

## **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.

<b>Town Clerk's Cost for Town Meeting and Town Election</b>		
<b>Item</b>	<b>Town Meeting (2021)</b>	<b>Town Election (2021)</b>
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
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$18,676</b>	<b>\$12,103</b>

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.