**Town Meeting Subcommittee**

**Minutes of Meeting of May 4, 2022**

Members present:

Peg Arguimbau

Rob Carver

Keevin Geller

Matthew Keenan

Ganesh Rangarajan

**Guest Speaker: Mark Fite, Option Technologies Inc.**

The meeting opened with a presentation by Mark Fite, president of Option Technologies Inc. (OTI), an Orlando, Florida-based company that provides electronic voting services for Massachusetts town meetings.

The company, founded in 1985, provides hardware and software for vote tabulations for corporations, unions, religious groups and other clients, in addition to town meetings. In 2011, OTI was the first firm to offer voting services for a representative town meeting (Framingham) and an open town meeting (Wayland).

The company currently serves 26 municipal clients in Massachusetts and has managed more than 200 open town meetings in the state.

Most communities rent OTI’s hardware rather than buy it. The company does sell its technology, usually to representative-meeting towns, which have a fixed number of voters, or to smaller open-meeting towns with relatively few registered voters.

Mr. Fite discussed two OTI products. The k4 is a small, credit-card-size device with a few buttons (yes, no, abstain) and a postage-stamp screen confirming when one’s vote has been accepted. The g3 is a larger handset with additional buttons and fuller LCD confirmation screen. The latter has a longer range. (The town of Weston uses the g3.)

Mr. Fite said there are two primary selling points to electronic voting. First, voters are concerned about privacy. They don’t want to alienate neighbors, business customers or others by the way they vote. (In response to a question later in the meeting, he said about one-third of voters believe attendees should stand up and be counted on votes, while two-thirds believe private voting is better.)

The second issue is speed. Vote tabulation tends is faster, and more accurate, with electronic voting than with hand counting or voice voting, he said.

The speed of voting depends on the size of the crowd, with larger audiences taking longer to cast votes, Mr. Fite said. In groups of up to 400, a vote can take 30 seconds; in audiences of 400 to 800, it takes 45 seconds; and among larger gatherings, a vote takes 60 seconds. He said research in Wayland claimed electronic voting saved up to 5 hours per meeting.

In addition, he said electronic voting creates a more positive and collegial environment than open voting.

He mentioned that, under Massachusetts law, voting from home is not permitted, because of concerns about security. Wayland, in coalition with other communities, is asking the state to permit a pilot program that tests voting from home, Mr. Fite said.

Members of representative town meetings have been allowed, under a special, COVID-era exemption, to vote from home via secure connections. Town meeting representatives in towns such as Lexington, Arlington and Plymouth have done so, Mr. Fite said.

**Question and answers**

Mr. Fite said client towns don’t necessarily use electronic voting on every vote. Some minor procedural matters can be taken care of in voice votes. More consequential issues, like any issues involving spending, are handled by using the voting devices.

On voting procedure, he said meeting attendees are given information in their warrant package and verbal instructions at the start of the event by the moderator. There is also a test vote, so voters know their devices are functioning properly.

When it is time for a vote, a green “voting light” is lit at the front of the auditorium and voters are told they 30 seconds (or 45 or 60) to press a button on their device to enter their preference.

Towns typically don’t display vote totals on a screen for the audiences to see. (OTI doesn’t recommend the practice because it tends to slow down voters.) Instead, there is a display for the moderator and town clerk to view the votes cast. Those officials announce the outcome and move on to the next agenda item.

Mr. Fite said voting devices are secure. Votes cast with a particular device are not linked to the person holding it. The devices are collected when voters leave the meeting and OTI’s software expunges all data.

If a community buys the hardware, OTI conducts training for town workers (including clerk’s office and technology staffs).

The company also rents devices and provides support services to communities. There is a 90-day planning cycle to organize meetings. For smaller town meetings, OTI sets up its equipment the day of the event, or one day earlier.

In Weston, which conducted a meeting May 9, OTI’s team planned arrive at Weston High School at 10 a.m. (9 hours before the start of the meeting). Six computers with the list of registered voters were set up and connected to servers; the town clerk’s staff checked voters in as they arrived. Three OTI staffers were at the site, setting up networks and, during the meeting, serving as an IT help deck for voters who needed assistance.

Mr. Fite said the cost of shipping devices is $110 per case. The larger, more sophisticated devices (g3) are more expensive to send. One case can hold 100 of those units, compared with 250 to 300 of the smaller devices (k4).

In response to a question by Mr. Rangarajan, he said it is cheaper to rent devices than purchase them if a town doesn’t hold at least four meetings a year. And if town employees can operate the system without on-site staff assistance, the cost is lower still.

Mr. Fite said Plymouth purchased 200 k4 handsets for about $7,000 to $8,000, along with a software fee of 10% to 15% a year.

The cost of on-site help is about $4,000.

The rental cost of 200 handsets is $1,000. Communities can receive a discount with a multiyear commitment.

Attendance at town meetings tends to vary from year to year, based on the issues in a particular agenda. Working with towns after a warrant is published, OTI can increase or decrease the number of devices provided at a meeting based on anticipated attendance. Wayland conducts a survey beforehand to gauge interest in a meeting.

**Discussion of 2022 Annual Town Meeting and survey**

The subcommittee held a brief discussion of the Town Meeting held two nights earlier (May 2), which all members attended.

In all, 193 townspeople, about 1.5% of registered voters, attended the session.

The subcommittee and full Governance Study Committee distributed to attendees a five-question survey about their thoughts about Town Meeting.

Some 151 voters, or 78% of those attending, completed the survey.

Mr. Rangarajan and Mr. Carver compiled the data from the survey.

Among the highlights:

* 63% of voters attending said they go to almost every Town Meeting; 11% were there for the first time.
* The average age of voters in attendance was 53.5 years (a study of the five previous annual and special Town Meeting sessions showed the average age at 59 years)
* 49% identified as women; 47% identified as men; 2% as nonbinary
* 85% of voters identified as white; 12% as Asian, Black, Latino or a member of another group
* The average time an attendee has lived in Sharon is 21 years and the median is 17
  + About one-third have lived in town less than 10 years
* Regarding their opinion of Town Meeting:
  + 61% said they try to attend no matter what’s on the agenda
  + 46% said the sessions take too long
  + 39% said there’s a better way to make decisions in the town
  + 34% said they know how they’re going to vote before they get to the meeting
  + Another 33% wait for the debates before deciding
* Voters cited the following as factors affecting their ability to attend Town Meeting sessions:
  + Childcare responsibilities: 36%
  + Conflicts with other activities: 32%
  + Work obligations: 31%
  + Holding meetings on weeknights: 19%
  + They weren’t always interested in the subjects at Town Meeting: 19%
* How voters learn about Town Meeting:
  + 78% said they got information from the town warrant booklet mailed to each home
  + 38% said Sharon Facebook groups
  + 33% said town webpages or emails
  + 28% said from friends or by word of mouth

Subcommittee members will continue to analyze the data for further insights.

As for Town Meeting itself, several members commented on the hour-long presentation and discussion of Article 20, regarding zoning. The presentation by a lawyer for the Planning Board exceeded the time given to other presenters, Mr. Geller noted. And a slide presentation accompanying the take was unreadable to members of the audience.

Ms. Arguimbau said townspeople should have had full information about the changes sought by the article well ahead of the meeting (a supplement to the article was handed to voters as they entered the meeting). The purpose of Town Meeting is to hold debate rather than to educate voters on issues for the first time, she said.

Ms. Arguimbau said the meeting, which took just under 4 hours, was not a bad amount of time to conduct the business on the agenda

Mr. Rangarajan, who had to leave the meeting early, said his experience watching the Sharon community TV coverage at home was far better than following the proceedings in the high school auditorium because of superior sound quality.

A fuller debriefing of the 2022 Town Meeting is set for the May 11 meeting of the Governance Study Committee. Additional discussions will be held in future subcommittee meetings.

**Discussion of letter on public forum**

The subcommittee discussed the draft of a letter by Mr. Keenan promoting a public forum of the Governance Study Committee. The event, tentatively scheduled for June, would offer members of the public an opportunity to give their opinions about town government. (A second session would be held in September.)

The committee also reviewed a list of civic and community groups to which the letter could be sent to encourage attendance.

The subcommittee decided to forward the letter to the full committee for a discussion on May 11.

**Minutes**

The members unanimously approved the minutes of the meetings of April 6 and April 20.