

Access to Town Meeting (ATM) Committee
Westford Community Input Working Group
“Thoughts on Town Meeting” Resident Survey
Executive Summary - March 2022

BACKGROUND

A review was conducted of surveys that were completed in other communities – Southborough in 2017, Lynnfield in 2018, and Acton in 2008. These surveys included questions about specific changes to the open town meeting format including time limits on comments and presentations, electronic voting, changing the start time, and even the month and day of the meeting.

GOALS

The working group agreed on the following goals: (1) to keep it as short and concise as possible, and (2) to have respondents identify their challenges to attending. A public consensus on specific changes seemed unlikely, so by focusing instead on collecting resident’s obstacles, the full committee could use that input to brainstorm what recommendations to make.

METHODOLOGY

The working group decided to include optional demographic questions like age, gender, racial, and ethnic identity to see if the survey had reached a cross-section of residents. In addition to asking about what keeps residents from attending, the survey had a question about sources of information for town meetings or town-related topics. Open-ended questions were also included for respondents to write in additional thoughts. The first question split the survey respondents into those who attend “almost always” and “sometimes” from those who attend “rarely” or “never” with slightly differently worded questions for each branch.

The likely attendees were asked “What makes attending Town Meeting challenging for you? Please select all that apply” with a write-in option at the end for answers not listed. They were then asked “Where do you hear about Town Meeting?” to discover what forms of notification and information are successfully reaching residents. An open-ended question of “What would make Town Meeting more convenient for you?” allowed respondents to share their ideas.

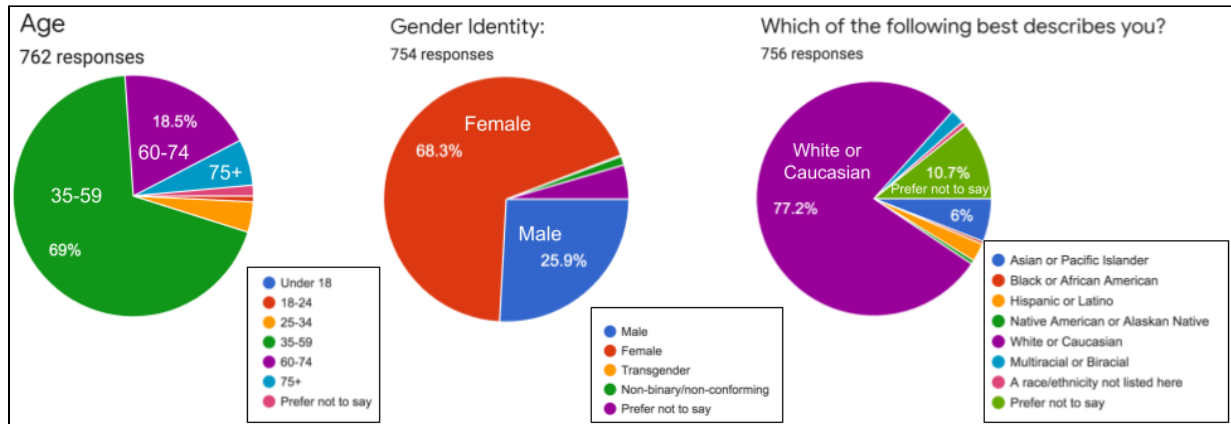
Individuals who indicated that they “rarely” or “never” attend Town Meeting were asked “What keeps you from attending Town Meeting? Choose all that apply” with a write-in option. Then, to find out where these residents could potentially be reached, the survey asked “Where do you learn about town events or issues?” Finally, these residents were asked for any ideas on increasing their chances of attending with an open-ended question of “What would make it more likely for you to attend Town Meeting?”

PUBLICITY

A flyer was displayed with printed copies at several locations within the community including Cameron Senior Center, J.V. Fletcher Library, Roudenbush Community Center and the Town Clerk's office. Letters to the Editor that publicized the survey were published in local news outlets including Action Unlimited, WickedLocal and WestfordCAT. Flyers advertising the survey were hung in local grocery stores, cafes, and on other community bulletin boards. It was referenced during open forum at meetings of boards and committees, and in the Town Manager newsletter. The online version was shared widely on social media in community groups.

DATA

The survey was live for about 5 weeks from mid-January to mid-February 2022. Approximately 800 responses were recorded, with over 760 of them coming in online. According to the June 2020 election, Westford has 16,907 registered voters, so the 800 responses to this survey represents less than 5% of registered voters.

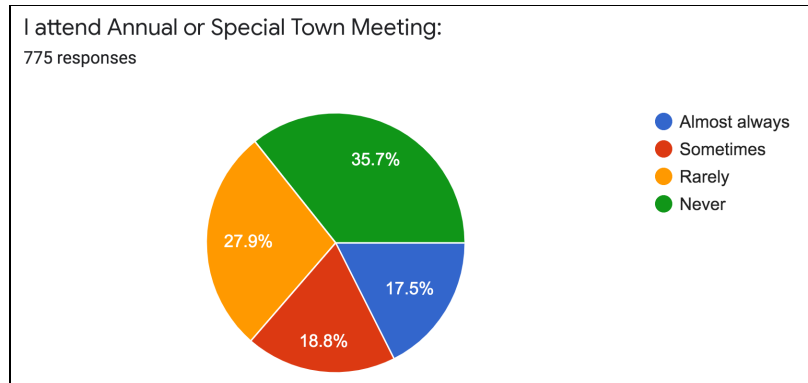


Demographics

Age: Almost 70% of respondents were between the ages of 35-59. We also heard from those aged 60-74 (18%) and those over 75 (6%). Other reported choices were each less than 5%.

Gender Identity: Again, almost 70% of respondents identify as Female. 26% chose Male. About 5% of responses preferred not to say, while less than 2% identify as Non-binary/non-conforming or Transgender.

Race/Ethnicity: 77% of respondents identify as White/Caucasian and 10% chose 'Prefer not to say'. 6% of respondents identify as Asian or Pacific Islander, with other responses recorded as Hispanic or Latino (2.5%), Multiracial or Biracial (2%), Native American or Alaskan Native (0.5%), and Black or African American (0.4%). The race and ethnic identities of respondents do not fully mirror the census distribution, and the working group acknowledges that a low reach to Asian residents is a weakness of the survey. *Author's Note: as of Westford's 2020 census, the town population identifies as White (77.5%), Asian (19.8%), Two or More Races (1.7%), Hispanic or Latino (1.5%), Black or African American (0.9%) and American Indian or Alaskan Native (0.1%).* <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/westfordtownmiddlesexcountymassachusetts>



Attendance: Individuals who answered they “never” attend Town Meeting were the largest group of respondents at 35.7% (277 responses). 27.9% claim to attend “rarely.” Only 17% (136 responses) attest to attending “almost always” while 18% attend “sometimes.”

Almost/Sometimes Attendees: Although a group of these regular attendees (27%) chose “Attending Town Meeting is not challenging for me,” there are residents who strive to consistently attend and still admit to having difficulties. The most commonly cited answers were “conflicts with other events/activities” (48%) and “length of meeting” (44%). Other answers included “childcare” (14%), “work conflicts” (12%), “lack of knowledge/preparation” (8%) and “mobility/health considerations” (6%).

Residents who almost or sometimes attend Town Meeting get notified about the event in a variety of traditional methods: town communications (66%), town mailings (56%), the hanging banner outside the library (48%), local Facebook groups (43%), local news outlets (41%), yard signs (37%) and word of mouth (33%). To a lesser degree, these individuals also acknowledged hearing about Town Meeting through school communications (16%).

Rarely/Never Attendees: Not surprisingly, individuals who are not regularly attending Town Meeting cited several obstacles and challenges. Interestingly, the two top choices were the same as the top challenges for regular attendees – “length of meeting” (60%) and “conflicts with other events/activities” (56%). The next most common obstacle for attending was “childcare” (34%). Individuals also cited “work conflicts” (20%) and a “lack of interest” (20%). “Transportation/parking issues” (5%) and “mobility/health considerations” (6%) were also mentioned. Also of note are the 19 individuals (4%) that answered “not a US citizen.”

This group of individuals who are not regularly attending Town Meeting get their information about town events and issues through the same traditional methods noted by regular attendees, but the distribution was noticeably different. Local Facebook groups (71%) was the most common answer. Word of mouth (56%) and school communications (54%) were also more cited more often than regular attendees. Local news (50%) and town communications (46%) continue to reach this group of residents. Other forms of communication include the Westford Academy Ghostwriter newspaper (12%), local bulletin boards (6%), Twitter (4%) and Instagram (3%).

Open-ended Written Responses: Slightly more than half of the residents who always or sometimes attend shared ideas in the open-ended question, while almost 80% of respondents who rarely or never attend had a write-in response. Most of these written responses further emphasized the challenges represented in the earlier questions about schedule conflicts or length of meeting. Some points raised about the typical schedule were the reluctance to sacrifice a weekend day to Town Meeting, the prevalence of sports conflicts, and the proposal to split the format into separate events with one focused on debate and information, and the other focused on taking votes with little discussion.

Several responses suggested their opinions of improvements or fixes to be made including having virtual attendance/voting, allowing a ballot format, enforcing limits to debate, defining set times for controversial topics, protecting privacy and saving time with clicker voting, increasing accessibility for hearing/vision/health/mobility concerns, and having a targeted outreach to new residents.

Write-in responses offered individuals a chance to share what was on their mind. Quite a few respondents shared their observations and beliefs that the current format of Town Meeting limits the ability of residents to have their voice heard. While some respondents acknowledge childcare is a challenge for them, other respondents admit not wanting to use childcare for a full weekend day even if it was available as an option. There were also responses that confessed no interest in attending Town Meeting, no matter how convenient it could become. Respondents also expressed interest in exploring an alternate form of local government.

NEXT STEPS

The working group's intention was for this information to be valuable as the full Access to Town Meeting Committee brainstorms a list of improvements to recommend to the Select Board that will hopefully increase attendance to Westford's Town Meetings.

REFERENCES

Lynnfield 2018 survey:

https://www.town.lynnfield.ma.us/sites/g/files/vyhli3391/f/uploads/town_meeting_survey_results_graphs.pdf

Southborough 2017 study:

https://www.southboroughtown.com/sites/g/files/vyhli3391/f/uploads/tmrc_report_final.pdf

Acton 2008 study:

https://www.acton-ma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/3786/LWV---Making-Town-Meeting-Work-Better-December_11_2008