

VLCT NEWS

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SERVING AND STRENGTHENING VERMONT LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

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VLCT PACIF OFFERS NEW MEMBER BENEFIT

HR SENTRY HUMAN RESOURCES SUPPORT

If you are a VLCT PACIF member and have a question about your municipality's human resource policies, practices or procedures, please visit HR Sentry, an on-line human resource library service now offered through VLCT PACIF.

HR Sentry (www.hrsentry.com) is provided to all PACIF members at no

additional cost. It is a Web-based system that provides its users with reliable human resources tools and information, organized into eleven different libraries. Users can locate sample human resource forms, policies and procedures, and links to related federal and state laws, regulations and resources

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TOWNS SUE OVER EDUCATION FUNDING

Late last month, the towns of Dorset, Killington, Ludlow, Manchester, West Windsor, Williston, Wilmington, and Winhall filed a lawsuit against the State of Vermont to prevent education tax dollars from being spent to support uses they believe are not appropriate under Vermont's education funding laws, Acts 60 and 68.

This lawsuit, and the issues it raises, are important to all towns because this case will determine whether moneys that have been raised by towns through the property tax and deposited in the Vermont Education Fund can be used for any purpose other than those authorized under Act 60. (Editor's Note: This lawsuit was filed in Rutland Superior Court, whose decision will be limited in scope to its jurisdiction. Should the case be appealed to the Vermont Supreme Court, the *VLCT News* will report on its outcome, and the resulting implications for the entire state.)

When first enacted in 1997, Act 60 limited the uses to which moneys in the

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BOOK REVIEW

ALL THOSE IN FAVOR: REDISCOVERING THE SECRETS OF TOWN MEETING AND COMMUNITY

RavenMark, Inc., 87 p., 2005, \$9.95. Special discount for municipal officials: \$6.00 per book, or \$5.00 per book if more than one is ordered; plus postage and handling (\$2.50 for the first book, \$.50 for each additional book). Order from VIG, 617 Comstock Road, Suite 5, Berlin, VT 05602-9194.

All Those In Favor, by Susan Clark and Frank Bryan, is a gem of a book. At 87 pages cover to cover, this is an entertaining read about a subject which is the basis of local government in Vermont and which extends back in time, as the authors tell us, to Ancient Greece.

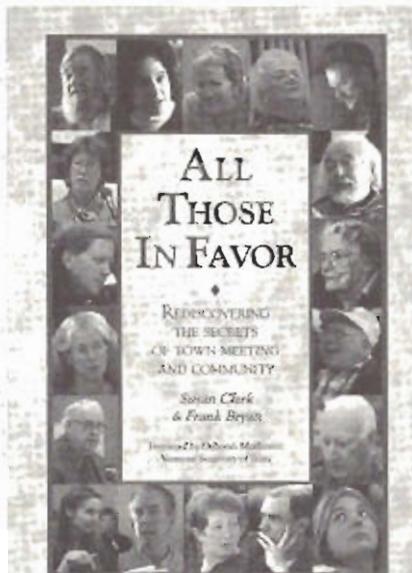
Out just in time for Town Meeting 2005, *All Those In Favor* is a call to action, a call

to revitalize Town Meeting, the annual practice of hands on democracy in our towns all around this state.

"Vermonters of 1830 would be astonished traveling through today's Vermont to attend a town meeting. But once inside the school gym or town hall or fire station where the town meeting was held, once the moderator had called the meeting to order, once she had read the words: 'the people of Craftsbury are warned to be at the Craftsbury Common School on Tuesday, the 4th of March 2004, at

9 in the forenoon to act on the following

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ALL THOSE IN FAVOR -

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articles, these Vermonters of long ago would know precisely what to do. Town meeting would be perfectly familiar to them."

In this quote, and throughout their book, Clark and Bryan do an excellent job of placing town meeting in historical context as well as describing how communities in Vermont continue to use it today. While the context has changed, the structure and import of the meeting itself has changed little. And though today it measures up astonishingly well against every other form of participatory government in this or any other country, self-governance by town meeting is in trouble. The authors recognize the reality of this, but also suggest some remedies.

Based on Bryan's research over the years, it is clear that several factors are working against town meeting:

- people's reluctance to speak in public (although the data show that a wide range of people actually do speak up at town meeting);
- populations of more than 5,000 (although not always);
- diminishing authority to decide items of significance at the local level;
- "nothing interesting on the ballot" (often related to above bullet);
- bad weather; and
- lack of transportation - people who can't get there.

The authors explain that "the authority of

our communities was not always taken away. Many times we gave it away. We gave it away because we felt the decline of localism and the rise of centralism (and the loss of democracy that went with it) was inevitable and we were helpless to stop it. *It is not and we can.*"

So let's get to it! Possibly the most important chapter is Chapter 11, entitled "*Ten Things You Can Do Now To Improve Your Town Meeting.*" Is there any intent in this being "Chapter 11," the condition of having sunk so far that you must reorganize with the help of outside arbiters in order to have any hope of succeeding in the future? Here are the things we can change, if not this year, then next:

- involve youth in Town Meeting;
- recognize businesses that provide time off for Town Meeting;
- serve food and "doughnuts around the edges" (or maybe bagels);
- create a "Democracy Matters" committee in your town; and
- consider a representative town meeting if your population is more than 5,000.

There are many more suggestions in this chapter. Some you have heard from your neighbors, some the authors got from your town, and some are altogether new. In fact you will recognize people from your town or the next town over making these suggestions, and that is half the joy of this book. It is about us, by us and for us as much as it is intended to assure the future of participatory democracy.

- Karen Horn, Director, VLCT Legislative and Membership Services