

Town Meeting Retrospective -- May 9, 2007

The following notes on the Town Meeting Retrospective are a compendium of comments from Andy Friedlich, Jim Osten, Edith Sandy and Marge Battin. Thanks to all for their contributions!

Questions Discussed:

1. Should wearing political buttons be permitted?

Donna Hooper noted that State Law prohibits restrictions on political buttons.

2. Should we add a regularly-scheduled fall Town Meeting?

The selectmen are willing to schedule fall town meetings when necessary but would prefer not to have them on a regular basis. Alan Levine thought that regular Fall Town Meetings would help get things out of the way before spring, but he and Tom Diaz both noted that the last two fall town meetings have delayed the budget process.

3. Should we consider some full-day sessions of Town Meeting?

Most members were opposed to a full day meeting as this would require taking a vacation day or giving up a busy weekend day. Marge Battin pointed out that in general, it is towns with open Town Meeting that have full-day sessions, and people come only for the articles they are interested in and don't stay for the whole session.

4. What should starting and ending times be (7:30? 8:00? 10:00? midnight? etc)

There is clearly no starting time that is optimal for everyone -- people with children have a hard time getting to Town Meeting by 7:30, but some also have a hard time getting baby sitters after 11:00 PM. It was suggested that TMMA re-survey its membership as to desired starting time.

Some ways of making better use of the time we do have were suggested. The time spent debating articles should be limited to 3 minutes per speaker rather than 5 minutes on main motions. The use of the question microphone for statements and rhetorical questions should be limited. Repeating a question because the questioner does not like the answer they received should not be allowed.

Jeanne Kreiger pointed out that article presenters come before the BOS, and TMMA could cover those sessions and ask questions at that time.

5. Should all capital projects be in a single article, or separate articles?

The selectmen determine the arrangement of warrant articles and have adopted the approach of a single capital article at the recommendation of the Capital Expenditures Committee some years ago. If each capital and CPA project were a separate article the Warrant could exceed 100 articles.

John Bartenstein suggested that capital projects are usually quite independent and a single article should be divided and voted separately. Our by-laws state that “when a motion is readily susceptible of division, it shall be divided and the vote on each part taken separately, provided the Moderator deems best or 25 members present so request” .

It has been the Moderator’s practice to divide the question on her own only if the article sponsor agrees.

6. How can we get the School budget early enough to allow real debate?

According to Tom Diaz, the school budget is usually ready in March, or April if there is to be an override. However, this year, while the school budget was available in preliminary form in January, several external factors delayed the final budget. Among these were fall Town Meeting, the fact that there have been two school budget managers in the past two years with the newest budget manager, Mary Ellen Dunn, having to work on the FY2007 deficit and supplemental budget as well as the FY2008 budget. Further, this year an extra \$640,000 was obtained from the state at the end of the budget process, which allowed the school budget to be revisited.

The revenue forecast at the start of the budget process has traditionally been underestimated. The town manager, Carl Valente, has endeavored to improve the forecasting accuracy. Also, new business analysts/assistant managers have been hired for the school budget and for special education which will assist in rectifying information and process constraints.

7. Should there be questions at Town meeting on general reports?

The discussion centered around two issues -- whether these reports should actually be read at Town Meeting or could simply be posted for perusal; and whether questions

should be allowed on them.

The Selectmen feel strongly that, even though it takes time, presentation at Town Meeting is important to inform the public watching at home and also helps Town Meeting members be informed. There was general agreement with this.

The Moderator will continue to adhere to the following rules:

*Oral reports will be a maximum of five minutes

*Advisory committees to the major elected boards/committees will report only if authorized by their appointing authority

*Reports should only be an overview of a committee's activities and not serve as an opportunity for further argument on an upcoming article

Because they are required to report to Town Meeting by state statute and/or by-law the Moderator does not time the reports of the Planning Board, Appropriation and Capital Expenditures Committees.

There was some consensus that questions to committees who have given an Article 2 report and then later participate in debate on a specific article can be asked when the article is considered, but not under Article 2.

Concern was expressed as to how to correct errors of fact in Town Meeting discussions. We were reminded that a point of personal privilege allows a town meeting member to rise and correct a factual misstatement, if in fact it is a factual misstatement and not an opinion or interpretation.

8. How can we avoid surprises when submitting amendments?

9. How can we better handle amendments?

Advance consultation with the Town Moderator, Town Clerk, and Town Legal Counselor and with the relevant committees and article sponsors is essential.

On this and other Town Meeting matters, each precinct should assign a senior town meeting member to discuss proper procedures with each new town meeting member.

A draft of a substantive amendment (particularly for generally and zoning by-laws and financial motions with complicated sources of funding) must be received by the Town Counsel, Moderator and Town Clerk no later than 1:00 pm on the business day immediately before the day of the session at which it will be offered so that it can be

checked for scope and legality and redrafted as necessary. This rule could be waived at the discretion of the Moderator or by vote of 2/3 of Town Meeting.

It is to the maker of the amendment's advantage to give advance notice of what they are proposing to the maker of the motion they wish to amend as well as to the relevant committee required by state law and/or by-law to make a recommendation to Town Meeting prior to the vote on the amendment (i.e. Planning Board, Appropriation Committee, Capital Expenditures Committee)

The Town Clerk, Donna Hooper, must receive a signed written copy in triplicate of the final draft of the proposed amendment. (It is not enough for her records to leave it on the TMMA table or post it on e-mail.)

When showing a proposed amendment on the screen, only the amendment language on which town meeting is voting should be shown. The amendment should preferably be typed for legibility. Backup information and ancillary supporting arguments should not be shown on the same screen.

10. Should we allow calling the question from the floor?

Consensus was to stay with the present system of waiting at any of the three floor microphones.

Some recommended actions came out of the discussion at this meeting, as follows:

Wearing political buttons is allowed as a right granted in state statute.

Consider a new poll of town meeting member preferences for starting time.

Reduce discussion time on main motions to 3 minutes from 5 minutes.

Allow no repetition of the same question at the question mike and eliminate preambles, statements and rhetorical questions except for a simple ending statement by the questioner that the answers received have convinced them to vote Yes -- No.

Ask selectmen to review the use of one article for capital items.

Recommend that each precinct assign a senior town meeting member to discuss town meeting procedures with each new member. (especially for amendments)

Citizens speaking from the balcony who serve on town committees should give their committee designation as well as their address.

Article sponsors who move that their article be indefinitely postponed should state the reason for doing so.