

Town Meeting Subcommittee Minutes of Meeting of April 6, 2022

Members present:

Peg Arguimbau
Rob Carver
Keevin Geller

Matthew Keenan
Ganesh Rangarajan

Guest presentation: Angela Harkness, Moderator, Town of Westford

Westford Moderator Angela Harkness spoke to the subcommittee about the work of her town's Access to Town Meeting Committee.

Westford has about 17,000 registered voters. The town's annual meeting is held on Saturdays in June. During the Covid era, between 200 and 300 voters attended meetings, down about 100 voters from the years immediately prior to the pandemic.

The Westford access committee has conducted two surveys – one of town residents, asking for their views of Town Meeting, and one of 46 town moderators throughout Massachusetts, asking about the level of voter participation as well as best practices for open town meetings. The board has a subcommittee examining technology issues, seeking ways to make it easier for residents to participate, Ms. Harkness said.

The committee made a series of suggestions to the town's Select Board, focusing on "low-hanging fruit" – relatively easy, no-cost proposals that can be implemented immediately. Those include setting up a family-friendly space at Town Meeting sessions and having an additional food truck at the event. The committee also recommended the use of electronic voting devices, something that Town Meeting voters previously rejected.

Question-and-answer session

In response to a question by Mr. Carver, Ms. Harkness said the committee has not held a public forum on its recommendations or the survey results. Responding to Mr. Rangarajan, she said a four-person subcommittee identified its recommendations on three levels (as high, medium or low priorities) before they were voted on by the full board.

Ms. Harkness said it may take a period of five years to evaluate the success of the initiatives implemented after the access committee's work is done. That would give the town time to educate members of the public about the changes.

Ms. Harkness said the survey of town voters drew 800 responses, about 5% of the voting population. After an initial response of about 400, the committee conducted a social media push that doubled the number of completed questionnaires.

One concern Ms. Harkness said she has about Town Meeting is that voters don't attend because they find the idea of speaking or voting in public intimidating. It's critical to educate them "how important it

is and that it's not scary," she said. The town needs to "let people know they can come to Town Meeting and people won't stare at them, or yell at them."

Asked by Mr. Keenan why it's important to have larger numbers of voters take part in Town Meeting, Ms. Harkness said: "The more people vote, the more representative Town Meeting is." She added that some people think Town Meeting is repressive, that it's repressing people's ability to vote. ...That is something I personally want to dispel."

The statewide survey of town moderators showed they don't think the attendees at their meetings reflect the actual diversity of their communities.

Mr. Carver asked if the surveys revealed whether there are voters who are systematically but unintentionally blocked from full participation in Westford. Ms. Harkness said parents of school-age children are the most-underrepresented group at Town Meeting. The length of meetings, scheduling conflicts and the feeling they can't "spend Saturday away from their kids," contributes to their relatively low level of attendance, she said.

According to the 2020 Census, Asians make up about 21% of Westford's population, but attendance at Town Meeting doesn't reflect their presence in the community, Ms. Harkness said. Another group not fully represented is retirees who live elsewhere in the winter and haven't returned to town by the time of the meeting, she said.

Because of the access committee's work, Ms. Harkness said, she had something of a change of heart about people who don't take part in town meeting. Previously, she thought that it was "their own fault" if they didn't turn out. Since then, she said she's "totally turned around"; she understands if voters can come only for an hour, or if they want to vote for only one issue. Her goal is to make Town Meeting more welcoming to voters overall, not just for the people who like government and politics.

Asked by Mr. Geller if voters stay away from Westford's meeting because the town is well run, Ms. Harkness said more don't attend because they think decisions have already been made ahead of time and they can't affect the outcome at the meeting.

In addition, she said voters tend to turn out when issues they care about are on a warrant. So, if a popular land-parcel purchase were on a warrant, and that question is mixed in with other more routine matters, they will still turn out even if they think the town is well governed.

Discussion of Sharon Town Meeting survey

The subcommittee members discussed revisions to the draft survey scheduled to be distributed at the Annual Town Meeting in May.

Mr. Keenan noted that Moderator Andy Nebenzahl is supportive of the survey and said he would work with the Governance Study Committee to encourage voters to fill out their questionnaires.

Mr. Rangarajan updated the subcommittee on his research into companies that could process completed forms and help compile the results.

Minutes

The subcommittee unanimously approved the minutes from the March 23 meeting.