

Increasing Young Adult Interest in Serving on a Town Board

Town boards have never garnered much attention. Most young adults do not know that their town has its own government. It is not until they become adults that they realize what a town board is. However, this means people are less interested in being town board members. They do not know what it does or why it is good to be informed about what the town board is doing because it took so long to find out about it. Wisconsin leaders can increase young adult interest in serving on a town board by expanding the required civics curriculum for high schoolers to include more information about local governments and increasing media attention for town board elections and meetings. In this essay, I will show the importance of town boards and how increased curriculum on local governments and more media attention will increase interest in town boards.

Town boards have many duties that affect the day-to-day life of everyone living in that town. Chapter 60, subchapter IV, sections 22 -24, lays out the responsibilities of the town board; the simplest definition is the town board is in charge "of all affairs of the town not committed by law to another body or officer or a town employee" (Wisconsin Legislature: 60.22). The town board decides what roads to repair each year, if there should be a noise ordinance, or if the noisy neighbor keeps getting to wake up everyone at 2 AM with fireworks. They decide how to spend the tax money, and if a person spots a dog running loose, it is a board member who returns that dog to its rightful owners or an animal shelter. The town board ensures that the township is running smoothly, and when it is not, they listen to the complaints and try and fix them. While a person may not always know what a town board is, or possibly never even heard of one, they are constantly being affected by one.

Wisconsin civics curriculum should include more information about local governments so high school students will understand the importance of the town board and become interested in serving on one. In Wisconsin, all schools have to teach about civics so that students have a better understanding of how the government works. However, these classes do not always address local governments, and most classes will focus on the federal instead of state or local government. In 2000 Wisconsin created the Wisconsin Civics Action Task Force to help students learn more about civics because the National Assessment of Education Progress in 1999 found that "one-third of the students assessed did not have even basic knowledge and skills of citizenship" (Evert). The task force then made recommendations on state standards that needed to be updated and provided materials and resources for teachers. This effort was successful since the National Assessment of Education Progress in 2018 saw the average score in the Midwest had increased (NAEP Civics: Student Group Scores and Score Gaps). Something similar should happen to improve students understanding of local governments. Wisconsin requires high school students to "explore opportunities... for personal or collaborative civic engagement with the community, school, state, tribal, national, and global implications" (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction). Local governments would fall under these standards, but there is nothing specific about local governments to force schools to make sure their students are knowledgeable on this topic. By including more curriculum requirements for local governments, students will know what town boards do and feel more comfortable interacting with their town board members when they are older, making them feel more comfortable being on a town board. Finally, an easy way to increase interest in serving on a town board is to have town board members go to schools and talk to civics classes. There is no one better to explain what a town board does and how important of a job they have than a person who is a current or retired board member. It is

something small and simple that would increase student knowledge on town boards and show them that this is a potential career path.

There needs to be more media attention on town board meetings and town board elections to increase young adult interest in serving on a town board. Very few young adults want to serve on town boards because they do not know what the town board is doing or when they have meetings. In the town, I live in the clerk only posts meeting notices in a few areas: the town hall, the town website, a local bar, and a small gas station. While those are the busiest places in the town, many people do not go there, so they will not know when the meetings are or what they are about. In 2020 there were 9,844,233 viewings of local news programs nationwide (Trends and Facts on Local News | State of the News Media). For many people watching the news is how they learn what is happening in their area. By having more information about what town boards are doing on the news, more people will hear about what their town board is doing and be more interested. Another way to attract attention to town meetings and elections is to have a social media presence. The Australian Government found having information on social media attracts new people, “increases your market reach”, and “increases traffic to your website” (Australian Government). If more people know about what the town board is doing, more people will be interested in serving on the town board.

Increasing young adult interest in serving on a town board is all about letting the young people know what the town board does and how important what they do is. By requiring more curricula related to local governments and increasing media related to town board activities, this can be done.

Works Cited

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