

SO YOU WANT TO SERVE ON THE PARK DISTRICT BOARD... WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

By Dr. Ted Flickinger, President and CEO of the Illinois Association of Park Districts

If you are appointed or elected to the park board, you will become a leader who has accepted a major civic responsibility. You should be willing to make a commitment to give freely of your time and talents to help strengthen and further the park, recreation and conservation mission. As a board member, you will take responsibility for helping to set the goals, formulate policies and establish services that will meet the present and future needs of the citizens in your community. The success of your agency depends greatly on how well you understand your role and how effectively you address your board member responsibilities.

More than 2,100 citizens serve on Illinois park district and recreation boards. Generally, board members are respected citizens, well known and active in community affairs and interested in the total recreational needs of their communities. Without coercion or pay, these men and women represent their fellow citizens and interpret their views. They contribute untold hours of time, energy and talent to efforts to improve the local delivery of park and recreation services. They have the primary responsibility of spending tax monies, fees and contributions designated for park and recreation services. They spend, and spend wisely, millions of dollars every year.

Board Obligations

Effective board members see the “big picture” and the long-term effects of the decisions they make. They use sound judgment by weighing the pros and cons of each issue. They are open to new ideas. They make ethical decisions and have the capacity to “take the heat” when unpopular, but necessary, decisions are made.

Specifically, they:

- Establish policies based on sound research and consideration of pros and cons of each issue.
- Adopt policies that allow the organization to run efficiently, effectively, legally and ethically.
- Hire, fire, supervise, evaluate and support the executive.
- Request, receive, evaluate and make decisions based on effective and wise guidance from the executive.
- Interpret the agency’s mission, values and vision to the public.
- Set a strategic direction that adopts goals relating to the mission of the organization.
- Secure adequate funds to carry out the agency’s goals.
- Monitor operational and capital finances.
- Act as a resource, as a sounding board and as the eyes and ears of the citizens of the community, making sure that the agency is meeting their needs.
- Develop, maintain and update long-range plans.
- Adopt a code of ethics.
- Support board decisions even when a decision conflicts with their personal views (recognizing the authority rests with the board, not with one board member).



The Illinois Association of Park Districts publishes books, provides training and assists board members in their desire to serve the public. We know that effective board members:

- Are good listeners.
- Have an attitude of cooperation, open-mindedness and objectivity.
- Are motivated only by a desire to serve the citizens and the agency.
- Work with the executive, not over or around him or her.
- Inspire the community’s confidence, respect and support.
- Spend time in board meetings on policies, programs and procedures, not on operational details that are the executive’s responsibility.
- Make no disparaging remarks about other board members or their opinions.
- Keep high ethical standards.
- Display a talent for working well with others.
- Recognize that to promise in advance of a meeting how they will vote on any proposition is to close their minds to other facts and points-of-view that may be presented in the meeting.
- Make decisions only after all sides of a question have been presented.

The Election Process

Park district boards in Illinois are comprised of five or seven members called commissioners or trustees. To be eligible to serve as an elected commissioner or trustee, you must live in the district for at least one year prior to election day. Terms are for six years, but the board or the community can elect to change terms to four years. In general, two seats are up for election in the spring of an odd-numbered year.

Briefly, the steps to being elected are:

1. In the fall of an even-numbered year, pick up a statement of economic interest and candidate petitions at your park district office.
2. Gather signatures of eligible voters so that your name may be placed on the ballot. You must obtain 25 valid signatures or 2 percent of the number of ballots cast for commissioner or trustee in the last election, whichever number is greater.
3. File the nominating petitions and a statement of candidacy with the park district secretary between 71 and 78 days prior to election day (usually in late January of an odd-numbered year).
4. File a statement of economic interests with your county clerk (and a receipt with the park district secretary) before the final day for filing petitions.
5. Choose whether to file with your county clerk an optional loyalty oath and a voluntary statement of compliance with the Fair Campaign Practices Act.
6. If you raise and spend a prescribed amount on your campaign, file campaign finance disclosure forms with the State Board of Elections.
7. Win election to the park board in the spring.

For specific details, contact your park district's executive director, board secretary or county clerk. Or, check the State Board of Elections' Web site at www.elections.il.gov.

Online Training for Current and Future Board Members

For an on-demand, in-depth preparatory course for board service, why not take advantage of the IAPD's Online Board Member Training Curriculum?

Those who complete this online training will know how to run effective, efficient meetings that follow parliamentary procedure and comply with the state laws that pertain to meetings of public boards. They will understand agency finances. They will know how to hire qualified and competent executives. They will regularly evaluate their agencies and prepare their agencies to be recognized for national awards. When appropriate, they will be prepared to take leadership roles in working to pass referenda that benefit their agencies and their communities. They will become informed and energized advocates for their agencies with legislators and with the public at large.

Board members who successfully complete the entire curriculum will be recognized by the Illinois Association of Park Districts as distinguished board members.

To find out more about the online curriculum or other IAPD educational services, contact:

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