
WOODBURY TOWN MEETING STUDY COMMITTEE FINAL REPORT

To: Woodbury Select Board

From: Woodbury Town Meeting Study Committee

August 25, 2022

This is the report and recommendations from the Woodbury Town Meeting Study Committee to the Select Board, which appointed the committee in April following a special Town Meeting in February to consider conducting some or all annual town business by Australian ballot. Voters decided at that meeting to continue electing town officers at Town Meeting, by a one-vote margin; those attending the meeting were nearly evenly divided.

The committee researched the subject, interviewed and met with Town Meeting experts in the field, and looked in what works and doesn't in other Vermont towns. The committee then conducted a townwide survey about Town Meeting and annual governance.

Two major take-aways from the *research*:

- Voter participation in annual town governance isn't just a numbers game. Town Meetings by their nature bring about more active citizen engagement in town business than deciding issues by paper ballot with no deliberation.
- Town Meeting participation is affected by how active citizen involvement is in town affairs throughout the year. Towns that communicate well with their voters have healthier, better attended Town Meetings.

The main take-aways from the townwide *survey*:

- 65% favor continuing traditional in-person Town Meeting
- 56% favor having it on Saturday
- 78% favor 10 a.m.
- 61% would like to have child care provided
- 79% would like to have a town "user's guide"

The committee recommends:

- That the Select Board warn for a special Town Meeting with this Article:

Shall Woodbury hold its future annual Town Meeting on the Saturday preceding the first Tuesday in March?

Changing the day of Town Meeting requires a townwide vote at a Town Meeting. We considered waiting until the regular Town Meeting next March to consider changing the day, but decided that given the strong preference for Saturday that it would be better to go ahead now, so the outcome could be implemented for next year's Town Meeting.

- That the Select Board appoint a standing Town Meeting Engagement Committee to help plan, promote and help with logistics for Town Meeting, including having child care provided at the meeting. This committee also would be tasked with producing a town "user's guide." The committee would also look for ways for ongoing community building.

Some members of the Town Meeting Study Committee are interested in serving on a standing Town Meeting Engagement Committee, but we thought it important that the Select Board issue a fresh invitation so that anyone who is interested has an opportunity to apply.

Attached is a copy of the results of the townwide survey. Three additional notes about the survey:

- QUESTION 1 and repeated as question 11 (continue with traditional Town Meeting): an explanatory sentence before this question contained an error made in editing. The sentence was:

Secretary of State data shows that either method, over time, results in a similar number of voters participating. Towns changing to Australian ballot have experienced an initial increase in voter turnout, but then it has returned to about the level of turnout the town previously had at Town Meeting.

What the sentence should have said is that the level of voter turnout for Town Meeting vs turnout for Australian ballot varies from town to town. In some towns there has remained a higher number of votes by Australian ballot. In other towns, after an initial increase, the turnout has returned to a level comparable to Town Meetings.

- QUESTION 13, Australian ballot for town budget, in-person Town Meeting for elected officials and other business: this question was added after the survey began, and there already had been 23 survey responses. As a result, response numbers are lower for this question than other Australian ballot-related questions.

This was not a poll of a cross section of Woodbury voters; these were the views of those who chose to take to the survey.

In looking into other towns and how they foster active citizen engagement, we make these observations:

- Woodbury town officials should look for and take advantage of opportunities to communicate with their fellow town citizens. Examples: Announcing that tax bills are in the mail, sending the results of town elections, deadline for dog licenses.

- Front Porch Forum is the predominant communications method. In the townwide survey, 95% said they receive FPF. There are about 740 Woodbury voters. Woodbury FPF has 687 members. We suggest that the Select Board publish its unapproved meeting minutes on FPF within a few days of its meetings.
- A town's web site is important. It needs to be pleasing to the eye, quick and easy to navigate, and easy to update (and kept current).
- The Select Board should look for opportunities to include articles on the Town Meeting agenda that encourage voter participation. Example: when and how to replace town road machinery.
- We need to be open to recognizing that what has worked in the past may need to be changed to engage newer / younger Woodbury residents in town affairs. Key to voter participation is everyone being included and feeling welcome.

Lastly, the Woodbury Community Library may be helpful in engendering citizen engagement in town governance, a good topic for the library trustees and a Woodbury Town Meeting Committee to take up.

Respectfully submitted,

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The committee met eight times - May through August. All meetings were fully and properly warned and open to the public (agenda posted on bulletin boards at Town Office and at Post Office, Front Porch Forum, and Woodbury web site. Minutes were prepared in a timely manner and posted in the same manner.