**Town Meeting Subcommittee**

**Minutes of Meeting of June 29, 2022**

Members present:

Peg Arguimbau

Rob Carver

Keevin Geller

Matthew Keenan

Ganesh Rangarajan

Also present:

Brian Luther, Metropolitan Area Planning Council

**Matters referred to MAPC for additional research**

The Metropolitan Area Planning Council has recently agreed to consult with the Governance Study Committee. The subcommittee members discussed subjects on which the MAPC might provide additional background information. The group asked MAPC to provide:

* Data from towns with particularly high attendance figures for open town meetings, to help determine the reasons for those figures. (Relatedly, the group asked for attendance data from Sharon’s “comparable towns.”)
* A set of best practices for communicating with voters about Town Meeting, based on examples from other towns. These practices should have an emphasis on voter education, especially around warrant articles.
* A grid of comparable towns showing which boards are elected and appointed.
* A review of comparable towns showing which have personnel boards and which may have disbanded those boards.

**Statements regarding Sharon’s form of government**

Each subcommittee member made a statement about the form of government the group should recommend that the full committee ultimately include in its report to the Select Board.

*Ms. Arguimbau spoke in favor of the current open town meeting form of government*, saying “it is not the time to change.” Open Town Meeting gives each voter a unique right to have a say in local government and the power to choose whether to participate, she said. The subcommittee should not advocate for decisions to be made by a smaller group, such as a representative town meeting.

Ms. Arguimbau also offered a series of suggestions for improving the preparation for and the conduct of Town Meeting. They include a separate educational pre-meeting session at which residents could learn about warrant articles; moving up the date for submission of warrant articles; sending “save the date” postcards about Town Meeting to all residents; requiring relevant maps and charts to be placed in the warrant; and placing the consent agenda of noncontroversial items at the end of the Town Meeting agenda.

*Mr. Carver spoke in favor of the current open town meeting form of government*, saying it should be retained and improved. More can be done to tell voters about Town Meeting, such as producing educational videos, as the town of Winchester has done, and teaching about local government in the town’s schools, he said. Sharon could step up to become a leader in electronic voting and to champion technology allowing remote participation in Town Meetings. “In 15 years, I can’t imagine we won’t be using technology in more productive ways,” he said.

*Mr. Geller spoke in favor of the current open town meeting form of government*. Open Town Meeting enables anyone to bring forward a warrant article and to speak about issues. While meeting sessions could still be streamlined, such as by cutting down on repetitious speeches, “for all the inefficiency, I do think it’s precious,” he said. The representative town meeting system suffers from cronyism and would not be an improvement, he said. Mr. Geller called for on-site electronic voting and said the town should work with state legislators to bring about hybrid Town Meetings.

*Mr. Rangarajan spoke in favor of the current open town meeting form of government*, saying he did not “fundamentally believe Town Meeting has to change.” Where he differed from the previous speakers, Mr. Rangarajan said, was in the need for (and emphasis of) community outreach. All residents, no matter who they are, need to feel they are fully part of the community and that their votes matter, too. He joined in recommending new modes of voting and for a move toward hybrid meetings.

*Mr. Keenan spoke in favor of a town council form of government.* He said while Town Meeting served Sharon for a long time, it no longer meets the needs of a modern suburban community. Town Meeting suffers from chronic low attendance (a median of 2%) and its structure serves to exclude certain voters (such as parent of young children), he said. A council-manager government would be nimbler and still permit residents to participate in democratic government, he said.