

Town Meeting Retrospective -- June 2, 2008

The following notes on the Town Meeting Retrospective are a compendium of notes from Andy Friedlich, Vicki Blier, and Marsha Baker. Thanks to all for their contributions!

Approximately 40 Town Meeting Members attended the retrospective session in the Selectmens Meeting Room, as well as Town Manager Carl Valente, Assistant Town Manager Linda Vine, Town Comptroller Rob Addelson, and Town Clerk Donna Hooper.

Issues Discussed:

1. Physical Arrangements

a. Acoustics

Marge Battin noted that the Moderator's microphone has problems. Sam Silverman stated that sound is distorted in parts of Cary Hall because of echoes and reverberations. Hank Manz stated that extensive work on the acoustics of the hall has been done and is continuing. More wireless listening devices will be available next year, and TMMs should be encouraged to use them.

b. Seating for Appropriations Committee

Al Levine requested that 9 chairs be set up for the Appropriations Committee.

c. Use of Cary Hall for all information meetings and precinct meetings

No problems were reported with having precinct meetings scattered throughout Cary Hall, so we will continue to use Cary Hall rather than Clarke for the information meetings.

2. Information Provided

a. Information Meetings

Margaret Heitz felt that we hear only from proponents at the information meetings, and that gives them an advantage. Norm Cohen and Marge Battin explained that the purpose of information meetings is to provide information and not to debate. It is appropriate to ask questions and express concerns. Also, the Warrant Information Report attempts to give a balanced picture.

b. Draft Warrant

Frank Sandy felt that the Draft Warrant was slow in coming this year, making it difficult to assign articles for the Warrant Information Report. But Norm Cohen said there was no difference in timing this year, and suggested that TMMA assign articles as they become ready, without waiting for the entire warrant.

c. School Budget

Andy Friedlich would like to get the School Budget earlier next year, and Dawn McKenna pointed out that the Budget Summary book was late. Tom Griffiths (in the absence of any sitting School Committee members) stated that the budget was actually ready early this year, and said they would try to get both the budget and the summary report out earlier next year.

d. Article 2 Reports

The length of presentations under Article 2 was questioned. Marge Battin clarified that these reports were all under 5 minutes, and they just cover what the committee has done and will do (i.e., not article positions, etc.) We don't debate or question Article 2 reports, just vote to acknowledge that they have been legally filed.

e. On-line Vs. Paper Reports

Colin Hamilton would prefer to receive more of his information on-line. But Al Levine (Appropriations) and David Kanter (Capital) both felt that their committees are required to produce their reports and have copies for all TMMs. It was suggested that TMMA research this question further.

3. Town Meeting

a. Starting date

Norm Cohen noted that our start date was one week earlier than previous years. In an override year it is important to be able to schedule the override vote as early as possible, which requires getting through Article 4 (Budget) early. The downside of doing the budget early is that that you have less information from the State.

David Kanter noted that Capital Expenditures will revise their schedule and should be able to get their report out earlier. Alan Levine noted that the schedule worked for Appropriations, but they could not have done it any earlier. Carl Valente said the early start worked this year, but it was "an easy year", and would be almost impossible in a more difficult year.

It was agreed that an initial administrative meeting would be needed to assure that all boards and committees agreed on timing and other issues.

Vicki Blier wondered if, for example, the High School presentations could be moved to the first night. But Norm Cohen felt that people wouldn't come if the first night were filled just with reports and presentations, so these should be spread throughout Town Meeting.

b. Length of Town Meeting

Dar Adams wondered if this year's 11 sessions were a record. Marge pointed out that before her tenure as moderator, Town Meetings routinely ran to 14 sessions. She was concerned that lengthy Town Meetings could discourage some new, young valuable TMMs.

Joel Adler expressed a concern that when Town Meeting runs too late, things get jammed in at the end. Also, people leave early. Donna Hooper pointed out that we lose about 20 attendees during the course of the night.

Brookline's Town meeting starts at 7:00 PM, ends at 10:30, and usually has 4 sessions. But Charles Hornig (Planning Board) pointed out that an early start time would mean committees would have to meet even earlier (at 6 PM) which would cause hardship for members.

Several people felt that the number and complexity of zoning articles added to the length of Town Meeting; however Charles Hornig pointed out that zoning articles will be with us for the foreseeable future.

c. Scheduling issues

Many articles were postponed this year, and a discussion ensued as to whether we could avoid "date certain" scheduling. But articles that involve citizen input should be discussed on a known date.

There was some discussion of grouping "non-controversial" capital projects together, but it isn't always possible to tell in advance what will be non-controversial, and it may become necessary to divide the articles. Tom Griffiths suggested grouping by financing arrangements, but these are not always known when the Warrant is published. Charles Hornig pointed out that when he was on Capital Expenditures, this method of grouping was tried but did not work well. TMMA may wish to investigate optimal grouping of capital articles.

It was felt that presentations could be expedited somewhat if all presenters were ready to immediately take the mike when it was their turn.

d. Debate on debate

Marge was concerned about the length of debate on the Countryside rezoning, which took up an entire session. This gave rise to a lengthy and rather inconclusive discussion of controlling debate, calling the question, how and whether to include citizens in the debate process, etc.

Colin Hamilton pointed out the lack of a place to make comments (as distinct from arguments pro or con) on an article; the question mike used to serve this purpose, but last year we decided to reserve its use for questions. The consensus was that the question mike could be used for comments as well.

It is possible to limit debate on a main motion to a specific amount of time (unless TM votes to extend debate) and Marge has considered trying this.

As on the email list, there is a relatively small number of people who seem to speak to almost every issue. Ideally, we'd convince them that they'd be more effective if they "picked their fights"; failing that, Marge might simply try skipping over some of the "frequent flyers" when they line up to speak.

e. Procedures

Glenn Parker pointed out that there was some confusion this year when someone requested a standing vote on an issue, and TMMs were unsure how to proceed. Marge will be more diligent in explaining the process in future. But this also brought out the continuing need for senior TMMs to mentor new TMMs.

f. Nametags

It was suggested that TMMs provide nametags, starting with the information sessions. These could be color-coded by precinct or even have stars for years of service.

g. Food Service

Dawn McKenna's comment that the food service really worked well this year was greeted by applause and appreciation for Erin Manz' hard work.

h. Keeping in Touch

Margaret Heitz wondered about ways to continue representing the people in her precinct when Town Meeting was not in session. TMMA should discuss this and find ways to reach out to precincts.

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

TMMA will continue to hold all information meetings in Cary Hall.

TMMA should investigate ways of accommodating both those people who want reports only on-line, and those who want them in-hand.

TMMA should revisit the question of whether discussion on main motions should be limited to 3 minutes or 5 minutes.

TMMA should consider having a “comment mike”, or allowing the question microphone to be used for comments as well as questions.

TMMA, together with Appropriations and Capital Expenditures, should brainstorm ways of optimally grouping capital articles.

TMMA should assure that each precinct assign a senior TMM to mentor new TMMs regarding procedures.

TMMA should make name tags available for TMMs, starting with the first information session and continuing through the first Town Meeting. Consider having “permanent” name tags.

TMMA should try to find ways to keep in touch with precincts throughout the year.