

Town Meeting Subcommittee Minutes of Meeting of April 6, 2022

Members present:

Peg Arguimbau
Rob Carver
Keevin Geller

Matthew Keenan
Ganesh Rangarajan

Guest presentation: Angela Harkness, Moderator, Town of Westford

Westford Moderator Angela Harkness spoke to the subcommittee about the work of her town's Access to Town Meeting Committee.

Westford has about 17,000 registered voters. The town's annual meeting is held on Saturdays in June. During the Covid era, between 200 and 300 voters attended meetings, down about 100 voters from the years immediately prior to the pandemic.

The Westford access committee has conducted two surveys – one of town residents, asking for their views of Town Meeting, and one of 46 town moderators throughout Massachusetts, asking about the level of voter participation as well as best practices for open town meetings. The board has a subcommittee examining technology issues, seeking ways to make it easier for residents to participate, Ms. Harkness said.

The committee made a series of suggestions to the town's Select Board, focusing on "low-hanging fruit" – relatively easy, no-cost proposals that can be implemented immediately. Those include setting up a family-friendly space at Town Meeting sessions and having an additional food truck at the event. The committee also recommended the use of electronic voting devices, something that Town Meeting voters previously rejected.

Question-and-answer session

In response to a question by Mr. Carver, Ms. Harkness said the committee has not held a public forum on its recommendations or the survey results. Responding to Mr. Rangarajan, she said a four-person subcommittee identified its recommendations on three levels (as high, medium or low priorities) before they were voted on by the full board.

Ms. Harkness said it may take a period of five years to evaluate the success of the initiatives implemented after the access committee's work is done. That would give the town time to educate members of the public about the changes.

Ms. Harkness said the survey of town voters drew 800 responses, about 5% of the voting population. After an initial response of about 400, the committee conducted a social media push that doubled the number of completed questionnaires.

One concern Ms. Harkness said she has about Town Meeting is that voters don't attend because they find the idea of speaking or voting in public intimidating. It's critical to educate them "how important it

is and that it's not scary," she said. The town needs to "let people know they can come to Town Meeting and people won't stare at them, or yell at them."

Asked by Mr. Keenan why it's important to have larger numbers of voters take part in Town Meeting, Ms. Harkness said: "The more people vote, the more representative Town Meeting is." She added that some people think Town Meeting is repressive, that it's repressing people's ability to vote. ...That is something I personally want to dispel."

The statewide survey of town moderators showed they don't think the attendees at their meetings reflect the actual diversity of their communities.

Mr. Carver asked if the surveys revealed whether there are voters who are systematically but unintentionally blocked from full participation in Westford. Ms. Harkness said parents of school-age children are the most-underrepresented group at Town Meeting. The length of meetings, scheduling conflicts and the feeling they can't "spend Saturday away from their kids," contributes to their relatively low level of attendance, she said.

According to the 2020 Census, Asians make up about 21% of Westford's population, but attendance at Town Meeting doesn't reflect their presence in the community, Ms. Harkness said. Another group not fully represented is retirees who live elsewhere in the winter and haven't returned to town by the time of the meeting, she said.

Because of the access committee's work, Ms. Harkness said, she had something of a change of heart about people who don't take part in town meeting. Previously, she thought that it was "their own fault" if they didn't turn out. Since then, she said she's "totally turned around"; she understands if voters can come only for an hour, or if they want to vote for only one issue. Her goal is to make Town Meeting more welcoming to voters overall, not just for the people who like government and politics.

Asked by Mr. Geller if voters stay away from Westford's meeting because the town is well run, Ms. Harkness said more don't attend because they think decisions have already been made ahead of time and they can't affect the outcome at the meeting.

In addition, she said voters tend to turn out when issues they care about are on a warrant. So, if a popular land-parcel purchase were on a warrant, and that question is mixed in with other more routine matters, they will still turn out even if they think the town is well governed.

Discussion of Sharon Town Meeting survey

The subcommittee members discussed revisions to the draft survey scheduled to be distributed at the Annual Town Meeting in May.

Mr. Keenan noted that Moderator Andy Nebenzahl is supportive of the survey and said he would work with the Governance Study Committee to encourage voters to fill out their questionnaires.

Mr. Rangarajan updated the subcommittee on his research into companies that could process completed forms and help compile the results.

Minutes

The subcommittee unanimously approved the minutes from the March 23 meeting.

**Town Meeting Subcommittee
Minutes of Meeting of April 20, 2022**

Members present:

Peg Arguimbau
Rob Carver
Keevin Geller

Matthew Keenan
Ganesh Rangarajan

Discussion of Town-wide Governance Survey

Subcommittee members discussed a draft list of more than a dozen questions that could be included in a survey of Sharon residents.

The survey, the second sponsored by the Governance Study Committee, would be used to gauge public opinion about the issues the panel was assigned to review by the Select Board. The responses would be taken into consideration when the governance committee makes its recommendations later this year.

The draft list included questions on subjects such as:

- The size of Sharon's Select Board.
- Opinions about the form of government in Sharon.
- Respondents' level of participation in town elections and Town Meeting.
- Impediments and incentives that influence voters' involvement in civic issues.
- The ability of non-U.S. citizens who are residents of Sharon to take part in town elections or serve on appointed boards.
- The effectiveness of town government.

Some of the questions were modeled on the governance committee's first survey, a poll about Town Meeting.

The committee discussed whether to include a set of demographic questions.

After several revisions, the members agreed to forward the potential survey list to the full governance committee for its April 27 agenda.

Discussion of Town Meeting Survey

The members turned to a review of the Town Meeting survey, scheduled to be distributed to voters attending the annual session on May 2. The members talked about the logistics of distributing the questionnaire and processing the responses.

Town Meeting Subcommittee
Minutes of Meeting of May 4, 2022

Members present:

Peg Arguimbau
Rob Carver
Keevin Geller

Matthew Keenan
Ganesh Rangarajan

Guest Speaker: Mark Fite, Option Technologies Inc.

The meeting opened with a presentation by Mark Fite, president of Option Technologies Inc. (OTI), an Orlando, Florida-based company that provides electronic voting services for Massachusetts town meetings.

The company, founded in 1985, provides hardware and software for vote tabulations for corporations, unions, religious groups and other clients, in addition to town meetings. In 2011, OTI was the first firm to offer voting services for a representative town meeting (Framingham) and an open town meeting (Wayland).

The company currently serves 26 municipal clients in Massachusetts and has managed more than 200 open town meetings in the state.

Most communities rent OTI's hardware rather than buy it. The company does sell its technology, usually to representative-meeting towns, which have a fixed number of voters, or to smaller open-meeting towns with relatively few registered voters.

Mr. Fite discussed two OTI products. The k4 is a small, credit-card-size device with a few buttons (yes, no, abstain) and a postage-stamp screen confirming when one's vote has been accepted. The g3 is a larger handset with additional buttons and fuller LCD confirmation screen. The latter has a longer range. (The town of Weston uses the g3.)

Mr. Fite said there are two primary selling points to electronic voting. First, voters are concerned about privacy. They don't want to alienate neighbors, business customers or others by the way they vote. (In response to a question later in the meeting, he said about one-third of voters believe attendees should stand up and be counted on votes, while two-thirds believe private voting is better.)

The second issue is speed. Vote tabulation tends to be faster, and more accurate, with electronic voting than with hand counting or voice voting, he said.

The speed of voting depends on the size of the crowd, with larger audiences taking longer to cast votes, Mr. Fite said. In groups of up to 400, a vote can take 30 seconds; in audiences of 400 to 800, it takes 45 seconds; and among larger gatherings, a vote takes 60 seconds. He said research in Wayland claimed electronic voting saved up to 5 hours per meeting.

In addition, he said electronic voting creates a more positive and collegial environment than open voting.

He mentioned that, under Massachusetts law, voting from home is not permitted, because of concerns about security. Wayland, in coalition with other communities, is asking the state to permit a pilot program that tests voting from home, Mr. Fite said.

Members of representative town meetings have been allowed, under a special, COVID-era exemption, to vote from home via secure connections. Town meeting representatives in towns such as Lexington, Arlington and Plymouth have done so, Mr. Fite said.

Question and answers

Mr. Fite said client towns don't necessarily use electronic voting on every vote. Some minor procedural matters can be taken care of in voice votes. More consequential issues, like any issues involving spending, are handled by using the voting devices.

On voting procedure, he said meeting attendees are given information in their warrant package and verbal instructions at the start of the event by the moderator. There is also a test vote, so voters know their devices are functioning properly.

When it is time for a vote, a green "voting light" is lit at the front of the auditorium and voters are told they 30 seconds (or 45 or 60) to press a button on their device to enter their preference.

Towns typically don't display vote totals on a screen for the audiences to see. (OTI doesn't recommend the practice because it tends to slow down voters.) Instead, there is a display for the moderator and town clerk to view the votes cast. Those officials announce the outcome and move on to the next agenda item.

Mr. Fite said voting devices are secure. Votes cast with a particular device are not linked to the person holding it. The devices are collected when voters leave the meeting and OTI's software expunges all data.

If a community buys the hardware, OTI conducts training for town workers (including clerk's office and technology staffs).

The company also rents devices and provides support services to communities. There is a 90-day planning cycle to organize meetings. For smaller town meetings, OTI sets up its equipment the day of the event, or one day earlier.

In Weston, which conducted a meeting May 9, OTI's team planned arrive at Weston High School at 10 a.m. (9 hours before the start of the meeting). Six computers with the list of registered voters were set up and connected to servers; the town clerk's staff checked voters in as they arrived. Three OTI staffers were at the site, setting up networks and, during the meeting, serving as an IT help desk for voters who needed assistance.

Mr. Fite said the cost of shipping devices is \$110 per case. The larger, more sophisticated devices (g3) are more expensive to send. One case can hold 100 of those units, compared with 250 to 300 of the smaller devices (k4).

In response to a question by Mr. Rangarajan, he said it is cheaper to rent devices than purchase them if a town doesn't hold at least four meetings a year. And if town employees can operate the system without on-site staff assistance, the cost is lower still.

Mr. Fite said Plymouth purchased 200 k4 handsets for about \$7,000 to \$8,000, along with a software fee of 10% to 15% a year.

The cost of on-site help is about \$4,000.

The rental cost of 200 handsets is \$1,000. Communities can receive a discount with a multiyear commitment.

Attendance at town meetings tends to vary from year to year, based on the issues in a particular agenda. Working with towns after a warrant is published, OTI can increase or decrease the number of devices provided at a meeting based on anticipated attendance. Wayland conducts a survey beforehand to gauge interest in a meeting.

Discussion of 2022 Annual Town Meeting and survey

The subcommittee held a brief discussion of the Town Meeting held two nights earlier (May 2), which all members attended.

In all, 193 townspeople, about 1.5% of registered voters, attended the session.

The subcommittee and full Governance Study Committee distributed to attendees a five-question survey about their thoughts about Town Meeting.

Some 151 voters, or 78% of those attending, completed the survey.

Mr. Rangarajan and Mr. Carver compiled the data from the survey.

Among the highlights:

- 63% of voters attending said they go to almost every Town Meeting; 11% were there for the first time.
- The average age of voters in attendance was 53.5 years (a study of the five previous annual and special Town Meeting sessions showed the average age at 59 years)
- 49% identified as women; 47% identified as men; 2% as nonbinary
- 85% of voters identified as white; 12% as Asian, Black, Latino or a member of another group

- The average time an attendee has lived in Sharon is 21 years and the median is 17
 - About one-third have lived in town less than 10 years
- Regarding their opinion of Town Meeting:
 - 61% said they try to attend no matter what's on the agenda
 - 46% said the sessions take too long
 - 39% said there's a better way to make decisions in the town
 - 34% said they know how they're going to vote before they get to the meeting
 - Another 33% wait for the debates before deciding
- Voters cited the following as factors affecting their ability to attend Town Meeting sessions:
 - Childcare responsibilities: 36%
 - Conflicts with other activities: 32%
 - Work obligations: 31%
 - Holding meetings on weeknights: 19%
 - They weren't always interested in the subjects at Town Meeting: 19%
- How voters learn about Town Meeting:
 - 78% said they got information from the town warrant booklet mailed to each home
 - 38% said Sharon Facebook groups
 - 33% said town webpages or emails
 - 28% said from friends or by word of mouth

Subcommittee members will continue to analyze the data for further insights.

As for Town Meeting itself, several members commented on the hour-long presentation and discussion of Article 20, regarding zoning. The presentation by a lawyer for the Planning Board exceeded the time given to other presenters, Mr. Geller noted. And a slide presentation accompanying the take was unreadable to members of the audience.

Ms. Arguimbau said townspeople should have had full information about the changes sought by the article well ahead of the meeting (a supplement to the article was handed to voters as they entered the meeting). The purpose of Town Meeting is to hold debate rather than to educate voters on issues for the first time, she said.

Ms. Arguimbau said the meeting, which took just under 4 hours, was not a bad amount of time to conduct the business on the agenda

Mr. Rangarajan, who had to leave the meeting early, said his experience watching the Sharon community TV coverage at home was far better than following the proceedings in the high school auditorium because of superior sound quality.

A fuller debriefing of the 2022 Town Meeting is set for the May 11 meeting of the Governance Study Committee. Additional discussions will be held in future subcommittee meetings.

Discussion of letter on public forum

The subcommittee discussed the draft of a letter by Mr. Keenan promoting a public forum of the Governance Study Committee. The event, tentatively scheduled for June, would offer members of the public an opportunity to give their opinions about town government. (A second session would be held in September.)

The committee also reviewed a list of civic and community groups to which the letter could be sent to encourage attendance.

The subcommittee decided to forward the letter to the full committee for a discussion on May 11.

Minutes

The members unanimously approved the minutes of the meetings of April 6 and April 20.

Town Meeting Subcommittee
Minutes of Meeting of June 29, 2022

Members present:

Peg Arguimbau
Rob Carver
Keevin Geller

Matthew Keenan
Ganesh Rangarajan

Also present:

Brian Luther, Metropolitan Area Planning Council

Matters referred to MAPC for additional research

The Metropolitan Area Planning Council has recently agreed to consult with the Governance Study Committee. The subcommittee members discussed subjects on which the MAPC might provide additional background information. The group asked MAPC to provide:

- Data from towns with particularly high attendance figures for open town meetings, to help determine the reasons for those figures. (Relatedly, the group asked for attendance data from Sharon's "comparable towns.")
- A set of best practices for communicating with voters about Town Meeting, based on examples from other towns. These practices should have an emphasis on voter education, especially around warrant articles.
- A grid of comparable towns showing which boards are elected and appointed.
- A review of comparable towns showing which have personnel boards and which may have disbanded those boards.

Statements regarding Sharon's form of government

Each subcommittee member made a statement about the form of government the group should recommend that the full committee ultimately include in its report to the Select Board.

Ms. Arguimbau spoke in favor of the current open town meeting form of government, saying "it is not the time to change." Open Town Meeting gives each voter a unique right to have a say in local government and the power to choose whether to participate, she said. The subcommittee should not advocate for decisions to be made by a smaller group, such as a representative town meeting.

Ms. Arguimbau also offered a series of suggestions for improving the preparation for and the conduct of Town Meeting. They include a separate educational pre-meeting session at which residents could learn about warrant articles; moving up the date for submission of warrant articles; sending "save the date" postcards about Town Meeting to all residents; requiring relevant maps and charts to be placed in the warrant; and placing the consent agenda of noncontroversial items at the end of the Town Meeting agenda.

Mr. Carver spoke in favor of the current open town meeting form of government, saying it should be retained and improved. More can be done to tell voters about Town Meeting, such as producing educational videos, as the town of Winchester has done, and teaching about local government in the town's schools, he said. Sharon could step up to become a leader in electronic voting and to champion technology allowing remote participation in Town Meetings. "In 15 years, I can't imagine we won't be using technology in more productive ways," he said.

Mr. Geller spoke in favor of the current open town meeting form of government. Open Town Meeting enables anyone to bring forward a warrant article and to speak about issues. While meeting sessions could still be streamlined, such as by cutting down on repetitious speeches, "for all the inefficiency, I do think it's precious," he said. The representative town meeting system suffers from cronyism and would not be an improvement, he said. Mr. Geller called for on-site electronic voting and said the town should work with state legislators to bring about hybrid Town Meetings.

Mr. Rangarajan spoke in favor of the current open town meeting form of government, saying he did not "fundamentally believe Town Meeting has to change." Where he differed from the previous speakers, Mr. Rangarajan said, was in the need for (and emphasis of) community outreach. All residents, no matter who they are, need to feel they are fully part of the community and that their votes matter, too. He joined in recommending new modes of voting and for a move toward hybrid meetings.

Mr. Keenan spoke in favor of a town council form of government. He said while Town Meeting served Sharon for a long time, it no longer meets the needs of a modern suburban community. Town Meeting suffers from chronic low attendance (a median of 2%) and its structure serves to exclude certain voters (such as parent of young children), he said. A council-manager government would be nimbler and still permit residents to participate in democratic government, he said.

Town Meeting Subcommittee
Minutes of Meeting of July 13, 2022

Members present:

Peg Arguimbau
Rob Carver
Keevin Geller

Matthew Keenan
Ganesh Rangarajan

Also present:

Brian Luther, Metropolitan Area Planning Council

Report from MAPC

Mr. Luther presented research findings regarding Town Meeting attendance in a handful of comparable communities in eastern Massachusetts, as well as efforts in some of those towns to attract more voters to the events.

In this comparison, Mr. Luther said, Sharon's Town Meeting attendance in the last 5 years was somewhat above the group average. He noted that the Wayland, another community in the group, has extensive experience with on-site electronic voting. The town of Wenham, which had the highest average attendance in the group, placed particular emphasis on communicating with and educating residents about the issues considered at its Town Meeting.

Debates and votes on resolutions

The subcommittee considered and voted on the following items. They will be forwarded to the full Governance Study Committee, which will decide whether to pass them on to the Select Board. The resolutions were:

- **Form of government:** Moved that the town retain the open town meeting form of government. We call on the Select Board to work to improve the existing form of our town government by implementing changes/recommendations from the Governance Study Committee to encourage greater participation and provide opportunities for voters to better understand issues prior to any Town Meeting. (Ms. Arguimbau) Approved, 4-1. (Ms. Arguimbau, Mr. Carver, Mr. Geller and Mr. Rangarajan in favor; Mr. Keenan opposed.)
- Proposal that the Select Board and town clerk work with the Recreation Department, School Department and other relevant bodies to minimize schedule conflicts on the dates of Town Meeting. (Mr. Carver) Approved, 5-0.

- ~~Proposal that no other town activities will be scheduled for the day/days of Town Meeting, including committee meetings, sports events or town or religious events. (Ms. Arguimbau) Withdrawn~~
- Proposal that the town clerk and Select Board identify an appropriate Annual Town Meeting date. The default or target day for the annual Town Meeting should be the first [Monday] in May. We recognize that, at times, efforts will need to be made to accommodate members of certain religious communities and others. The purpose of this resolution is to avoid scheduling conflicts that may effectively exclude segments of the voting population. The proposal does not seek to set a particular day for the annual meeting; instead, it sets a target and encourages flexibility by the town's decision-makers to enable maximum voter participation. We call on the clerk and Select Board to similarly collaborate on dates for special meetings. {The subcommittee reserves the right to revisit this issue pending the results of the town-wide survey.} (Mr. Keenan) Approved, 5-0.
- Proposal to set aside two consecutive days of the week to address the business of the town. If more are needed, the third day would be in the following week. (Ms. Arguimbau) Approved, 5-0.
- Proposal to retain the twice-yearly meeting schedule, with the May (annual) meeting to address budget, capital expenditures and non-zoning-related articles, and the fall meeting reserved for zoning and bylaw changes. Allowances should be made to allow for any time-sensitive articles that may arise. (Ms. Arguimbau) Approved, 5-0.

Minutes

The subcommittee unanimously approved the minutes of the June 29, 2022, meeting.

Town Meeting Subcommittee
Minutes of Meeting of July 27, 2022

Members present:

Peg Arguimbau
Rob Carver
Matthew Keenan

Joanne Michalek
Ganesh Rangarajan

Also present:

Brian Luther, Metropolitan Area Planning Council

Member absent:

Keevin Geller

Debates and votes on resolutions

The subcommittee considered and voted on the following items. They will be forwarded to the full Governance Study Committee, which will decide whether to pass them on to the Select Board. The resolutions were:

- Proposal to test on-site electronic voting at Town Meeting. For more than a decade, Massachusetts communities have safely used hand-held electronic voting devices at Town Meetings – saving significant time, improving the experience of participants, and ensuring secure and accurate vote counts. We recommend the town conduct a three-year experiment, using voting devices at all annual and special Town Meetings, to determine the merits and cost-effectiveness of electronic voting. (Mr. Keenan)
 - Discussion: Mr. Carver said other towns had shown on-site electronic voting to be feasible and functional. Adopting electronic voting would help foster greater engagement in town government here, he said; Ms. Michalek concurred. Mr. Keenan spoke about the expense of buying or renting voting systems and securing technological support, which could raise the cost of Town Meeting considerably. Mr. Rangarajan said there is a price to be borne for true democracy.
 - Approved, 5-0. (Ms. Arguimbau, Mr. Carver, Mr. Keenan, Ms. Michalek and Mr. Rangarajan in favor.)

- Proposal to support efforts enabling remote participation in Town Meeting. Current state law does not allow voters to take part in Town Meeting unless they are physically present. Officials in Wayland are seeking passage of enabling legislation allowing that town to test a remote-participation system at its Town Meeting; that system would permit off-site participants to speak, introduce amendments and cast votes. We recommend the Select Board vote to support Wayland's efforts (including asking our legislative delegation to co-sponsor the bill), monitor the progress of the legislation and, if a successful test is conducted, determine if a similar experiment should take place in Sharon. (Mr. Keenan)
 - Approved, 4-0. (Mr. Carver, Mr. Keenan, Ms. Michalek and Mr. Rangarajan in favor.)

- Proposal to allow noncitizen participation in government. Current law prohibits noncitizens from voting in federal and state elections. Recently, several communities in Massachusetts have petitioned the legislature to allow noncitizens, many of whom have lived in their communities for decades, to vote in local elections. We recommend the Select Board seek legislation that permits non-U.S. citizens to participate more fully in community life in Sharon by voting in town elections and at Town Meeting, as well as serving in appointed and elected positions on town boards and committees. (Mr. Keenan)
 - Discussion: Mr. Rangarajan said many noncitizens living in Sharon are legal permanent residents. They own homes and pay property taxes without having a say in how the town's money is spent. Many have to wait decades, upwards of 60 years in certain cases, to become a U.S. citizen, he said. Mr. Rangarajan said he would consider amending the proposal to restrict noncitizen voting to property owners; Mr. Carver and Mr. Keenan opposed the idea. Mr. Carver said he felt strongly about not connecting citizen rights to property rights. Mr. Carver also noted there may be pushback from some townspeople who believe voting should be restricted to legal U.S. citizens. He said allowing noncitizens to serve on town boards and committees would be a plus: "There's a lot of talent out there." Ms. Arguimbau and Ms. Michalek said they wished to have more time to consider the proposal. Mr. Keenan said the motion would be considered again by the full Governance Study Committee and the subcommittee members will have a chance to vote again then.
 - Approved, 3-0-2. (Mr. Carver, Mr. Keenan and Mr. Rangarajan in favor; Ms. Arguimbau and Ms. Michalek abstaining).

- Proposal to prioritize town warrant on internet: Currently, the town sends a full warrant booklet to all households, accounting for the majority of expenses related to Town Meeting. This proposal would recommend instead placing a clear, navigable version of the warrant on the town website. A postcard would be sent to all households alerting voters aware to the posting, allowing them to become familiar with the issues under consideration. Printed versions of the warrant will still be available at town buildings and at the meeting itself. (Mr. Keenan)
 - Discussion: Mr. Keenan said switching to a web-based warrant book from a printed version sent to each household in the town could partially offset the cost of other committee initiatives, including on-site electronic voting. Mr. Luther of the MAPC said state law lets communities decide how to distribute information about the articles to be discussed at their town meetings. Most nearby and comparable towns still send warrant books to their residents, though Milton, Wales, Dover and others have stopped the practice, he said.
 - Approved, 5-0. (Ms. Arguimbau, Mr. Carver, Mr. Keenan, Ms. Michalek and Mr. Rangarajan in favor.)

- Moved that the Select Board consider the following suggestions to be implemented prior to Town Meeting to increase voters' understanding of the issues to be addressed at Town Meeting: Once the warrant has been closed (early January) , a series of town-wide communications should be issued (via mailing, cable TV notice and Facebook) to call attention to the warrant ("Your Warrant is Coming to the Internet!" or

“Be on the Lookout - Your Warrant is on the Way!”) with a list of general topics to be taken up at Town Meeting. It will also include the board or committee to be contacted or watched for information regarding specific topics. (Ms. Arguimbau)

- o Approved, 5-0. (Ms. Arguimbau, Mr. Carver, Mr. Keenan, Ms. Michalek and Mr. Rangarajan in favor.)

- Moved that the Select Board incorporate changes to the format of the Town Meeting Warrant as recommended by the Governance Study Committee. Those changes may include, but not be limited to, placing in the warrant any and all slides, charts or maps next to the corresponding article to be utilized during Town Meeting discussion. (Ms. Arguimbau)
 - o Approved, 5-0. (Ms. Arguimbau, Mr. Carver, Mr. Keenan, Ms. Michalek and Mr. Rangarajan in favor.)

Minutes

The subcommittee unanimously approved the minutes of the July 13, 2022, meeting.

**Sharon Governance Study Committee
Subcommittee on Town Meeting**

Minutes of meeting held October 13, 2021, at 7 p.m.

Attendance

The subcommittee held its first meeting, an organizational session, via Zoom. All six members were present:

- Peg Arguimbau
- Robert Carver
- Keevin Geller
- Matthew Keenan
- Ganesh Rangarajan
- Maureen Silverleib

Mission

The subcommittee reviewed the subjects it is charged with studying. They are:

- Three forms of town government: open town meeting, representative town meeting and town council.
- Using technology or other innovations to enhance voter participation and improve voter experience.
- The timing of town elections and town meetings.

Members of the committee spoke about their expectations and goals for the upcoming work.

Election of chair

The subcommittee members selected Mr. Keenan as chair.

Upcoming meetings

The members discussed the upcoming meeting schedule. They stated their desire to hear from numerous other communities regarding their governing structures.

The subcommittee is slated to hear a presentation by Mark Hogan, the Sharon town clerk, on Nov. 3.

Minutes of Town Meeting Subcommittee Meeting (Nov. 3)

The Town Meeting Subcommittee met via Zoom on Wednesday, Nov. 3 at 7:30 p.m.

Five subcommittee members were present: Peg Arguimbau, Robert Carver, Matthew Keenan, Ganesh Rangarajan and Maureen Silverleib. Absent: Keevin Geller.

Guest: Mark Hogan, Sharon Town Clerk

Mark Hogan, the Sharon town clerk attended the meeting. He made a presentation describing his office's role in operating town meetings and later answered questions from committee members.

Mr. Hogan noted that various town officials have responsibility for organizing and managing the town meeting. Until the time of the meeting, control rests largely with the Select Board. At the meeting itself, the moderator is in command. After the meeting, the town clerk's office is responsible for reporting the results of the meeting to finance officials, the state attorney general's office and to the general public.

Before the meeting, the clerk's office also helps disseminate the warrant (the description of items that will be taken up at the meeting). The clerk's office also organizes the sound, video and stenography services; checks in voters at the meeting and counts roll call votes at the meeting.

Mr. Hogan said that about 25 people affiliated with the clerk's office work at a typical town meeting. The total includes people meeting voters at the entrance to the meeting, as well as and vote counters.

Costs

Mr. Hogan provided the expenses paid by his office for the 2021 town meeting, along with the cost of the 2021 town election. He noted that these meetings were not necessarily typical, since they were held outside under tents to comply with public safety rules related to the COVID-19 outbreak.

In the future, he said, some costs (notably wages) could be higher, while others (sound system) may drop, especially after the meetings move to the new high school.

Town Clerk's Cost for Town Meeting and Town Election		
Item	Town Meeting (2021)	Town Election (2021)
Staff overtime	\$533	\$1,248
Election workers	\$1,826	\$7,536
Police	\$396	\$2473
Voting cards	\$13	N/A
Warrant printing	\$9,049	Uses the same Warrant
Warrant mailing	\$1,336	Uses the same Warrant
Sound	\$4,940	N/A
Stenographer	\$583	N/A
Department of Public Works	Paid by another Dept.	\$564
Meals for poll workers	N/A	\$282
TOTAL	\$18,676	\$12,103

In addition to the costs noted above, Mr. Hogan said the cost of tent rentals made necessary by the COVID-19 pandemic for the 2020 and 2021 town meetings was \$18,874 and \$18,999, respectively.

The cost of elections does not include mailed ballots. Those costs were covered by the state; it is not yet clear if the state will continue to pay for those mailings in the future, Mr. Hogan said.

Other town bodies may have some additional costs for either elections or town meetings (such as the Select Board, Finance Committee or Capital Outlay Committee).

Capacity and time

Mr. Hogan noted that the current high school has a capacity of about 3,100, including the auditorium, gymnasium and cafeteria. The new high school has a capacity of about 2,900 in those rooms. The figures for each building are somewhat inflated because they include seating on the stage. Parking capacity for each building (on the grounds and net to Ames Street playground) is 330 vehicles.

He noted that the largest town meeting attendance in the last 25 years was 2,100 in 2002.

Mr. Hogan said roll call votes at town meetings take just under 7 minutes, according to his analysis of tapes of the 2020 and 2021 meetings. He later said that he does not believe voting takes longer at better-attended indoor meetings because of the number of vote counters employed.

Improvements at town meetings

Regarding what changes could be made to improve the town meeting, Mr. Hogan said a few had already been implemented and could continue to be used. They include:

- The moderator's initiative to form a "consent agenda," which combines agenda items believed to be routine and non-controversial. Mr. Hogan said this change has helped speed up proceedings.
- Preview meetings: The pre-town meeting may be useful, though he is not certain. Before COVID, these sessions were used to rehearse logistics. The last two meetings have included a public forum. Some residents use the meeting to ask questions, and then don't raise those same questions at the town meeting itself, thus speeding up the process. He also thinks that having that pre-meeting via Zoom allows more people to attend and be engaged. Mr. Hogan later said, in response to a question by Ms. Arguimbau, that he would like to continue and expand the use of pre-meetings. In response to a question by Mr. Keenan, he said the pre-meetings did not attract that many residents.
- Voting cards: The use of index cards, held up by voters at the meeting during roll call votes, made those votes more visible and helped speed up counting.

Mr. Hogan said he is looking into electronic voting systems, though he is "not sold on the idea," in part because he is not sure it can be cost effective. In response to a question from Ms. Silverleib, he said a system using TV remote-style devices and a master vote counting system may "shave off" 40 seconds of vote counting. Mitigating factors include how much time the moderator gives people to vote and the potential for user error, he said.

Question period

After Mr. Hogan's presentation, members of the subcommittee asked questions.

Mr. Carver asked about the effect on spending when town meeting sessions are moved to the new high school building. Mr. Hogan said some costs may be lower (for example, for the sound system). Mr. Hogan also said that he isn't inclined to implement innovations such as electronic voting before the move to the new high school.

Ms. Silverleib asked whether there could be a "hard stop" (a predetermined time to end the town meeting) so attendees could know when a meeting would end. Mr. Hogan said that question would be better asked of the Select Board or moderator.

Mr. Rangarajan asked how Mr. Hogan prepares for the size of the meeting. Mr. Hogan said his office tends to "over-prepare," anticipating a larger attendance, and then makes staffing and other plans accordingly.

Asked about the possibility of errors being made in counting votes, Mr. Hogan said that because two workers independently count votes in each section of the meeting and then verify those figures with each other, he is confident the final figures are accurate.

Mr. Rangarajan noted that Sharon has a large immigrant population, many of whom are noncitizens; the children in these families make up a significant portion of the school population. Because of their citizenship status, many of these residents aren't allowed to vote in town elections or town meetings. Two towns in Massachusetts are considering whether to allow noncitizens to vote in their local elections (one is Chelsea). Meanwhile, two towns in Vermont allow noncitizens to vote (not in state or federal elections). Mr. Rangarajan asked whether the state would allow noncitizens to participate in town meetings and elections. Mr. Hogan said he'd been asked by some noncitizen residents about serving on elected town boards; they cannot. If permitted by the state, likely it would be a local option and any changes in town policy would likely have to be approved by (current) town voters.

In response to a question about scheduling town meetings, Mr. Hogan said he would like some flexibility, in part to accommodate religious holidays. He said the upcoming meeting is currently set for the last day of Ramadan.

In response to Mr. Keenan, Mr. Hogan said that the clerk's office had not operated childcare rooms in 2020 or 2021, due to the state's COVID-related regulations barring children from meeting sites. To accommodate senior residents and those with disabilities, the town provided wheelchairs and used "floating" microphones so voters with mobility issues weren't required to physically wait in line to speak.

Mr. Hogan noted his wife does not attend town meetings because she cares for their children at that time. This is the case in many families. He noted that some people use the word "disenfranchisement" in criticizing town meeting. "Someone is always going to be 'disenfranchised' by your meeting," Mr. Hogan said. The goal is to include as many people as possible, he said.

Mr. Hogan responded to a question from Ms. Silverleib about voting electronically at town meetings – by Zoom, for example. Under state law, it is illegal to vote electronically at open town meetings, he said. During the COVID era, the state permitted representative town meetings to vote electronically. Those are special cases, since RTMs are smaller and more-controlled groups. It's unclear if this will be permissible after COVID.

Mr. Carver asked Mr. Hogan how well the town had done in engaging voters in the town meeting. Mr. Hogan said he has placed notices on the webpages of his office and the town, as well as on social media and Sharon Cable Television. He said it's been difficult to get people to engage and to read the town's materials.

Mr. Hogan said he liked holding town meetings on Sunday, which was made necessary during the pandemic, since large meetings needed to be conducted outside. Some other towns regularly hold meetings on weekends. Among the obstacles to weekend meetings are religious observances for a significant portion of the population, as well as other activities (such as scouting or youth sports). And, while the 2020 and 2021 meetings have lasted only one session, future meetings that extended into additional sessions could take up an entire month of weekends, he said.

Mr. Hogan recommended that the subcommittee hear input from the Select Board, town administrator's office, the Finance Committee and Capital Outlay Committee. He suggested talking with officials from Stoughton and Walpole, which have representative town meetings.

Future agendas

After the conversation with Mr. Hogan, subcommittee members discussed the agendas of future meetings, including a possible meeting with a local government expert affiliated with the Massachusetts Municipal Association on Nov. 17.

Ms. Silverleib said she wanted the subcommittee meetings to be as productive as possible and wanted to hear from more citizens and officials from Sharon.

Mr. Rangarajan suggested that, by the time of our next meeting, each member of the group suggest two or three individuals they believe the subcommittee should meet with.

Minutes

The subcommittee unanimously approved the minutes of the Oct. 13 meeting.

Sharon Governance Study Committee Subcommittee on Town Meeting

Minutes of meeting held November 29, 2021, at 7:30 p.m.

Attendance

Present:

- Peg Arguimbau
- Robert Carver
- Keevin Geller
- Matthew Keenan
- Ganesh Rangarajan

Absent:

- Maureen Silverleib

Data comparison

Rob Carver presented a statistical analysis of Massachusetts towns that most closely resemble Sharon. Using data from the state Department of Revenue, the Massachusetts Taxpayers Association and media sources, Mr. Carver identified 16 communities that are similar to Sharon – as measured by demographics, income, voter participation and other factors. The subcommittee will use the results to examine the governing structures in those communities.

Discussion

Keevin Geller suggested that the subcommittee members disclose what direction they are leaning, though not what their final decision on the town governance structure should be, in order to facilitate discussions. The committee members discussed the idea without taking action.

The committee discussed which experts, town officials, legislators and citizens should be invited to appear at upcoming meetings. Michael Dutton, town manager of Bridgewater and chair of the form of governance committee of the Massachusetts Municipal Management Association, expressed his willingness to speak to the group in December.

Matthew Keenan reached out to Mr. Dutton, who can discuss:

- Current trends in municipal governance in Massachusetts.
- The strengths and weaknesses in each form (open and representative town meetings, as well as town council).
- The possible ways in which to improve and increase participation in open town meetings.
- The advantages and disadvantages in choosing another form of governance, either representative town meeting or council, in a town like Sharon.

Minutes

The subcommittee approved the minutes of the Nov. 3 meeting.

Sharon Governance Study Committee Subcommittee on Town Meeting

Minutes of meeting held December 22, 2021, at 7:30 p.m.

Attendance

Present:

- Robert Carver
- Keevin Geller
- Matthew Keenan
- Ganesh Rangarajan
- Maureen Silverleib

Absent:

- Peg Arguimbau

Discussion of forms of governance

Michael Dutton, town manager of Bridgewater and chair of the form of governance committee of the Massachusetts Municipal Management Association, appeared as a guest speaker.

In his opening remarks, Mr. Dutton said that one of the key developments in local government in the last 10 years, regardless of the form of governance, has been an effort to manage risk more effectively (especially in the area of labor/human resources). One way of doing that has been giving some central authority to town managers/administrators, operating alongside select boards or councils.

Regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the forms of government being studied by the committee, Mr. Dutton said:

The open town meeting (OTM) form, dating back more than 300 years in Massachusetts, is the most direct form of democracy. "We don't do a whole lot of things the way we did in 1650, but town meeting might be one of these," he said. The involvement of community who sometimes aren't well-informed about complex issues can create a cumbersome decision-making process.

Many towns have difficulty meeting the relatively low levels of attendance required to reach a quorum. (He used a hypothetical example of a town of 20,000 people failing to hit the 50-participant minimum.)

The voters who are motivated to attend an OTM one year – because they are interested in a particular topic – may not attend the next year if the issues aren't as compelling to them. "There's no consistency year to year, meeting to meeting," he said. From his perspective, having essentially different legislatures year to year, makes it difficult to follow through on policy strategies, such as master plans.

The representative town meeting (RTM) involves smaller numbers of elected citizens who may be better informed and more inclined to study issues, policies and strategies.

Bridgewater has used a council-manager system for more than a decade, switching from an open town meeting. Acting as CEO of the town government, he prefers this system, saying it offers clarity and

efficiency (while acknowledging efficiency is “not always good”). Town councilors tend to have more expertise than town meeting participants. He also said it enables the town to follow long-term strategies on financial matters and infrastructure, for example.

The biggest downside to replacing the OTM system is some “people miss attending town meeting,” he said. For them, town meeting represents “tradition and mom and apple pies.”

Regarding ways to improve town meetings, or increase attendance at them, Mr. Dutton said:

He hopes that, after the pandemic lifts, more residents will be drawn to town meetings, and that some form of virtual participation will be considered (at the state level).

It is a “challenge,” he added, to convince voters to give up a night to attend OTM. The easiest way “to increase participation is to put something controversial” on every town warrant.

Questions and answers

In response to questions by Mr. Geller, Mr. Dutton said Bridgewater’s nine-person council is made up of a majority of members from individual precincts, with two at-large. Mr. Geller said local elections can be marked by low turnout and voter apathy that could leave an “open door to special interests.” He asked whether Bridgewater’s elections had been characterized by aggressive politicking. Mr. Dutton said the town’s elections, when contested, have been focused on issues, a contrast to what he said existed before the change in systems there.

Responding to Mr. Rangarajan, Mr. Dutton said most towns that adopted a council-manager (or administrator) form of government previously had representative town meetings (for example, Amherst three years ago).

Ms. Silverleib asked Mr. Dutton if the state allows virtual town meetings, what the road map would be to implementing them. He said the meetings would likely be more structured and planned than they are in their current form. So, there might be a set number of speakers chosen in advance for certain topics, perhaps chosen at random. “There has to be a structure or that’s a recipe for disaster,” he said. It “would be incredible” if virtual participation were expanded, he said, since it could raise interest and participation (like among parents of school-age children.) “Doing the same thing you did 300 years ago” doesn’t work, he said.

Mr. Dutton said in a discussion with Mr. Carver that some issues are complex for town meetings. Using the example of a \$42 million sewer upgrade in Bridgewater, Mr. Dutton said the council had to get up to speed on timelines, permits and other topics: “It would be even harder at a town meeting.”

Answering Mr. Rangarajan, Mr. Dutton described the council-manager system this way: The council sets policy, the manager executes it. In an OTM system, the Select Board is the executive branch, while the town meeting itself is the legislative branch. Under the council-manager form, the council is the legislature, the manager is the chief executive.

Mr. Dutton said his advice to the Governance Study Committee, as it makes recommendations in about a Select Board or council, is not to base its judgments on the people who occupy those seats now.

Mr. Keenan asked Mr. Dutton about the independence of boards and committees under a council-manager for. In Bridgewater, Mr. Dutton appoints board members on the recommendation of a citizen's advisory committee. The council has a check on board appointments.

There are exceptions: He names three members to the nine-person Financial Committee, as do the Town Council and the elected town clerk. (The Financial Committee advises the manager on annual budgets and long-range capital improvement plans, and it reports its recommendations to the council.)

Mr. Dutton said that giving the manager the authority to make appointments, for example on the Planning Board, helps the town's ability to meet its objectives.

On the issue of a manager appointing board members, Mr. Geller said, "To me, that sends up a big red flag," as it may exclude some unrepresented voices from town government.

Mr. Dutton said his example of the Planning Board may have been stated too strongly. He stated that his governing goals aren't ones he sets himself; the council sets his goals and it's his job to implement them. He also said that, if a town had a \$20 million grant to make downtown improvements and its long-range plan included such a project, it wouldn't make sense for a manager to appoint a person opposed to the project to a board overseeing it.

Minutes

The subcommittee unanimously approved the minutes of the November 29 meeting.

Town Meeting Subcommittee Governance Study Committee

Minutes of Meeting on January 5, 2022, at 7:30 p.m.

Members Present:

- Peg Arguimbau
- Rob Carver
- Matthew Keenan
- Ganesh Rangarajan
- Maureen Silverleib

Members Absent:

- Keevin Geller

Guest Speaker: Andrew Nebenzahl

Mr. Nebenzahl is Sharon's moderator and served as chairman of the 2009 Charter Commission, which reviewed the town's governing structure.

Regarding the Sharon Charter Commission

The Charter Commission followed a less formal government study committee and was formed because of a general sense that things were not working as well as they could and that the structure of town government may have been an obstacle, Mr. Nebenzahl said. Some citizens believed that there wasn't enough cohesive, long-range planning in the town's policy decisions, that certain choices were made in a quixotic or foolish fashion.

There were nine elected members on the panel.

The commission was a diverse group, with some members very motivated to replace the town meeting form of government while others believed Town Meeting was important and needed to be kept, Mr. Nebenzahl said.

Over the course of two years, the commission met with stakeholders, including residents and members of other town boards, as well as officials from other communities. The commission did deep dives into structural issues and eventually came up with a hybrid structure, with a 17-member Legislative Committee serving as the main legislative body, and with a town meeting component. (The latter would convene if residents submitted a petition with the required number of signatures within a certain period of time.)

Part of the motivation for forming a Legislative Committee was to eliminate routine items from discussion at a town meeting. If an open town meeting were held, that would mean enough people thought an issue was important enough to require the direct input of voters.

"That was the needle we tried to thread," Mr. Nebenzahl said.

A charter recommending the change in form of government (along with other recommendations) went before voters in a referendum. The charter proposal was rejected by a ratio of more than 2 to 1. "The people spoke. They spoke definitively," he said.

Mr. Nebenzahl said the idea failed because the commission "tried to do too much in one fell swoop." He said review committees need to address the most pressing problems and to get the support of the people. He urged the current Governance Study Committee: "Don't try to paint with too broad a brush."

Regarding Town Meeting and his role as moderator

Mr. Nebenzahl said he didn't join the charter process to get rid of the town meeting. But there was a sense that "things soured people from participating in town meeting." In the intervening years, under his leadership and that of his predecessor, changes were made to streamline meeting sessions. Among them:

- Changing the way agenda items were introduced. Previously, the Finance Committee was allowed to make the first motion at a town meeting. If that board opposed a measure, it was asked for an indefinite postponement, meaning the vote would be to put off consideration of an issue. "That put things backwards," Mr. Nebenzahl. Now, a measure is put forward as proposed, giving voters a chance to decide on its merits.
- Putting together a "consent agenda" of routine items. That way, if there is no desire to debate these issues individually, they can be voted on collectively. The consent agenda has lessened routine items from about 1 hour of meeting time to 20 minutes, he said.
- Designating microphones for those speaking in favor of or against an agenda item. This change made is easier to identify speakers, allow all sides to be heard and oversee the debate, he said.
- Imposing time limits for some presentations: Presenters are given 10 minutes, while those with opposing perspectives (or substantially differing supporting views) get 5 minutes of speaking time. The time limit does not extend to voters.

Mr. Nebenzahl said he met beforehand with proponents and opponents of licensing a marijuana dispensary in Sharon, which was the subject of a town meeting three years ago. Many people, pro and con, weren't familiar with the way meeting sessions operate. The pre-meeting session helped the debate to proceed smoothly.

He noted that the most recent Town Meeting, held in May, finished in 3.5 hours: "It can work well. It can work effectively."

Mr. Nebenzahl said he does not favor either a representative town meeting (RTM) or town council structure for Sharon. Regarding an RTM, he said there's no empirical evidence that it works better or that its voters are better informed than those at an open town meeting. Also, other communities have seen municipal employees "stack" the meetings in order to get favorable results, he said. Open town meeting provides an opportunity for "direct democracy of voters."

Questions and answers

Asked by Mr. Rangarajan whether the 2009 charter proposal failed because it was too complex, Mr. Nebenzahl said the concerns about it “overcame its perceived positives.” He also said that residents who were in favor of retaining Town Meeting were better organized and did more marketing than the proposals’ backers. Again, he said, “We tried to do too much at once.”

Ms. Silverleib asked how the town could better educate Sharon residents about Town Meeting, suggesting education sessions at Sharon Public Library and webinars, among other methods. Mr. Nebenzahl said communicating what town government is doing for citizens is a major need, and difficult to fulfill; he noted that, while Sharon Cable TV continues to show meetings of boards and commissions, fewer people have conventional cable TV because of cord cutting. He noted that the town publishes an annual report, though “if 1% read it, I’d be surprised.” He said before one Town Meeting, he walked across Ames Street Playground, which was filled with children playing sports, and their parents, who clearly weren’t going to the meeting: “I don’t know how you engage more people.”

Asked by Mr. Keenan about on-site electronic voting at Town Meeting, Mr. Nebenzahl said it could be a useful, but potentially expensive, tool. He noted that other towns using electronic voting, including Wayland, like their systems.

In the last two years, town meeting sessions have been held outdoors, under tents and on weekends, a circumstance required because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Asked about moving meetings to weekends permanently, Saturdays clearly wouldn’t work in Sharon for religious reasons, he said.

As to what is a manageable crowd at Town Meeting, from a moderator’s perspective, he expressed confidence in the town’s ability to run any session: It’s “the number of people who can fit into the venues that we have.”

Asked by Mr. Rangarajan about how to increase turnout among people who believe issues have already been decided, Mr. Nebenzahl said, if it is true that decisions have been made, it’s true “because the deliberative work has been done in advance” by members of the town’s boards and committees. He said it is “hard to sell the idea” to get people to come to a meeting to pass the recommendations of the Capital Outlay Committee, for example.

Asked about increasing turnout by providing more on-site childcare or offering transportation or other accommodations for older voters, Mr. Nebenzahl said the town could do additional work in these areas and he called for more “out-of-the box thinking.”

Minutes

The subcommittee approved the minutes of the meeting held on December 22, 2021.

Town Meeting Subcommittee Governance Study Committee

Minutes of January 19, 2022, meeting

Members present:

- Rob Carver
- Keevin Geller
- Matthew Keenan
- Ganesh Rangarajan
- Peg Arguimbau

Guest speakers

Meeting by Zoom link, the subcommittee heard from two guest speakers: *Sam Liao*, a member of the Sharon Charter Commission, which recommended a town charter in 2009, and *David Fixler*, the assistant town moderator and a member of another government study committee in the early 2000s.

Mr. Liao said he ran for an elected position on the charter commission as a believer in the town meeting form of government. He wanted to represent others who shared that viewpoint and wanted a seat at the table where changes in governance were being considered.

He said the commission met frequently, hearing from guest speakers in town government and surrounding towns. The commission's debates were intense and respectful, and the group's members collaborated effectively. As for what didn't work, he said the process took too long, going down some unfruitful avenues and "rabbit holes," though, at times, seemingly unproductive work paid dividends.

The charter's recommendations included the establishment of a hybrid-style government, led by a 17-member Legislative Committee and a provision permitting open town meetings. The proposal was defeated by voters by a 2-to-1 ratio.

Mr. Liao said the current Governance Study Committee could learn from the example of his group. If it wants to make changes in town government, the group should focus on what is doable rather than trying to do everything at once, he said. The committee should aim for "an evolution, not a revolution." Some such changes could include streamlining the way town meetings are run and instituting some form of electronic voting, he said.

Mr. Fixler said that when he was named to government study group around 2001, town meeting sessions were too long, arcane and inefficient. The committee considered whether to urge improvements in town meetings or recommend a different form of government. That committee suggested holding two town meetings each year – an annual meeting in the spring to discuss budget matters and a special meeting in the fall to deliberate mainly about zoning issues. The panel formally recommended having a charter commission formally study town government.

Mr. Fixler said he believes, "all things being equal," the town would be better off with a town council form of government than the open town meeting (OTM). On present-day issues like the construction of a new town library, a council would have been more likely to catch problems than the town meeting. The early-2000s study committee discussed the merits of a council system, but it didn't propose such a change – in part because of an uncertainty that enough qualified people would want to run for office.

As assistant moderator, Mr. Fixler has filled in for Moderator Andre Nebenzahl, including on a debate over the construction of the new Sharon High School. That evening, Mr. Fixler said he made a particular point to explain the rules of debate to the attendees, many of whom were likely to be unfamiliar with town meeting. While he believes there are better governing options for the town, he said it's important for him to make a session run as well as possible. He disagrees, though, that OTM is the purest form of democracy: "It's tyranny of the minority, if you look at it."

Committee member Keevin Geller said town meeting is a form of pure democracy and that residents who don't attend sessions are exercising their rights not to vote. Instituting another form of government would remove a degree further from their local government. He said he didn't "want to see the town catering to the lazy or the uninvolved." While changes can be made to town meeting, such as limiting speaking time and avoiding repetitious debate, Sharon voters have the right to attend and speak and vote. The fact that many voters aren't going to town meeting isn't a reason to change the form of government, he said.

Mr. Fixler said Sharon residents lead busy lives and feel disenfranchised because work and family commitments keep them from attending. The town meeting is a way to "shoehorn modern society into a form of government started in 1765."

Question-and-answer session

Responding to committee member Rob Carver, Mr. Liao said town meeting is deliberative, and often considers complex issues that don't have simple yes-or-no answers. If lucid arguments are made, he said, speakers can change voters' minds: "So, it works."

Mr. Liao said the town has done a good job of handling overflow crowds, when they occur, allowing parents to be involved. He added that remote attendance options, such as attending by Zoom, could encourage participation, though that would likely happen sometime well into the future.

Mr. Fixler said the Finance Committee, which recommends action on warrant items that come before voters at Town Meeting, could use Zoom and in-person meetings to explain key issues ahead of time. That would give voters a better chance to understand the issues that are charged with deciding.

Electronic voting could be another way improving town meetings, though the town would have to weigh the expense, he said. Mr. Geller suggested using smartphone-based apps to count votes at town meeting, predicting the number of town meeting participants would jump astronomically.

Committee member Peg Arguimbau said she was at the opposite end of Mr. Fixler's view of the council vs. open town meeting debate. Mr. Fixler noted he did not have a preference between open town meeting and representative town meeting.

Mr. Liao said that as the town population grows, it might make sense to consider a representative town meeting (RTM), though he said the committee should not recommend an RTM form of government prematurely. He noted the participants change at OTM each year – voters who favor school spending might go to a session when education is at the forefront, while those who want more soccer fields would turn out the next time. "That's not a bad thing," he said. "Even if people don't come, they want the opportunity to come."

Additional items

Mr. Carver presented information he obtained from town officials in Westford and Sherborn. Westford (population 14,000) formed an "Access to Town Meeting" Committee, which is conducting an online survey about possible barriers to attendance and ways to improve its town meeting. That survey is ongoing. Sherborn (population 4,300) has conducted two recent government studies, one resulting in the expansion of its Select Board to five members from three. "We are hardly alone," Mr. Carver said. All forms of government involve trade-offs, and all could be made more efficient, he said.

Committee member Ganesh Rangarajan suggested the group start a document tracking the spell out the pros and cons of the three available forms of government, in order to keep track as the committee continues to gather facts from speakers, articles and other sources. Mr. Rangarajan agreed to set up a Google document for that purpose.

Minutes

The committee unanimously approved the minutes of the January 5, 2022, meeting.

Town Meeting Subcommittee Minutes of Meeting of March 9, 2022

Members present:

Peg Arguimbau
Rob Carver
Matthew Keenan

Keevin Geller
Ganesh Rangarajan

Presentation

The subcommittee heard a presentation by guest speaker Robert Hiss, the moderator of the town of Milton.

Mr. Hiss said Milton has had a representative town meeting (RTM) for decades, dating from a change in state law permitting larger towns switch from an open town meetings (OTM) form of government. Milton's RTM has 279 elected voting members from 10 precincts; in addition, 10 elected and appointed officials (including the town's state representative and state senator) serve as RTM members. [Note: Milton has a population of 28,620, as of the 2020 U.S. Census, including about 22,000 adults.]

Compared with open meetings, RTMs lose an element of "real citizen participation," though they create more consistency in governing, Mr. Hiss said. Under open meetings, attendance can range from a handful of voters to thousands, depending on the issues under consideration. In exchange, RTMs attract a "good-government crowd who believe in this" and are "good at it," Mr. Hiss said.

Neighborhood associations hold caucuses before town meetings. RTM members who act as representatives of their neighborhood can collect information and get an idea of what issues voters want debated at town meeting. He said that was relatively rare. Most members have a particular point of view they want to "inject" into town government.

Only about 15% of RTM members consistently speak at sessions, and the vast majority don't. Pre-Covid era attendance was typically strong during the first town meeting night, with about 265 members present, Mr. Hiss said. It declined by about 20 people a night as the meeting extended over several sessions. (An average RTM lasts three evenings, he said in response to a question later in his presentation.)

The town meeting hears warrant articles presented by a Warrant Committee, the rough equivalent of Sharon's Finance Committee. The Warrant Committee makes recommendations on all matters that come before the RTM, including nonfinancial topics. Its opinions serve as the proposals debated by the meeting members (unlike in Sharon, where town meeting proposals are put forward in the language of a measure's proponents.)

As moderator, Mr. Hiss appoints the members of about 10 of Milton's boards and committees, those involved in special projects (such as the School Building Committee) and those that keep checks and balances on the town's Select Board and town administrator (like the audit and warrant committees).

Question-and-answer session

Mr. Geller, who was raised in Milton and whose father was a longtime town meeting member, said most RTM members were reelected in campaign after campaign and that having a representative rather than an open town meeting removed power by a “big step from the average voter.” He also said RTM members don’t always reflect the views of the average voter.

Mr. Hiss said voters make conscious decisions about who should represent them, just as they do for state House and Senate positions. Town meeting members are often reelected, he said, with changes occurring mainly because of poor attendance or bad behavior. The town publishes attendance reports on its website.

The average RTM member is “probably more left-liberal than the town overall,” based on his knowledge of their political affiliations and backgrounds. Milton voters are more conservative in other elections than in RTM races, he said. There is an “interesting alignment” at RTM, as members vote in a more moderate or homogeneous manner than their affiliations might suggest.

In response to a later question by Mr. Keenan, Mr. Hiss said RTM members are “more moderate because it’s their own town and their own money.” The membership “skews older” than the town as a whole and “absolutely skews white,” he said. The RTM does not represent the ethnic diversity of the town, he said. There is a “balanced” gender representation.

In response a question by Mr. Rangarajan, Mr. Hiss said the RTM tends to draw an overrepresentation of townspeople who are attorneys or have a finance background. Members are “careful readers” of the warrants, “are fairly serious about taking care of the town’s business” and have good institutional knowledge of town affairs. There is a larger percentage of college-educated RTM members than among residents, he said.

Mr. Hiss said there is “generally” not an issue with getting enough people to run for RTM. The town also has provisions allowing write-in candidates, and it can appoint members to fill vacancies.

Typically, one-third of the RTM spots are up for election each year. This year, the town was required to redraw its precincts after population shifts captured by the 2020 census. As a result, there are more positions up for election than in a typical year. This type of realignment could come up every 10 years due to the census.

Mr. Hiss said candidates generally self-finance their campaigns, making the collection of election finance reports a non-issue in Milton.

Asked if he had any recommendations to streamline town meetings, Mr. Hiss mentioned time limits on speakers (it is 10 minutes at the Milton RTM) and the combination of routine items into a consent agenda (something that is already done in Sharon).

For the last two years, Milton’s RTM has taken place via Zoom, which has created its own efficiencies. The most contentious of these is that members’ votes are public. But the ability to track votes electronically has eliminated time-consuming events such as standing counts, roll call votes and quorum calls.

He noted that other RTM towns reported they had better attendance in the Covid era. On the other hand, Milton had about 50 members who regularly didn't tune into meetings; attendance peaked at around 230 members. This occurred despite outreach by the town to RTM members.

Milton is edging toward using in-person electronic voting at the RTM. The question is whether it would be better to own or lease a voting system. If they buy a system, town staff would have to operate it, and the system would be obsolete in about 5 years. If the town leases a system, the vendor's staff would help town officials operate it.

Discussion of a possible survey regarding Town Meeting

The committee discussed a potential survey of Town Meeting attendees submitted by Mr. Keenan. A five-question survey would be distributed to voters as they arrive at Town Meeting in May. It would cover issues such as frequency of attendance; possible impediments to attendance; voters' opinions about Town Meeting, and demographic information.

At the subcommittee meeting, the members offered suggestions about wording of questions; additional responses in multiple choice categories; formatting, and other issues. The members agreed to bring the questionnaire to the full Governance Study Committee for discussion on March 16.

Select Board update

Mr. Rangarajan reported the Select Board discussed the previous night filling a vacancy on the Governance Study Committee. He also reported the board also was concerned about the level of attendance in committee meetings.

Minutes

The subcommittee approved the minutes of the January 19, 2022, meeting in a unanimous vote.

Town Meeting Subcommittee
Minutes of Meeting of March 23, 2022

Members present:

Peg Arguimbau
Rob Carver
Keevin Geller

Matthew Keenan
Ganesh Rangarajan

Guest speaker: Dan Bruce, Walpole Moderator

The subcommittee heard a presentation by guest speaker Dan Bruce, moderator of the town of Walpole, which has a representative town meeting (RTM) form of government.

Mr. Bruce has held the moderator's post for five years, after serving as a member of the town's Finance Committee and the RTM. (The Walpole moderator serves a one-year term; about half of moderators in Massachusetts serve for one year, while the remainder are elected for three years.) As moderator, he appoints members to the Finance Committee and Capital Budget Committee.

He mentioned that the RTM will consider a resolution to disband or deactivate the town Personnel Board, in part because of the difficulty in recruiting members. Other communities have done away with personnel committees, dividing the boards' responsibilities among town managers, human resources directors and labor relations staffers. [Note: Towns including Duxbury and Halifax have dissolved their personnel boards.]

Mr. Bruce said the representative town meeting structure "works well in Walpole." The Walpole RTM has 150 members serving 8 precincts. "150 is a good number," he said, and the town hasn't had difficulty attracting candidates. In recent years, he said, races have become more competitive, especially after debates over long-postponed spending on the construction of schools, public safety buildings and a senior center.

What drives participation in voting for RTM members "is the issues on your warrant," he said. The percentage of registered voters participating in town elections has been relatively low, in the high teens or 20%. "We're not satisfied with that," he said, adding that electing RTM members places "a lot of trust in your neighbor."

In the Covid era, the town has held its meetings outdoors on Saturday mornings (rather than indoors on weekend nights in May and October). Before the pandemic, meetings typically took two or three nights to consider 25 to 30 warrant articles. The most recent meeting used only 4 hours to complete the agenda in a single session.

The town has informal speaking limits for its members, with primary speakers receiving 5 minutes at the microphone and others up to 3 minutes. No repeat speakers are allowed until other members have had a chance to weigh in and unless they have a new point to make. The purpose of the limits isn't to stifle debate, but to keep the meetings efficient and the members engaged, Mr. Bruce said.

Question-and-answer session

Regarding community outreach, Mr. Bruce said some RTM members make efforts to consult with the constituents in their precincts before the annual sessions; the reverse also happens, when voters contact meeting members.

He said there has been some turnover in the RTM ranks when "season members were voted out" because a segment of voters wanted schools to be built. About the Walpole electorate, he said there's "a body of people who pay attention to local politics and then there are others who just don't." And still others prefer to rely on their representatives, he said.

Every 10 years, the town meeting is subject to redistricting because of the U.S. Census. This year, 5 of the 8 precincts have been redrawn. So, the majority of RTM seats will be up for a vote, rather than one-third, as in a typical election year.

Mr. Bruce said the Walpole meeting had used electronic voting, renting devices for 3 years from Options Technologies Inc. He called the experience "very successful" and a "fantastic time saver." However, in the Covid era, once the meeting moved outside, it turned instead to using color-coded index cards (red and green) for members to indicate their votes. He said the meeting will continue using cards when sessions return indoors, since that system worked efficiently, too.

Discussion of revisions to possible survey regarding Town Meeting

The committee discussed revisions to a potential survey of Town Meeting attendees. A two-page version of the questionnaire was discussed. The members agreed to move ahead with the new edition.

Mr. Rangarajan said he would conduct research into programs that would allow the completed surveys to be scanned, saving time on data input and analysis.

Minutes

The subcommittee approved the minutes of the March 9, 2022, meeting in a unanimous vote.