



# Powerful Citizen Roles: Appointed Office



**BACKGROUND:** Signed by Gov. Corzine in N.J. in 2009, the **Citizen Service Act** requires that every municipality keep an updated list of all boards/commissions, their members and terms, and existing vacancies. This public directory would be found at the municipal clerk's office or on the municipal website, along with a "Citizen Service Application".

**You've learned about the Appointed Office Role and now you're ready to step off the sidelines and get in the game!**

**In this Guide we review:**

**STEP 1:** Deciding where to serve: What opportunities are available?

**STEP 2:** Apply to serve

**STEP 3:** Best practices to get appointed

**STEP 4:** How to make the most of your appointment

## Serving on a Decision-Making Board or Commission

Sometimes the most powerful people in your community aren't even elected, they are appointed, and you could be one of those people. Every municipality has a wide range of volunteer boards and commissions that work on a variety of issues, including: Land Use & Development (*Planning/Zoning Boards, Environmental/Historic Preservation/Open Space Commissions*), Constituent Services (*Youth Councils, Senior Service/Disability/Mental Health Commissions, Rent Leveling Boards*), Enforcement (*Parking/Housing Authorities, Rent Control Boards*), and Community Improvements & Education (*Green Teams, Recreation/Human Relations Commissions, Economic Development Boards, Arts Councils*).

### **STEP 1: Deciding where to serve: What is available?**

- ✓ **The first step to seeking an appointed position is to visit your municipal website or municipal clerk's office to get a list of boards and commissions.** This directory will tell you not only who the members are, but also if there are any existing vacancies or terms expiring soon.
- ✓ **Look at the list and see which boards interest you.** Ask your municipal clerk how frequently your top choices meet, when and where. Before applying, you want to make sure your schedule allows you to participate in the meetings.
- ✓ **Attend a board or commission meeting to narrow your options.** Find out who the board members are and what the board is working on. Introduce yourself to the board members and ask



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them about current and upcoming projects. You can also read newspaper coverage and past meeting minutes (from your municipal clerk) to get a feel for the board.



**TIP:** If no board or commission exists that deals with the policy issue you are interested in working on, you can propose to your governing body that a new commission be created. Find a model ordinance from another town where that board exists through an OPRA request or Google search. Then you can propose to your governing body that such a board be created in your town. Share some examples as to how this board will make a positive impact in your community. Take our Citizen Legislator class to learn how to successfully gain the adoption of your proposal.

## STEP 2: Apply to Serve

- ✓ **Once you have obtained a list, picked your favorites, and confirmed you would be able to make the meetings, then it is time to apply.** Get a copy of an application form\* from your municipal clerk or town's website. An application often allows you to have choices, and often, even if there are no vacancies, you can still apply so that your application is on record for when a vacancy comes up or a term expires. \* Some towns may ask for a resume or letter rather than using an application form.
- ✓ **Apply to related boards with similar purposes.** Whether a vacancy exists on your board of choice or not, applying for a related board or two can increase your options. You can also use a related board as a way to gain experience and network towards your ultimate goal.

**TIP:** If you are interested in land use and serving on the planning board, then you might also consider applying to similar land use boards like the zoning board and environmental commission. Planning board positions are usually very competitive, and serving on a zoning board or environmental commission will allow you still make an impact on land use policy while at the same time better positioning you for a planning board position when one opens up.





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## STEP 3: Best Practices for Getting Appointed.

- ✓ **Reach out to the “powers that be”.** Follow up with your political leaders to let them know that you are interested in serving. Introduce yourself to your mayor and council representative, your political party chair, and neighborhood committee person. Find out who has the power to appoint the position you applied for and tell them that you applied. Make sure to mention if the position is currently vacant, as this will give more timeliness to your application.
- ✓ **Introduce yourself to the Chair and members of the board or commission.** Many elected officials will look to the current board leadership and members for advice and input on whom to appoint to the board. Having members of the board rooting for you can help increase your chances and help you stand out among the other applicants.
- ✓ **Regularly attend the meetings to keep a steady presence.** What better way to show you are seriously interested in serving than attending the meetings when you are not required to?
- ✓ **Volunteer to help out** on projects or upcoming events. Often times, boards will have subcommittees that are open to volunteers. Green Teams are a great example of this structure. This is another great way to show that you are committed to the purpose of the board.

Learn how to develop a constructive proposal by taking the free, online Power Civics video trainings in No-Blame Problem Solving. Visit [thecitizenscampaign.org](http://thecitizenscampaign.org)

- ✓ **Participate at the meetings.** Show the board your skills and interest by presenting a constructive proposal. This is a great way to show members that you are capable and committed to serve. If you had a policy issue which was the reason for your interest in the board, develop a constructive proposal to address the issue and present it to the board.

## STEP 4: How to make the most out of your appointed position.

You got appointed, but feel the board you serve on is not as effective as it could be? Here are some helpful hints.

- ✓ **Know Your Mission and Goals.** Make sure you know what the mayor and councils’ goals are for the board. This can change as different elected officials take power. If you feel like the board is not as effective as it could be, reminding the members of their duties and goals could be a way of motivating the board to become more effective at its work. A regular review of the board’s bylaws



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or ordinance/resolution that created the board is a good way of doing this. Sometimes these documents may need to be updated to reflect current goals for the town.

- ✓ **Broaden Your Perspective.** 1) Research best practices through an internet search on the same board in other towns or nationwide to get ideas for events & programs, funding sources, research projects, etc.; 2) Survey the public. What better way to find out what the community needs than to ask them?



**SPOTLIGHT:** (Plainsboro, N.J.) The Human Relations Council was stalled in coming up with ideas for community events. So it passed out a brief questionnaire at a town-wide event, asking whether people would be interested in networking or educational events, ideal times of day, and suggestions for topics and locations. The response was overwhelming, and the HRC was able to narrow down topics for programs based on the public feedback.

- ✓ **Maintain professionalism and order.** Learn about Robert's Rules of Order or Parliamentary Procedure, which most appointed boards/commissions use to govern the way they conduct business and run meetings. This will help keep your board/commission on track and focused, and minimize disruptions. It also helps keep order, and provides a means to allow everyone to participate and raise new points or ask for a vote on a topic of discussion.
- ✓ **Identify funding opportunities.** If you are trying to get a project going in the community through the board/commission you serve on, but don't have money, you could find potential funding or community partners that would provide people to do the work. For example, the Environmental Commission may want to install a rain garden on municipal property. You may be able to get volunteers to help with installation from a local or regional environmental group.
- ✓ **Hold annual elections** of the Chair and Vice Chair. New leadership can bring in fresh, new ideas.

## NEED MORE HELP?

If you run in to any roadblocks on your way, you take a Power Civics© video training any time at [thecitizenscampaign.org](http://thecitizenscampaign.org).