

## **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.