

TOWN OF SUDBURY



Sudbury, Massachusetts 01776

MINUTES FROM MODERATOR'S FORUM

October 27, 2015

Silva Conference Room, Flynn Building

The meeting commenced at 7:05 p.m. A long-term resident began the discussion by noting his appreciation for the current format of Town Meeting, which he considers to be unique and participatory.

Another long-term resident described his experience last year when unable to physically attend Town Meeting due to a family commitment. There were issues that he wanted to vote on but he felt disenfranchised. He opined that some of our colonial methods are in need of modernization. Specifically, he argued that some mechanism needs to be enacted to allow seniors, and others who cannot attend Town Meeting, for whatever reason, to be able to vote from home.

The group then discussed Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 39, Section 10, which in essence, prohibits anyone from voting at Town Meeting unless present. All agreed that any changes to this requirement would need to be initiated and championed by our state legislators.

Several present with school age children questioned whether there might be creative ways to address the scheduling challenges facing residents with commitments that require them to be at home during the evening. They argued that they are able to view the

proceedings on Sudbury TV, and are therefore informed, and should be able to vote. One resident suggested that the Town consider rules amendments that would postpone votes on all articles until a time certain. In other words, articles would be considered and debated, but not voted on until the very end of Town Meeting. Other residents voiced concerns about the continuity of the proceedings, as well as the possibility that people would only show up for the session at which votes were actually taken.

Others suggested that predictability in the timing of when articles would come up would assist those who are juggling babysitters. In other words, if it were known in advance that Articles 1-10, and only Articles 1-10 would be considered on first night, etc., it would help some residents better plan for when they would need to attend. An older resident said that such provisions would do nothing for senior, handicapped or mobility impaired residents, and questioned why absentee balloting could not be implemented. Again, however, the group noted that such a process would be prohibited by state law.

A long-time resident questioned the utility of the budgetary limiting motion. The motion has been used historically to set the upper limit of a budget appropriation prior to considering and voting upon specific line items. The resident asserted that once the limiting motion passed the following budget debate was but a *fait accompli*. Others disagreed. The moderator acknowledged that the limiting motion was a tradition whose origins he could not explain, but expressed a strong preference to continue its use in order to provide a workable framework for later discussion of specific line item appropriations. The resident responded that too little time is devoted to budget presentations and suggested that greater emphasis needs to be placed on transparency and depth of information disclosed by town officials during consideration of budget articles.

One resident stated that there was too much “fluff” at the beginning of Town Meeting and urged the moderator to get right to the point on the first night.

There was a brief discussion regarding the benefits of exploring charter amendments that would shift voting from an “open” town meeting model, to a “representative” approach, where elected representatives, instead of individual citizens, would vote. There was little support for the notion.

The moderator requested specific suggestions on how to improve the Town Meeting experience, or make it more efficient. Several residents expressed support for returning to microphones at the front of the hall designated “pro” and “con” requiring persons to stand in line in order to be recognized to speak. There was broad support for the suggestion.

One resident suggested that the Warrant could be better organized by topic so that the progress of Town Meeting would be more predictable. The moderator pointed out that the initial ordering of the Warrant is determined by the Board of Selectman, and although items could be taken out of order upon a 2/3 vote of the Hall, it appeared that the BOS made every effort to structure the Warrant so that similar articles were heard as sequentially as possible.

One resident suggested the use of straw polls at the beginning of each debate to determine how many individuals wished to speak for or against a particular article.

The group discussed changing the date of Town Meeting and there were widely divergent views on whether it would be preferable to hold the ATM earlier or later than the first week of May, as currently mandated by the by-law. A member of the BOS stated that

the more information we have from the State regarding available aid is a big component of any budget discussion, and thus would militate against efforts to hold ATM any earlier.

There was brief discussion regarding holding ATM on Saturday, as they do in Lincoln. There was no consensus or strong support for the idea, however several long-term residents discussed the need for residents to become better informed on issues discussed at Town Meeting. One suggested a Town Meeting “preview” forum that would allow voters to educate themselves about particular issues prior to voting at Town Meeting. Some questioned whether a “preview” would be well-attended, or would be duplicative with the Town Forum, public budget hearings, and televised Finance Committee meetings. All agreed that whatever efforts could be made to better inform voters, especially on budgetary matters, are worth considering.

Finally, there was some discussion regarding the implementation of electronic voting. While it would eliminate all uncertainties regarding vote outcomes, the technology is expensive. The Town Clerk described that the device could be leased or purchased, but that it was difficult to gauge how many devices would be required because of an inability to predict how many people would actually attend any given meeting. Even if the requisite amount of devices could be properly estimated, the costs are exorbitant, and vary based on vendors. One resident noted that the costs could be mitigated if the concept of voting only at the conclusion of all article discussions on a single last night of Town Meeting were to be implemented.

The session concluded shortly before 9:00 p.m., with the moderator agreeing to circulate notes of the discussion and schedule follow-up sessions as appropriate. Given the feedback from the forum, action items are as follows:

- Residents to discuss potential amendments to G.L. c. 39 with state legislators.
- Moderator to report to the Board of Selectmen suggestion that voting on all articles be in abeyance until the final night of Town Meeting (would require amendment of Town By-Laws).
- Moderator to consider and implement specific suggestions regarding more efficient recognition of speakers at Town Meeting.
- Moderator and Town Clerk to continue to collect information regarding pros and cons of implementing electronic voting.
- Moderator to publicize the results of the forum and to schedule additional sessions as appropriate.