they conduct their research. Permitting could be tracked online, too. Many communities have installed permit tracking software that allows residents to follow a project as it moves through the review and decision process. The same system helps developers and homebuilders as they await steps such as departmental sign-offs on building permit applications. Communities that have invested in making more information (and more types of information) available on the internet report that ultimately, the service can save some staff time even as it places additional responsibilities on town departments. For example, staff can direct many inquiries to the town's website and spend less time on tasks such as photocopying documents in response to public records requests.

The public benefits of an improved website seem fairly obvious, but there are even more important advantages for volunteers and staff inside town government. Some Massachusetts communities have structured their websites to support public use and separate internal use, i.e., non-public space for posting draft minutes that board members can download prior to a public meeting, or posting draft reports for committee members to mark up and re-post for the chair or a staff member to review.

- ❖ **Information Storage and Management.** As is true in most small towns, Lincoln's information storage and management systems are fairly dated. Virtually everyone in town hall agrees that more needs to be done to advance Lincoln's information management capabilities. Basic systems exist for sharing financial data between the town accountant and treasurer-collector. The town has appointed a new Town Archive Advisory Committee and hired an archivist to evaluate and catalog older documents and assist with setting up a usable archive for permanent public records. A variety of department-level databases have been created to manage other information, such as a tracking system for Zoning Board of Appeals cases and homeowners registered under the "Do Not Solicit" Bylaw. However, fundamental questions about technology needs, data management and shared data access needs will have to be explored with staff and town boards. Lincoln may want to consider using a qualified consultant to expedite the process of evaluating all of these needs and bring clarity to the town's options.
- ❖ **Town Boards and Committees.** There seems to be widespread agreement in Lincoln that boards and committees need more effective ways to communicate. Lincoln may find it difficult to address this problem. First, the limited inter-board communication that exists today must reflect, at least in part, the time constraints that Lincoln's volunteers contend with as they juggle public service with other commitments. Second, town boards meet on different weeknights or at different times of day, so they do not always have

access to each other. Third, volunteers may need more help to perform their duties, but unless the town is prepared to hire additional employees and provide suitable work space for them, there will continue to be limitations on the amount of professional and administrative support that Lincoln can provide. Fourth, any system of improved communication has to account for compliance with the Open Meeting Law. For example, it may be possible for committee chairs to meet from time to time for the purpose of exchanging information, but strategies like this need to be reviewed with Town Counsel.

It does seem possible for Lincoln to establish more predictable communication among the Planning Board, Conservation Commission, Zoning Board of Appeals, and Board of Health, two of which currently meet on the same weeknight (though not every week). However, Lincoln seems to need a more comprehensive approach to inter-board communication, one that would benefit all boards and committees as well as staff. Some possibilities used in other towns include:

- ◆ Communications technology improvements and training, and web support for local officials.
- ◆ Systematic quarterly meetings for all town officials, organized by the selectmen's office, with a prepared agenda to assure that important topics receive adequate attention;
- ◆ Periodic "all boards" meetings, i.e., not on a fixed schedule, sometimes inspired by specific issues, other times by the need for informal, less structured discussion, organized by the selectmen's office or on a rotating basis by the town's major policy boards;
- ◆ A single document that includes a list of all town boards and committees, their responsibilities, number of members, customary meeting times, and the chair's name and contact information;
- ◆ An annual process, possibly organized by the Moderator, for bringing boards together to establish mutual goals;
- ◆ An "executive committee" of chairs or designees of each town board, mainly for purposes of sharing information; and
- ◆ Redefining the roles and responsibilities of volunteers and delegating more authority to staff, to the extent allowed by law.

GOALS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Goal G-1. Increase citizen participation in town government.

- G-1.1. Work with community organizations and networks to encourage public participation and provide town government information to residents.
- G-1.2. Provide regular e-news about town government activities, issues, and decisions.
- G-1.3. Establish a citizen skills bank (database) as a resource to identify qualified volunteers and candidates, and encourage town boards and committees to use the skills bank to identify and cultivate new members.

- G-1.4. Create a volunteer coordinating committee to assist with outreach and recruitment of potential volunteers.

DISCUSSION

Town government is not the only entity with a role to play in encouraging public participation. Other groups can help to build esprit between newcomers and long-time residents, and they may be better suited than the town to carry out some tasks. Further, many of the same community networks that generate local government volunteers also have volunteer needs of their own. For example, it would be equally effective if private organizations took responsibility for organizing welcoming events and special activities for newcomers while the town should focus on providing information about Lincoln's local government: what it does, how government is organized, opportunities for people to serve, contact information for programs and services that people typically want to know about, and a short primer on open town meeting and Lincoln's State of the Town Meeting – services once provided by the (former) Lincoln League of Women Voters. Lincoln has a small town government with limited resources that can be allocated to volunteer recruitment. It should not try to take on more than it can manage well.

Lincoln's website has basic "e-news" capability, i.e., a mechanism that allows residents and business owners to register for Connect-CTY, a service that supports mass communication by phone or email to subscribers. In many towns, the same type of service is available for residents to subscribe for news items from a menu of options, such as meeting agendas of particular boards or information from specific town departments. The challenge is that volunteers or staff have to know how to access and use the system to transmit news, and since subscribers expect to receive timely information, the people responsible for generating it inherit a maintenance responsibility. Lincoln has to decide how much internal capacity it has to provide this service and design an e-news program that is realistic for the town to implement.

For most communities with skills databases or "talent banks" of prospective local government volunteers, the source of information is a form completed by residents seeking appointment to a town board. Lincoln's volunteer application form is available on the website as a downloadable document. As designed, the form assumes that a volunteer candidate has a fair amount of prior knowledge about the work of boards or committees on which they would like to serve, and it places the burden for becoming more informed on the prospective volunteer. The town may want to consider simplifying the volunteer application process and instituting a system of follow-up with applicants by veteran local government mentors.

A local resident with expertise in volunteer development could be recruited to assist with designing a plan for outreach, skills assessment and skills matching, and a process for periodically evaluating the town's recruitment strategies. Since outreach and recruitment are time-consuming tasks, the town would most likely need to create a special committee for this purpose. Committee appointees should include some members connected to the "networks" that tend to generate most local government volunteers, as well as underrepresented networks. The Comprehensive Plan survey suggests that residents are more likely to attend town meeting if they serve on a town board or committee, and that many survey respondents who had not attended a recent town meeting had never been asked to serve. An outreach system led by experienced town officials would make encouragement to run for office more credible to those asked and also provide them with a source of mentoring. The town could have a simple set of "fact sheets" on each board with elected positions and use them to distribute information to prospective candidates, supplemented by one-to-one contact with the outreach group.

- Goal G-2. Make public service and town meeting participation engaging and attractive to residents and office-holders.**
- G-2.1. Encourage regular, informal breakfast meetings for town board chairs to exchange ideas and information.
 - G-2.2. Provide training for board and committee chairs and members, and additional staff support as needed.
 - G-2.3. Hold interdepartmental meetings of town boards and staff to coordinate the town's response to issues that involve multiple boards or committees.
 - G-2.4. Prepare and distribute a booklet with clear, simple, user-friendly descriptions of town meeting warrant articles and even-handed descriptions of the arguments pro and con.

DISCUSSION

Some boards receive direct staff support because of the scope of their responsibilities, such as the Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, Zoning Board of Appeals, and Conservation Commission. However, most town boards receive support on an as-needed or upon-request basis from personnel in the selectmen's office or other town departments. Since Lincoln's departments are not generously staffed and many of them seem hard-pressed to manage their existing workloads, the town should set priorities and focus on strengthening the confidence and proficiency of its volunteers. Lincoln could then assess the training needs of town boards and committees, develop a training plan, and budget funds for board training in each year's operating budget. It is not necessary to offer training to all boards every year, but the training plan should account for the terms in office of various town boards and attempt to cover all boards over a three-year cycle. Many training opportunities are available through State agencies and departments as well as various organizations devoted to professional practices and municipal government. These programs are often low-cost and scheduled on weekends and evenings for the convenience of volunteers. A well-designed survey can produce enough information to develop a training plan.

Lincoln's town department heads meet regularly under the leadership of the Town Administrator, and some staff hold interdepartmental meetings specifically to coordinate shared or overlapping responsibilities. For example, the department heads who support boards and commissions with development review and permitting responsibilities meet from time to time to review proposed projects. Since the town boards have the legal authority to issue or deny permits, however, Lincoln may want to consider an interdepartmental communication structure that brings together boards and staff for joint review of significant development proposals, joint meetings with applicants, and joint public hearings. For more effective, community-wide coordination, an annual goal-setting process led by the Board of Selectmen would help to build consistency in the work of town boards, committees, and staff.

Many communities in Massachusetts produce town meeting warrant supplements that contain more information for voters than the text of the warrant articles. These warrant supplements typically include the Finance Committee's report to town meeting and short descriptions of each article, but some also include a summary of supporting and opposing arguments as well. Town staff is usually responsible for preparing a warrant supplement under the direction of the town administrator or town manager, and each department, board, or committee sponsoring a warrant article is responsible for providing the text for a short description. Due to widespread use of the internet today, the practice of printing many copies of a warrant supplement has largely disappeared. Instead, supplements are posted on town websites and circulated by email to residents who subscribe to a town

government distribution list. It is important to note that organizing the production of town meeting booklets is very time-consuming and it requires a single point person to coordinate the process.

Goal G-3. Enhance the frequency and effectiveness of town government and citizen communications.

G-3.1. Improve the town's website to facilitate access to information about the town and town government activities.

G-3.2. Enhance two-way electronic communications between residents and the town offices.

G-3.3. Consider the creation of blogs to facilitate constructive dialogue about town-related issues.

DISCUSSION

Lincoln's official website is difficult to navigate. Although it contains a considerable amount of information, the design of the website overall and the departmental web pages in particular do not make using the website inviting for many people. Most towns with well-organized, visually interesting websites have hired website design consultants, even if the towns have a full-time information technology director. In addition, the design of a new municipal website is often one aspect of a comprehensive overhaul and update of a community's information management systems. Lincoln's website could be improved significantly without such a sizeable commitment of public funds, however.

- ❖ Establish an advisory committee to evaluate the website, its use by town departments, boards and committees, the internal systems that it supports or with which it is integrated, and how it is accessed and maintained internally. The committee should also evaluate a sample of municipal websites in other communities and consult with the personnel or volunteers who maintain those websites. Lincoln's information technology director needs to be part of this process, whether as an advisor to the committee or an ex officio member.
- ❖ Consider retaining a consultant to assist the advisory committee by conducting a website needs assessment in Lincoln. Ideally, the consultant should have prior experience with e-gov models of local government service delivery. At a minimum, this process should include consultations with staff at town hall, the school department, the library, the public safety building, and at other town facilities where employees regularly work. The consultant should also have experience and the ability to design, administer, and interpret a community survey.
- ❖ Determine the information needs of users, both internal and external, how those needs are or are not met today, and the system requirements for meeting those needs. The following are some examples of the kinds of information that other communities have made available, through open access to the public and restricted access for internal users (e.g., town staff with login access):
 - ◆ Permit tracking systems that enable applicants, town boards and committees, and the public to verify the status of development permit applications for a given parcel of land. These systems require consistent data input by town departments, using an integrated database, and a public interface that is easy to use and search. Sometimes these systems are integrated with a community's online assessor's maps, such that when users select a parcel, they can view not only data from the property record card but also the property's recent permit history.
 - ◆ Repositories of reports, plans, and studies, which can be retrieved both from an online library (linked to the home page), where reports are listed by topic and subdivided by year, and from a department's

web page. These systems require an assessment of existing electronic document collection and recording procedures at the departmental level and mechanisms to protect the public records once published on the internet.

- ◆ Town manager blogs.
- ◆ “Report” links for the public to report problems to town departments. Some communities have a simple “report a problem” box while others have more detailed “report” systems, such as “report a pot-hole” or “report lost/found animal” boxes. These different approaches reflect how the reporting system database is managed at town hall. A “report a problem” box means that a single town employee reviews all citizen complaints and refers them to the appropriate department, but problem-specific “report” boxes are managed directly by the departments responsible for various services. The difference is important because any website feature for residents to communicate with government must be designed with government’s response capabilities in mind.
- ◆ Suggestion boxes, which residents can use to make suggestions to town boards and staff.
- ◆ Automated email services that allow residents to sign up to receive meeting notices, agendas, minutes, e-newsletters, and other information from specific boards or departments. Some of these systems support SMS and MMS messaging, too. *(See also, discussion under Goal G-1.)*
- ◆ An integrated calendar of all public meetings, which allows users to view a summary of meetings posted by date and access more detailed information about specific meetings by clicking on the meeting date or the town boards listed for that date.
- ❖ Identify realistic options for the town to improve the website, which may include short-term and longer-term options, and the estimated cost of each (redesign, setup, training, and ongoing maintenance).
- ❖ Determine whether the improvements can be designed in-house or if the town needs to retain additional consulting services.
- ❖ Agree on a financing plan and a management plan.

Towns make e-gov decisions based on their operating needs and the needs of their residents and businesses. A crucial factor in designing any internet and non-internet e-gov communications system is the capacity of local government to maintain it and, for interactive or two-way communication features, the capacity to respond in a timely manner. Most towns that make extensive use of the internet to provide public information say that in the long run, it helps staff work more efficiently. They also say that making information available on the internet increases public expectations. Lincoln is a small town and some of its departments have unmet staffing needs. A departmental capacity assessment must be part of any plan to improve the town’s website because if the system is not properly or consistently maintained, an attractive website could easily become a frustrating experience for residents as well as town employees.

Goal G-4. Work with other communities and the state to overhaul the system of real property taxation as the primary method of financing local government.

G-4.1. Seek assistance from the Massachusetts Municipal Association (MMA) to form a task force to facilitate discussions and to develop proposals.

- G-4.2. Work to ensure that the Massachusetts Association of Town Finance Committees becomes an active participant in reform efforts.

DISCUSSION

Dependence on the property tax as the primary source of local government revenue has been a concern of Massachusetts cities and towns for more than a century. The ad valorem tax fosters significant inequalities between communities and makes it very difficult for small towns like Lincoln to finance the cost of basic municipal and school services. The Commonwealth's cities and towns are subject to more revenue raising constraints than their counterparts in nearly all other states, as evidenced by the inability of communities in Massachusetts to assess various local option taxes. They also generate a comparatively large percentage of total local government revenues, which means they receive a comparatively small share of their operating revenue from sources such as state aid. Obviously Lincoln cannot change the state's approach to municipal finance on its own, but the town could take a leadership role and press regional and statewide organizations such as MAPC and MMA to put more institutional effort and resources into this issue.