

## Should municipal clerks continue to be elected to their positions?

By Victor Goodwin, Sr., Selectman, West Gardiner

**YES.** Maine's small town tradition of having an elected municipal clerk is one that we do not want to give up. It is a tradition that has stood the test of time because it works!

During my 28 years as selectman in the Town of West Gardiner, I have been indeed fortunate to have worked alongside two very capable, elected town clerks. Virginia Curtis served the town extraordinarily well for 41 years, before retiring last March. Her replacement, Nancy O'Laughlin, is now carrying on the fine tradition of an elected clerk.

Besides maintaining the small town heritage, the elected town clerk has some pragmatic advantages over an appointed town clerk.

— Electing a town clerk avoids the cronyism, or "politics", of having an appointment made by the selectmen.

— An elected clerk is directly accountable to the people of the community and thus serves at the will of the people, and not at the discretion of a three-person board of selectmen.

— The decision of electing a town clerk involves an electorate of several hundred people as opposed to an appointment made by only three individuals.

— Elected town clerks are more service oriented. They often have flexible office hours and are more accommodating to the people that have elected them.

— Cost savings to the town are likely to result from having an elected clerk. Appointed positions are sometimes made full-time when part-time would do; appointed positions may require benefits; appointed positions may be

compensated by salary or hourly instead of by fees. Moreover, an appointed town clerk may be just a stepping stone for the selectmen to propose hiring a town manager.

— Having an elected town clerk frees up time for the selectmen that would have been spent supervising an appointed person.

— Appointed employees, after six months on the job, can only be removed "with cause", requiring proper personnel management skills on the part of selectmen. An elected clerk can be removed from office at any election for any reason.

The elected town clerk has served the Town of West Gardiner well for many years, and I see no need to take this responsibility and right away from the people.

By Jonathan Carter, Town Manager, Wells

**NO.** I have been privileged to work in two towns and one city with elected municipal clerks, including the late Raymond (Red) Nadeau in Sanford, the late William Clark in Westbrook, and presently Marion Noble (MTCCA's Municipal Clerk of the Year) in Wells. All were (are) excellent municipal clerks!

Elected municipal clerks, from my experiences, appear to have employment longevity that could make a city or town manager envious. Importantly, it is that longevity that affords them on the job training.

Municipal clerks are the alter ego of the appointed municipal manager and elected board of selectmen or council. On the one hand, elected clerks are department heads, while on the other hand they can be independent in their actions, without reporting to the manager, selectmen or council. They can appoint a deputy of choice, and at least in my town, are exempt from the municipality's personnel policy.

Elected town clerks are extremely oriented toward customer service. Many have weekend office hours, and some conduct their municipal business out of their home. Perhaps, this customer service orientation is what allows them to continue getting elected. But, the elective process for clerks is disruptive to the entire municipal organization.

Municipal clerks should be appointed. They must be a member of a flexible municipal team as resources dwindle and technology virtually eliminates their present manual duties. They need to have skills that are not often found in people running for an elective position.

Technology is rapidly changing the skills needed to perform the duties of the municipal clerk. Historically, the elected municipal clerk has been charged with carrying out important town administrative functions such as records retention, distribution of pub-

lic information, vital statistics, licenses and elections. In the future, the municipal clerk will be an electronic archivist as computer imaging grows in popularity. Computers have and will continue to automate vital statistics, the issuance of hunting and fishing licenses, voter registration, and other traditional clerks' functions.

In the end, appointed municipal clerks provide the municipality with flexibility and accountability, with a cadre of skills and services which can be evaluated.

The number of the elected clerks in the future will continue to decrease. Elected department heads, such as the town clerk, are tough to manage and the changes coming to municipal government will make it impractical and inefficient for cities or towns to continue this practice of electing people to a position only to have it become the alter ego of the manager and elected selectmen or councilors.