

SHARON GOVERNANCE STUDY COMMITTEE MINUTES

April 13, 2022

The meeting of the Sharon Governance Study Committee was called to order at 7:34 pm by Chair Paul Pietal.

Member attendance

Arguimbau: Present	Carver: Present	Geller: Present	Goodman: Absent
Keenan: Present	King: Present	Monahan: Present	Pietal: Present
Rangarajan: Present	Wluka: Absent		

Subcommittee updates

Mr. Keenan provided an update from the Town Meeting Subcommittee, which met on April 6. That meeting featured a guest, Angela Harkness, Westford, town moderator. Westford shares many characteristics with Sharon, including an Open Town Meeting. The annual town meeting is held on a Saturday in June, and normal attendance is about 1-2% of registered voters, and the Westford Select Board created a Town Meeting Access committee to investigate ways to increase attendance. That committee has been divided into three subcommittees, charged with (1) surveying residents about impediments to participation, (2) surveying moderators across the state for their experience with improving engagement, and (3) investigating technologies that might facilitate and increase the efficiency of Town Meetings.

Ms. Harkness' presentation was particularly clear and informative. Approximately 800 voters (5% of the voting population) responded to the first survey, and 46 moderators of other towns (including Sharon) completed the second. The surveys identified action items, which the committee grouped according to goals, then categorized as high, medium, and low priorities. Ms. Harkness indicated that she wants to implement low-cost, high-priority recommendations in time for this year's ATM. She provided us with documents reporting the survey results, and those documents are in our shared folder.

She noted that the committee used multiple communication channels and methods to reach voters, resulting in a good response rate.

One finding that surprised her: many residents report feeling intimidated by town meeting. The Access Committee will work to educate residents about the realities of OTM. The committee is unified in the belief that greater participation leads to greater representation.

In the Moderator survey, one noteworthy finding was that most moderators report that TM attendance does not reflect town demographics.

In response to a subcommittee question about systematic impediments to participation, the main affected groups were parents of young kids, people with work conflicts, and retirees who winter elsewhere.

Ms. Harkness' experience as Moderator and this survey have changed her thinking about citizens who come for a few votes and leave. She now thinks that some participation is preferable to none, and might lead to greater involvement in the future.

Another subcommittee question asked if people stay away because they are satisfied? Ms. Harkness thought that was unlikely; more commonly people indicate a belief that decisions have already been made. Length of meetings was reported as another common deterrent.

Finally, she noted that Westford is investigating electronic voting, which was previously voted down at ATM.

Mr. Keenan concluded by noting that the planned survey to be distributed at Town Meeting is nearly ready for implementation. There is a current copy in the shared drive. He thanked Mr. Rangarajan for his research into vendors and software to facilitate data collection and compilation.

Mr. Geller praised Ms. Harkness' presentation as the best one we have seen. Ms. Arguimbau concurred, noting that we already do some of the recommended items in the Westford report. Mr. Rangarajan also agreed, particularly noting the clarity and quality of their action items.

Mr. Pietal commented on the idea of the phenomenon of voters coming for one issue, agreeing that for some issues that's all that people are willing to do.

Mr. Rangarajan observed that we are seeing a common theme from moderators around the value of saving time when votes must be counted. There is a consistent agreement that electronic voting is a time saver. Mr. Geller concurs that electronic voting is the way to go.

Mr. Keenan reported that the Town Meeting Subcommittee is expecting a presentation from Option Technologies, an electronic voting firm. They have already suggested that we attend ATM in Wayland and/or Weston, where their systems will be used this year.

Mr. Pietal asked how many of our votes go to a hand count and suggested that we inquire of Mr. Hogan or Mr. Nebenzahl. Mr. King recalled Mr. Hogan noting that standing votes are fairly scarce and move quickly with the use of multiple tellers.

Mr. King provided a report from the Board and Committees subcommittee, which met on April 5. He began by noting that they had paused their planning for a broader town-wide survey, and decided to see what is learned from the town meeting survey.

The subcommittee had discussed community engagement with the work and functioning of boards and committees and raised several questions. Should we publish committee mission descriptions for the public—the roles of different committees are probably not well known among residents. Should we standardize the way different committees post and report on the town website.

Mr. Pietal has investigated whether committees know how to update their sites, or do they have to work through the IT department, but has no definitive answer yet.

There was then a discussion of whether the Town Meeting survey should include a QR code that would send Town Meeting attendees to the GSC website. After input from several members, it was decided that Mr. Keenan and Mr. Rangarajan examine the layout of the already crowded survey to see if there's a good place to put a QR code.

Mr. King also reported that the subcommittee has discussed a removal policy for committees, as there is currently no standard process in place. Mr. Pietal added that it would be good to articulate processes.

Ms. Monahan added that the subcommittee discussed updating our own webpage with, for example, bullet points from each meeting like the ones Mr. Pietal assembles for the Select Board.

In reference to the Select Board, Mr. Rangarajan reminded us that there are modest costs involved with photocopies and with the survey software, and noted that we'll need a small amount of funding.

Liaison updates

None.

General updates

Swampscott Representative Town Meeting. Mr. Carver reported on his correspondence and a phone interview with Town Moderator Michael McClung, who had been invited to attend a Town Meeting

Subcommittee meeting, but had not signed on. Mr. Carver observed that Swampscott's experience was quite similar to that of other towns we have contacted. They have one of the larger RTM's, with 324 members. They have successfully conducted virtual meetings during COVID, and Mr. McClung spoke of a "mission control team" of 10 people to monitor questions, confirm the identity of members, tally votes, coordinate speakers, and so on. Voting during the meetings has gone smoothly. He stated that "RTM is a two-edged sword: on the one hand, you've got a built-in base of engaged residents; on the other hand, if it's too large a meeting (Swampscott is 3rd largest in Mass at 324), you've simply got another thing to recruit for."

Mr. Carver commented that one feature of RTMs is the provision for non-RTM members to speak on issues, even though they cannot vote. We have previously raised the question of engaging tax-paying residents who are non-citizens, and therefore non-voters. We may want further discussion of how to facilitate participation that is limited to speaking but not voting and educating residents about the option.

Governance Study Committee web page

Mr. Pietal will work with Ms. Imbaro on this.

Remaining timeline

Mr. Pietal referred to the Draft April-July Schedule sent out with the meeting packet. He thanked Mr. Keenan for drafting this schedule and commented that he is hoping to intensify our efforts before summer. He asked for comments, questions, and suggestions for the draft.

Ms. Monahan wonders if a broader survey should precede public hearings.

Mr. Rangarajan asked if this schedule was too ambitious? Should we think about phasing/staging elements of our mission into separate rounds?

Mr. King recommended adding a full committee meeting between the 2 forums, to allow debriefing of the forum process.

Mr. Carver suggested marketing the public hearings and having surveys to follow. Forums might increase awareness and improve survey results.

Mr. Keenan commented that the schedule is aggressive, but we do need to look ahead to our deadlines. We should be writing reports in October, and some of the intervening steps will require time. We have previously discussed consulting assistance from MAPC or Collins Center, which may not be forthcoming. We may likely need to do this on our own.

Ms. Arguimbau noted that surveys can happen while other things are happening. We can be running the survey while meeting for other purposes.

On the subject of open forums, Mr. Geller reflected on the experience of the Conservation Commission, which has had forums that were poorly attended.

Ms. Monahan raised the idea of placing forums further apart on the calendar. The 1st could be quite open-ended on general issues of governance, and the 2nd focus on the draft recommendations before writing a report. We might ask the public for reactions to our draft recommendations. This idea received considerable support.

Mr. Keenan asked what tasks are most critical for subcommittees to do in the near term.

Mr. Carver asked where we stand with conferring with existing civic groups in town. At an earlier point, the Committee had discussed this approach to seeking input. Mr. Pietal noted that we still need to nail that down.

Mr. Pietal then summarized the action steps:

- Prepare a second broader survey. Mr. Keenan & Mr. Rangarajan expressed willingness to start, with assistance from the contact person that Mr. Goodman brought in previously.
- Reconnect with MAPC re: their availability in early May. This is a task for Mr. Wluka.

After some discussion about the target audience for a second survey, the consensus view was to make the survey available to everyone, with questions about current service on a board.

Ms. Monahan reminded us that the Boards Subcommittee already has the first draft of some survey questions. Next subcommittee meetings should move forward with refining the questions.

Mr. Pietal supports an approach with multiple rounds, noting there are still issues that the committee has not yet discussed, such as a charter for example. The committee felt they should stage and sequence the issues in the coming months.

Minutes

MOTION: To approve the minutes of the March 16, 2022 meeting with the correction of two typographical errors.

(Arguimbau - King)

Arguimbau: AYE
Keenan: AYE

Carver: Abstain
King: Abstain

Geller: AYE
Monahan: AYE

Pietal: AYE
Rangarajan: AYE

6-0-2 **PASSES**

MOTION: To approve the minutes of the March 30, 2022 meeting.

(King - Geller)

Arguimbau: AYE
Keenan: AYE

Carver: AYE
King: AYE

Geller: AYE
Monahan: AYE

Pietal: AYE
Rangarajan: AYE

8-0-0 **PASSES**

Updates on Old business

Status on vacancy: One application has been received

Mr. Pietal meets next week with Select Board and will discuss funding.

Mr. Carver asked where things stand on enlisting student assistance with surveys and other tasks. The committee suggested contacting the School Superintendent and asking Mr. Goodman to inquire of the School Committee.

Topics not anticipated within 48 hours of posting

Mr. King raised the topic of resuming in-person meetings which Mr. Geller endorsed. Ms. Arguimbau commented that scheduling time and space could be a challenge.

Mr. Pietal indicated that he was inclined to do so only if we are unanimous, wishing not to force anyone. Ms. Monahan noted that the Open Meeting Law permits the streaming of in-person meeting.

MOTION: (Geller-Rangarajan) As soon as possible, the full committee should begin meeting in person.

Arguimbau: AYE*
(*conditional on large room)

Carver: AYE

Geller: AYE

Pietal: AYE

Keenan: AYE

King: AYE

Monahan: NAY

Rangarajan: AYE

7-1-o PASSES

Mr. Pietal reiterated his goal of unanimity on this issue and notes the absence of two members. He will explore with Ms. Imbaro.

The next scheduled meeting will be on April 27.

Adjourn

Seeing no other business to come before the committee, Mr. Pietal adjourned the meeting at 9:15 pm.