

Town Meeting Subcommittee Minutes of Meeting of March 9, 2022

Members present:

Peg Arguimbau
Rob Carver
Matthew Keenan

Keevin Geller
Ganesh Rangarajan

Presentation

The subcommittee heard a presentation by guest speaker Robert Hiss, the moderator of the town of Milton.

Mr. Hiss said Milton has had a representative town meeting (RTM) for decades, dating from a change in state law permitting larger towns switch from an open town meetings (OTM) form of government. Milton's RTM has 279 elected voting members from 10 precincts; in addition, 10 elected and appointed officials (including the town's state representative and state senator) serve as RTM members. [Note: Milton has a population of 28,620, as of the 2020 U.S. Census, including about 22,000 adults.]

Compared with open meetings, RTMs lose an element of "real citizen participation," though they create more consistency in governing, Mr. Hiss said. Under open meetings, attendance can range from a handful of voters to thousands, depending on the issues under consideration. In exchange, RTMs attract a "good-government crowd who believe in this" and are "good at it," Mr. Hiss said.

Neighborhood associations hold caucuses before town meetings. RTM members who act as representatives of their neighborhood can collect information and get an idea of what issues voters want debated at town meeting. He said that was relatively rare. Most members have a particular point of view they want to "inject" into town government.

Only about 15% of RTM members consistently speak at sessions, and the vast majority don't. Pre-Covid era attendance was typically strong during the first town meeting night, with about 265 members present, Mr. Hiss said. It declined by about 20 people a night as the meeting extended over several sessions. (An average RTM lasts three evenings, he said in response to a question later in his presentation.)

The town meeting hears warrant articles presented by a Warrant Committee, the rough equivalent of Sharon's Finance Committee. The Warrant Committee makes recommendations on all matters that come before the RTM, including nonfinancial topics. Its opinions serve as the proposals debated by the meeting members (unlike in Sharon, where town meeting proposals are put forward in the language of a measure's proponents.)

As moderator, Mr. Hiss appoints the members of about 10 of Milton's boards and committees, those involved in special projects (such as the School Building Committee) and those that keep checks and balances on the town's Select Board and town administrator (like the audit and warrant committees).

Question-and-answer session

Mr. Geller, who was raised in Milton and whose father was a longtime town meeting member, said most RTM members were reelected in campaign after campaign and that having a representative rather than an open town meeting removed power by a “big step from the average voter.” He also said RTM members don’t always reflect the views of the average voter.

Mr. Hiss said voters make conscious decisions about who should represent them, just as they do for state House and Senate positions. Town meeting members are often reelected, he said, with changes occurring mainly because of poor attendance or bad behavior. The town publishes attendance reports on its website.

The average RTM member is “probably more left-liberal than the town overall,” based on his knowledge of their political affiliations and backgrounds. Milton voters are more conservative in other elections than in RTM races, he said. There is an “interesting alignment” at RTM, as members vote in a more moderate or homogeneous manner than their affiliations might suggest.

In response to a later question by Mr. Keenan, Mr. Hiss said RTM members are “more moderate because it’s their own town and their own money.” The membership “skews older” than the town as a whole and “absolutely skews white,” he said. The RTM does not represent the ethnic diversity of the town, he said. There is a “balanced” gender representation.

In response a question by Mr. Rangarajan, Mr. Hiss said the RTM tends to draw an overrepresentation of townspeople who are attorneys or have a finance background. Members are “careful readers” of the warrants, “are fairly serious about taking care of the town’s business” and have good institutional knowledge of town affairs. There is a larger percentage of college-educated RTM members than among residents, he said.

Mr. Hiss said there is “generally” not an issue with getting enough people to run for RTM. The town also has provisions allowing write-in candidates, and it can appoint members to fill vacancies.

Typically, one-third of the RTM spots are up for election each year. This year, the town was required to redraw its precincts after population shifts captured by the 2020 census. As a result, there are more positions up for election than in a typical year. This type of realignment could come up every 10 years due to the census.

Mr. Hiss said candidates generally self-finance their campaigns, making the collection of election finance reports a non-issue in Milton.

Asked if he had any recommendations to streamline town meetings, Mr. Hiss mentioned time limits on speakers (it is 10 minutes at the Milton RTM) and the combination of routine items into a consent agenda (something that is already done in Sharon).

For the last two years, Milton’s RTM has taken place via Zoom, which has created its own efficiencies. The most contentious of these is that members’ votes are public. But the ability to track votes electronically has eliminated time-consuming events such as standing counts, roll call votes and quorum calls.

He noted that other RTM towns reported they had better attendance in the Covid era. On the other hand, Milton had about 50 members who regularly didn't tune into meetings; attendance peaked at around 230 members. This occurred despite outreach by the town to RTM members.

Milton is edging toward using in-person electronic voting at the RTM. The question is whether it would be better to own or lease a voting system. If they buy a system, town staff would have to operate it, and the system would be obsolete in about 5 years. If the town leases a system, the vendor's staff would help town officials operate it.

Discussion of a possible survey regarding Town Meeting

The committee discussed a potential survey of Town Meeting attendees submitted by Mr. Keenan. A five-question survey would be distributed to voters as they arrive at Town Meeting in May. It would cover issues such as frequency of attendance; possible impediments to attendance; voters' opinions about Town Meeting, and demographic information.

At the subcommittee meeting, the members offered suggestions about wording of questions; additional responses in multiple choice categories; formatting, and other issues. The members agreed to bring the questionnaire to the full Governance Study Committee for discussion on March 16.

Select Board update

Mr. Rangarajan reported the Select Board discussed the previous night filling a vacancy on the Governance Study Committee. He also reported the board also was concerned about the level of attendance in committee meetings.

Minutes

The subcommittee approved the minutes of the January 19, 2022, meeting in a unanimous vote.