

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.