

“Minding the Store”

A New Internal Controls Checklist for Town Government Financial Officers



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Dear Vermont government official:

Today, Vermonters' eyes are on government finances as never before. The combination of increasing property taxes for schools and town services, pressures on the state budget, national news of accounting scandals, and a soft economy is forcing Vermonters to pay more attention to how their tax dollars are collected, managed, accounted for and spent.

This new **INTERNAL CONTROLS CHECKLIST** is designed to help town managers, bookkeepers, treasurers and auditors assess a town's internal control environment. It should help people review their accounting and financial reporting procedures and provide guidance in implementing controls where there are weaknesses.

If the old saying is true that "cash is king," then "internal controls" is really the throne where the king sits. Without tough internal controls that are periodically reviewed and assessed, small problems can become big ones, to the detriment of the taxpayer and the local town, city or school district. Your town's system of internal controls includes all the policies and procedures needed to provide reasonable assurance that your financial statements are reliable, that operations within the office are effective and secure, and that you are complying with applicable laws and regulations.

This checklist should give you a good indication of the number and type of internal control areas that might need some attention in your operation.

I would like to thank the members of my staff, state and local officials, and outside accountants who helped compile and review this important checklist. Please give my Office a call at 802-828-2281 with your questions, comments and suggestions. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth M. Ready
Vermont State Auditor

INTERNAL CONTROL CHECKLIST FOR VERMONT TOWNS

This self-assessment checklist has been compiled to assist town managers, treasurers, and auditors to assess their town's internal control environment for accounting and financial reporting and to provide guidance in implementing controls where weaknesses are perceived. Your town's system of internal controls includes all of the policies and procedures needed to provide reasonable assurance that your financial information is reliable, that operations within the office are effective and secure, and that you are complying with applicable laws and regulations.

Proceed through the questionnaire, and circle "Y" (Yes) or "N" (No) in response to each question.

After completing the questionnaire, scan down your answers in the "Response" column, noting whether they are aligned to the left or right side of the column. The questions that you have been able to answer on the left side indicate the internal control is in place. Your answers on the right side indicate an internal control weakness. This checklist should give you a good indicator of the number and type of internal controls that might need attention in your operation. Please give your auditor or the Vermont State Auditor's Office (802-828-2281) a call if you need assistance.

GENERAL:

		Response	Comments
1.	Is town management aware that internal control is their responsibility?	Y N	
2.	Does town management show commitment to establishing and maintaining controls?	Y N	
3.	Do town offices have an organizational chart defining the activities and persons responsible for them?	Y N	
4.	Are the duties of officials and employees clearly defined and assigned?	Y N	
5.	Does town management consistently exhibit high ethical and professional standards in its conduct, setting the standard for the entire organization?	Y N	
6.	Are personnel involved in accounting functions required to take an annual vacation?	Y N	
7.	Are accounting functions performed by other personnel during the vacation of primary accounting personnel?	Y N	
8.	Is other staff trained in the accounting functions to provide backup in the case of vacation or other absence of the primary bookkeeping employee(s)?	Y N	
9.	Is responsibility for accounting duties ever rotated among staff?	Y N	
10.	Is the town in compliance with state statutes covering incompatible offices? (17 VSA §2647) See VLCT Handbook for Town Officers (p.4)	Y N	
11.	Is a current, accurate and accessible policy and procedures manual in place, including an official code of conduct or an official set of policies governing employee conduct?	Y N	
12.	Are the policies governing employee conduct communicated in an effective way to all staff and reviewed with them periodically?	Y N	
13.	Is confidential or sensitive material (e.g., payroll records and taxes) maintained separately from non-confidential records?	Y N	
14.	Is insurance coverage reviewed periodically by qualified individuals to determine adequacy?	Y N	
15.	Does the comprehensive liability policy include liability coverage for all officials and employees?	Y N	

16.	Is a budget system (including monthly or quarterly budget reports) used for watching income and expenses?	Y	N
17.	Are cash projections made and periodically compared by management to the operational accounting information?	Y	N
18.	Do surety and/or performance bonds cover all employees/officials who handle town funds? (24 VSA §§832, 1234)	Y	N
19.	Are surety bonds of a sufficient amount, as prescribed and approved by the selectboard? (24 VSA §832)	Y	N
20.	Are authorizations for all bank accounts and check signers updated annually?	Y	N

FINANCIAL RECORDS

21.	Is any single individual able to a) <i>authorize</i> a transaction, b) <i>record</i> the transaction in the accounting records and c) maintain <i>custody</i> of the assets resulting from the transaction?	N	Y
22.	Is an accounting system in use that allows management to record financial transactions, view the data by category, and create timely reports to maintain accountability for the government's assets?	Y	N
23.	Are detailed cash receipts journals maintained? (24 VSA §1571(a))	Y	N
24.	Are detailed cash disbursement journals maintained? (24 VSA §1571(a))	Y	N
25.	Are selectboard records (if separate records other than orders are kept) reconciled with treasurer's records monthly?	Y	N
26.	Are the general ledger and its subsidiary ledgers kept up to date and reconciled monthly?	Y	N
27.	Is a chart of accounts used?	Y	N
28.	Are records properly guarded from fire, theft and manipulation?	Y	N
29.	Is computerized data backed up daily and source documents retained until backup?	Y	N
30.	Is a copy of electronic data properly stored off-site?	Y	N
31.	Are all financial recording documents (receipts, purchase orders) sequentially prenumbered, retained, and accounted for, including spoiled or voided forms?	Y	N
32.	Are automatic duplicates of certain forms (receipts & purchase orders) provided to individuals (e.g., vendors, taxpayers, etc.)?	Y	N
33.	Is the person who does the bank reconciliation authorized to sign checks?	N	Y
34.	Is the bank reconciliation procedure documented?	Y	N
35.	Are bank statements reconciled monthly, preferably within 15 days after the statement date?	Y	N
36.	Does a responsible official, other than the preparer, review completed bank reconciliations?	Y	N
37.	Is the completed bank reconciliation initialed and dated by both the preparer and the reviewer?	Y	N
38.	Are the following monthly procedures currently performed: - Reconcile cash accounts? - Reconcile accounts receivable to the detail invoices? - Reconcile payroll withholdings to the payroll reports? - Reconcile accounts payable subsidiary ledger to actual invoices?	Y Y Y Y	N N N N

	- Reconcile property tax receipts to property tax receivables?	Y	N	
39.	Are all adjusting entries to the financial statements approved in writing by management?	Y	N	

CASH RECEIPTS

40.	Is receipt of currency adequately controlled until deposited or remitted to the treasurer?	Y	N	
41.	Is a copy kept of the treasurer's signed and dated endorsement of the tax collector's receipts, payments and any abatements? (24 VSA §§1579, 1580)	Y	N	
42.	Have safeguards been provided to prevent officials or employees from cashing checks payable to the town?	Y	N	
43.	Are monies received by one employee, documented and then deposited by another employee?	Y	N	
44.	Are all monies received by the town turned over intact daily to the person who makes the bank deposit?	Y	N	
45.	Does the treasurer keep separate accounts of all money received as highway or school taxes? (32 VSA §4791)	Y	N	
46.	Does the person who handles cash (receipts, bank deposits, purchases) keep the cashbooks / accounting records?	N	Y	
47.	Are funds received over the counter controlled by sequentially numbered counter receipts?	Y	N	

PURCHASING

48.	Are selectboard orders: a. Required for all purchases? b. Signed by a majority of the board and dated?	Y	N	
49.	Does the treasurer keep a book recording all pay orders (outstanding payables) that are not paid? (24 VSA §1576)	Y	N	
50.	Are the functions of purchasing goods, receipt of goods, and cash payment for goods performed by separate employees?	Y	N	
51.	Are: - Checks pre-numbered? - Unused checks controlled? - Checks prepared and signed by the bookkeeper? - Checks ever written to "Cash"?	Y	N	
52.	Are there adequate procedures for controlling the receipt of all goods and services purchased?	Y	N	
53.	Are materials and supplies inspected for condition and counted when received?	Y	N	
54.	Does invoice processing include a mathematical check of footings, extensions and discounts?	Y	N	

CASH DISBURSEMENTS

55.	Are all cash disbursements, except petty cash items, made by check?	Y	N	
56.	Are pre-numbered checks used?	Y	N	
57.	If checks are produced manually, is a controlled, mechanical check protector used?	Y	N	
58.	Are checks produced on an automated financial system?	Y	N	
59.	Is all investment activity by the treasurer approved by the selectboard	Y	N	

	and documented? (24 VSA §1571(b))		
60.	Is petty cash handled through a fixed amount account?	Y	N

PAYROLL

61.	Are personnel records (including wages, salaries and deductions) maintained for all employees?	Y	N
62.	Are salary and wage rates formally approved in the selectboard's minutes?	Y	N
63.	Are methods of accumulating time and recording absences satisfactory?	Y	N
64.	Are payroll deductions properly approved and controlled?	Y	N
65.	Are withholding taxes remitted properly?	Y	N
66.	If the town treasurer is paid a fee for collecting delinquent taxes, does the town maintain a support schedule showing: - The rate or method of calculation for the payment? - Compliance with selectboard guidelines on these payments? (32 VSA §1672)	Y Y	N N

PROPERTY AND EQUIPMENT

67.	Are schedules of fixed assets and depreciation maintained?	Y	N
68.	Are periodic inventories taken and compared with the schedules of fixed assets?	Y	N
69.	Is all property and equipment purchased or leased with town funds held in the name of the town department?	Y	N
70.	Are invoices maintained to support the purchase or lease of equipment?	Y	N

NOTES AND INVESTMENTS

71.	Are schedules maintained of all borrowing and investing activities?	Y	N
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GRAND LIST AND TAX RECORDS

72.	Is a system used (ideally a tax map) to be certain that all taxable property is included in the grand list?	Y	N
73.	Does the delinquent tax collector turn all receipts over to the treasurer so that the collector's fees can be entered into the town's books as wages?	Y	N
74.	Does the town have adequate follow-up policies with delinquent taxpayers?	Y	N
75.	Does someone other than the tax collector (delinquent or current) reconcile taxes?	Y	N

ENTERPRISE FUNDS (Water, Sewer, etc.)

76.	Do accounting practices for enterprise funds follow guidelines listed above for all other town funds?	Y	N
77.	Is the follow-up on delinquent accounts adequate?	Y	N

(a) "VSA" refers to Vermont Statutes Annotated.

References:

1. Various handbooks for Vermont Town Officers, Locally Elected Auditors, Vermont Municipal Clerks, and Collectors of Delinquent Taxes, prepared by the Vermont League of Cities and Towns, Montpelier, VT. 1999.
2. "Evaluating Internal Controls, A Local Government Manager's Guide", S. Gauthier, Government Finance Officer's Association (GFOA), Chicago, Ill., 1996.