

AROUND THE STATE

Citizen Committees Can Be Helpful in Assessing Technology Needs

By *BETSY JOHNSON*

"If Columbus had an advisory committee he would probably still be at the dock." - Arthur Goldberg

Committees can get a pretty bad rap. But committees often do accomplish something, and in Belmont one such group is the local technology committee, or the Information Technology Advisory Committee, as it's formally known. Comprised of nine technologically savvy citizens—one is the author of numerous information security hooks and the former owner of an Internet service provider—the ITAC has helped to bring **Belmont into** the 21st century by spearheading significant technology initiatives, according to Assistant Town Administrator Joyce Munro. "The membership of ITAC is phenomenal," she says, "with all members having significant experience with technology issues."

The Belmont group has acted much like a technology consultant in its thorough assessment of the town's technology needs and its subsequent recommendations. In recent years, the committee conducted an extensive needs assessment that led to "fundamental changes" in Belmont's computer network, says ITAC member Guy Parsons. That process, which included having members of the committee travel in pairs to interview every department head in town—as well as department heads in other towns, for comparative purposes—led to the conclusion that individual departments were "flailing" when it came to computer use, he says. "There was a lack of training, a lack of consistent policy," says Parsons, who is a business consultant. For instance, there



was no policy for upgrading memory in computers or for managing equipment upgrades or purchases. The solution, the committee agreed, was for the town to hire an **information** technology director to oversee technology use not only in all town departments, but in the schools as well.

tight budget year," Munro says. Last year the selectmen agreed to fund the IT position and an ITAC committee member, Jonathan Green, personally interviewed the candidates.

From its inception in the mid-1990s, the committee researched the best way to add capacity, power and flexibility to the

town's computer network, eventually recommending that a fiber optic link be installed between the town's network and the schools' network, creating both an Internet link and an intranet while simultaneously fully integrating the town's system. That link was installed in 1999. Because Belmont has its own electric department, the town was able to install the line itself. Parsons says.

Many cities and towns in Massachusetts have technology committees to help them deal with ever-changing software and hardware needs, according to municipal technology consultant Sheldon Cohen, president of Systems Consulting Group. And while there are almost as many configurations of committees as there are towns, he says they fall into roughly three categories: some are run by a municipality's professional staff, some are all-citizen committees, and some are a blend of the two. While some of these committees work on an ongoing basis, others operate only when there is a procurement need.

Citizen committees can be useful for a variety of reasons, not least of which is that they can bring a startling amount of free expertise to the table. That expertise earns the respect of Town Meeting members when committee members are advocating for a substantial purchase of computer-related equipment or software, according to Weston Assistant Town Manager Donna Vanderclark. "It's a political thing," she says. "They can stand up at Town Meeting and say, 'Yes, we've looked at all of these options, and this is the best way to go.'"

Cohen says the criticism of "staff only" technology committees is that, while these people know the needs of their employees, there can be a perception that staff members are padding their requests for software and hardware with non-essential bells and whistles. He warns, however, that it's important for members of citizen committees to have experience with municipal technology, particularly when the aim of the committee is to purchase new software. "In this day and age," he says, "everything's a specialty."

The towns of Wenham and Hamilton are embarking on a joint citizens-only technology committee. The committee's goal is to assess the technology needs of

the two communities, bring Hamilton up to par with Wenham, which is a few steps ahead in its computer technology, and then to plan for added capacity, according to Wenham Town Administrator Jeff Chelgren. As in Belmont, the committee expects to set policy and to hire an IT director for both towns and their regional school system. In addition, they hope to improve their buying power by combining their resources.

The two North Shore towns were already working together to negotiate a new five-year cable television license with Comcast. As the contract deadline neared, the towns decided to merge that effort with technology in general. Both fiber optic lines and an I-net, which will connect all of the buildings in the two towns and the schools, are part of the new license, Chelgren says. The committee negotiating the contract will be analyzing how best to use the system and upgrade connectivity so that the towns have the capacity they'll need for the next dozen years or so. A natural outgrowth of this effort is shared network use and upgrades.

While some towns prefer to rely on knowledgeable citizens, others hire Cohen or someone like him. The town of Yarmouth has a technology committee comprised of department heads and, given their other responsibilities, the members preferred to have a consultant walk them through the process of purchasing a new computer system, according to the town's finance director, Susan Milne. "The software is really complex," she says. "There are all kinds of different systems."

"The greatest challenge is sitting down and planning where you want to go technologically," she says. "You don't want to shut the doors on something that you might find will be a great asset for you. ... You need a consultant to say, 'Let's think about options for down the road.' We first said, 'Oh, we can do it, we can do it,' Without [the consultant], there's no way we'd be this far."

In Belmont, meanwhile, Parsons waxes enthusiastic about the process of rolling up his sleeves and digging into the issues surrounding technology applications in his town. "We've had a lot of fun," he says



Watertown decided to lease this former junior high school that was no longer in use.

Sell vs. Lease: Communities Consider Options for Surplus Property

Determining whether to sell or lease vacant municipal buildings is often a difficult decision for municipal officials. Do you take the quick bucks and apply them to the gaping budget deficit that appears to be strangling local services? Or do you attempt to hold the property in reserve for later use and lease it for a fraction of the sale price?

This is really a decision that has to be made on a case-by-case basis, local officials say. Some communities own a seeming abundance of buildings that they no longer need and want to unload them, while others are scrambling for space and can't conceive of actually selling a building and losing it forever. The consensus seems to be that while a windfall from the sale of a building can be a lifesaver, keeping options open is a prudent course.

"Everyone has a story about selling a school and then wishing they hadn't twenty-five years later," says Franklin Town Administrator Jeff Nutting, who is seeking tenants for Franklin's old Town Hall.

Officials in Watertown narrowly averted a financial disaster in 1998 when the town of 33,000 sold thirty acres of an old federal arsenal site to a private developer who planned to create commercial office space. For fourteen years Watertown officials had negotiated with the federal government to clean up the site and sell it to the town so the town, in turn, could sell the property and