**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.