

A Five Step Guide to City and County Boards and Commissions And How to Get Appointed



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Overview

What exactly are local boards and commissions?

Boards and commissions are advisory or regulatory groups that work with cities and counties. Regulatory groups set licensing standards and professional requirements for members. Advisory groups provide guidance to the program or agency with which they are affiliated. Board and commission members are unpaid volunteers.



Examples of local boards or commissions include Planning and Zoning, Libraries, Health, and Compensation.

Why should I serve?

Serving on a board or commission is a significant and meaningful way to participate in civic life. As a member, you can share your expertise while directly participating in shaping your local community. Many people choose to serve on boards and commissions as a means of gaining new skills, sharing diverse viewpoints, or to “step out of a comfort zone.” Some might also choose to utilize their seats as a means to attain higher leadership positions, appointed or elected.

Gender balance for state-level boards and commissions has been required since 1987, and in 2009, the Iowa Legislature extended this mandate to county and city boards and commissions, effective January 1, 2012. However, many cities and counties are already looking for qualified individuals to serve. Often, citizens may apply for boards and commissions that they think themselves qualified for, which has led to a concentration of women on certain bodies and a concentration of men on others. For instance, traditionally, men have not been asked as often to sit on early childhood boards, and those boards tend to be dominated by women.

Counties and cities are looking for a diversity of experiences and skills on their boards and commissions. Although women make up more than half of the Iowa population, they have been underrepresented on some local boards and commissions. Joining local boards and commissions now can help to open future leadership possibilities to other women in your area.

What are the qualifications?

Local residents are preferred appointees because boards and commissions are a wonderful way to encourage citizens to be involved in their own governance.

Most often, a person is appointed to a board or commission because of a particular skill, interest, or expertise. Others may have a general background in a subject, such as health care or the environment, and be selected to serve on a board with responsibilities related to that subject.

Specific expertise is not a requirement to apply for all boards and commissions. Do not hesitate to apply, even if your skill set may not be right on target.

Many boards and commissions operate differently than as described here, so check locally to find out how the application process works in your area. In smaller population areas, often the application process may be less formal. You may want to contact the City Administrator, City Clerk, or County Auditor to learn about the appointment process.

What is the appointment process?

Appointment processes vary by city and county. The best way to find out the process is to contact your city or county offices. Information may also be on their websites.

Step 1—Learning about Boards and Commissions

Learning all you can about boards and commissions is critical to making a decision to commit to this path. You want to fully understand the function, purpose, and mission of any board or commission before seeking an appointment.

Tips for starting research:

- Contact your city or county offices to inquire as to publications or websites that list their current boards and commissions. Review the lists to identify any organizations of special relevance to your **area of interest**.
- Learn all you can about the purpose of the board or commission, including the law that establishes its existence and mandates its duties. Search for its **enabling statute**.
- Many boards and commissions do not have paid staff, but most do have web pages linked to the official city or county government website. Check the board or commission web page to review materials of the organization, such as minutes, newsletters, strategic plans, and annual reports.
- **Attend a meeting** or event to form a first impression of how the body operates.
- **Talk to members** who currently serve or have served in the past on the board or commission. This is perhaps the best way to learn what commitment is expected as part of an appointment. You can generally find a list of current members on the city's or county's website.

Notable questions to consider:

- Which boards and/or commissions are related to your area of **expertise**?
- Which boards and/or commissions have current or upcoming **vacancies**?
- Who is the **appointing authority** for the board and/or commission?
- How many **members** serve on the commission/board?
- What are the required or preferred **qualifications** for members?
- What are the term **limits** for members?
- What are the **duties** of members?

As you speak with individuals about the board or commissions, be sure to ask:

- How much **time** is expected from members?
- **When** and **where** are the meetings held? How long are they?
- How is the board or commission **structured** in terms of committees, etc.?
- What are the current **priorities** of the board or commission?
- What are the current **challenges** faced by the board or commission?

Step 2—Finding a Board or Commission for You

Once you have found a board or commission that interests you, the next step is to figure out if you are a good match. To do this, you will need to examine and evaluate your qualifications and assess the mission of the organization along with the criteria it has set for its members.

Getting appointed can be a competitive process. Because of this, it is important to have a clear sense of your qualifications and their connection to the mission and duties of the board or commission. Women who consider serving on boards or commissions maybe humble about their qualifications, or may feel underqualified to serve. Realize that many individuals who serve on boards and commissions

began with little or no experience. Be confident in your qualifications and the experiences you will bring to the board or commission.

Although this step is intended to help you toward being ready for appointment, it is important to go ahead and let people know you are interested. The sooner others know, the more the appointing body will know about you.

Self-assessment is important in determining your qualities and strengths. This worksheet will help you prepare your application and write your resume in Step 4.

Self-Assessment Exercise

1. Skills and Experience

Professional
Experience

Volunteer
Experience

Educational
Experience

List your skills acquired through your professional, volunteer, and educational experience:

From these, highlight skills that will directly contribute to your selected board/commission:

2. Honors, Awards, and Other Interests:

From these, highlight honors, awards, and interests that are most relevant to the mission and duties of your selected board or commission:

3. Descriptive Qualities:

Analytical
Calm
Confident
Cooperative
Creative
Decisive
Fair

Flexible
Goal-Oriented
Innovative
Knowledgeable
Leadership
Well Connected
Logical

Organized
Reliable
Resourceful
Self-Directed
Self-Motivated
Team Player
Tolerant

Compile your qualities, skills, honors, and experiences that pertain directly to your selected board or commission, especially as relating to the guiding mission and duties. Gathering this information will help you reflect on your qualifications and strengthen your application to the selected board or commission. How will you be an asset?

Step 3—Making Connections; Building Support

Once you know you have the necessary skills, experience, and interest to serve on a board or commission, the next step is to convince others. It’s best to do this early in the process so that your network can help identify opportunities for you and spread good news about you. The following are tips that can help your goal of appointment:

- **Get to know** the current members of your selected board or commission.
- **Meet with a representative** of the appointing authority. Explicitly express your interest in an appointment and your qualifications for membership.
- **Send a cover letter** if you are unable to meet the appointing authority directly.
- **Use your connections**, personal and professional. Let them know of your interest in serving on a board or commission. Chances are you know someone with connections.



Don’t have connections? Now is the time to build relationships with any groups relevant to the activities of the board or commission you are pursuing. It may be easier than you realize to find someone who is already involved in a relevant area of interest.

Step 4—Resumes, Covers Letters, and Recommendations

Your request for nomination should include a **cover letter**, a current **resume**, and possibly **letters of recommendation**. Requirements may vary for each organization, so be sure to check with the appointing authority to ensure your application is complete.

The Cover Letter

A cover letter should be typed, brief, printed on high-quality paper, and organized into three parts:

1. In the first paragraph, state your reasons for submitting your resume. Indicate a specific interest or general appointment request.
2. If your request is general, express your interest in serving on a board addressing certain issues.
3. The third paragraph should indicate your interest in pursuing the appointment, including a brief description of your relevant qualifications for serving.

The Resume

A resume used to apply for a position on a board or committee may differ from a traditional resume used to seek a job. A resume used for an appointment may highlight political affiliations, knowledge of the community, and political campaign experience. It should highlight experiences that directly relate to the mission and goals of the board or commission rather than a full description of your working history.

A strong resume is neat, well organized, typed, easy to read, and includes the following:

Contact Information:	Include your name, address, email address, fax number, and day and evening telephone numbers.
Objective Statement:	A very specific statement stating your goals. Name the appointment you want.
Qualifications:	Describe your professional, educational, and volunteer experiences related to your objectives. Use action verbs. List strongest and most relevant experiences first.
Experiences:	List information about your paid work, education, volunteerism, and special skills and abilities, most important listed first. List your title, duties, name of organization, and relevant dates. Tailor to maintain relevancy.
References:	Include names and contact information for references if well known or influential, otherwise simply state “References furnished upon request.”

Letters of Recommendation

Although not always required, it is a good idea to include letters of support as part of your application. Consider including letters from experts affiliated with the board or commission, as well as letters from people who may have influence with the appointing authority. Provide a copy of your resume to the person writing the recommendation. Be sure to indicate when the recommendation is needed, where it should be sent, and to whom it should be addressed.

Step 5—Nomination, Confirmation, and Appointment

The appointment process is actually two separate steps:

1. **Nomination** by the appointing authority, and
2. **Confirmation** through a separate body.

You'll want to know who is in control of each step of the process, so be sure to identify this information when researching your preferred board or commission. Send your application packet to the nominating party to begin the appointment process. If your name is put forth for nomination, follow the steps below:



Nomination

You can expect to be notified by the appointing authority if your name will be put forward for nomination. In most cases, you will be asked to fill out and return an **Application for Appointment**. The application is subject to change.

Confirmation

A nomination is an honor, but does not constitute an actual appointment. A body separate from the nominating party may confirm nominations in some cases.

Once you have been notified of your nomination and submitted your Application for Appointment, if requested, you should begin to contact members of the body who confirm nominations. While email can be used as a last resort, telephone calls are the best way to make personal contact with confirming members. If the person is unavailable when you call, leave detailed contact information so they can contact you with any questions.

If you reach a member by phone, expect to be interviewed about your interest in serving. The best way to be prepared for this conversation is to know all you can about the board or commission to which you have been nominated. Reviewing Steps 1 and 2 will help.

If you have connections, now is the time to use them. Ask friends and colleagues to put in a good word for your nomination with confirming members.

Appointment

There can be considerable time between a nomination and confirmation. To learn about the status of your confirmation,

- Check your local newspaper. They often cover local residents who are up for appointments.
- Contact the city or the county office.
- Wait for confirmation papers in the mail. If appointed, you will likely be notified in writing.



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